

UNIVERSITY OF MANITOBA

**AMBASSADOR FREDERICK NOLTING'S ROLE IN AMERICAN DIPLOMATIC &
MILITARY POLICY TOWARD THE GOVERNMENT OF SOUTH VIETNAM
1961 – 1963**

**A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**

DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

BY

GEOFFREY DT SHAW

WINNIPEG, MANITOBA

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1961 - 1963**

by

GEOFFREY DT SHAW

**A Thesis/Practicum submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of The University
of Manitoba in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree**

of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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AMBASSADOR FREDERICK NOLTING'S ROLE IN AMERICAN DIPLOMATIC & MILITARY POLICY TOWARD THE GOVERNMENT OF SOUTH VIETNAM

Preface:

The issues that are examined in this thesis, which occur, for the most part, at the political/diplomatic level of United States Government policy are associated with the most salient strategic military concerns.¹ Accordingly, the foundations and methodology for this study, concerned with Ambassador Frederick Nolting's role in the Vietnam conflict, share as many similarities with those conceptual tools most often used in the discipline of military history as they do with those used in the study of diplomatic history. This approach finds its direction in the fact that Frederick Nolting's role was, indeed, concerned with overarching strategic concerns as they applied to South Vietnam and for United States' government interests in the region.

Nolting recognised, very early on in his mission to Saigon, that the role of the United States Ambassador in Vietnam was unique in that the direction of US policy emanating from the embassy would, ultimately, hold sway over all other considerations – including the counter-insurgency program. Hence, the link between American diplomatic and military policy in Vietnam was profound. Fortunately for the Kennedy Administration, Nolting had a very solid military background and he had a keen sensitivity, almost a sixth sense, for the strategic direction that would best serve US and South Vietnamese interests. As such, later 'turf wars,' which erupted between the Department of State and the Pentagon, did not ensnare the Nolting mission as the ambassador was able to share the same strategic vision as the top American

Footnotes

¹ For this is the level at which the doctrine of counter-insurgency was conceived, established and then, effectively, destroyed.

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soldiers, such as General Paul D. Harkins, who were stationed in Vietnam.² Furthermore, and as the reader will see, it was the soldiers, in the end, who defended Nolting's position in Washington when the high-powered diplomats of the State Department urged President Kennedy to opt for political violence, in the form of a coup, in South Vietnam.

This school of history, while often dismissed as "prescriptive" by the uninitiated, has a very tough readership to which its scholars must pay heed.³ The theoretical core of this school can be described in relatively concise terms as it is concerned with the utility of such study (i.e., why study military history?) and the considerable chaos which, to a significant degree, constitutes and accompanies the methods of violence and warfare.

The utility of studying human conflict lies at the heart of military history because it is concerned with that most distressful of occurrences: the calculated destruction or killing of human beings; likewise, it incorporates the means of doctrines, men and material that makes this violence possible. In the blunt assessment of the discipline's most prolific writer and unconventional thinker, J.F.C. Fuller, the practical heart of military history "...constitutes the crucial problem in the art of war: 'how to kill without being killed.' This problem is fundamental, universal and eternal to war...We, therefore, start with man, the author of all human

Footnotes

² Although Roger Hilsman and Michael V. Forrestal argued in their report to President Kennedy that there was no overarching vision or co-ordination between the diplomatic and military missions in Vietnam. In so doing, effectively, they were firing a full 'broadside' at Ambassador Nolting. As such, through the body of this work, the reader will be made aware of why these two men engaged in such an assault on the ambassador. The full thrust of this Hilsman/Forrestal criticism of Nolting's mission can be readily discerned when the reader peruses the Secret, Eyes Only Annex to their report, which can be found in Appendix A of this work.

³ The military historian has a substantial responsibility to his readers because they are usually military officers who make decisions based upon what they have studied, and these decisions, often, directly affect the lives of men under their command. Military history is the backbone of all military science and this reality is duly acknowledged within all service academies. Even courses on logistics and supply must ground themselves in the realities of military operations that have gone before and, thus, they require solid military history.

strife.”⁴ On the other hand, it was hoped by military thinkers like Fuller and Basil Liddell-Hart that something could be learned from the study of the history of warfare in order that lives could be saved.⁵ The study of war/military history had an extremely utilitarian and urgent basis for Fuller and his military peers and he emphasised: “Unless history can teach us how to look at the future the history of war is but a bloody romance.”⁶ For the reader, who is unfamiliar with military history, this writer will, again, draw on the authority of J.F.C. Fuller to illustrate how military history should be approached:

“To understand the past and to judge the present is to foresee the future. To understand is to see through, to judge is to value and decide, that is to think logically before a decision is arrived at; consequently, in order to appreciate the worth of a proposition, it is necessary to discover the facts which underlie it and to reduce these to the general terms of theory;”⁷

Professor Michael Howard supports Fuller’s understanding of military history and stresses that military history has a utility to it that is distinct from the other genres of history.

Footnotes

⁴ J.F.C. Fuller, “The Foundations of the Science of War,” The Army Quarterly Vol.1 (Oct. 1920 - Jan. 1921), pp. 91-92.

⁵ Where the “prescriptive” tendencies of military history find ready support would require one to look no further than the excellent example that the Battle of the Somme provided. For during the opening day of that battle, July 1, 1916, over 60,000 British officers and men had become casualties for the gain of a mere 1,000 yards. When the battle finally ended on November 18 of that year, over 418,000 British officers and men had been killed. 195,000 French officers and men fell and the Germans lost approximately 650,000 personnel. Naturally, the study of military history took on an urgency by the historians, such as Fuller and Liddell-Hart, as they believed that some answers could be found that would offer prescription for future conflict wherein the pitfalls of the past could be avoided. As such, the wholesale murder and mayhem of this century has welded “prescription” to military history. After all, who would want to repeat the carnage of the two great world wars of this century? George Bruce, The Paladin Dictionary of Battles, (London: Paladin Grafton Books, 1986), p. 274.

⁶ Hew Strachan, European Armies and the Conduct of War, (London: Unwin Hyman, 1988), p. 1.

⁷ J.F.C. Fuller, “The Application of Recent Developments In Mechanics and Other Scientific Knowledge to Preparation and Training For Future War on Land;” GOLD MEDAL (MILITARY) PRIZE ESSAY FOR 1919; in The Journal of the Royal United Service Institution (RUSI), Vol. LXV (May, 1920), No. 438, p. 239.

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Consequently, the notion of utility cannot be easily dismissed as Howard's perspective, in terms of strategic studies and military history, is buttressed with an academic prestige that is second to none; moreover, his general and, indeed, his specialist knowledge has been attested to by political and military leaders the world over. Accordingly, the reader can study the following excerpt from Howard's writings on the utility of military history - which constitutes much of what military history is about and what this writer's thesis is about:

*Given all these academic caveats, war is none the less a distinct and repetitive form of human behaviour. Unlike politics, or administration, or economic activity, which are continuing and constantly developing processes, war is intermittent, clearly defined, with distinct criteria of success or failure. We cannot state dogmatically that Britain is better governed now, or that her economy is more flourishing, than it was in 1761. We can disagree as to whether certain historical events - the Reformation, or the Glorious Revolution, or the Great Reform Act - were triumphs or disasters. **The historian of peace can only chronicle and analyse 'change'. But the military historian knows what is victory and what defeat, what is success and what failure. When activities do thus constantly recur, and their success can be assessed by a straightforward standard, it does not seem over-optimistic to assume that we can make judgements about them and draw conclusions which will have an abiding value [my emphasis].**"⁸*

The following thesis is based upon the foundations and methodology set forth, very clearly, by both J.F.C. Fuller and Michael Howard. As a student and instructor of at least some experience of the subject of low intensity conflict, this writer can assert, effectively, the argument that as a strategy of low intensity conflict US counter-insurgency policy was destroyed in the years 1961-1963. This destruction occurred because of a profound disagreement on political/strategic views, which transpired in Washington amongst the Kennedy administration's leadership. President Kennedy's mission leaders in the field, such as William Colby, Frederick Nolting, and General Paul Harkins, wanted to stay the official Kennedy policy course with a

Footnotes

⁸ Michael Howard, The Causes of War, (Cambridge, [MA]: Harvard University Press, 1983), p. 193.

steady and patient support of Ngo Dinh Diem's government. Powerful and prestigious men, such as Averell Harriman, John Kenneth Galbraith, and Roger Hilsman, who had direct access to the President, had grown impatient with the incumbent policy and they believed that a radical change would best serve America's interests. In pursuing and attaining their reorientation of American policy toward South Vietnam during the years of 1961 through to 1963 inclusive, Diem and his government were destroyed. Because the lynch-pin to any successful counter-insurgency campaign is the maintenance and nurturing of a legitimate, indigenous government, regardless of such a government's flaws and weaknesses, the American counter-insurgency strategy, which existed in the period stretching from 1960 – 1963 approximately, was destroyed also, along with Diem and his government.

Ambassador Frederick Nolting's acute role, during this historically crucial period, became that of fighting against the reorientation of official policy toward South Vietnam. In his battle to save American interests and sound counter-insurgency policy, as he accurately perceived them linked to the support of Diem, Nolting faced increasing hostility from his home department, i.e., the Department of State, and from some of Kennedy's closest advisors. As the reader shall see, President Kennedy was hesitant if not reluctant to accept the radical reorientation of policy toward Diem's government that was being thrust upon him by Averell Harriman and his group. As such, Kennedy wanted to hear from Nolting, almost right up until the coup in November of 1963. The President even went so far as to defend Nolting and his criticism of the radical policy change from Harriman. This was no small matter for Kennedy as Harriman was normally able to intimidate the President with his forceful manner, acknowledged diplomatic expertise, and his formidable prestige acquired from his family background. In the end, Nolting lost his fight as Kennedy was overwhelmed by the advocates of the new policy and acquiesced to their urgent request for such a change.

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Unfortunately, Nolting's loss became America's because with the removal and murder of Diem, the United States Government found itself morally compelled to prop-up the hollow political entity South Vietnam turned into without a legitimate government. After the awkward stability of Diem came the deluge of 'revolving-door' coups. The strategic hamlets program and other related, critical counter-insurgency programs all fell prey to this chaotic political instability, and American strategy, which had been cohesive and viable under Ngo Dinh Diem's leadership, also succumbed to chaos and disarray. With the introduction of US troops, in order to stabilise the political void in South Vietnam, American strategic thought had reached its nadir as Washington was simply reacting to continual political/military crises in Vietnam.

One can affirm, without supporting the entirety of his arguments, that Colonel Harry Summers Jr. was precise when he argued in his book, On Strategy, that the debacle which the American involvement in Vietnam became was founded on an inadequate view of what the strategic objectives were in South Vietnam. Indeed, as one military historian told this writer "the Americans in Vietnam were not so much out-fought as they were out-thought by their adversaries." This problem becomes manifest when one peruses the documents, memoranda, letters, telegrams, and notes that streamed back and forth between the American mission in South Vietnam and Washington. For there was no clear understanding of what the fight was about or what the strategic objectives should be, at least at the level where policy was ultimately decided. Thus, the American effort foundered, first, on the political/diplomatic plane before it was destroyed at the operational level in Vietnam. Nevertheless, defeat is defeat and military historians in this light must assess the policies that led to such an eventuality. For example, when the Germans, in the Second World War, chose to attack Russian cities rather than Soviet armies they made a choice to abandon their strategic doctrine of Blitzkrieg. Yet, this was the doctrine that their armies and overarching strategic plans had been founded on, and, thus, they plunged into unplanned territory and they invited defeat. Likewise, when the Americans abandoned the

long, arduous, pains-taking, and exasperating process of assisting the non-communist Government of South Vietnam in its efforts to secure political legitimacy, and when they opted increasingly for the mere physical destruction of Communist guerrillas, they too made a choice that invited defeat. The strategic objectives of full-scale modern warfare must include the destruction of the enemy's armies in order to secure a more perfect peace on one's own terms. But the strategic objectives of limited, low-intensity conflict or counter-insurgency must include the destruction of the insurgents' ability to garner political legitimacy and support unto themselves.⁹ In short, the fight is not over armies, terrain or even resources but, instead, over who will govern with accepted legitimacy.

In addition to the essential understanding just mentioned, this writer has included a discussion on the historiography of the Vietnam conflict in the introduction to this thesis. It is hoped that the utility of this bibliographical discussion will be that the reader is given an overview of just how complex and divergent the various approaches to the history of American involvement in Vietnam truly are. In conjunction with this discussion, full cognisance is given to the fact that this work is concerned with the combined diplomatic and military history problem of how American policy was turned around in 1961-1963. Thus, this study is particularly interested in the manner and mechanics of US government policy decisions that permitted sound counter-insurgency doctrine to be destroyed in Vietnam during these crucial years. Within this context, the main purpose of focusing on the Nolting ambassadorship is to examine the testimony of an American diplomat who was in a position to discern the gulf which developed between the US Government missions in South Vietnam and vacillating policy in Washington.

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⁹ The tactics of this kind of conflict often necessitate the turning of political cadres and may warrant the killing of hard-core political ideologues, but killing the enemy's armed force is not the strategic objective.

It is documented fact, supported by the British Advisory Mission in South Vietnam and the South Vietnamese themselves, that Ambassador Frederick Nolting fought against the destruction of realistic American counter-insurgency efforts. Accordingly, his subsequent resignation from the State Department, based on his belief that the murder of President Diem would lead America into an unnecessary war, warrants serious analysis - considering what eventually occurred in Vietnam. Ambassador Nolting remained steadfast in his analysis before, during, and after the coup that removed Diem:

"During the next couple of weeks, I attended several meetings on Vietnam. At the President's request, I expressed my own convictions, independently of those held by my superiors in the State Department. I felt too strongly to do otherwise. The basic issue was whether the U.S. government should connive to overthrow the Diem government. I argued that it should not. A coup would create a political vacuum, encourage the Communists, and wipe out the nine years of relatively successful support we had given South Vietnam - without the use of American combat forces. Furthermore, in supporting a coup, the United States would be doing exactly what President Kennedy had promised Diem we would not do, namely, interfering in South Vietnam's internal affairs. Our moral commitment, the integrity of the United States, was at stake. Finally, I argued that the generals would be ineffective leaders. They would not gain the support of the South Vietnamese people and would naturally turn to the United States for more and more military help, including, probably, U.S. combat forces. I was appalled that our government would encourage a coup of dissident generals to overthrow their elected government. It was wrong in principle and would, even if successfully executed, have disastrous long-range consequences for the United States as well as for Vietnam."¹⁰

A substantial portion of this thesis is concerned with the Nolting dialogue with President Kennedy's Administration and with the State Department; indeed, the 'backbone' of this dissertation is constructed out of the cable traffic between Washington and Saigon. Yet, because it cannot be forgotten that much of this study falls within the purview of military history it is

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¹⁰ Frederick Nolting, From Trust To Tragedy: The Political Memoirs of Frederick Nolting, Kennedy's Ambassador to Diem's Vietnam, (New York, [NY]: Praeger Publishers, 1988), p. 125.

designed, in the final analysis, as a contribution to that discipline as well as that of political/diplomatic history.

The real war, in fact, was fought not only in the perceptions of the South Vietnamese people vis-à-vis the legitimacy of their government but, also, in the perceptions of the men who directed American policy. It was fought in the perceptions of the American Press Corps and thus it was fought in the forum of American public opinion with all the inherent ramifications this held for American domestic politics. As the reader shall see, at one time President Kennedy had blurted out to a friend that he could not go into the 1964 elections if he became known as the President who 'lost' Vietnam to the Communists. At another point the reader will also discern this powerful domestic political force at work when Secretary of State Dean Rusk pleaded with Nolting that the Kennedy Administration could not "stand anymore burnings" – with regard to the bad public relations that the Buddhist Crisis engendered between Washington and Saigon.

The famous dictum of Carl Von Clausewitz was never more applicable than in this case of insurgency warfare: "We see, therefore, that war is not merely an act of policy but a true political instrument, a continuation of political intercourse, carried on with other means...The political object is the goal..."¹¹ The Vietnamese Communists understood this Clausewitzian dictum very clearly indeed and they acted upon it with a disciplined steadfastness that was both ruthless and, dialectically, flexible. Many Americans were well aware of what the Communists were up to as they too recognised this dictum of Clausewitz's at work. Accordingly, they worked with the South Vietnamese Government and people to stop the Communists from attaining their goal but they were ultimately impeded, not so much by the Communists in the field, as by perceptions in Washington, by the power of the American press and by domestic political

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¹¹ Carl Von Clausewitz, On War; edited and translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret; (Princeton [NJ]: Princeton University Press, 1984), p. 87.

concerns. The choice became clearer and clearer for Kennedy and his administration: to make the decisions that statesmen make or to make the decisions that politicians make; in the end, they chose the latter course. The Vietnamese Communist leadership called this choice "a great gift" from the Americans to them.

The reason why this study must, likewise, be considered within the parameters of military history is straightforward enough. For counter-insurgency, while not conducted as a normal military campaign, nevertheless, has the same strategic objectives as all military undertakings: the destruction of the enemy, in this case the Communist cadres, and organisational abilities of the Viet Cong, in order to secure a more perfect peace. In conventional warfare, as previously noted, the war-making ability of the adversary is targeted as a strategic priority. In unconventional, counter-insurgent warfare, the insurrectionists' attempt to gain political legitimacy should be considered the most salient target. In this context it is worth remembering that the Communists in Vietnam had clearly identified political legitimacy as their strategic goal. With consummate intelligence and ruthlessness they fashioned and used a carefully designed program of "carrot and stick" to gain this political legitimacy from the people. The "carrot" consisted of the promises of land-reform, lower taxes, more schools, etc., and the "stick" consisted of an unparalleled, in Vietnamese terms, program of terror. Over 20,000 GVN local officials murdered, 1959-1962, along with their families in the most horrific manner imaginable. Intimidation, extortion and coerced political lecture/harangues - otherwise known as "agit-prop" were also part of the Communists' "stick." Thus, it is within the discipline of military history that the steadiest analysis can be brought to bear on what is, fundamentally, an unconventional manifestation of war.

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Introduction to the Historiographical Problem:

The literature about American involvement in the Vietnam wars of the post-1945 era is vast and confusing and, as such, requires establishment of an organised, scholarly foundation upon which historiographical analysis can be made. Diplomatic historian Gary R. Hess has provided such a basis and, within the framework that he has carefully structured, I have pursued my historical research into the evolution of American diplomatic and military policy in Vietnam during the salient years 1962-1963.¹²

Gary Hess's Structure for Vietnam War Literature:

According to Hess the early literature that examined the Vietnam War and American involvement there was relatively simple. The United States, in much of the early literature, was driven by a "...mindless anti-communism" which, when coupled with a hubris that disregarded Vietnamese politics and culture, drew the US into a civil-war which it could not win.¹³ Hess described these early accounts as the "orthodox" interpretation. This view saw the United States political/military intervention in Southeast Asia as tragically misguided and arrogant in its idealism and, consequently, the titles clearly evoke this critical image. Examples of the

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¹² The structure that Hess has provided is made manifest in the following article: Gary R. Hess, "Historiography: The Unending Debate: Historians and The Vietnam War", in Diplomatic History, Vol. 18, No. 2, (Spring, 1994).

¹³ Ibid., pp. 239 - 240.

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“orthodox” school would include David Halberstam’s The Making of A Quagmire,¹⁴ Theodore Draper’s The Abuse of Power, Chester Cooper’s The Lost Crusade: America in Vietnam,¹⁵ and Frances Fitzgerald’s Fire In The Lake.¹⁶

The “Orthodox” School:

What promised to be a relatively concise, if not unduly simplified, “orthodox” rendering of the American involvement in the Vietnam War gradually took on a more complex character as the literature on the subject evolved. The “orthodox” school has been increasingly challenged as more de-classified documentation has come to light.¹⁷ Trying to sort out this expansive body of work - as it moved from the popular vein to that of ever-more critical and scholarly analysis - became the work of diplomatic historian Gary Hess. His work has to be viewed within the context of the ever-increasing recognition that there is no longer an “accepted wisdom”, concerning American involvement in the Vietnam War.

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¹⁴ David Halberstam, The Making of A Quagmire: America and Vietnam During the Kennedy Era; (New York, [NY]: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc. 1988).

¹⁵ Chester L. Cooper, The Lost Crusade: America in Vietnam, (New York, [NY]: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1970).

¹⁶ Frances Fitzgerald, Fire In The Lake: The Vietnamese and the Americans in Vietnam, (New York, [NY]: Vintage Books, 1989).

¹⁷ At a recent conference on the Vietnam War, this writer was introduced to recently smuggled documents from Vietnam which dealt, specifically, with the role of the North Vietnamese in the Southern insurrection and the intelligence figures for their own men transferred down the Ho Chi Minh Trail. In concise terms, the North Vietnamese themselves claimed to have been the true force behind the insurrection in the South and to have sent over a million men down the Ho Chi Minh Trail during the 1960’s. This kind of documentation, quite clearly, calls into question some of the fundamental assumptions of the “orthodox” school (the arguments concerned with these documents can be perused through the proceedings of the conference, “Vietnam, After The Cold War,” which will be published in the near future. Currently, they are available on the home page of the Center For The Study of The Vietnam Conflict at Texas Tech).

What the discerning student of history needs to know about this school is that its founders, David Halberstam, Neil Sheehan, Malcolm Browne et al., were openly hostile to the original Kennedy Administration policy of support for the South Vietnamese President, Ngo Dinh Diem. While their position was entirely unobjective, as they admitted at the time, not only in words but in actions as well, i.e., such as assisting the radical bonzes of the Xa Loi Pagoda in publishing their anti-government material by lending them their mimeograph machine, nevertheless, they were able to stake out the ground of 'orthodoxy' because they got there first. As the editor of the Wall Street Journal explained:

The anti-Diem faction dominated the press through the efforts of three young men in Saigon – David Halberstam of the New York Times, Neil Sheehan of UPI and Malcolm Browne of AP. ...The significance of this is that those who championed the coup have written the popular history of its aftermath. Mr. Halberstam's writings are best understood as an attempt to blame the outcome in Vietnam on everything but the coup. Mr. Sheehan, by then with the Times, was the recipient of the Pentagon Papers leak; in its original newspaper publication, his series started with the events of December 1963; the coup was the last instalment. He used the papers, an enormous and ambiguous record from which nearly any lesson could be drawn, to advance the preposterous notion that we had entered the war by stealth, without anyone in the public or Congress noticing.

These writings etched a neurotic if widespread popular understanding of the origins of the war.¹⁸

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¹⁸ The Editor, "Review & Outlook: The First Lesson of Vietnam," in the Wall Street Journal, November 2, 1983. This article can be found in "The Papers of Frederick E. Nolting, Jr." The University of Virginia Library – Special Collections Department/Alderman Library, Charlottesville, Virginia; Accession Number of Collection: R621/102.921; Box Number: 23; Folder Dates and Heading: Professional Papers, Newsclippings, 2 of 3.

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The “Revisionist” School:

The reason for the emergence of a “revisionist” school of Vietnam War historiography is straightforward. Increasing quantities of documents became available, from many different sources and experiences of the Vietnam conflict, and revising of the “orthodox” position was almost certain to occur. In terms of the historiography, the “orthodox” historians had run with their thesis too soon, well before adequate documentation was available (David Halberstam wrote one of the defining works of the “orthodox” school, The Making of A Quagmire, which first appeared in 1964).¹⁹ Nevertheless, the works of these journalists established the highly critical political tone of the “orthodox” school by the mid-1960s. By contrast, it was not until 1978 and 1979 when the first “revisionist” works were published: i.e., such as Leslie H. Gelb’s and Richard K. Betts’, The Irony of Vietnam (1978) and Dave Richard Palmers, Summons of The Trumpet (1978). According to the Hess analysis, the “revisionist” school consists of three prominent sub-schools: the “Clausewitzians”, the “hearts-and-minders” and the “legitimacists.”

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¹⁹ Neil Sheehan, likewise, can be considered a co-founder of the “orthodox” position as he and Halberstam were certainly comrades in their journalistic efforts in Vietnam and they tended to espouse the same arguments at the same time (in the early 1960’s). Sheehan was one of the editors who composed The New York Times version of The Pentagon Papers (see Neil Sheehan, Hedrick Smith, E.W. Kenworthy and Fox Butterfield, eds., The Pentagon Papers, [Chicago, [ILL]: Quadrangle Books, Inc., 1971]). To his credit, Sheehan recognised that John Paul Vann had used them to promote his personal ideas and policy for counter-insurgency warfare and that they had bought, wholesale, all of his ranting about the failure of ARVN at the so-called battle of Ap Bac. Incredibly, though, Sheehan continued to believe much of what Vann had told him as it corresponded to his own shallow and occidental view of government and politics in Vietnam (see Neil Sheehan, A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam, [New York, [NY]: Vintage Books, 1989]).

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The “Clausewitzian” Revisionists:

The most notable example of the “Clausewitzians” is Colonel Harry Summer’s On Strategy²⁰, which contrasts and compares the US conduct of the war, at a strategic level, with the classic strategic doctrines articulated in Carl von Clausewitz’s On War.²¹ The essential argument that Colonel Summers makes is that American political leaders were fundamentally responsible for a strategy that was deficient in every significant way. Other serving officers followed suit with accounts such as Bruce Palmer’s The 25 Year War: America’s Military Role In Vietnam, Shelby Stanton’s The Rise And Fall of an American Army: U.S. Ground Forces in Vietnam, 1965-1973, and Phillip B. Davidson’s Vietnam at War: The History, 1946-1975, and Secrets of The Vietnam War.²²

The core understanding of the “Clausewitzian” revisionists is that civilian leaders sent the United States Armed Forces off to fight the wrong kind of war because they misunderstood the Vietnam Conflict and, subsequently, developed incorrect political/military policies. The most important error occurred in U.S. counter-insurgency doctrine. This school claims that the U.S. Administration failed to realise that the primary cause of the Vietnam War was aggression sponsored and formulated in the North and not insurgency that had grown out of the complications of indigenous South Vietnamese society. The “Clausewitzians” believed that the United States had the necessary military might which would have permitted them to obliterate the North as any kind of threat whatsoever in a short, sharp unleashing of American firepower

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²⁰ Colonel Harry G. Summers, Jr., On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War, (Novato, [California]: Presidio Press, 1982).

²¹ Carl Von Clausewitz, On War; edited and translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret; (Princeton [NJ]: Princeton University Press, 1984).

²² Hess, “Historiography: The Unending Debate: Historians and The Vietnam War;” pp. 241 - 242.

and technology.²³ Conversely, this war-winning capability, in their estimation, was severely handicapped, if not completely undermined, in protracted war - which is what had led to apathy and, ultimately, disillusionment amongst the populace in the United States.²⁴

The “Hearts-and-Minds” “Revisionists”:

Those historians whose works Hess has classified as “hearts-and-minds” “revisionists” argue that too much effort was wasted on conventional warfare which worked directly against the precepts of effective pacification. Thus, they differ from the “Clausewitzians”, who blamed civilian leaders for the loss of the war, and, instead, find the real fault in the army leadership for, at first, resisting and ignoring counter-insurgency doctrine, and then, secondly, having accepted such doctrine, misapplying it. The works of Colonel David Hackworth, Dr. Larry E. Cable and Andrew Krepinevich are considered to be the best examples of the “hearts-and-minds” school.

Hess uses Cable’s works, Conflict of Myths: The Development of American Counter-insurgency Doctrine and the Vietnam War and Unholy Grail: The US and the Wars in Vietnam, 1965-1968, to illustrate the most well defined and concise arguments that best define this school. Larry Cable, as Hess notes, turns the Clausewitzian argument on its head by demonstrating that the US military did, indeed, fight a conventional war, albeit - a rather lame one, against the

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²³Judging by the types and quantities of conventional fire-power alone, that the U.S. Air Force had at its disposal, America’s political and military leaders may well have been able to cripple North Vietnam in less than a month had they permitted their air assets to do so. For example, the fire-storming of Hanoi/Haiphong and any large civilian or industrial population centre whilst also destroying North Vietnam’s Red River flood control and dike system, which would have, effectively, flooded all of the agricultural land that produced rice etc., would have reduced the North’s war-making capacity dramatically. In a total war scenario, which fell just short of the use of nuclear weapons, North Vietnam would have been physically destroyed; however, the political costs to the Washington Administration would have exceeded any justification for such destruction.

²⁴It is noteworthy to remember that on this point, amongst several other political/military decisions, that the “Clausewitzians” concurred with Ho Chi Minh’s estimation of what would undo the Americans in Vietnam.

North. The Army's strategic error, according to Dr. Cable, was in insisting that the Vietcong insurgency exemplified partisan warfare in which a guerrilla movement depended on external support. This primary error, in Dr. Cable's analysis, permitted the attendant error wherein the Army viewed North Vietnam as the main enemy and fought a conventional war with Clausewitzian emphasis on massive destruction.²⁵ Larry Cable continues this argument by emphasising that only the Marines,²⁶ with their considerable experience in the "Banana Wars" of the early twentieth century, had the doctrinal understanding to allow them to deal effectively with the indigenous origins of insurgency.²⁷ American military strategy, Cable contends, steadily played into the hands of North Vietnam thereby giving it a greater influence in the South: "...Rolling Thunder provided the impetus for increased infiltration of the South; and the mindless ground war disrupted Southern society and undermined the Vietcong."²⁸ Larry Cable, with his flare for sardonic humour, put it this way: "*In an attempt to solve a problem that did not exist, [the United States] created a problem that could not be solved [my emphasis].*"²⁹

What is especially important to note, however, about Hess's demarcations for the various factions within the "revisionist" school, is that some scholars, such as Larry Cable, are extremely

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²⁵ Hess, "Historiography: The Unending Debate: Historians and The Vietnam War;" p. 243.

²⁶ "The U.S. Marine Corps had far more experience with counter-insurgency than any other American armed service." Larry Cable, Conflict of Myths: The Development of American Counter-insurgency Doctrine and the Vietnam War, (New York, [NY]: New York University Press, 1986), p. 96. Larry Cable claims that he spent some five years in South Vietnam, operating at the village level, as a member of the USMC (United States Marine Corps) and, thus, while his favouring the Marines may, at first glance, appear somewhat subjective - the objective record, which denotes a remarkable counterinsurgent flexibility on the part of the USMC - tends to bear out his assertions. Dr. Cable is quick to add, though, that the Marines had to re-learn much of this treasure of counterinsurgent doctrine in Vietnam. Cable, Conflict of Myths, pp. 170-171.

²⁷ Hess, "Historiography: The Unending Debate: Historians and The Vietnam War;" p. 243.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Cable, Conflict of Myths; p. 225.

difficult to “pigeon-hole” with one hundred percent accuracy. Dr. Cable, for example, has placed a considerable portion of the blame for the insurgency in the South at the feet of Ngo Dinh Diem and Ngo Dinh Nhu and therefore is linked to the “orthodox” school on some important issues.³⁰ On the other hand, formidable scholars such as Douglas Pike, who was attached to the United States Embassy in Saigon from 1954 through to the mid-1960’s, have consistently argued that there was no way that the Ngo Dinh’s were responsible for the insurrection in the South. Drawing on an irrefutable practical expertise about the Vietnamese Communist insurgent infrastructure, Professor Pike argues that the whole political structure, cell-structure and supply logistics infrastructure could not have been created during the Diem administration - as the restrictions of time, alone, made this impossible. In fact, the clearly demonstrated scope, precision and professionalism of the NLF political presence betrayed the hand of Ho Chi Minh.

Thus Pike notes:

“Vietnamese with whom the author [Pike] has talked agree that unrest was widespread in the Vietnamese countryside in 1958, but all have insisted that the Diem government was by no means as well organised or as efficient as would have been necessary to have been as repressive as the Communists claimed...The NLF [National Liberation Front] was a true Communist-front organisation...The Viet Minh elements in South Vietnam during the struggle against the French had of course included many non-communist elements, as, for example, the private Catholic armies that operated south of Saigon. After 1954 many Viet Minh entered the ranks of the Diem government, and even a decade later many of the top military and civilian governmental figures in Saigon were former Viet Minh. Nevertheless the Viet Minh elements, made up chiefly but not entirely of Communists, continued to offer resistance to the Diem government...The National Liberation Front was not simply another indigenous covert group, or even a coalition of such groups. It was an organisational steamroller, nationally conceived and nationally organised, endowed with ample cadres and funds, crashing out of the jungle to flatten the GVN. It was not an ordinary secret

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³⁰This writer and Larry Cable have had several discussions on this very issue and, to date, have been unable to be that persuasive, one to the other, in finally agreeing on the effect of the Ngo Dinh’s on the insurgency in South Vietnam. Nevertheless, this has always been a most useful and friendly debate wherein much has been learned with regard to the actual complexity of the whole issue.

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*society of the kind that dotted the Vietnamese political landscape for decades. It projected a social construction program of such scope and ambition that of necessity it must have been created in Hanoi and imported...The creation of the NLF was an accomplishment of such skill, precision, and refinement that when one thinks of who the master planner must have been, only one name comes to mind: Vietnam's organisational genius, Ho Chi Minh."*³¹

Sir Robert Thompson concurred with the Pike analysis emphasising that the infrastructure of the insurgency in South Vietnam would have required at least a decade to put into place and, thus, belonged to an earlier era: - that of the Viet Minh.³²

All of this is to say, that while Hess's analysis of the historiography of the war is timely and useful it can never completely solve the problem of making the study of this conflict substantially less complicated. On the other hand, one should still consider Hess's schools and factions in a positive and common sense light as they are, as previously noted, practical.

Footnotes

³¹ Douglas Pike, Viet Cong: The Organization and Techniques of the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam, (Cambridge, [MA]: The MIT Press, 1966), pp. 75, 76 & 80.

³² William Colby, an efficient and consummate professional intelligence officer, supported this understanding and, indeed, was at odds with Larry Cable over this point.

The “Legitimist” School:

“Legitimist” interpretation of the Vietnam War argues that the United States was headed in the right direction in the late 1950s (with regard to its diplomatic/military policy for Southeast Asia) and that it should have continued to support President Ngo Dinh Diem. The “legitimist” school brings to bear a formidable amount of documentary evidence. The best account, which demonstrates that Diem’s overthrow not only led to the ensuing political instability in South Vietnam but also to the necessity of US military intervention, is R.B. Smith’s multi-volume An International History of The Vietnam War. In addition, the written memoirs of Edward Geary Lansdale, William E. Colby, Rufus C. Phillips III (Lansdale’s assistant), Sir Robert Thompson - all of whom had several years of practical experience in the field of countering Communist insurgency support this view. Likewise, academics, such as Ellen J. Hammer (whom the French scholars acclaimed as the one American who had actually developed an historical understanding of some substance about the Vietnamese and South Vietnam), Wesley R. Fishel (of Michigan State University), Dennis J. Duncanson, Robert Scigliano, and Denis Warner belonged to the “legitimist” faction.

This thesis (which falls within the “legitimist” school described by Gary Hess) examines the role that Ambassador Frederick Nolting had in South Vietnam during the critical years of 1962-1963. The reason that I have focussed on this specific time is that it was during these two years of Ambassador Nolting’s tenure that relations seriously deteriorated between the administration in Washington and Diem’s government in Saigon. These were the years when American policy shifted from support to an estranged disengagement with the Diem government. As such, I have been particularly interested in tracing and analysing what Nolting’s advice was to both the Washington and Saigon governments on American diplomatic/military policy and the response of these governments to that advice.

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According to his own memoirs, Nolting was sent as United States Ambassador to South Vietnam in May of 1961, at the special request of President Kennedy, in order to ameliorate the growing tensions and difficulties between Diem and Washington.³³ The Kennedy Administration had been advised that a sound counter-insurgency policy could only be developed upon the foundation of a civilian controlled and led South Vietnamese government, which enjoyed a measure of popular political support. Ambassador Nolting, as well as General Paul Harkins, had been originally sent to South Vietnam with the full understanding that this was official policy for assisting Diem and his government. However, by the summer of 1963, Nolting's advice and efforts were largely ignored by Kennedy's administration, which embarked on policies that led in the opposite direction. Indeed he was recalled by the State Department while on holiday in August of 1963. It is the intent of this writer to analyse the process of this policy shift and specifically to analyse the role played by Ambassador Nolting and the process through which the State Department and the White House rejected his recommendations and gradually put in place a new policy.

Utility of This Study:

From a diplomatic/military history perspective, this study holds the promise of solving a long-outstanding problem: the crucial failing of relations between the United States and Ngo Dinh Diem and the subsequent policies which followed. It is intended that, in the general historiography of the Vietnam Wars in the Twentieth Century, a crucial gap will be filled by this work. To this

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³³ Many of these tensions grew out of the direction that the American military advisory group believed was fundamental to a successful counter-insurgency campaign as opposed to the direction that President Diem had been advised to take by the British Advisory group. The Americans wanted more control of Diem, while the British advocated the need for even greater GVN (Government of Vietnam)

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date, this writer has been impressed by the singular lack of study and analysis given to the Nolting mission and the United States government's diplomatic/military policy shift that occurred during his mission - contrary to his advice. When this writer has broached this topic at conferences with the experts in the United States he has always found an agreement that such a study has not been done and affirmative support for such an academic undertaking. This has been particularly true within the context of a military history study concerned with the failure of the counter-insurgency program that the United States had put into place in the late 1950's and early 1960's in South Vietnam. Typically, studies in this area have blamed counter-insurgency as a poor military option (see Colonel Summer's argument) or they blame Ngo Dinh Diem as a corrupt or incompetent Southeast Asian despot incapable of carrying out such a program in a proper manner (see the arguments of the "orthodox" school). There has been a deep-set historical reluctance on the part of American historians to bring the necessary cool and detached analysis to the situation and to study the root of the problem, which was concerned with a deliberate and calculated policy-shift.³⁴ Even at the time, the British advisory team in Vietnam had few qualms about telling the Americans where they were going 'off track'. For, as the world's leading experts in defeating Communist insurgencies, the British held serious misgivings about this American policy-shift and believed it to be destructive to sound counter-insurgency practice (specifically, see Sir Robert Thompson's criticisms). In fact, Thompson's analysis of a particular scenario wherein the US supported a potential coup proved prescient and uncannily accurate. American reporter Marguerite Higgins

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control of COIN (Counter-Insurgency) ops. Ambassador Nolting tried to mediate the differences between these two positions - as the Pentagon Papers make manifest.

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recalled this analysis from a dinner meeting that she had with Thompson and John Richardson of the CIA in August of 1963:

"In a dinner on the seventh floor of the Hotel Caravelle the previous August I had pressed Robert G.K. Thompson, chief of the British advisory mission, and John Richardson, head of the CIA (then identified only as the first secretary of the U.S. embassy), for an opinion about what would happen if there were a coup d'état. "It would set back the war twelve months - maybe forever," said Thompson, and Richardson nodded agreement. "But why?" Because, they agreed, purges would be inevitable. At the very least, any new military junta would have to fire the forty-two province chiefs; to justify their coup they would have to discredit those who served Diem. They would want to appoint men personally beholden to them. The firing of province chiefs would in itself shake Vietnam's hard-won stability, the two officials said, because it had taken nine long, hard years to fill the bureaucratic vacuum left by the French and to develop reasonably competent rural officials. Both men feared that any future military dictatorship might also be tempted to junk good programs in their zeal to prove that all that went before was bad. The logic of any revolution is that it must be quickly justified. "In revolutions of this kind," said Thompson, "the rule of law is usually the first victim."³⁵

Ambassador Nolting's view of events falls within the parameters of the "legitimet" school.

This writer would like to reiterate that the terms "orthodox" and "revisionism" by no means depict an established school in the process of being revised with arguable evidence. On the contrary, the fact remains that the works of Halberstam, Sheehan, et al., clearly, became established well before there was adequate documentation to support their arguments. Indeed, documents that were released much later (including Ambassador Nolting's own memoirs) illustrate that there was a profound difference between what these authors claimed and what actually occurred. For example,

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³⁴ Several American historians, including George Herring, have told this writer that there is an emotional inability on the part of American historians to recognise the manifest mistakes of the Kennedy Administration in this regard, and an even deeper reluctance to criticise JFK in particular.

³⁵ Marguerite Higgins, Our Vietnam Nightmare, (New York, [NY]: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1965), pp. 234-235.

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David Halberstam, when confronted after the event with authoritative evidence which clearly demonstrated that the Buddhist crisis was a manufactured political coup, reversed his position and stated: "I always said it. The Buddhist campaign was political...I thought I always emphasized that this was a political dispute under a religious banner."³⁶ Yet, in all of his dispatches sent back to the New York Times, Halberstam had used emotional and inflammatory language which manifestly depicted religious persecution occurring in Saigon and, by his intended implication, all of South Vietnam. Other American reporters followed this tack with an exuberant abandonment of any attempt at impartial research into the problem. President Kennedy's press secretary, Pierre Salinger, had duly noted this bias and declared:

*"Whether they intended it or not their articles reflected their bitter hatred for the Diem government and their avowed purpose (stated to a number of reporters in Saigon) to bring down the Diem government...It is a deep question of reportorial ethics whether the destruction of a government is within the legitimate framework of journalistic enterprise."*³⁷

As such, assumptions made about the scholarly objectivity or impartiality of the American Saigon Press Corps,³⁸ which had a lot to do with the establishment of the so-called "orthodox" school,

Footnotes

³⁶ Ibid., p. 83.

³⁷ Pierre Salinger, With Kennedy, (Garden City, [NY]: Doubleday, 1966), p. 325.

³⁸ Stanley Karnow's work, which has some merit in its broad scope, nevertheless, has problems in precision with crucial events such as the Buddhist crisis, which occurred during the summer of 1963. For example, Karnow misleads readers through his depiction of the Buddhist crisis more by what he chose to leave out of his account than by what he included. He noted the Buddhist protests yet somehow managed to miss the salient point, confirmed to this writer by several sources - including General Khanh and William Colby, that, for the most part, the protest banners of the Buddhists were all in English - not in Vietnamese or French. Accordingly, there was little doubt that the Xa Loi Pagodists were targeting American public opinion, through the American journalists, with an efficacy which caused the CIA, amongst many, to question the true source of the Xa Loi's political directives because there was no doubt that the Communist insurrectionists benefited directly from their campaign. Karnow - in his written work, painstakingly avoided consideration of these likelihoods and, indeed, encouraged the manufactured picture of Diem - the religious persecutor (see Stanley Karnow's Vietnam: A History, pp. 279,280, 290, & 285).

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warrant reconsideration. By contrast, the later works of the so-called "revisionists" rely, substantially, on the most recent releases of de-classified documents and on testimony from key figures of that era who have long since retired and have been able to publish memoirs etc. Consequently, it is within the discipline of this school that this writer has chosen to pursue the study of Ambassador Nolting's mission to Saigon (1961-1963) and, as previously noted this approach is supported by substantial academic work already in place.³⁹

A Word on Method & Sources:

The method or manner of approach that I have used is relatively straightforward: a combination of interviews with primary and secondary source material (this includes official and private documents). Mrs. Nolting warned this writer that many key lines of text have been "pulled" from the official State Department papers and to remain sceptical about the possibility of the whole story being found within them or any of the remaining official US Government documents which have been declassified.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, the reader will be able to discern an emphasis placed on material found in the official documents. In other words, the State

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Halberstam, Karnow, Sheehan, et al., paid no heed to the United Nations commission which came in to investigate, at Diem's request, the possibility of religious persecution in South Vietnam and they ignored the commission's findings - that there was no evidence of Buddhists being systematically persecuted (see Marguerite Higgins', Our Vietnam Nightmare, pp. 90, 91, - 97). General Nguyen Khanh, after laughing at the seriousness with which the American Press corps went after the whole issue (because he was convinced that they had been mere dupes for Thich Tri Quang and the Xa Loi Pagodists), stated that most of Diem's cabinet were Buddhist and that he, as one of Diem's most trusted officers, was also a Buddhist. The list of facts ignored or "re-orientated" by the "orthodox" school, on this issue, goes on for a considerable length and, indeed, a whole study could be undertaken with regard to the problem of the Buddhist crisis and the news-media's depiction of it.

³⁹ For proof of the academic viability of this school one should consult Gary Hess's article previously mentioned.

⁴⁰ This writer's previous experience with the government documents in question confirms Mrs. Nolting's caveat, as the first issues of the Foreign Relations Papers of the Department of State, actually had the blanked out lines left in the documents, blacked through with the printer's ink of course and, thus, illegible.

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Department papers form the backbone of this work. In addition to this, I have pursued a multi-archival research of the letters and private papers of key US diplomats, for example, such as Ambassador Nolting's, Ambassador Lodge's, Averell Harriman's, Roger Hillman's, etc.⁴¹ Likewise, I should emphasise that I have used the written work of such contemporary participants and observers as Sir Robert Thompson, since he and his fellow British advisors consistently displayed a clear and steady view about the area of military/political policy that this thesis is concerned with. For example, Thompson's work, which has been all-but ignored in the historical analysis of this crucial period in Vietnam, provided me with a genuine and intelligible starting place for my thesis direction. As a result of this, my work should add to and hopefully expand the military historians' understanding of what happened in the Counter-Insurgency Operations that were implemented in South Vietnam.

This study also incorporates the perceptions and the advice given Nolting from the CIA's station chief, William Colby,⁴² and the Commanders of the Military advisory, Generals Lionel C. McGarr and Paul D. Harkins. Professor Douglas Pike was a key witness in this context as he was Ambassador Nolting's speechwriter in Saigon and was privy to much of the background discussions that took place between Ambassador Nolting, William Colby and Paul Harkins.

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⁴¹ For references on these memoirs and papers please consult the bibliography at the end of this work.

⁴² This writer has had lengthy discussions with Ambassador Colby about this topic and, as always, Mr. Colby was most helpful with both his time and effort concerned with this particular era in the Vietnam conflict. Indeed, he unequivocally endorsed this writer's understanding that the destruction of Ngo Dinh Diem and his government was a strategic error of incalculable proportions. In his recent address to many distinguished academics and United States Government officials - at the Vietnam Conflict Study Centre at Texas Tech, he made it manifest to all that one of the key turning points of the entirety of American involvement in Southeast Asia was the American encouraged coup which overthrew Diem's government. Even though William Colby has passed away just recently he, nevertheless, gave this writer some very useful interviews and has directed the writer toward sources and documents that he believed would be helpful to this dissertation topic.

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One final note would be that good fortune permitted me to interview William Colby, briefly, less than a week before his untimely demise. Through this interview, combined with my previous discussions with this gentleman, I have been able to piece together a relatively substantial understanding of Colby's perceptions of the Nolting mission in South Vietnam. Colby's perspective, as I believe I will demonstrate accurately within this work, was clear-sighted and realistic from his early days in Vietnam onward.⁴³

To date, this writer's personal study of the thesis area is not inconsiderable. I have submitted three different papers (all of which have been published and used within the academies of the United States Armed Services) at various conferences and lecture sections at the Centre for the Study of the Vietnam Conflict and at the USAF Special Operations School. All of these works were concerned with the critical period of 1961-1963 during which US counter-insurgency policy took a disastrous turn. Likewise, as part of the MA requirements that I fulfilled at the University of Victoria, I undertook a study of President Ngo Dinh Diem and produced a substantial research paper on the subject. This paper incorporated many of the documents that had just been released by the United States Government in 1992. This earlier work on Ngo Dinh Diem is now part of the Vietnam Archive collections at Texas Tech. Dr. James Reckner, the Director of the Vietnam Center at Texas Tech, the leading center of such study in the United States, has supported and advised this work from its inception. Additionally, throughout the process of researching and writing this work I received the support and comments of William Colby before he died. Professor Douglas Pike – now of Texas Tech's Vietnam Center, similarly, has assisted and supported this work. Of considerable value, at least to this writer, was a comment that William Colby made only three days before he died, when he declared "I think you are right - the loss of Diem was a fatal

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⁴³ Larry Cable informed me that I was most certainly the last Canadian student to have the opportunity to discuss this history with Ambassador Colby.

blow to the counter-insurgent effort being made in South Vietnam." Upon completion of my MA oral exams at the University of Victoria, in April of 1992, Professor Ted Wooley of the Department of History confided: "You have caused me to revise my view of Ngo Dinh Diem." To anyone who knew Professor Wooley and his position on the US involvement in the Vietnam conflict - this was a substantial acknowledgement.

This writer's personal involvement in this field, as a regular guest-lecturer at the United States Air-Force Special Operations School - at Hurlburt Field, Florida and as an assistant professor for the American Military University at Manassas, Virginia,⁴⁴ has made contact possible with some of the military men and intelligence officers who were commanders in Vietnam during the period this thesis is concerned with.⁴⁵ Consequently, I have been able to conclude that the particular approach that I have taken and questions that I have dealt with in this thesis offer a distinct possibility for a significant contribution to the field of American Diplomatic/Military History. For example, William Colby - CIA station chief in Vietnam and later Director of the CIA - has informed me that my focus for this study warrants support and endorsement because it attempts to come to grips with the American COIN (Counter- Insurgency) effort by bringing to the field a

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⁴⁴ I have designed, constructed and taught the graduate-level course LW 531/LIC 509 for two academic sessions at the AMU. The course is concerned with insurgency/counter-insurgency questions and, as such, has brought me into close contact with many soldiers who have a keen interest in this area.

⁴⁵ This would include General Theodore C. Mataxis, retired commander of the 82nd. Airborne who, quite apart from his current vocation as a professor at the American Military University, was a field officer in Vietnam.

perspective which uses British COIN (Counter-Insurgency) success as a foundation. This perspective is unique, or so Professor Caesar Sereseres - Social Sciences Department Head, University of California at Irvine, has told me.

GLOSSARY

List of Abbreviations:

- Adm: - Admiral
- AF: - Air Force
- AFB: - Air Force Base
- AP: - Associated Press
- ARVN: - Army of the Republic of Vietnam
- CF: - Conference File
- CG: - Civil Guard
- CIA: - Central Intelligence Agency
- CINCPAC: - Commander in Chief, Pacific
- CINCPACFLT: - Commander in Chief, Pacific Fleet
- CIO: - Central Intelligence Organisation
- CIP: - Counter Insurgency Plan
- Comdr: - Commander
- COMUS Vietnam: - Commander of U.S. Forces, Vietnam
- CP: - Communist Party
- CT: - Country Team
- CY: - Calendar Year
- DA: - Series indicator for telegrams from the Department of Army
- DCM: - Deputy Chief of Mission
- DEF: - Series indicator for telegrams from the Department of Defense
- DefSec: - Secretary of Defense
- Deptel: - Department of State telegram
- Dissem: - dissemination
- DMZ: - Demilitarised zone
- DOD: - Department of Defense
- DRV: - Democratic Republic of Vietnam
- DTG: - date time group
- Embdes(p): - Embassy despatch
- Embtel: - Embassy telegram
- Emtel: - Embassy telegram
- EUR: - Bureau of European Affairs, Department of State
- FE: - Bureau of Far Eastern Affairs, Department of State
- FE/SEA: - Office of Southeast Asian Affairs, Bureau of Far Eastern Affairs, Department of State
- FECON: - Far East Conference
- FO: - Foreign Office
- FSO: - Foreign Service Officer
- FY: - Fiscal Year
- FYI: - For your information
- G: - Deputy Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs
- Gen: - General
- GVN: - Government of Vietnam

- Hq: - Headquarters
- ICC: - International Control Commission
- INR: - Bureau of Intelligence and Research, Department of State
- IO: - Bureau of International Organisation, Department of State
- ISA: - Office of International Security Affairs, Department of Defense
- ISC: - Internal Security Council
- JCS: - Joint Chiefs of Staff
- JCSM: - Joint Chiefs of Staff memorandum
- JGS: - Joint General Staff
- JUSMAG: - Joint U.S. Military Advisory Group
- JUSMAPG: - Joint U.S. Military Advisory and Planning Group
- MAAG: - Military Assistance Advisory Group
- MACV: - Military Assistance Command, Vietnam
- MAP: - Military Assistance Program
- MilAd: - Military Advisor
- MNR: - Vietnamese Political Group
- Niact: - night action; communications indicator requiring attention by the recipient at any hour of the day or night
- NIE: - National Intelligence Estimate
- Noform: - No foreign dissemination
- NPSS: - National Police and Security Service
- NVN: - North Vietnam
- OSA: - Office of the Special Assistant to the Ambassador in Vietnam
- OSD: - Office of the Secretary of Defense
- PAO: - Public Affairs Officer
- PL: - Pathet Lao
- PolAd: - Political Advisor
- PPC: - Policy Planning Council, Department of State
- PPS: - Policy Planning Staff, Department of State
- PsyOps: - Psychological Operations
- PsyWar: - Psychological Warfare
- Radm: - Rear Admiral
- Ref: - reference
- Reftel: - reference telegram
- RVNAF: - Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces
- S: - Office of the Secretary of State
- S/p: - Policy Planning Staff, Department of State
- S/S: - Executive Secretariat, Department of State
- SDC: - Self-Defense Corps
- SEA: - Southeast Asia; Office of Southeast Asian Affairs, Department of State
- SEATO: - Southeast Asian Treaty Organisation
- SecDef: - Secretary of Defense
- Secto: - Series indicator for telegrams from the Secretary of State or his party to the Department of State
- Septel: - separate telegram

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- SGN: - series indicator for telegrams from the Military Assistance Advisory Group in Vietnam
- SNIE: - Special National Intelligence Estimate
- SVN: - South Vietnam
- TF(VN): - Task Force (on Vietnam)
- To sec: - Series indicator for telegrams to the Secretary of State or his party from the Department of State
- TS: - Top Secret
- US/FW: - U.S. Field Worker
- US/MC: - U.S. memorandum of conversation
- USA: - United States Army
- USAF: - United States Air Force
- USARPAC: - U.S. Army, Pacific
- U.S. ELINT: - U.S. Electronic Intelligence
- USFV: U.S. Forces, Vietnam
- USG: - U.S. Government
- USIA: - U.S. Information Agency
- USIS: - U.S. Information Service
- USMACV: - United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam
- USOM: - U.S. Operations Mission
- VNA: - Vietnamese Army
- VC: - Viet Cong
- VM: - Viet Minh
- VN: - Vietnam
- VNAF: - Vietnamese Armed Forces
- Zone D: - Viet Cong jungle base area Northeast of Saigon

Source Note:

The Department of State's publications were used as the source for this material because many of the noted abbreviations in this glossary are concerned with United States Government documents and telegrams. For a full listing of all pertinent abbreviations the reader should consult: John P. Glennon, editor in chief, "List of Abbreviations," in Foreign Relations of the United States: Vietnam, August-December, 1963, Volume IV, 1961 – 1963; (Washington, [DC]: United States Government Printing Office, 1991), pages: XVII – XIX.

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ABSTRACT

This work, entitled "Ambassador Frederick Nolting's Role in American Diplomatic and Military Policy toward South Vietnam (1961-1963)," is concerned with the most salient years of American involvement in Vietnam.

As United States Ambassador, Frederick Nolting was sent over to South Vietnam, in May of 1961. He had departed Washington with President Kennedy's instructions to ameliorate the differences that had grown between the American and Saigon governments and thereby enact a diplomatic rapprochement. Relations had been badly strained between Diem and the previous American Ambassador, Elbridge Durbrow. This problem had arisen out of the fact that the Eisenhower Administration had discovered that Ngo Dinh Diem was not compliant to American direction. Ambassador Durbrow found that it was nearly impossible to carry out Washington's instructions in the presence of the Confucian leadership of Diem. The political expediency of the Occident had reached a fundamental impasse in the enigmatic 'mandate of heaven' of the Orient. Attempting to discern the motivations of a leader not beholden to those political concerns considered normal in the West drove the Americans to distraction. Owing to profound qualities of character Ambassador Nolting was able to turn American – Vietnamese relations in a more amicable direction. In the process of this difficult undertaking, his respect and admiration for Ngo Dinh Diem began to grow, as he became more aware of the basic humility and decency of the Vietnamese leader. As with Edward Geary Lansdale, and others who took the time to get to know Diem, Nolting became a fast friend as surely as he became aware of the man's greatness.

Ambassador Nolting's rapprochement and American policy were undone not by the vast immutable forces of history but, instead, by the political will of powerful individual Americans. W. Averell Harriman was pre-eminent amongst these men of power and he drove all before his will, including President Kennedy. This work carefully traces a documentary trail that makes manifest the fact that when President Diem confronted Harriman over the latter's plan for making Laos 'neutral' he earned the American's undying enmity. From that point forward, Harriman steadily undermined support for Diem. Ap Bac, the Buddhist Crisis, problems with the Strategic Hamlets Program, and the purported North – South Vietnamese dialogue only added more fuel to the fire of Harriman's engine. Frederick Nolting stood in the way of this Harriman direction and he was replaced as Ambassador. Subsequently, Nolting resigned from the State Department in 1964 in protest of what had taken place in South Vietnam.

Regardless of the warnings from the British experts on counter-insurgency warfare, regardless of the support for Diem coming from other concerned Southeast Asian countries such as Australia, the Philippines, Thailand and India, regardless of late-coming official French support for the Vietnamese leader, and even regardless of what their own experts in the field were telling them, the Kennedy administration succumbed to the will of W. Averell Harriman. A classical tragedy ensued: Ngo Dinh Diem was murdered, along with his brother Ngo Dinh Nhu, when they were driven from office in a Kennedy administration supported coup. As entirely predicted before the fact, by Ambassador Nolting and experts such as Sir Robert Thompson and William E. Colby, the United States then found that no other politically legitimate leadership existed in South Vietnam. The Kennedy administration had created a political vacuum, and they were then morally beholden to somehow solve the very problem they had created. This eventually resulted in American troops being sent to South Vietnam.

Truly, "in order to solve a problem that didn't exist the Kennedy Administration created a problem that couldn't be solved."

Dedicated to the Memory of two American Noblemen:

Frederick (Fritz) E. Nolting

&

William E. Colby

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Ngo Dinh Diem: the Enigmatic Confucian -

Immediately preceding Ambassador Frederick Nolting's mission to the Government of South Vietnam, the United States Government's concerns about how to best match their diplomatic and military responses to the evidence of growing strife in the former French colony, were beginning to expand at a prodigious rate. While there had always been some concern over what kind of a man they had allied themselves with, in the person of Ngo Dinh Diem, there had been little doubt about his leadership ability, at least - in these early years, given the fact that out of near absolute political and civil chaos, which predominated the country in 1955, Diem had produced, by 1957, a tenuous stability which was, quite rightly, referred to as a miracle in the American news media publications of the day.¹ Yet, there was a dissatisfaction amongst some American statesmen with the actual character that Diem possessed, this was a man who seemed aloof and impervious to American and French "deal-making".² Diem, in fact, scared many

Footnotes

¹ It was in this year that Eisenhower had praised Diem as the 'miracle man' of Asia and had pledged further American support (John S. Bowman, general editor, The Vietnam War: An Almanac, [New York, [NY]: Random House, Inc., 1985], p. 45). Contemporary printed news-media articles, such as those written in Foreign Affairs, Life, and Time, portrayed Diem in a very favourable light - one of the most ironic being William Henderson's in Foreign Affairs: "We cannot claim credit for selecting Diem or having pushed him into office, but we have since been his most ardent and effective champion." (William Henderson, "South Vietnam Finds Itself," in Foreign Affairs: An American Quarterly Review, v.35, nos. 1-4, October 1956-July 1957, (New York, [NY]: Foreign Affairs, 1957), p. 286.

² In order to placate factions that had been supporting the French against the Communists in the South pressure had been brought to bear on Diem for him to accept a working relationship with certain unsavoury sects or gangs. "Collins and Ely repeatedly urged Diem to seek the broadest possible support

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Westerners as he was a man dedicated to a firm religious and philosophical belief that seemed to give him a quality similar to that of leaders from medieval times. Ngo Dinh Diem was not a modern and, compounding this problem, he was most assuredly not “Western” in his outlook. He could not be bribed, he could not be forced to surrender on principles, he could not be appealed to in terms of practical politics and he could not be coerced.³ He was dangerous because he had

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among all Vietnamese factions in the South.” David L. Anderson, ‘J. Lawton Collins, John Foster Dulles, and the Eisenhower Administration’s “Point of No Return” in Vietnam,’ in Diplomatic History, vol. 12, no.2, (Spring, 1988), p. 132. On this issue alone, a fundamental misunderstanding about Diem’s character was evident, for both Collins and Ely expected Diem, the devout Roman Catholic-Confucian known for his incorruptible and rigidly pious nature, to accept members of the Binh Xuyen into his government. The Binh Xuyen, it should be noted, “was a Mafia-like gang that controlled the vice establishments - brothels, casinos, opium dens - in Saigon and its suburb, Cholon.” Anderson, “Point of No Return In Vietnam,” p. 132. Collins’ mind became set against Diem as he noted in his memoirs: “I had wrestled with this decision for weeks, torn between our commitment to Diem - along with my personal agreement with his objectives - and my growing conviction that despite Diem’s many admirable attributes he did not have the leadership and political know-how to unite the divisive forces of Vietnam in the face of the unity and tough efficiency of the communists under Ho Chi Minh....I had come to admire Diem’s spiritual qualities, his personal incorruptibility, dogged patriotism, and tenacity, but these very qualities, linked with his stubborn reliance on the venal ambitions of his brothers, his lack of political sense, his inability to compromise, and his distrust of anyone who disagreed with him, convinced me he would never make the grade as leader of his country.” General J. Lawton Collins, Lightning Joe: An Autobiography, (Baton Rouge, [Louisiana]: Louisiana State University Press, 1979), p. 404.

³ On April 25, 1961, Brigadier-General Lansdale sent a memorandum to Deputy Secretary of Defense Roswell L. Gilpatric. This memorandum was concerned with the subject of Ngo Dinh Diem’s character - a factor that had been causing a great deal of consternation in American planners’ minds and, indeed, seemed to be undoing what Americans thought was the best direction for the Government of South Vietnam to follow. Yet, in Lansdale’s singularly perceptive assessment of Diem and his character American impatience and immaturity is brought to light as it contrasts so sharply with Ngo Dinh Diem’s steadfastness. Accordingly, while the excerpt from the memorandum is lengthy, it is essential reading as it is the very best rendering ever given of the man Ngo Dinh Diem was - by a Westerner and an American no less. This excerpt can be read in Appendix B. Congress, House, Committee on Armed Services, Brigadier-General Edward Geary Lansdale, “Memorandum For Deputy Secretary Gilpatric - Subject: Ngo Dinh Diem,” (25 April 1961), V.B.4. U.S. Involvement in The War - Internal Documents, The Kennedy Administration: January 1961 - November 1963, in United States - Vietnam Relations, 1945 -1967, Book 1 within Book 11 of 12, Study Prepared by the Department of Defense, Leslie H. Gelb, Chairman OSD Task Force, 92nd Cong., 1st sess., (Washington, [DC]: United States Government Printing Office, 1971), pp. 36 - 41.

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all the hallmarks of a dedicated martyr made so manifest in his unrelenting pursuit of Confucian order in the face of both revolutionary Marxism and Western democracy and capital. Devout Roman Catholics, such as Francis Cardinal Spellman,⁴ were drawn to the man's otherworldly spirituality while the practical soldiers, such as General J. Lawton Collins,⁵ were concerned about his inflexibility.⁶ What the like of Spellman and Collins had difficulty in understanding was the fact that Diem's character and leadership style had proved efficient, practical, and moral, at least for the local Vietnamese, as he had been very successful as a village and province chief in his early twenties.⁷ Thus, the American concerns about his ability to govern, such as those

Footnotes

⁴ Spellman was not the only one drawn to support Diem along Roman Catholic lines and his firm anti-Communist commitments as this group included some very powerful allies such as Senator John F. Kennedy, Senator Mike Mansfield, Kenneth Young of the State Department, Edward Lansdale of the CIA, Allen Dulles - Director of the CIA, and John Foster Dulles, Secretary of State. Robert Scheer, 'The Genesis of United States Support for Ngo Dinh Diem,' in Vietnam: History, Documents and Opinions on a Major World Crisis, Marvin E. Gettleman, editor, (New York, [NY]: Fawcett Publications Inc., 1965), pp. 251-252.

⁵ General J. Lawton Collins was a very competent soldier, proven under Eisenhower's direct command in Europe, and highly trusted by the United States President. Accordingly, Eisenhower had given Collins a special mission to South Vietnam, essentially to reconnoitre the situation with Diem and report back with recommendations of what to do, in this capacity of special envoy, Collins temporarily replaced United States Ambassador Donald Heath in Saigon. Collins had Eisenhower's express authority to oversee the implementation of the entire United States Government aid program in Vietnam. General J. Lawton Collins, Lightning Joe: An Autobiography, pp. 381-382.

⁶ Ellen Hammer had noted that Collins was "...unprepared for this Confucian Catholic patriot who accepted help from Washington, yet resisted American advice when it ran counter to his own strong convictions." Ellen J. Hammer, A Death In November: America in Vietnam, 1963, (New York, [NY]: E.P. Dutton, 1987), p. 71.

⁷ At the age of twenty (in the year 1921) Diem was given the charge of 225 villages wherein he immediately displayed genuine leadership qualities as he developed an efficient counter-strategy to Ho Chi Minh's fledgling Communist Party and its agents. Bernard Fall, The Two Vietnams, p. 239; The editors, "South Vietnam: The Beleaguered Man," in Time, v. LXV, no. 14, (April 4, 1955), page 24.

In 1929 the French rewarded Diem for his efficient work by appointing him (at age twenty-eight) governor of Phan Thiet Province. During the next four years, Diem became well known for honest and

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expressed by General Collins, were not founded upon Vietnamese experience but upon American preconceptions of what good government, universally, should be. The American Roman Catholics made their own error in judgement when they assumed that Diem's Catholicism would necessarily weld him to their view and, thus, make him more amenable to American direction. Diem was a Roman Catholic Confucianist who was most decidedly non-Occidental in his outlook on the spiritual realm.⁸ Indeed, he had even warned French scholars who interviewed him that his sympathies were not with French Catholicism but more closely linked to the middle-eastern mix that was to be found in Spain.⁹ Nevertheless, it is fairly easy to discern how Americans dealing with Diem would expect certain responses and how they became flummoxed and annoyed when the man responded in what, to them, could only be seen as a bizarre or quixotic fashion.

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competent administration and formidable opposition to violent revolutionaries. Bernard Fall, The Two Vietnams: A Political and Military Analysis, second edition, (New York, [NY]: Praeger Publishers, 1967), p. 239. Significantly, Diem depended on following the rule of law in order to maintain order and coercion or oppression were completely rejected - all of which would impress the Vietnamese with regard to his Confucian mandate. Denis Warner, The Last Confucian: Vietnam, South-East Asia, and the West, (New York, [NY]: The Macmillan Company, 1964), p. 89. These crucial legislative features gave Diem a legitimacy that was never doubted by the rural Vietnamese and they were tied very closely to what the British understood to be the most salient issue of countering Communist insurgency.

⁸ Father Piero Gheddo identified another aspect of the problem for modern Westerners to understand the faith of Vietnamese like Diem: "We [i.e., Westerners] now live in a secularised world, while they [i.e., the Roman Catholic Vietnamese] are still in a sacral period, like our Middle Ages." Piero Gheddo, The Cross and The Bo-Tree: Catholics & Buddhists in Vietnam, translated by Charles Underhill Quinn, (New York, [NY]: Sheed & Ward, Inc., 1970), p. 72.

⁹ Bernard Fall, thus, noted: "Ngo Dinh Diem's...faith was made less of the kindness of the apostles than of the ruthless militancy of the Grand Inquisitor ...To a French interlocutor who wanted to emphasise Diem's bonds with French culture by stressing 'our common faith,' Diem was reported to have answered calmly: 'You know, I consider myself rather as a Spanish Catholic,' i.e., a spiritual son of a fiercely aggressive and militant faith rather than of the easygoing and tolerant approach to Gallican Catholicism." Fall, The Two Vietnams, Second Edition, p. 236.

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The Communists invoke Strategic Paralysis through the Implementation of a Terror Campaign: "The Destruction of the Oppression" –

Regardless of the concerns expressed about the enigma of Diem's character, he had managed to produce order out of chaos and in a relatively short period of time. Diem's Communist adversaries were realists and by 1958 they understood that they had a problem on their hands as South Vietnam was not disintegrating into the kind of chaos which would have made a reintegration with the North a foregone conclusion.¹⁰ They also understood that there were many grievances which they could exploit and organise in the form of an indigenous political movement in the South - no emerging nation, at least in Southeast Asia, was immune from such problems.¹¹ But political action with a duly subordinated military/terror campaign

Footnotes

¹⁰ William Colby phrased the issue this way: "The communists basically had gone into a holding pattern in 1954, believing that Diem was going to collapse. So did most of the rest of the world. The communists had withdrawn some fifty thousand of their people back to the north. They had put their networks into a state of stay-behind--suspension--and there really wasn't much problem." William Colby, "William E. Colby on Vietnam, Interview I." Recorded interview by Ted Gittinger, June 2, 1981, p. 1., Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, Oral History Program; (Transcript copies available from the LBJ Library Oral History Program, University of Texas at Austin).

¹¹ Sir Robert Thompson gives a competent overview of these problems in the following excerpt from his work. "The Second World War, then, and its aftermath, gave the Communist Parties in both countries [Malaya and Vietnam] the opportunity to build up strength based on the resistance movements to the Japanese and to collect an initial stock of weapons with which to arm their guerrilla units.... Every insurgency, particularly a communist revolutionary one, requires a cause. Resistance to the Japanese was no longer valid, but it had given an air of respectability to the Communist Party, which was a valuable heritage not to be lightly discarded. For this reason every effort was made to adopt causes which appeared legitimate, progressive and desirable. The basic cause was ready at hand: anti-colonialism...It did not quite fit the situation prevailing in Vietnam after 1954, but by twisting the cause to anti-imperialism it could be made to apply to the United States' presence in South Vietnam at the invitation and in support of the Ngo Dinh Diem government.

Given a basic cause, many other issues can be tacked onto it, such as land for the landless, exploitation of labour on estates and mines, regional autonomy for ethnic minorities and political equality

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was what was required to break the bonds being formed between the Diem government and the people.

After penetrating the village, the Dang Lao Dong set about to destroy the "social adhesive" that had traditionally integrated the villager into his society and provided him with a sense of identity....the South Vietnamese Government enjoyed at the outset...an "inertial relationship" between itself and the village. Simply put, the village was to respond to the demands of the Government, no matter how weak the presence, because there were no other authoritarian demands from other directions. This relationship, undisturbed, integrated the Government and the villages into a single social structure....The Party's intensified campaign to break those bonds began on a nation-wide scale in mid-1957. By March 1958, Bernard Fall noted that the Party had assassinated more than 400 village officials. In Dinh Tuong Province, the first mention of systematic destruction of Government presence appeared in early 1959, when the Party embarked on the assassination of schoolteachers. This campaign, which was concentrated in the key Mekong Delta provinces of Long An, Kien Hoa, and Dinh Tuong, contributed to the subsequent lack of schooling for nearly 30,000 children - children who, to the advantage of the Party, were no longer in contact with the Government of South Viet-Nam.

The first wave of Party terror was called the Destruction of the Oppression and marked the partial emergence of the Dang Lao Dong from its

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for immigrant races with the indigenous races. At the same time, all local seeds of conflict within a community can be exploited, as between young and old, between progressive and traditional, between different religions and races, and even between local capitalists and foreign capitalists. There is always some issue that has an appeal to each section of the community, and, even if dormant, an inspired incident may easily revive it in an acute form. This particularly applies during the course of the insurgency itself, when new causes can be developed from events, and, if necessary, old ones be forgotten. For example, the dominant cause in Vietnam in the summer of 1965 is to drive the American forces out. The fact that, but for the insurgency, they would not have been there can be conveniently ignored. It is simple enough to confuse cause and effect....All governments are vulnerable to criticism, and every grievance, shortcoming or abuse will be exploited....Above all the communist appeal is directed to youth. For the intellectual there is the ideological appeal of communism; for the uneducated there is the appeal of change. The rural youth in Asia was no longer prepared to accept the humdrum existence of village rural life, where the most he could expect was to succeed his father on a small plot of land. The desire to escape from this rut was closely allied with a desire for further education, so that he could take his place in a modern progressive community. Stated in one phrase, communism appeared to offer the cheapest and quickest passport to modernity." Sir Robert Thompson, Defeating Communist Insurgency: Experiences from Malaya and Vietnam, (London: Chatto & Windus, 1966), pp. 21 - 23.

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organisational phase. Most knowledgeable sources agree that the Destruction of the Oppression moved into full swing in late 1959 or early 1960 in Dinh Tuong.¹²

The Communists intentions, through the means of terrorism, were not merely “selective” but overarching, as they were designed for the purpose of frightening the people away from helping and supporting the government; indeed, as they testified themselves:

“Our purpose was not only to eliminate those who could be harmful to the movement but also with a view toward making the people afraid and to prevent them from co-operating with the government.”¹³

Or, as Alexander Dallin and George W. Breslauer noted in their study on Political Terror In Communist Systems: “Even a mistaken assumption or vague rumour in the population that arbitrary repression is about to occur may be as productive of terror as its purposive use.”¹⁴

Thus, the Communist assessment was correct and precise in exactly who had to be targeted in order that the ‘Diem miracle’ be brought to an end and, indeed, the political legitimacy of his

Footnotes

¹² William R. Andrews, The Village War: Vietnamese Communist Revolutionary Activities in Dinh Tuong Province, 1960 - 1964, (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1973), pp. 51, 54 & 55.

Andrews’ contentions are supported by Rand Corporation and Military Assistance Command, Vietnam J-2, Studies of the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam, (Saigon: Mimeographed); DT-86, p. 2; DT-99, p. 2; DT-84, p. 2; DT-88, p. 1.

¹³ Vietnam J-2, Studies of the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam, (Saigon: the Rand Corporation, Mimeographed), DT-99, p. 2. Found in the notes of Andrews, The Village War, pp. 51, 54 & 55.

¹⁴ Alexander Dallin and George W. Breslauer, Political Terror in Communist Systems, (Stanford, [Calif.]: Stanford University Press, 1970), p. 5. The authors go on to note why Communist systems are so dependent on the use of terror: “Most instances of massive political terror under Communism appear to have served the functions of destroying or inhibiting all rival authorities, and of insulating the population from all incongruent value systems. The net effect is to eliminate all organised political opposition and to facilitate socialisation by exposing the population to a single, unchallenged system of values.” p. 7.

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government challenged to the point where it would become not viable. Specifically, the Communists were targeting Diem's leadership, which had a thorough and unique legitimacy in Vietnamese culture. ¹⁵

There was a French scholar, Paul Mus, who was well-acquainted with both Ho Chi Minh and Ngo Dinh Diem and he had acquired an insight into what constituted Vietnamese leadership legitimacy: these were moral qualities that both men had and both knew it. "Only one man could ever hope to challenge Ho Chi Minh for leadership – Ngo Dinh Diem. Because he alone has the same reputation for virtue and austerity as Ho. Vietnamese will only follow a man who is known to be virtuous and who leads an austere life."¹⁶ Paul Mus gave Ellen Hammer this revelation when she interviewed him in Paris; he was an individual who had grown up in Vietnam and had acted as an official French emissary to Ho Chi Minh early in the war. He was well acquainted with the Vietnamese and his expertise was held in the highest regard by the French Government. Mus' expert observations on Diem had been related to the Americans back in 1948, and, as such, they constitute praise for the man and leader that Diem was, while, at the same time, warning the Americans that Diem could not be used as 'their man.'¹⁷

Footnotes

¹⁵ Hammer, *A Death In November*, p. 47.

¹⁶ General Nguyen Khanh told this writer virtually the same thing in an interview. When asked what lay at the core of Diem's greatness Khanh answered without hesitation: "The number one thing was the example of the way of his life; how he lived his life. He sacrificed himself! He didn't even have a good bed to sleep on – he slept on an army cot!" General Nguyen Khanh, "Interview with General Khanh." Recorded interview by Geoffrey DT Shaw. June 16, 1994 (USAF Special Operations School, Hurlburt Field, Florida), p. 61. Transcript available through the Vietnam Center at Texas Tech or USAFSOS.

¹⁷ Hammer, *A Death In November*, p. 47.

The 'Destruction of the Oppression' –

The “Destruction of the Oppression,” as the terror campaign was called, spanned the gamut between (and including) few to no killings to outright massacre and slaughter which, even the Americans at their undisciplined worst,¹⁸ would have been hard-pressed to match:

At other times, in different circumstances, the terror of the Destruction of the Oppression, which apologists for the Party have often excused on the grounds that it was “selective,” could take on the appearance of a charnel house. In a Cai Lay village that had changed hands between the Front and the South Vietnamese Government four times in as many years, twenty persons, including women, were accused of being Government spies: “They all had their heads cut off and their bodies were thrown in the street. On them were pinned the charges written on a piece of paper. Government cadres were terrorised... and slow[ed] down their activities.”¹⁹

The scene of another particularly bestial execution was visited by Malcome Browne. The hamlet chief in this instance had been tied to a stake in the middle of the market place in full view of the assembled villagers. The man was slowly disembowelled, his children decapitated, and his pregnant wife then tied to the same stake and similarly disembowelled.”²⁰

The Communists clearly understood that terror worked best when it paralysed the greatest amount of people and thus it was most effective when it would seem to be only partially

Footnotes

¹⁸ Even what went on at My Lai 4, many years later, paled in comparison to what the Communists demonstrated they were capable of during their campaign of the “Destruction of the Oppression.”

¹⁹ W.P. Davison, Some Observations on Viet Cong Operations in the Villages, (Santa Monica, [California]: The Rand Corporation, 1967), p. 25.

²⁰ Malcome Browne, The New Face of War, (New York, [NY]: Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1965), p. 103.

selective to the villagers - much like lightning, wherein no-one could predict who would get hit next.

The Party at times accused and then executed or humiliated certain persons for their pro-Government activities when even a cursory examination would have revealed the charges to be baseless. Had the Party been consistently discriminatory, eliminating only those persons widely known to be class enemies, then the terror would have become highly predictable and incapable of creating the desired level of anxiety response among the villagers.²¹

In his studies, tours, and interviews within South Vietnam, author William R. Andrews, determined that the killings of village officials, schoolteachers, public-health workers, and other civil servants reached its peak in the year 1963 with a definite decline noticed in 1964.²² Andrews has argued that the sharp drop in killings of Government civil workers in 1964 was owing to a combination of factors such as: in the first place, by 1964, the Destruction of the Oppression had been effective in eliminating Government workers from areas that had been penetrated by the Party earlier on;²³ secondly, he argues, that the South Vietnamese officials in the rural areas, by this time, were no longer exposing themselves to the Party cadre and, thus, were avoiding death; in this avoidance, Andrews states that the officials were no longer exposing

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²¹ Andrews, *The Village War*, pp. 57 - 58.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 60.

²³ *Ibid.*

the population of the rural villages to the Government.²⁴ Here are the figures which Andrews has drawn attention to and, indeed, which are relevant to the arguments being made:²⁵

Year	Assassinations
1957 – 1960	1,700
1961	1,300
1962	1,700
1963	2,000
1964	500

(These figures of Andrews are supported by the studies of Douglas Pike and warrant careful consideration in light of the thesis at hand.²⁶)

There is, however, a third explanation which has overarching strategic implications and is linked directly to the central thesis of this study and, of rational necessity, is irrefutably linked to the central tenets of insurgency warfare; and that explanation is that by 1964, it was no longer necessary to kill civil workers and discredit the GVN to the same extent because the Government's most powerful and substantial pillar of political legitimacy had been removed, i.e., Ngo Dinh Diem; and, accordingly, even with military power attempting (in futility) to fill the political vacuum left behind by the demise of Diem it was just a matter of time before the whole structure collapsed. Communist though they were, the insurrectionists were also Vietnamese and they knew that soldiers could never take the place of a moral, ascetic-scholar, Confucianist leader like Diem in the hearts and the minds of the average Vietnamese. The

Footnotes

²⁴ *ibid.*, p. 61.

²⁵ *ibid.*, p. 60.

²⁶ Douglas Pike, *Viet Cong*, (Cambridge, [MA]: MIT Press, 1966), p. 102.

importance of the strategic political victory gained in the murder of Ngo Dinh Diem cannot be minimised as the reader shall discern upon reading this study.

Probably not even in their wildest dreams could the Communists have imagined that it would be the Americans who would help them the most in undermining Ngo Dinh Diem and bringing his government down in ruins. Ho Chi Minh and Vo Nguyen Giap both knew the quality of their adversary in Ngo Dinh Diem; they knew that the moral example set by this scholarly gentleman cut across all levels of Vietnamese society, including the newest and shallowest imposed through contact with modernity (i.e., during the World War and during their increasing contact with things Western brought in by the French), and that his example as a true Confucian leader, who had the mandate of heaven, was the most formidable obstacle they would face in reintegrating all of Vietnam under their revolutionary government.²⁷ They both had tried,²⁸ Giap on a number of occasions and Ho on one important attempt, to win Diem over to

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²⁷ Ho and Giap knew exactly where Diem was placed in terms of Vietnamese custom and respect: "The Confucian ethic and the Taoist concept of universal harmony and universal order totally disregard material wealth. In the Vietnamese hierarchy of values, a rich man is a *troc phu* (filthy rich), and a poor scholar is *thanh ban* (immaculate poor). The traditional Vietnamese social order followed this scale: first, the *si* (scholars, men of letters); second, the *nong* (peasants, farmers); third, the *cong* (workers); fourth, the *thuong* (businessmen, merchants); and fifth, and last, the *binh* (soldiers)." Tran Van Dinh, "Why Every American Should Read Kim Van Kieu," in *We The Vietnamese: Voices From Vietnam*, Francois Sully, ed., (New York, [NY]: Praeger Publishers, Inc., 1971), pp. 236 - 237. If anything, the upstarts against Vietnamese tradition were more truly found in these two Communist revolutionaries who certainly managed to maintain the Confucian veneer - which they realised was so necessary in order to assure political legitimacy in the eyes of the Vietnamese people. But in Diem, Ho and Giap were up against the genuine article, Diem's family and background placed the mantle of Confucian authority on him and his character confirmed what Vietnamese wisdom and tradition had anointed by birth.

²⁸ During the immediate pre-Second World War years (and during the war itself) Diem used to meet with Vietnamese nationalists from across the political spectrum at secret meetings in Saigon. Their talk was of revolution, but no concrete plans emerged. In fact, the only significant event that occurred at these meetings in terms of Diem's political development was his opportunity to meet, assess and influence Vo Nguyen Giap, the later successful commander of the Viet-Minh. Resisting Diem's non-socialist

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their cause and they had failed.²⁹ But they also sensed that the Americans were Diem's Achilles-heel and that through them a successful assault on Diem's legitimacy was their best hope.

At this point, the reader might wish to refer back to the discussion in the bibliographical section of the introduction which was concerned with just who was responsible for the insurrection in the South, i.e., incompetent administration or a carefully planned Communist stay-behind or "sleeper" organisation.³⁰ This writer believes that Professor Pike has the most and the best supporting evidence in his argument (duly noted in the introduction) that confirms the fact that all evidence pointed toward a superb Communist insurgent organisational infrastructure being in place even before Diem had truly taken up the reins of power.³¹

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approach, Giap, in return attempted to convert Diem. Neither was successful, although they did earn each other's mutual respect and admiration. Robert Shaplen, "A Reporter In Vietnam: Diem," in The New Yorker, (Sept. 22, 1962), p. 108.

²⁹ In September, 1945, the Vietminh had murdered Diem's brother, Khoi,, and, having been captured himself, Diem was brought before Ho Chi Minh. Ho tried to convince Diem to work with him and the Vietminh. Diem refused, bluntly stating that he could never work with the murderers of his brother and that he had nothing in common with the destroyers of his country. Deeply impressed with Diem's raw courage, all the while protesting that he knew nothing of Khoi's murder, Ho amazingly informed Diem that he was free to go. Stanley Karnow, Vietnam: A History, (New York, [NY]: Viking Press/Penguin Books, 1984), pp. 216 - 217. Karnow was able to have this story confirmed in early 1981 by the propaganda chief of the Vietnamese Communist Party, Hoang Tung. Mr. Tung indicated to Karnow that Ho's leniency toward Diem had been a mistake.

³⁰ The "sleeper" or stay-behind argument, as noted earlier, is strongly endorsed by William Colby.

³¹ Professor Pike also makes it abundantly clear that, even before there was a Ngo Dinh Diem government, the Communists had an overarching strategy which was based upon the reunification of all Vietnam under the Party: "The goal of unification, one Vietnam under the Party's banner, became an objective as soon as it became a problem at the 1954 Geneva Conference. Not liberation of the South, nor a revolution in the society there, but unification alone was the Party's undeviating purpose until it was achieved nearly twenty years later. The Party never hid this fact, as even a casual inspection of its pronouncements and leader's speeches through the years clearly demonstrates....The question of how to deal with the South had long plagued the Party. Failure to assign priority to the region in the early 1950s resulted in the Party's inability to seize the opportunity offered by the French withdrawal. Later in the

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Certainly, as the reader will be able to peruse in the final chapters of this work, the Communists in the North made no attempt to hide the fact that they controlled the insurrection in the South. This was made manifest in their clandestine proposals to Ngo Dinh Nhu in 1963 when they put out 'feelers' to the beleaguered Diem government for a cease-fire in exchange for the beginning of an American withdrawal from Vietnam. Indeed, author Seymour M. Hersh predicated his understanding, that the Kennedy Administration engineered and supported the coup which removed Diem from power in November of 1963, on the argument that Kennedy and his officials became alarmed at the evidence that the Ngo Dinh's were, in fact, going to come to such terms with the North.³² Hersh, of course, made this point very clear and quite compelling in his book, The Dark Side of Camelot, quoting from Mieczyslaw Maneli, a Polish diplomat, who

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decade, uncertainty as to how to proceed continued, although the picture painted by some historians - the Party passively waiting for the South to collapse - is inaccurate. The Party had a clear objective, unification, and a strategy that was dynamic even if unsuccessful....The sense of the 1954 Sixth Plenum contained the hope, as opposed to the expectation, that the French and other participants in the conference would 'implement' the agreement and bring about unification. Meantime, political struggle pressure would be applied in the South to help topple the shaky Ngo Dinh Diem government....The second period was the revolutionary guerrilla war phase, from 1959 until late 1964, when unification was sought by means of a mix of armed struggle, in the form of revolutionary guerrilla war, and political struggle, through the instrument of the National Liberation Front. The expectation was that the two prongs could create sufficient social pathology, anarchy, and simple chaos to bring down the Diem government and lead eventually to a government amenable to unification. The strategy did indeed tear up the South Vietnamese society. It also was militarily effective. By 1964 the Party controlled two-thirds of the country's 2,500 villages." Douglas Pike, History of Vietnamese Communism, 1925 - 1976, (Stanford, [Calif.]: Hoover Institution Press - Stanford University, 1978), pp. 115 - 118.

³² "Allen Whiting, a China scholar who was a State Department intelligence officer in 1963, told me that he and most of his colleagues 'all thought that this Nhu-Diem tie with the North was a very live possibility.' The talks posed risks to the senior officials making policy, he added: 'You don't want Diem and Nhu to cut a deal with the North and tell us to get the hell out.'" Seymour M. Hersh, The Dark Side of Camelot, (Boston, [MA]: Little, Brown and Company, 1997), p. 423.

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sounded out Hanoi and Saigon government leaders for the purposes of bringing about a negotiated neutrality:

How does it happen that the National Liberation Front is...less active now than during the period before the [present Buddhist] crisis in the Diem regime? At the present time, the Diem-Nhu regime is so weak that a larger partisan offensive could end up in the liquidation of the South Vietnamese administration, leaving only American units on the battle-field. Hanoi must be aware of this, as are many outside observers. If the government in Hanoi does not undertake an offensive designed to remove Diem and Nhu from Saigon, this is certainly because it wishes them to survive for a time yet – long enough to come to an agreement with them behind the Americans' backs.³³

In his studies concerned with the late 1950's in South Vietnam, scholar Dennis Duncanson, confirmed the Douglas Pike argument - as he had observed that the Communists had not been idle during and since President Diem's initial triumphs over the sects (Binh Xuyen, Cao Dai, and Hoa Hao).³⁴ According to Duncanson they had left a 'sleeper' or a hidden party base in

Footnotes

³³ *ibid.*, p. 422.

³⁴ The sects, the Cao Dai, the Hoa Hao, and the criminal Binh Xuyen, had been a challenge to Diem's political legitimacy right from the beginning of his government. Fall, The Two Vietnams, second edition, p. 239. For these sects not only had access to a bounty of arms and soldiers willing to fight in their hire, but also, at least in the case of the Binh Xuyen, they had purchased officials and police in Saigon. Dennis J. Duncanson, Government and Revolution In Vietnam, (London: Oxford University Press, [Issued under the Auspices of the Royal Institute of International Affairs], 1968), pp. 220 - 221. "Diem's status with the sects was not that of a national leader but that of an irritating and, unless checked, potentially dangerous rival. Le Van Vien (alias Bay Vien) knew that moralist Diem was unlikely to be tempted to accept a share of the profits from the activities of the 1,200 young ladies who offered their services at the Hall of Mirrors. General Soai and his followers and the Cao Dai also understood that the chance to dip their hands into the French cornucopia was rapidly coming to an end and that they would need to move fast to establish other claims." Warner, The Last Confucian, p. 98.

Diem's victory over the sects was, by no means imaginable, a foregone conclusion. For, by March of 1955, with the loyalty of the army still in question (the fledgling ARVN), Bao Dai turned against Diem and sought to have Bay Vien replace him. Hammer, A Death In November, p. 71. Despite threats of a violent coup (Edward Geary Lansdale, In The Midst of Wars: An American's Mission to Southeast Asia, [New York, [NY]: Harper & Row, 1972], p. 258), Diem resisted those ambitions and even decided to challenge the Binh Xuyen's control over the police. He knew that "as a matter of both government integrity

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most villages,³⁵ and threats, coercion and selective assassinations kept peasants in a perpetual state of terror.³⁶ The excuse of not holding the Geneva Accord's designated re-unification

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and his own survival, the police must be under his control." Anderson, "Point of No Return In Vietnam," p. 132.

Meanwhile, with the Cao Dai controlling the country west of Saigon, the Hoa Hao holding the southern delta, and the Binh Xuyen in charge of Saigon, the Viet Minh commanded large areas of South Vietnam where "Diem had nothing with which to enforce his authority." Warner, The Last Confucian, p. 99.

³⁵ Duncanson, Government and Revolution In Vietnam, p. 252.

³⁶ Understanding terror and how it can be used effectively is to comprehend, perhaps, the most salient foundation stone of Communist insurrection. Mao was right when he noted that power came from out of the barrel of a gun, but he neglected to refine this philosophy any further to the fact that Communist political legitimacy was founded on terror. Terror has several facets and can be manifested in a variety of ways but political/military terror has a specific purpose in its application. The pre-eminent military historian and thinker, JFC Fuller, first duly noted this purpose. In formulating the foundations of what became known as 'Blitzkrieg' Fuller had described the precise military benefits of terror in what he described as 'strategic paralysis.' Carefully selected targets, attacked and destroyed, transmitted the psychological phenomenon of paralysing terror wherein large groups of people, soldiers or civilians, are rendered incapable of organising resistance, at least, in the short term. Thus, for a very low expenditure in resources and wastage of human life, a great number of potential adversaries could be knocked-out without destroying them. To facilitate this transmission of paralysis, Fuller advocated that armies must attempt to destroy their opponents command and control centres (what he called a blow to the brains of the body) while leaving the actual communication links between units untouched in order to spread the terror of rumours, false orders, etc., all the faster. All that the Communists did, when down-sizing this kind of direct military strategic paralysis for civilian insurrectionist use, was to target key-government employees in the villages and hamlets and make sure that their horrific demise was transmitted to all the surrounding areas so that everyone got the message and was, thus, rendered helpless in supporting the government (it also helped if this terror seemed to have no method so as to appear as if a strike by lightning - so that no-one could feel safe in a pattern of non-commitment). This was an intelligent, cost-effective, and cold-blooded way of destroying the bonds between the incumbent government and the people in the field, it was also completely beyond the pale of moral restraint as it moved outside the areas prescribed by international laws in dealing with non-combatants in a time of war. This Communist insurrectionist strategy drew non-combatants into the line of fire in more ways than one, not least of these being the simple fact that government troops would eventually grow tired and angry at the constant sullen responses they got when interrogating civilians in the villages and hamlets about the presence of insurgents (remembering that these villagers were being sullen and quiet because they had just witnessed the disembowelling of a village chief or even a relative and they did not relish the same fate for themselves). Government troop reprisals against civilians would eventually occur which would then allow the Communist insurgents to take on the new found role of protector of the oppressed peasant. The civilian was clearly marked as the cannon fodder for this kind of deliberate action-reaction terror campaign provoked by the Communists.

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elections was a convenient propaganda tool for the Communists as they increased the pressure on the Diem government in the form of ever-escalating terror:

There was no period when selective assassination of village authorities, incautious about concealing their antipathy to the DRV, ceased to occur frequently; but after Ngo Dinh Diem repudiated demands for all-Vietnam elections, the rate at which murders were committed (hardly ever humanely) seems to have increased faster; although the Government's limited administrative control obscured much of what was going on, it is now generally thought that during the nine years that Diem was in power close on 20,000 people lost their lives in this way - the equivalent of an annual murder in every administrative village.³⁷

Sir Robert Thompson noted that the published figures for murders and abductions, that were part of the Communist insurgents' terror campaign, exceeded 12,000 civilians and government workers for the one year period between 1960 and 1961.³⁸ But what had really prompted the terror campaign was the fact that Diem's government had been so successful in bringing about a relative sense of peace and stability in rural South Vietnam during the three-year period after 1955. Another British counter-insurgency expert, P.J. Honey, who was attached to Robert Thompson's advisory mission to President Diem, had made a precise note of this:

The country has enjoyed three years of relative peace and calm in which it has been able to carry on the very necessary work of national reconstruction. The most destructive feature in the national life of Vietnam throughout recent years has been the lack of security in the countryside, which obliged farmers and peasants to abandon the ricefields and to flee to the large cities for safety. Today it is possible to travel all over South Vietnam without any risk. The army and

Footnotes

³⁷ Duncanson, Government and Revolution in Vietnam, p. 252.

³⁸ Thompson, Defeating Communist Insurgency, p. 27.

*security forces have mopped up most of the armed bands of political opponents of the Government, of Communists and of common bandits.*³⁹

The purpose of the terror, then, was not to seek retribution for the failed elections as, in fact, the Communists in the North were in no position to hold such elections,⁴⁰ but, instead, its

Footnotes

³⁹ Congress, House, Committee on Armed Services, Rebellion Against My-Diem, Evolution of the War - Origins of the Insurgency, 1954 - 1960 in United States-Vietnam Relations: 1945-1967, IV. A., 5. Tab 2., Book 2 of 12, Study Prepared by the Department of Defense, Leslie H. Gelb, Chairman OSD Task Force, 92nd Cong., 1st sess., (Washington, [DC]: United States Government Printing Office, 1971), p. 46.

⁴⁰ Edward Geary Lansdale had predicted just prior to when the plebiscite for the 1956 elections was to be held that the North, itself, would probably find a convenient way around the process and blame the South for ruining the agreement - because they had serious political problems, of their own making, in North Vietnam. In a concise manner, Lansdale informed John Foster Dulles that the Hanoi officials had destroyed much good-will and positive public opinion in the North through their brutal and inept attempts at land-reform: "The Communist land reform program had been carried out in too radical a fashion, too abruptly, with even small family farms taken away from the owners and handed over not to the poor, but to the village never-do-wells, beggars, and the indolent. Apparently the thought was that when they failed at farming, the farms then could be impounded by the state as idle land and be made into collectivised state farms. Rural sections of North Vietnam were in revolt, especially in Ho Chi Minh's home province of Hghe An where troops were called in to re-establish governmental control." Lansdale, In The Midst of Wars, p. 346.

Perhaps, the most thorough-going examination of the land-reform bungling which led to open revolt in the North was rendered by Professor Pike in his book on The History of Vietnamese Communism, 1925-1976, pp. 108 - 113.

In addition to land-reform excesses and brutalities, the Ho Chi Minh regime was hardly in a position to be accusing Diem's government of Geneva Accords violations as, indeed, the Communists had been involved in several serious violations not least of which included the fact that they had been building up the offensive capabilities of their armies: "The United Kingdom had cited in 1956 an increase in the DRV armed forces from 7 to 20 divisions and evoked the 1958 denunciation of the French Minister of Foreign Affairs for the DRV's increasing its military strength from a 1954 total of 200,000 to 550,000. The White Paper castigated Hanoi for 'introducing 600 to 700 Chinese instructors' and noted that 'the number of Russian and Chinese advisors amounts to several thousand in all echelons of the Army.'" Congress, House, Committee on Armed Services, Failure of the Geneva Settlement, Evolution of the War - Origins of the Insurgency, 1954 - 1960, in United States-Vietnam Relations: 1945-1967, IV. A. 5. Tab 1. Book 2 of 12, Study Prepared by the Department of Defense, Leslie H. Gelb, Chairman OSD Task Force, 92nd Cong., 1st sess., (Washington, [DC]: United States Government Printing Office, 1971), pp. 29 - 30.

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purpose was to break the growing bonds between the people and the Government of South Vietnam.⁴¹ This terror, in turn, would bring about strategic paralysis in the governing of South Vietnam as the Communists hoped that the people would be paralysed, through fear, from taking action in support of the GVN. In essence, it was the beginning of an all out effort to destroy the legitimacy of Ngo Dinh Diem and his government.⁴² While this attack on the political and moral legitimacy of the Diem government was already underway at the tactical, village level in South Vietnam,⁴³ in May of 1959, at the fifteenth plenum of the Communist Central Committee, the leaders of North Vietnam made the formal decision to strategically direct the entire insurgency campaign in the South. The North Vietnamese Communist leadership had a number of options to consider in undertaking this action, as author William R. Andrews noted:

By 1956, the strength of President Ngo Dinh Diem's political base and the apparent economic progress in South Viet-Nam made the likelihood of the fledgling Government folding upon itself remote. After 1956, it seemed that only force could unite the two halves of Viet-Nam.

A conventional attack by Ho Chi Minh's People's Army of Viet-Nam patterned after the invasion of South Korea probably would have succeeded because the Army of the Republic of Viet-Nam was weak and fragmented, but two factors mitigated against such a move: world opinion and the alternative means possessed by the Lao Dong to destroy the South Vietnamese

Footnotes

⁴¹ Andrews, The Village War, p. 20.

⁴² "Disorientation is the objective par excellence of the terrorist removing the underpinnings of the order in which his targets live out their daily lives. The primary responsibility of any incumbent group is to guarantee order to its population, and the terrorist will attempt to disorient the population by demonstrating that the incumbent's structure cannot give adequate support." Thomas Perry Thorton, "Terror As A Weapon of Political Agitation," in Internal War: Problems and Approaches, Harry Eckstein, ed., (New York, [NY]: The Free Press, 1968), p. 83.

⁴³ This argument is also supported by RAND studies; see Stephen T. Hosmer's, Viet Cong Repression and Its Implications For The Future, R-475/1-ARPA - A Report prepared for the Advanced Research Projects Agency, (Santa Monica, [Calif.]: The Rand Corporation, 1970), p. 7 - 8.

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Government...The alternative means possessed by the Dang Lao Dong bypassed the difficulties of conventional military action; that means was revolutionary guerrilla warfare. Conditions in South Viet-Nam, no matter how improved, were advantageous for such an undertaking.⁴⁴

William Colby's observations on the progress that Diem had made support the argument that the Communists had little choice but to attack with political terror and violence if they were not to lose the South but, potentially, the North as well. Colby noted that the Communists were well aware of the fact that their campaign to win the people over was going nowhere in the face of the GVN's programs to rebuild the basic rural infrastructure of the South. He called what the Diem government was managing to do, between the years of 1956 to 1959, "...the total social and economic regeneration of South Vietnam." Villages that had been abandoned during the Viet Minh war were re-populated and new schools were being built in rapid order. For example, Colby noted that in one particular province that he visited, at the end of the Viet Minh war, there had only been two or three schools, all in the province capital, however, by the spring of 1959 there were approximately forty new schools spread throughout the province.⁴⁵ As such, these

Footnotes

⁴⁴ Andrews, The Village War, pp. 20 – 21.

⁴⁵ "...he (Diem) consolidated his position by about 1956 and was engaged in a very vigorous economic and social development program at that point, which was proving quite successful (page #: 1)certainly the communists weren't going anywhere. They may have gone up to the North and said, "If you don't do something, we are dead." Because what was really happening was the total social and economic regeneration of South Vietnam. That's what happened between 1956 and 1959. I went to little schools out in the country being dedicated down in the swamps of Ca Mau. This one, I remember doing it, it was way out along the canal and they were dedicating this new school...But the interesting thing about it was I asked about this little village where the school was. Well, the village had been evacuated during the period of the war and in about 1952 or 1953 had been just evacuated and everybody gone. About 1957 or 1958 they had re-established the village and people had moved back to it. Then with the government program of assistance to schools and training of teachers, they were re-establishing this school in this little village. It was way out, ten miles, fifteen miles something, far from the provincial capital. I went to the

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were practical and, thus, powerful indicators to the ordinary Vietnamese peasant that Diem had their best interests at the forefront of his focus on rebuilding the country. They were also powerful indicators to the Communists that their campaign was finished unless they some how could break the people from the GVN.⁴⁶ He had come to believe that the Communists were left without a hope of assuming political leadership and authority in South Vietnam unless they turned, yet again, to violence and insurgency. In this context, then, Colby told his interviewer that he had personally verified this regeneration that was so devastating to the Communists:

Ted Gittinger (LBJ Library): Did you verify that?

Colby: "Yes. There's no question about it, that that had happened. In other words, there was a revival of the economic life [my emphasis]. You saw it in the rice production, for instance, totals, the increase of rice being sold and so forth. A variety of things of that nature were going on. The land reform that's been criticised, the land reform did take the land away from the French owners, and very substantial quantities of it. The program of industrialisation, building up a little industrial zone around Saigon,...the country had an enormous amount of momentum....And of course the communists' conclusion out of this was, no chance. No chance of playing a role, and we're being crushed by the

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provincial capital, to the office of education there, after having been there and looked at their map. You know, they had a comparative map of the number of schools they had in 1954, which was about two or three, all in the capital or the district capitals, and the number of schools they had in 1959 – this was in the spring of 1959 – which was in the order of thirty or forty in the province. Now, that had happened." William Colby, "William E. Colby on Vietnam, Interview I." Recorded interview by Ted Gittinger, (June 2, 1981), pp. 1, 7 & 8, Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, Oral History Program, University of Texas at Austin.

⁴⁶ Edward Geary Lansdale's observations about what faced the Communists correspond, precisely, to the Colby analysis. "Paradoxically, the Communist campaign of terrorism started just as life in the countryside was beginning to show great promise for the people on the land. It wasn't only that the armies had departed from the former battlegrounds in the rice paddies, letting farmlands be tilled in peace; there were, as well, a multitude of new efforts being made to improve the whole agrarian economy of Vietnam. Each time that I visited President Diem in his office, I would find him deep in the study of some new program, often of vast dimensions..." Lansdale, In The Midst of Wars, p. 354.

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*momentum of the government, by this positive momentum of the economic and social development that was in the process. And I think that is what led them to the decision, we've got to go back to the war. Otherwise we've lost it, and we've not only lost it in South Vietnam, we may lose it in North Vietnam as well [my emphasis]. Because it was going through its terrible problems of land reform and not getting anywhere and stagnation and all the rest of it. I think that's really -- now, some people say they were compelled to undertake the fight. Well, they were compelled if they wanted to take South Vietnam, and that they had no hope of taking South Vietnam if they let the natural process go."*⁴⁷

The time for substantial Northern assistance for the stay-behind cadres in the South was at hand and it became manifest to most observers that by 1960 the Viet Minh were embarking upon another major war, the political target being Ngo Dinh Diem who was more assailable through the Americans than the Vietnamese.⁴⁸

Footnotes

⁴⁷ William Colby, "William E. Colby on Vietnam, Interview I." Recorded interview by Ted Gittinger, June 2, 1981, pp. 1,7,8 & 9, Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, Oral History Program, University of Texas at Austin.

⁴⁸ Warner, The Last Confucian, p. 146.

The Educated, Urban Elite of Saigon: The Caravellistes -

The educated and articulate classes of South Vietnam, the urban elite, were painfully aware that a renewed struggle would mean more years of sacrifice,⁴⁹ and they were aware through past experience that any struggle with the Viet Minh would be decidedly violent, bitter, and unrelenting. Furthermore, the new urban elite (nourished, indeed, established by American money⁵⁰) resented much of what Diem and his family represented, as the Ngo Dinh's were upper class or mandarin, French speaking and Catholic, and not associated with 'trade money.'⁵¹ A representative of this new urban elite, Dr. Phan Quang Dan, told Life Magazine reporter, John Osborne, that they feared Diem was building "a Ngo Dynasty."⁵²

These new social elites put forward their own manifesto of grievances, which they first enunciated at the Caravelle Hotel in Saigon, and thus they became known as the Caravellistes.⁵³ In the "Manifesto of the Eighteen",⁵⁴ which they gave to the international press, they claimed that Diem and his brother, Nhu, were playing into the hands of the Communists with their 'state-

Footnotes

⁴⁹ Duncanson, Government and Revolution In Vietnam, p. 266.

⁵⁰ John Osborne, "The Tough Miracle Man of Vietnam: Diem, America's newly arrived visitor, has roused his country and routed the Reds," in Life, No.42, (May 13, 1957), p. 175.

⁵¹ Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., The Bitter Heritage: Vietnam and American Democracy, 1941 - 1966, (Boston, [MA]: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1967), p. 16.

⁵² Osborne, "The Tough Miracle Man of Vietnam," in Life, No. 42, (May 13, 1957), p. 168.

⁵³ Duncanson, Government and Revolution In Vietnam, p. 267.

⁵⁴ Congress, House, Committee on Armed Services, Rebellion Against My-Diem, Evolution of the War - Origins of the Insurgency, 1954 - 1960 in United States-Vietnam Relations: 1945-1967, IV. A., 5. Tab 2., Book 2 of 12, p. 34.

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of-emergency' methods of government.⁵⁵ Furthermore, they argued that Diem was being insulated from the truth by members of the government's executive branch and that he needed to act upon Caravellist advice if the country was to be spared from complete destruction at the hands of a rebellious populace.⁵⁶

American military intelligence reports indicated that the large majority of the Caravellist 'Eighteen' were suspect in terms of their objectivity (i.e., their position in Saigon's ever-festering partisan politics) and that none of them had a proven 'track-record' for commitment to anything other than their own careers.⁵⁷

President Diem and his brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu - who served in an advisory capacity to the President were not easily swayed by the arguments of the Caravellistes, so weakly claiming to be for the benefit of the average poor Vietnamese and, assuming that such remonstrations were unwarranted during a time of crisis, took it as a sign that the government was not tough enough.⁵⁸ Mr. Colby paraphrased, in succinct Western terms, the Diem/Nhu argument on this issue, for Mr. Ted Gittinger:

Footnotes

⁵⁵ Duncanson, Government and Revolution In Vietnam, p. 267.

⁵⁶ Congress, House, Committee on Armed Services, Rebellion Against My-Diem, Evolution of the War - Origins of the Insurgency, 1954 - 1960 in United States-Vietnam Relations: 1945-1967, IV. A., 5. Tab 2., Book 2 of 12, p. 39.

⁵⁷ Congress, House, Committee on Armed Services, Brigadier-General Edward Geary Lansdale, "Memorandum For The Secretary of Defense, Deputy Secretary of Defense", (January 17, 1961), U.S. Perceptions of the Insurgency, 1954 - 1960, Evolution of the War - Origins of the Insurgency, 1954 - 1960, in United States - Vietnam Relations, 1945 - 1967, IV. A. 5. Tab 4. Book 2 of 12, pp. 67, 69, & 73.

⁵⁸ Douglas Pike has told this writer that, for a supposed tyrant, Diem was loathe to act like one even when, perhaps, it would have been better for all concerned if he had been a good deal tougher (see Pike's work on Diem in Friendly Tyrants).

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This put him [Ambassador Durbrow] into conflict frequently with Diem's concept that you've got to hold a strong line of authority here, or your whole thing will come apart. And yes, [Diem's argument here] we're building a new structure and base for our government, but we're not going to do it next week, and we're not going to do it by giving it away to some of these liberal opposition groups [i.e., the Caravellistes] in the Saigon area who have no base in the countryside, none, and who are just a pain in the neck and have no real political force and really don't understand what we're trying to do in this country in terms of building it and strengthening it. They're talking about loosening when it needs to be tightened and aimed toward a very significant objective.⁵⁹

Thus spurred into action, Diem and Nhu set about intensifying the very measures that had been subjected to severe criticism.⁶⁰ Meanwhile, although the Caravellistes were unable to come up with any practical method for dealing with the Communists, American advisors continued to urge Diem to implement democracy in order to gain the confidence and support of the people.⁶¹ But the net "...effect of the [Caravellistes'] petition was to start a political war within Saigon to go along with and complicate the guerrilla war in the countryside."⁶² It should also be noted that

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William Colby summed up the effect of the Caravellistes on Diem and Nhu in the following excerpt from his memoirs: "Diem and Nhu contemptuously rejected the petition, remarking on the plush surroundings of the Caravelle Hotel in which this group of Saigon politicians had gathered, and on their lack of contact with the rural areas where the real battle against both the Communists and underdevelopment were underway." William Colby (and Peter Forbath), Honorable Men: My Life in the CIA, (New York, [NY]: Simon & Schuster, 1978), p. 159.

⁵⁹ William Colby, "William E. Colby on Vietnam, Interview I." Recorded interview by Ted Gittinger, June 2, 1981. The Lyndon Baines Johnson Library Oral History Program (Transcript copies available from the LBJ Library Oral History Program, University of Texas at Austin); p. 11.

⁶⁰ These measures included, inter alia, the following: press censorship, detention without trial, implementation of the agrovilles and Can Lao Party suzerainty over the army. Duncanson, Government and Revolution in Vietnam, p. 267.

⁶¹ Shaplen, "A Reporter In Vietnam: Diem," in The New Yorker, (Sept., 22, 1962), p. 125.

⁶² Colby, Honorable Men, p. 159.

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this was a 'war' that simmered in the back-rooms and coffee-houses of Saigon, percolating with intrigue, upon rumour, upon more intrigue, until it boiled-over under the guise of religious persecution, in tandem with the Buddhist Crisis, in the summer of 1963.

Diem and Land Reform-

American criticism, at this time, seemed to be concerned with Diem's land-reform problems as well as his apparent intransigence with regard to democratic government practices. Historian George C. Herring in this regard espoused a classic orthodox view of Diem's failure. Having buttressed his argument from known orthodox school critics of Diem, such as Bernard B. Fall and Frances FitzGerald, Herring proceeded to claim that Diem's land reform program was implemented half-heartedly and really did nothing to meet the rising expectations for land in South Vietnam.⁶³ In Herring's estimation, as in the orthodox interpretations that he relied on, no understanding of what Diem was up against and what he was truly trying to accomplish was ever given. Indeed, Diem was derided as being callous toward the peasants and not caring with regard to their political and land expectations.⁶⁴

William Colby gave a completely different perspective than that of the orthodox historians on the problems of land reform in South Vietnam. First of all, Colby gives full

Footnotes

⁶³ George C. Herring, America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975, Second Edition, (New York, [NY]: Alfred A. Knopf, 1986), p. 65.

⁶⁴ The standard anti-Diem position is best related in the following excerpt from Herring's work: "The Diem government might have survived its authoritarianism had it pursued enlightened policies, but its inattention to the needs of the people and its ruthless suppression of dissent stirred a rising discontent which eventually brought its downfall. Diem's policies toward the villages – traditionally the backbone of Vietnamese society – demonstrated a singular lack of concern and near-callous irresponsibility." *Ibid.*, pp. 64 – 65.

recognition to Diem's earnest struggles to effect national land reform. Secondly, Colby had the imagination necessary to pick-up on what Diem was really telling the Americans who were disappointed with the slow pace and mistakes of his land reform directions; for the Diem message was, in effect, 'be patient, we have to work with an awkward system and the political reality that there will be some remaining landlordism in this interim period.' Colby explains as much in an interview with Ted Gittinger of the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library:

Ted Gittinger: "We've discussed Diem's reform, progress-minded activities. How good were our estimates on such reforms as land reform, the agrovilles and so on?"

William Colby: "Well, the land reform worked according to the way most of the successful land reform programs had worked in the past -- the one in Japan, the one in Taiwan, various others -- in which the government took the land from the larger landowners, and particularly the French, and then loaned the peasant the money, which he then repaid over the next few years. Now the communists very intelligently focused on that as just a way of insisting on further payment of taxes. Because during the intervening years, the years of the war, there were no taxes collected because the backcountry was in a turmoil and in an uproar, and so the peasants weren't paying any taxes. So that the interpretation successfully put forward by the communists, which was in a sense accurate, was that this legal mumbo jumbo meant that the peasants would be required to pay taxes today that they hadn't been required to pay before."

Ted Gittinger: "Weren't there charges -- perhaps not at the time but later -- that the land reform was really too much of a facade? That landlordism was still very prevalent?"

William Colby: "The point there is that whatever the maximum size of holding was set at -- I don't know, let's say a hundred hectares or something like that, I think that's what it was, which is two hundred and fifty acres, which is quite a lot -- too large. And we went to Diem at one point saying, "Well, you know, you've got to cut this down and make it smaller, because there were still landlords and you still had landlordism." His response was very interesting, as again, the politics is the art of the possible. He said, 'You don't understand, I cannot eliminate my middle class.' When you think of his position at that particular time, what he was saying was the same decision he made in 1954 to 1956: I'm going to use the apparatus of social order that exists in order to conduct this

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*longer-term transition. And I'm not going to dispense with it and try to create a new one in a hurry."*⁶⁵

Diem's Usurping of the Communist Political Infrastructure in the Villages of South Vietnam -

The orthodox claims, vis-à-vis land reform and, particularly, Diem's interference in village democracy, were nothing much more than pat explanations that simply were not commensurate with the reality of who Ngo Dinh Diem was and the depth of his near-obsession with land-reform.⁶⁶ Anyone who knew anything about the background of Ngo Dinh Diem, as a village and later province chief, knew that he was most at home attending to the small details of

Footnotes

⁶⁵ William Colby, "William E. Colby Oral History, Interview I." Recorded interview by Ted Gittinger, June 2, 1981, pp. 13 & 14, Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, Oral History Program, University of Texas at Austin.

⁶⁶ "One of the actualities was the development of the trans-Bassac region, the land between the Bassac branch of the Mekong River and the Gulf of Thailand. The first phase called for settling over a hundred thousand people in new model farm communities in the Cai Sab area and draining the low-lying land by constructing 125 miles of navigable canals. Model villages and canals were constructed mostly by hand labor....The settlements were planned to sandwich a community of refugees from the North between similar communities of farmers from the South, alternating northerners and southerners throughout the region in a cultural melting pot that hopefully would give each equal opportunity.

Diem also was full of enthusiasm for new crops. Under his guidance, floating rice was grown in huge experimental plots along the Vaico River where seasonal flooding turned the low-lands into vast bogs, and communities of northern refugees located in foothills of the Vietnam cordillera were urged to grow kenaf, whose fiber could be woven into bags for sugar....Wolf Ladejinsky, the American land reform expert, had left his position with the U.S. government at the time, and Diem immediately employed him. The two men became close friends in 1956, and Ladejinsky was given a house next to the presidential palace and joined Diem at breakfast nearly every morning. Thus Diem's daily routine began with these breakfast sessions, discussing the implementation of the land reform measures drafted by Ladejinsky and issued as decrees by Diem, as well as the myriad problems of the whole range of agricultural projects afoot. Both men shared the dream of making an Eden of Vietnam, with bounty for all its inhabitants and with ample foods for other nations in the Pacific basin." Lansdale, *In The Midst of Wars*, pp. 354 -356.

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peasant and village life. His reputation as a Vietnamese nationalist was built upon this understanding. Relatedly, the criticism levelled at him, by scholars and journalists like Bernard B. Fall – that he had foolishly destroyed the natural democracy of the village elections, becomes preposterous in the face of the facts. These facts, which constituted political reality in South Vietnam, dictated that prior to Diem's attempts to effect Government control in the villages, the Communist stay-behind cadres had already been hard at work thus necessitating the GVN's interference.⁶⁷

Here, then, is the standard explanation of Diem's alleged anti-democratic maladministration as put forward by the orthodox school's Bernard B. Fall, but also adhered to by a few non-orthodox historians including such authors as Larry Cable:⁶⁸

"And in June, 1956, the South Vietnamese government made perhaps its most fateful decision. In defiance of one of the most hallowed Vietnamese traditions, according to which the power of the central authorities stops at the bamboo hedge of the village, the Saigon administration abolished by a stroke of the pen elected village chiefs and village councils and replaced them by appointive members." ⁶⁹

What Fall and Cable neglected to mention was the fact that Diem was trying to short-circuit the Communist influence in the villages. This was an influence which, of course, made elections at

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⁶⁷ Bernard B. Fall, Last Reflections On A War: Bernard B. Fall's Last Comments on Vietnam, (Garden City, [NY]: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1967), pp. 198 – 199.

⁶⁸ "Unfortunately, Lansdale and the Americans did not prevent their new protégé from committing a massive and egregious error in 1956, when he prohibited the traditional and deeply cherished village elections and instead appointed as village chiefs fellow Catholic refugees from the North. This was a blunder which even the French and the Japanese had not committed during their terms as occupiers of Vietnam. It was a cause of massive discontent among the rural population of South Vietnam." Larry E. Cable, Conflict of Myths: The Development of American Counterinsurgency Doctrine and the Vietnam War, (New York, [NY]: New York University Press, 1986), p. 185.

⁶⁹ Fall, Last Reflections On A War, pp. 198 – 199.

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the best, irrelevant and, at the worst, useful Communist propaganda. Fall tried to claim that even the Communists in the North had not been so stupid as to attempt to interfere with the villages. Yet, this explanation studiously ignores the fact that there had been massive rebellions against Ho Chi Minh's 'land-reform' (i.e., Stalinist collectivisation) in the villages in Northern Vietnam during 1956. Indeed, the Northern rebellion was so out of control that Ho sent in the army with the result that approximately 10,000 Vietnamese peasants lost their lives.⁷⁰ Lansdale stated that the Communist officials who were adept at running guerrilla war proved to be terrible bunglers in running the Hanoi government.⁷¹ In fact, Lansdale claims that the Northern Communists were so unpopular at this time that they would have been soundly defeated by Diem had the 1956 plebiscite/reunification elections been held – as prescribed by the original 1954 agreements in Geneva. Here, in his own words, is the Lansdale argument:

The Communist officials who had waged a successful war against the French were terrible bunglers at running a government. Their stock with the public in North Vietnam was so abysmally low that they wouldn't dare put it to a vote, let alone chance a contest against Diem, whose popularity was at a peak. (Diem's landslide victory over Bao Dai at the polls wasn't lost on Hanoi's leaders.) I felt certain that the Communist leaders, while declaiming loudly about holding a plebiscite, would do everything they could to postpone it. ... On top of earning all this resentment in the rural areas, the Hanoi regime had also managed to be maladroit with its most prized asset, the youth. Revolt was stirring at the University of Hanoi, where students were demanding relief from the heavy input of political indoctrination in all their lectures. Students complained that their instructors skimped even highly technical subjects in favor of long dissertations on dialectical materialism. Much of the same thing was happening in the high schools of North Vietnam. ... For these reasons I felt that the Communist leaders in Hanoi would discreetly inform the Soviets (co-sponsors of the 1954 Geneva

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⁷⁰ Lansdale, In The Midst of Wars, p. 346.

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 345.

accords) to go slow on pressing for a plebiscite in any meeting with the British (the other Geneva co-sponsor).⁷²

Further to all of these claims by Lansdale, which the orthodox school deliberately ignores or makes light of, Bernard Fall admits that there had been a substantial stay-behind Communist organisation in the South but then he fails to ascribe any thorough going revolutionary capabilities to them.⁷³ In short, there is no explanation given in the orthodox interpretation vis-à-vis the threat that these Communists posed to Diem's GVN nor is there any consideration given to how he was supposed to deal with such a threat.

The fact was that Diem's interference at the village level was necessary and it eventually translated into the Strategic Hamlets Program wherein village or hamlet elections were encouraged by the GVN because the protected peasant communities were no longer subject to the intimidation of the Communists. In effect, the orthodox historians set Diem up in order to knock him down while studiously ignoring all the facts that were pertinent to the context of Communist insurgency in the villages.⁷⁴

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⁷² *ibid.*, pp. 345 – 347.

⁷³ Fall, *Last Reflections On A War*, p. 198.

⁷⁴ Robert Thompson, however, did not ignore what Diem said or did in this context and he supported the Vietnamese President in his attempts to purge Communist control from the villages. Thompson, *Defeating Communist Insurgency*, pp. 78 – 79.

The Struggle between the Department of State and the Department of Defense over How to Best Fight the Communist Insurgents -

The Caravellistes Manifesto/petition and the rural problems associated with land reform and who would have legitimate authority in the villages also marked the beginning of a serious schism, of strategic proportions, that began to develop in American policy toward the Government in South Vietnam and the burgeoning guerrilla threat. The CIA was caught in the middle of what would turn out to be a long and bitter fight over “turf” between the Department of Defense and the Department of State. Accordingly, the eyewitness testimony of William Colby, again, becomes very valuable and worth considering as he was in a unique position to observe what the quarrel was concerned with. Colby noted that the officials from the Department of State and the Department of Defense, both in Saigon and Washington, fell into a serious difference of opinion over what to do to meet the Communist challenge rising in the villages of South Vietnam.⁷⁵

According to the Colby recollection, the Department of Defense took a predictable stand by viewing the rising Viet Cong insurgency as the outbreak of war. As such, general officers in the US military, like General Sam Williams, argued that the South Vietnamese army needed to be shaped up and reorganised in order to meet the possibility of an invasion from North Vietnam. Consequently, the American military advisory in Vietnam reorganised the command structure of

Footnotes

⁷⁵ “...the official United States community, both in Washington and in Saigon, fell to quarrelling bitterly about what to do to meet the challenge, starting the long, bloody and tragic debate over the American role in Vietnam.” Colby, Honorable Men, p. 159.

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the ARVN in 1959 and called for an increase in men from 150,000 to 170,000 soldiers.⁷⁶ It should be noted, at this point, that regardless of the varying views on the design of the force necessary to meet and defeat the Communists, i.e., more soldiers versus more policemen, etc.,⁷⁷ Diem and his officials had quite good relations with the American military for the most part.

The problems that arose between Diem and Washington found their source in the American political/diplomatic arena. Colby recalled that the American Embassy and State Department objected to the direction that the Diem and US military were taking. They saw the problem as finding its solution only in Diem making his regime more democratic and less authoritarian. Thus, the State Department viewed the military build-up, and corresponding US military aid that would make such a build-up feasible, as a lever that should be applied to Diem in order to secure the reforms the American diplomats thought he should be making.⁷⁸ Quite

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⁷⁶ "The United States military took a predictable stand. It viewed the escalation of the Viet Cong insurgency as the outbreak of a war, with General "Hanging Sam" Williams arguing for measures to shore up South Vietnam's ability to defend, in effect, against an invasion from the North. To this end, MAAG stepped up its efforts to re-form the South Vietnamese Army in line with the American model and in 1959 secured the reorganisation of the Vietnamese Army into seven divisions under three corps headquarters and a general headquarters, so that co-ordination with an American force would be facilitated if the war escalated to a real invasion. The military also urged the increase of size of the Vietnamese Army from 150,000 to 170,000 men, with the enthusiastic support of Diem, and secured Washington's approval for an increase in the American MAAG from 327 to 685 in strength." *Ibid.*, pp. 159 – 160.

⁷⁷ These debates, concerned with which force was best suited to counter-insurgency warfare, are addressed later on in this dissertation.

⁷⁸ "But the Embassy objected. The State Department officers in Saigon looked at the problem as one of building political confidence in the Diem regime among the Vietnamese people, and they believed that this could be done only by forcing Diem to make his government less authoritarian and more democratic and so enlist popular support for the fight against the Communists. Thus, the increase in the Army was held up in hope of pressuring Diem to undertake the reforms the Embassy thought needed, which included exiling Nhu as an Ambassador far from Saigon, disbanding his Can Lao party, appointing one or two ministers to the cabinet from among the political opposition, and stimulating the National Assembly to conduct legislative investigations of the government. The contradiction between these ideas

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naturally, the American military advisors were infuriated with the State Department's officers presuming to know which was the best way or means for deploying armed forces in South Vietnam:

Thus, the "country team" meetings at the Embassy became barely civil, as "Hanging Sam" vented his fury at AID's Gardiner and State's Mendenhall for presuming to interfere in such military matters as determining the proper force levels with which to defend the country, while Gardiner and Mendenhall argued for reforms, especially the removal of Nhu.⁷⁹

Observing the fight between the Departments of Defense and State, Colby - who had an excellent grasp of what was going on at the village level in South Vietnam - formed his own conclusions on counter-insurgency which did not agree with the DOD or DOS. It is important to note that Colby admitted to being heavily influenced, with regard to countering Communist insurgents, by the British successes and the French failures.

The Communist strategy, Colby surmised, was anything but a traditional war-fighting direction. The CIA Saigon station-chief intuited that what they were really looking at was the beginning of "people's war" in 1960. Certainly, he recognised all the telltale indicators of the first stage of "people's war" as the mobilisation and organisation of insurgent Communist forces was clearly under way.⁸⁰ With the reality of this development kept in plain view, Colby argued

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and the reality of the Diem regime did not discourage the Foreign Service officers. They even went so far as to recommend that the United States might have to consider alternatives to Diem and Nhu in order to achieve our objectives,..." Colby, Honorable Men, pp. 159 – 160.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ "In the first place, it seemed obvious to me that the Communist strategy was anything but a traditional war. Vo Nguyen Giap, Hanoi's military genius, had written of how he had fought the "people's war" in North Vietnam and, although its culmination was in the set-piece battle of Dien-bienphu, it had begun just as it was beginning now in South Vietnam in 1960. Clearly, this was the first stage of the "people's war," the mobilization and organization of the forces with which to fight." Ibid., pp. 161 – 170.

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that, because the challenge was a political and subversive one, it could not be easily addressed by the sorts of standard military doctrines that the American military advisors were advocating. He was quick to add to this realisation, however, that the calls for a more democratic or honest or just government in Saigon, were for the most part, irrelevant to the task at hand.⁸¹ This writer talked to William Colby about this very issue which he, quite humorously and quite accurately translated as something akin to: "...it's difficult to talk about draining the swamp when your up to your --- in alligators." This was a crucial point which was evidently lost on the "best and the brightest" in Washington.

The real battle ground, that Colby noted, was the same one that Sir Robert Thompson had drawn attention to in his now famous statement that it was a struggle for "the hearts and the minds of the people;" and, again, Thompson made this fundamental understanding plain when he stated that "An insurgent movement is a war for the people."⁸² Indeed, the similarities between how both Colby and Thompson viewed the nature of the struggle were remarkable. Accordingly, the following excerpt from Colby's writing on this issue would find immediate recognition and support (and vice versa) in Thompson's seminal work on the subject, entitled: Defeating Communist Insurgency: Experiences From Malaya and Vietnam. Any way one chooses to peruse the following, while written by Colby it could have as easily been the work of Thompson:

Footnotes

⁸¹ "And clearly at this point the challenge was a political and subversive one, and not something for divisions and corps headquarters to contend with. On the other hand, though, the political challenge was not one that could be met by a well-meaning, intellectual elite with no political base issuing manifestos from the Caravelle Hotel, calling for an "honest and just government," "a valiant army animated by a single spirit," and an economy which will "flourish" provided that the government changes its ways. And thus, in my view, the embassy prescriptions of appointing oppositionists to the government and advocating American-style Congressional investigations seemed largely irrelevant." Ibid.

⁸² Thompson, Defeating Communist Insurgency, p. 51.

The real contest, it seemed to me, was in the villages, where the issues were more fundamental. Did association with the Saigon government offer a better future, both economic and political, for the villager? Or did the national and revolutionary appeal of the Communist organizer, reinforced by the authority of guerrilla squads, convince the villager or leave him no alternative but to join the revolt? My travels in the countryside had shown how wide was the gap between the French-influenced urban class and the traditional Vietnamese villager. But it had also shown the latter's enthusiastic acceptance of economic and social development and his willingness to work hard toward it. In the long term, villagers would certainly insist on more of a voice in their national affairs, even along the lines advocated by the oppositionists in Saigon, but in the near term, they were far more interested in the practical improvements that could be made in their lives and in the life-and-death issue of protection from the armed bands circulating in their regions. Thus, the real way to contest the Communists, it seemed to me, would be to mobilize, organize and involve the villagers in the economic and social improvements that the government was providing and to strengthen them so that they could help defend themselves against Communist pressures. The question was which side they would join, and whether they would be free to join the government's if they wanted to. The answer, I was convinced, would be found only in the villages, not in the political circles in Saigon or in General Staff Headquarters.⁸³

With reference to Colby's analysis, Thompson made a specific effort in pointing out that the government could win over the people without being a Western-styled democracy. He believed, and with a considerable wealth of experience to intelligently support such belief, that an authoritarian government which applied the rule of law equally to all while, at the same time, engaging in constructive and progressive national policies, very much like what Diem had done, could win the people over. What was required of the government was that it firmly establish in the peoples' minds that legality plus construction plus results are what flowed from the

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⁸³ Colby, Honorable Men, pp. 161-170.

government while, conversely, illegality plus destruction plus promises equalled what the Communist insurgency could be summed up as.⁸⁴

The very fact that a Communist insurgency had begun to spread through rural South Vietnam in the late 1950's caused many Americans to take a critical view of Diem. By 1960, American experience with Ngo Dinh Diem and the GVN had created much controversy in Washington and this was a controversy that would not go away. To many American liberal democrats Diem was an enigma and one that they suspected was unsympathetic to their secular liberal-humanist worldview. The discerning reader will be able to detect between the lines of what men like Averell Harriman and John Galbraith said and wrote about Diem and his brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu, a subtle but definite partisan or political-philosophical distaste. This distaste blossomed without restraint into a very definite hatred of Ngo Dinh Diem and his brother; yet, irrational though it was this hatred was couched in the finest politically correct reserve and wording that Kennedy's 'best and brightest' could very adroitly bring to bear. These critics, as the reader shall see, were not as straightforward or as blunt as the early American critics of the South Vietnamese president, such as General Collins were. In so many words, 'their tracks were covered' with intellectual sophistry, intrigue and manipulation which proved, in the end, far more destructive than the Collins' or Durbrow's approach. Ambassador Frederick Nolting explained many years after the fact that he could never, entirely, plumb the depths of this malice but he intuited that it was this irrational force that spelled Diem's death and, similarly, it undermined sound and patient US policy in the region.

Footnotes

⁸⁴ Thompson, Defeating Communist Insurgency, p. 68.

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*"You think you can have a meeting of the minds with Diem... [but] I tell you it is impossible. To a Westerner, Diem does not just come from another culture and another hemisphere. He comes from another planet."*¹

Frederick Nolting's Predecessor: Ambassador Elbridge Durbrow –

Frederick Nolting's predecessor, Elbridge Durbrow, was posted to South Vietnam as American Ambassador in 1957. Durbrow, who had been educated as a lawyer, joined the Foreign Service in 1930 and served in the Eastern European capitals of Warsaw and Bucharest before being assigned to Moscow for three years, a posting that began in 1934.² Indeed, during the 1930's and 1940's Durbrow had been on what became known as the 'East European shuttle',³ a State Department exercise which ensured a diplomat was exposed to all of the capitals and, therefore, governments of the region. As a result of his experience with the Soviets under Stalin, Durbrow developed a very shrewd and realistic understanding of just what kind of ruthless political machine America was dealing with in Moscow. It was this understanding, of course, which placed him at odds with the party direction emanating from Roosevelt's White House 'New Dealers.'

Durbrow, for instance, considered [Benjamin] Cohen a suspect member of "the [Soviet] accommodationist school." He recalled one conversation:

"Now listen, Durby, they [the Soviets] can't be that bad."

Footnotes

¹ Warner, The Last Confucian, p. 92.

² Martin Weil, A Pretty Good Club: The Founding Fathers of the U.S. Foreign Service, (New York, [NY]: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1978), pp. 53 & 268.

³ Ibid., p. 53.

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"I'm sorry, Mr. Cohen, but that's the way they operate."

"But they signed the Declaration on Liberated Europe...[they] will live up to it soon."

*"But look what they are doing today."*⁴

In fact, a real 'knock-down' fight had developed under Franklin D. Roosevelt between his 'New Deal' proponents and the professional diplomats within the State Department. In concise terms, the 'New Dealers' wished to believe the best about Stalinist Russia and enact policy based upon those beliefs while the diplomats were infuriated by the naiveté of the New Deal administration in their dealings with the Soviets. Indeed, Roosevelt had prepared the ground for this on-going quarrel with the Department of State via his methods of trying to "divide and conquer" what he perceived to be an unruly department of 'stuffed shirts.'⁵ This antagonism carried on into the Truman administration, through no design of Truman's but, instead, as a 'hang-over' from Roosevelt's appointments. The following excerpt from Martin Weil's text, while lengthy, is well worth digesting as it makes plain what was going on between the White House and the State Department during the 1940's and it also illustrates the tenacious character that Durbrow possessed:

When another wartime bureaucrat, Donald Nelson, head of the War Production Board, embarked on the OWI [Office of War Information] path, Durbrow lashed out again. Nelson came back from a meeting with Stalin aglow with the promise of vastly expanded postwar Soviet-American trade. "It was a fine idea," Durbrow recalled, "but it was obvious it couldn't work. They didn't have anything to exchange with us. I wrote a memo...fine idea but unrealistic...no basis from our end." He recommended "extreme caution...to avoid false impressions being created regarding the possibilities of postwar trade with the Soviet Union." The distance between the EE [Eastern European Bureau within the State Department] and the New Deal agencies is quite evident in this episode.

Footnotes

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 235.

⁵ Smith Simpson, *Anatomy of The State Department*, (Boston, [MA]: Beacon Press, 1968), pp. 75, 138, & 142.

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Henry Morgenthau's economists later recommended a \$10 billion credit to Russia. Durbrow set a ceiling of \$200 million.

Nothing disturbed him [Durbrow] more than the dissolution of the Comintern. Roosevelt and Hopkins might be satisfied by this apparent evidence of their success in wooing Stalin, but Durbrow felt only trepidation. The bosses were fooling themselves. Russian objectives had not changed. Their methods had just become harder to detect. ...In a long memo in February 1944, Durbrow expanded on the theme that the Grand Alliance was a grand deception. ...Durbrow...began with a careful understatement: The Russians "apparently are not fully convinced that this policy [of cooperation] will succeed," and urged his superiors to note renewed Comintern activity throughout Europe, "which unless it is studied and correlated might not otherwise be apparent." In Eastern Europe and the Balkans Communist "elements" were allying with the strongest nationalist groups in a bid for post-war domination. By the time the victims discovered the penetration, it would be too late. "The 'front' organizations are controlled by a small percentage of Communist Party workers, while a large majority of the members often do not realize that they are members of a Communist-dominated group." Correcting another misconception, Durbrow emphasized the fanatic discipline and devotion required by the Party. One Communist was equivalent to many democrats in political weight. Do not be misled by "the often mistaken idea that the Communists cannot represent any really important force since there are so few of them." He anticipated "more or less complete Soviet hegemony" in the Balkans, Greece, and Eastern Europe if nothing were done to halt these "back-door" methods.

Bohlen [Charles] joined hands with Durbrow in the department to employ the EE cable-writing and memo-drafting power to stifle White House initiatives to compromise impending conflicts with Russia.⁶

Evidently, Elbridge Durbrow was a formidable opponent of potential American policies that did not confront the reality of Soviet expansionism. Furthermore, along with George F. Kennan and Charles Bohlen, he outlived President Roosevelt and outlasted the policies of the New Dealers.⁷ It is worth noting that Durbrow's prestige and impact within the Department of State was very much alive when he received his posting to Saigon as nearly all cable traffic directed to him was addressed with his well-known EE nick-name 'Durby.' His credentials, as an

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⁶ Weil, *A Pretty Good Club*, pp. 161 – 162.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 267.

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old Soviet expert, were second to none within the State Department and since Soviet expansion truly was perceived as being behind the Viet Minh effort in Southeast Asia, his appointment as Ambassador to South Vietnam, in 1957, was logical. The problem, though, was that Indo-China was not Eastern Europe.

The Vietnamese, both in the North and the South, had an entirely different approach to politics where even the leader of the Communists, Ho Chi Minh, had to pay certain homage to the Confucian understanding of what a true leader of the people should be. This proved to be a substantial stumbling block for Elbridge Durbrow and another powerful and well-versed Soviet expert, Averell Harriman. If Ho Chi Minh at least paid lip service to Confucian ideals and in his personal life and actual appearance attempted to emulate such a leadership role, then, Ngo Dinh Diem was the consummate Confucian.⁸ The French had, indeed, warned the Americans about this;⁹ but Durbrow in 1960 and Harriman, a year later, paid this caveat little heed. Perhaps, with their long experience with Russian Communist perfidy these men were too focussed on Soviet machinations in the region.

Footnotes

⁸ Diem was the corporeal entity of all that Confucian philosophy demanded of a leader. Ellen J. Hammer was aware of this and noted this fact, thoroughly, in her excellent book, *A Death In November*. The French were irritatingly aware of this fact as well but, perhaps, the most overwhelming documented evidence of Diem's strict Confucian approach to the world exists in a massive unpublished biography entitled *And One For The People: The Life-Story of President Ngo Dinh Diem*. This work was written by Anne Miller and is dated Saigon, July 30, 1955. Professor Douglas Pike, now of the Vietnam Centre at Texas Tech, very kindly sent this writer a copy of the two volume, 620 page work. Having read this biography in some detail, this writer was struck by the fact that Ngo Dinh Diem's upbringing, indeed, his entire life and outlook, were utterly foreign to Western perceptions. Of course, this point is made several times throughout this work but it simply cannot be stressed enough as it proved to harbour so much trouble for the Americans in Vietnam. Owing to his strict Confucian training (which began when he was old enough to talk) the man could have as easily lived two thousand years ago as in the twentieth century. His beliefs, values and perceptions were linked through a continuity of Confucian/Vietnamese customs, traditions and history that seemed to flow back and forth between the past and the present age. This was the source of Diem's incredible, almost, unworldly, integrity and it was also the source of the near complete bafflement that most Westerners experienced when dealing with the man. To intelligent but impatient Americans, like Durbrow and Harriman, Diem must have been outright irritating.

⁹ This warning from the French about Diem had actually come as early as 1948, according to Ellen Hammer's research. Hammer, *A Death In November*, p. 47.

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Expanding Communist Insurgency in 1960 and its effect on US – GVN Relations-

By early 1960 the reports concerned with expanding Viet Cong strength, and the boldness and increasing size of their attacks, that were reaching Ambassador Durbrow were not at all encouraging. Indeed, the growing lack of patience being displayed by the Americans toward Diem and his government, on the surface at least, would appear to be justified. Accordingly, in a despatch (Desp. No. 278) sent to Washington via Diplomatic Pouch, Ambassador Durbrow noted the following salient points that were disturbing the Americans:

- 1.) VC groups were now operating in larger strength, and that their tactics had changed from attacking individuals to more frequent and daring attacks on the GVN's security forces.¹⁰
- 2.) A recent intelligence report indicated that the VC intended to press a more general guerrilla warfare in South Vietnam during 1960 and that the VC felt confident that they could mount a successful coup d'etat later in the same year. In support of this President Diem had informed Durbrow that he had captured VC documents which clearly indicated their intentions for stepping up massive military attacks throughout the depth and breadth of South Vietnam.¹¹
- 3.) While guerrilla activity and potential was increasing weaknesses within the GVN's ARVN were becoming more apparent. In this context, the need for more counter-insurgent training

Footnotes

¹⁰ "VC groups now operate in larger strength, and their tactics have changed from attacks on individuals to rather frequent and daring attacks on GVN security forces." Congress, House, Committee on Armed Services, Elbridge Durbrow, "Special Report on Current Internal Security Situation," 1956 French Withdrawal - 1960, in United States - Vietnam, 1945 – 1967, d. Volume IV, Book 10 of 12, pp. 1255 - 1256.

¹¹ "A recent CAS report has indicated a VC intention to press general guerrilla warfare in South Viet-Nam in 1960, and indicates the VC are convinced they can mount a coup d'etat this year. President Diem also told me in late February about the capture of a VC document indicating their intention to step up aggressive attacks all over the country, including Saigon, beginning in the second quarter." Ibid.

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was being called for by the leaders of the GVN and, likewise, so was the need for a competent Civil Guard.¹²

- 4.) The South Vietnamese people in the rural areas were showing signs of apathy and even considerable dissatisfaction. The primary cause of this dissatisfaction and apathy toward the GVN was the sustained Viet Cong terror campaign. The GVN was seen as not protecting the peasants well enough from this terror and this, in itself, was building considerable resentment amongst the people. Combined with this resentment was the anger against local officials who, in their frustration at attempting to overcome the inroads made by VC terror, were, themselves, abrogating benign persuasion for rough coercion in implementing programs decided upon in Saigon.¹³ Durbrow finally noted that:

Diem cannot be completely absolved of blame for this unsatisfactory situation in the rural areas. Considerable evidence has existed that he has not in the past kept himself properly informed of what is going on. Officials have tended to tell him what he wants to hear, largely because of fear of removal if they indicate that mistakes have been made or reply that projects he is pushing should not be carried out as rapidly as he desires.¹⁴

Footnotes

¹² "...At the same time that the DRV guerrilla potential has increased in the South, weaknesses have become more apparent in the GVN security forces. GVN leaders have in recent weeks stressed the need for more anti-guerrilla training of ARVN. The desirability of centralized command in insecure areas and a centralized intelligence service has also become more evident. The need for a capable, well-equipped, well-trained, centrally controlled Civil Guard is even more keenly felt than previously." Ibid.

¹³ "Likewise, at the same time, signs of general apathy and considerable dissatisfaction which the VC can play upon have become more evident among the people in rural areas. Fear among the peasants engendered by sustained VC terrorist activism against which the GVN has not succeeded in protecting them is combined with resentment of the GVN because of the methods which are all too often employed by local officials. Coercion rather than suasion are often used by these officials in carrying out the program decided upon in Saigon. There is a tendency to disregard the desires and feelings of the peasantry by, for instance, taking them away from their harvests to perform community work. The new agrovillage program requiring large numbers of "volunteer" laborers has accentuated this trend. Improper actions by local officials such as torture, extortion and corruption, many of which have been reported in the press, have also contributed to peasant dissatisfaction. Favouritism and fear of officials and members of the semi-covert Can Lao Party have likewise contributed to this situation." Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

Doctrinal Divergence: ARVN, Police and Counter-Insurgency Warfare -

Beneath the surface of this report of Durbrow's,¹⁵ concerned with what appeared to be large-scale incompetence of the South Vietnamese Government, was the more complex reality which dictated that much of what the Americans were complaining about was owing to their own fault. Diem was burdened with an army that did not have the slightest idea of how to conduct a counter-insurgency campaign. For the ARVN had been designed by the Americans to be a conventional armed force for the purpose of "dove-tailing" into their command structure and forces should a large scale invasion be embarked upon by the North Vietnamese and their Communist supporters, much like what had happened in Korea. The Americans were loath to let Diem develop the kind of power needed to break an insurgency via the means of a large, well-equipped Special-Constable and police force.¹⁶ Yet, it was precisely this kind of police force that could live in the rural communities and thus secure an intimate working understanding and, therefore, an effective intelligence of the local population wherein they would additionally secure the locals' trust through effectively protecting them from terrorist activity. The British had demonstrated, very clearly, that the strategic use of local policing was crucial in effective counter-

Footnotes

¹⁵ Ambassador Elbridge Durbrow had been appointed to Saigon as United States Ambassador under the Eisenhower administration which had been relatively supportive of Ngo Dinh Diem. Nevertheless, by late 1960 questions were being raised about Diem within the State Department and American frustration with the slow pace of Southeast Asian progress was made manifest. As always, regardless of who supported Diem, in the United States or elsewhere, American lack of patience would prove to be the single most unifying theme of dissatisfaction with Ngo Dinh Diem.

¹⁶ Indeed, early Pentagon analyst reports indicated quite clearly that the use of Police forces was most effective in curbing Communist insurgent activity, even though they had not been developed anywhere near the numbers and capabilities of the Malayan counter-insurgent police: "The police services, which include the 7,500-man Vietnamese Bureau of Investigation, and 10,500-man police force stationed in the main cities, have had considerable success in tracking down subversives and terrorists and are developing into efficient organizations "Major Trends in South Vietnam," Book 10 of 12; d. Volume IV: 1956 French Withdrawal - 1960, in United States - Vietnam Relations, 1945 - 1967," p. 1193.

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insurgency warfare as they had made this exact type of police program the foundation for their success against the Communist guerrillas in Malaya.

To the Americans these measures, quite apart from placing the main thrust of counter-insurgency in Diem's hands, seemed to be militarily unacceptable, as they appeared to be passive and not offensive oriented enough. This is a significant point of some substance that cannot be shrugged aside by the scholar of America's involvement in Vietnam. It was this attitude of the American military that helped to make sure that eventually their army would be engaged in a war that it was not designed for. For those military historians versed in the American doctrinal teaching that the offensive had to be taken aggressively against the guerrilla through overwhelming firepower (amongst other things),¹⁷ the United States Army Commanders' reluctance to fully endorse what seemed to be a passive approach had a consistent logic. In conjunction with this, it is also known amongst military historians that the American military maintains a myth that the British are not offensively minded enough when it comes to taking the fight to the enemy. This myth is blatantly false and cannot be reconciled with the basic facts of military history which do dictate that the British experience at war has a depth and a breadth that the United States would be hard-pressed to equal even in a century's date from this writing. Nevertheless, through popular American history this false myth has been steadily maintained and, while reaching its apex in recalling the events of D-Day and thereafter during the Second World War,¹⁸ it never really died out. It can be argued with some justification, then, that the American

Footnotes

¹⁷ Russell F. Weigley, History of The United States Army, (New York, [NY]: The Macmillan Company, 1967), p. 545.

¹⁸ Most popular American histories maintain that it was Field Marshal Lord Montgomery's lack of aggressiveness in the Caen sector which led to the D-Day breakout in Normandy being a very near thing. Of course this understanding does not at all coincide with the British, Canadian and German histories which comply with each other, for the most part, by demonstrating that the real big fight took place around Caen for the following reasons: 1.) Montgomery knew that his troops could act as the 'anvil' which could take a pounding from the best German troops on the Western Front; 2.) The Germans identified the British and Canadian forces as the most serious threat and correspondingly matched that threat with their best

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military advisors in Vietnam would have been prejudiced against British ideas for countering insurgents in a more circumspect approach.¹⁹ Indeed, this was to become an area of real quarrelling with the British advisory team and the American MAAG (Military Assistance Advisory Group). It also cannot be forgotten that MAAG was under instructions from Washington to not let Diem have total control of the CIP (Counter-Insurgency Program).

American Idealism versus Political Reality -

As for corrupt officials at the local level, Diem was forced to opt for less and less quality of capability in his civil-servant selection process as the best had been, quite simply, murdered off by the Viet Cong. Moreover, American demands and advice that he not choose his civil servants from the Roman Catholic community defied Vietnamese reality. In Vietnam, the best educated, and there were precious few of these, were invariably the product of the Roman Catholic

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forces; 3.) Montgomery had hoped that the Americans would break out of their sector earlier than they did and thus act as a 'hammer' to pound the remaining German forces with. In other words, because of their reputation as very tough troops, a reputation bestowed by the Germans on to the British, Montgomery could count on the Germans piling most of their resources into the Caen area and it was his plan/hope that the Americans would then have the easier task, or so it was hoped, of flanking the Germans while all attention was on Caen. Here is how one of the finest tactical military historians alive, Ian Hogg, described the D-Day plan: "The overall plan for expanding the lodgement area was, as already stated, a simple one. The British would attack in the area of Caen with the object of drawing as much of the German armoured strength as possible, while the Americans would execute a 'right hook' and break out through the less defended area to the west and the south." Ian Hogg, Great Land Battles of World War II, (Garden City, [NY]: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1987), pp. 141 – 142.

As events unfolded the D-Day timetable went off schedule because the Americans were unable to break-out on time and because the British and Canadian forces got into such a horrific fight with the finest troops the Wehrmacht and Waffen SS could boast. This slogging match, which had developed in the Caen sector, rendered the British unable to assist the Americans in their breakout. More than any other consideration, the one thing that led to both the American and British difficulties was the fighting capabilities of the German soldier: "...one of the unpalatable lessons which eventually – many years later, so far as the general public were concerned – emerged was the simple fact that the individual Allied soldier was usually inferior to his German counterpart. Whether the reason was training, discipline, indoctrination, ideology, fanaticism – whatever it was, the German had just that little bit more to pull out when the going got really rough." *Ibid.*, p. 136.

¹⁹ At several conferences in the United States this writer has heard this prejudice, first-hand, from senior American General Staff members.

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Church's schools. Buddhism had no similar infrastructure, or discipline, wherein it could supply the Vietnamese with a modern education - so desperately needed in the running of an emerging modern nation-state and its government.²⁰ Furthermore, the Roman Catholics were one hundred per cent loyal to the anti-Communist cause as nearly one million of them had fled South as a result of the severe and brutal persecution that they had received at the hands of Ho's Communist cadres. They needed no ideological coaxing or propaganda to convince them how serious their fight was against the Communist Vietnamese.²¹ In short, they made up an ideal recruiting base for Diem's government and counter-insurgency efforts.²² Yet, American fears over what constituted democracy were keeping Diem from fully engaging this dynamic, nation-building potential of the Catholic community. This restraint on using the educated Catholic potential created an American induced, Vietnamese-styled 'affirmative action.' It was this policy that ensured that most of Diem's own cabinet and General Staff were made up of Buddhists. Nevertheless, these were Buddhists who, like most Buddhists in Vietnam, were that in name only and were committed to nothing much more than themselves.²³

Footnotes

²⁰ "With education left in a lamentable state by the French, it is true that the Catholics, being better organised than other faiths, tended to be better educated." Marguerite Higgins, Our Vietnam Nightmare, (New York, [NY]: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1965), p. 43.

²¹ "It is also true that the Catholics are probably the most militant anti-Communists, although the Hoa Hao sect is not to be slighted in this respect." Ibid.

²² "I mean - Diem of course had no hesitation in arming a Catholic community because he had confidence that they would fight, and they did. There's no question about it." William Colby, "William E. Colby on Vietnam, Interview I." Recorded interview by Ted Gittinger, June 2, 1981. The Lyndon Baines Johnson Library Oral History Program (Transcript copies available from the LBJ Library Oral History Program, University of Texas at Austin); p. 34.

²³ "But in Diem's immediate entourage - his cabinet - there were only six Catholics out of seventeen men. The Vice-President of Vietnam, Nguyen Ngoc Tho, was a Buddhist and was in charge of the efforts to achieve a truce with the Buddhist extremists.

In the military sphere most generals were Confucianists, Buddhists, and Cao Dai. Out of seventeen generals on active duty, three were Catholic and the rest non-Catholic." Higgins, Our Vietnam Nightmare, pp. 43 - 44.

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Americans, specifically “The Best and The Brightest,” however, were not likely to look to their own flawed perceptions when Diem’s seemed so obvious.²⁴ As such, their concern had increased to the extent that, in 1960, Ambassador Durbrow was even contemplating the removal of the President of South Vietnam from office. Diem being an intelligent and sensitive man, was aware of the increasing ambivalence of the Americans toward his government,²⁵ as expressed in the following excerpt from Durbrow’s telegram to the State Department, September 16, 1960:

We believe US should at this time support Diem as best available Vietnamese leader, but should recognise that overriding US objective is strongly anti-Communist Vietnamese government which can command loyal and enthusiastic support of widest possible segments of Vietnamese people, and is able to carry on effective fight against guerrillas. If Diem’s position in country continues deteriorate as result failure to adopt proper political, psychological, economic and security measures, it may become necessary for US Government to begin consideration alternative courses of action and leaders in order achieve our objective.²⁶

Of course, the whole problem of political legitimacy was coming to the fore here. Given Durbrow’s considerable experience with Soviet duplicity and expansionist policies, it would be reasonable to believe that he would be impatient with Diem’s peculiar methods of government; specifically, if he believed that Diem was getting in the way of stopping Communist expansion.

Footnotes

²⁴ Everett Bumgardner, associated with the Michigan State University program in South Vietnam, held that Diem was subject to the view that the Americans did not know what they were involved in: “I think he looked upon us as great big children – well intentioned, powerful, with a lot of technical know-how, but not very sophisticated in dealing with him or his race, or his country’s problems.” Everett Bumgardner interviewed for “Vietnam: America’s Mandarin (1954 – 1963), A Television History.” This is a 13-part documentary film series produced for public television by WGBH Boston. The transcript is available through the University of Virginia’s Nolting Papers collection, page number of transcript: 8. Compiled by Philip J. Di Benedetto for the Special Collections Department’ Alderman Library – University of Virginia Library. Accession Number of Collection: R621/102.921; Box Number: 28; Folder Dates and Heading: Professional Papers – Historical Background Records, The Nolting Papers.

²⁵ In any case, Diem would have had at his immediate disposal the intelligence reports garnered by Nhu. As a result of his far-reaching intelligence gathering apparatus and capabilities, Nhu was usually able to keep his brother and himself one step ahead of various prospective plotters at any given time.

²⁶ Ambassador Elbridge Durbrow, *FRUS: Vietnam, 1958 - 1960, Vol.1*; John P. Glennon, editor in chief, (Washington, [DC]: The United States Government Printing Office, 1988), p. 579.

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Thus, in his concern to find the most expedient avenue to bolster American interests against Communist encroachment in Southeast Asia, Durbrow may have dismissed consideration that there were other more salient reasons for the Government of South Vietnam to exist than to function as an agency for American objectives. Yet, in fairness to Ambassador Durbrow, he had to try and stand by policy that was made in Washington and he had to work within the confines of his role:

The ambassador's role was to react to the pressures he got from Washington to try to generate more liberal governmental procedures. The press began to talk about the corruption and abuses and so forth, and the ambassador's role would have to be to try to move the government towards better imagery in that respect.²⁷

Nevertheless the Ambassador's role was not supposed to be one of unthinking and immediate implementation of Washington formulated policy as, obviously, unforeseen circumstances existed that were likely to have a mitigating effect on official policy, once translated, in the field.²⁸ Indeed, there was no hard and fast understanding that the Ambassador was supposed to be a mere field-manager of policy and, certainly, the direction had been toward more prestige, power and autonomy in the Ambassadorial post. This was a direction that Dean Rusk, Kennedy's Secretary

Footnotes

²⁷ William Colby, "William E. Colby on Vietnam, Interview I." Recorded interview by Ted Gittinger, June 2, 1981, p. 11, Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, Oral History Program, Austin, Tx.

²⁸ "Except for the posts in the Communist bloc and a few small posts where our responsibilities are limited, the number of agencies and operating programs in each American mission demands on the spot co-ordination and central supervision, lest interagency pulling and hauling dissipate American influence.

To meet this need Washington has turned to the Ambassador, whose authority is reinforced by his Presidential appointment and diplomatic precedence. Gradually, if unevenly, since World War II, the Truman, Eisenhower, and especially the Kennedy Administrations have tried to build the Ambassador's role into our tradition and get it accepted in the day-to-day operations of government agencies....In theory, the Ambassador is now more than *primus inter pares*. He is the active leader and director of American policies and programs. But practice often falls short, not least because Washington frequently undercuts the leadership and direction it asks him to provide." Senator Henry M. Jackson – editor, The Secretary of State and the Ambassador, Jackson Subcommittee Papers on the Conduct of American Foreign Policy, Contributors: Dean Rusk, Averell Harriman, Ellis O. Briggs, Samuel D. Berger, Edmund A. Gullion, Richard E. Neustadt, (New York, [NY]: Frederick A. Praeger, Publishers, 1966 - [Third Printing]), pp. 64 – 65.

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of State, would later espouse: "If the Department of State is to take primary responsibility for foreign policy in Washington, it follows that the Ambassador is expected to take charge overseas."²⁹

Notwithstanding all the above new implications concerned with the post-Second World War US Ambassador's role, Washington still used the ambassador as a messenger service to foreign leaders. In this particular case, happily for Durbrow, much of what he was to communicate to Diem incorporated his own suggestions which he had previously cabled to Washington in September of that same year (1960) and some of which had already been presented to Diem in October (1960).³⁰ In this regard, evidently, the pressures emanating from Washington were growing in their persistence and audacity for, on December 23, 1960, Ambassador Durbrow delivered another memorandum to the South Vietnamese President which seemingly maintained a surface cordial and advisory tone. But this memorandum was nothing less than Washington telling Diem how he should be running his government. Durbrow was instructed to drive home the following five points:

- 1.) To instruct the Diem that Washington wanted him to make the intricate workings of his cabinet and his ministers budgets, which were debated in the Vietnamese Assembly, more accessible to the press.
- 2.) Washington wanted the South Vietnamese President to permit the elected assembly to conduct investigations into any branch of the government.
- 3.) Washington wanted Diem, his government, and the Assembly to develop a more liberal Press code thereby allowing far more freedom of information to the press.

Footnotes

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

³⁰ The September suggestions to Washington and the October demands placed before Diem are covered later in this chapter in more detail.

- 4.) Durbrow had to make sure that Diem realised the importance of developing more favourable relations with the foreign press.
- 5.) Washington wanted Diem to develop an even broader credit program for the rural peasants and, incredibly, with total disregard for the culture and even the kind of war he was fighting, they asked him to develop a process of "fire-side" chats with the peasants. In short, they wanted Diem to be more American in his political approach with the South Vietnamese. ³¹

Footnotes

³¹ "In an effort to be as helpful as we can to assist you in your efforts to broaden the base of your government [an American idea being forced on Diem], the Department of State has instructed me to discuss with you some of the suggestions which we have already made and which the Department of State believes would have beneficial affects if adopted now in connection with the other measures you are planning. Apart from organizational changes proposed in the governmental and military structure and those liberalizing schemes you have told me about -- such as elections of youths to village councils and other progressive matters of this nature -- we believe it would be helpful if you could also adopt the measures outlined below. We, of course, recognize that security considerations impose certain limitations on liberalization, but we believe that the political situation requires certain calculated risks in order that the public and world opinion [should read -US, voters', public opinion] will become convinced of the sincerity of the steps you are taking to evoke broad participation in your efforts to improve security and develop the economy and institutions of Viet-Nam. It is our belief that the liberilization schemes should be clear-cut, effective, and of a broad nature so that the impact of their announcement will have the desired beneficial effect on the public here and abroad and will enhance the public support for your regime. With this thought in mind, we suggest:

1. In connection with the excellent new method of having Ministers defend their budgets before Assembly Committees, it would be advantageous from a political and press point of view either to publicize these hearings in full or at least to give fairly full minutes of these meetings to the press. [What use this would have to the ordinary Vietnamese was not thought through - as the average Vietnamese peasant was illiterate].

2. As has already been suggested, it would be politically worthwhile to authorize the Assembly to conduct investigations of any Department or Agency, of the Government. While public hearings would be politically more, useful, closed hearings could be held providing the results of the investigation are made public in considerable detail.

3. While it is realized that it is not a simple matter to work out an effective press code, we believe it would be most beneficial to a better understanding of the fruitful efforts being made by your government on behalf of the people and a better appreciation of the many problems you and your colleagues have to face, if the Assembly could adopt in the near future a fairly liberal press code. If this cannot be accomplished shortly, the press should be encouraged to set up machinery to police itself. Under such a system the Government should only intervene if articles are flagrantly dishonest, inaccurate, or favorable to the Communists. In case of a breach of the press code it might be better to require the paper to publish a full retraction rather than confiscate the particular edition or suspend the newspaper.

4. I have already discussed with you our suggestions on ways and means to have more favorable foreign press coverage. In this connection, the Department of State believes that it is almost as important for your Government to have favorable foreign press relations as it is to have diplomatic recognition from

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While the preceding footnoted document is lengthy it, nevertheless, reveals the subtlety of the process wherein friendly American advice could easily be seen as condescending and demeaning to the leader of a sovereign government. This was especially the case when one considers that Diem had, on many occasions, already proven his ability to govern equitably and consistently at the local, provincial and ministerial levels. Indeed, those who knew the South Vietnamese President understood that such a communication to the man could have only had a negative effect and increased his suspicion about the Americans and what they wanted. Predictably, Diem's reaction to the Durbrow' prompting was blunt, as duly noted by the Ambassador in a telegram to the State Department.

Diem told Durbrow that reform was a wonderful thing but there was no point in implementing anything rurally if people and places could not be protected from terrorist assault. As such, he stressed the need for at least 20,000 more trained soldiers. The situation in Laos had

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friendly countries. The Department suggests that you continue to have periodic press conferences as those recently conducted by Mr. Thuan, that effective use be made of the weekly press conferences of the Directorate General of Information by channelling items of substantive information through that agency for release, that foreign correspondents be permitted to make trips in the country to learn for themselves the nature of the Viet Cong threat, and that Ministers of the Government be available to have open and frank talks with correspondents about the accomplishments and problems of the various Ministries. It is believed that this might be helpful in improving the tone of foreign press articles.

5. We are pleased to learn that steps are being taken to increase and stabilise the price of paddy to the peasants. We also suggest that further efforts be made to grant broader credit facilities to the peasants.

It is the belief of the Department of State that if measures such as those suggested above, in addition to other liberalizing steps regarding elections of youth representatives to village councils, sending better administrators into the countryside, periodic "fireside chats", etc., are adopted in the near future, it would be worthwhile to withhold the announcement of individual measures, so that a meaningful official announcement could be made, preferably by you, of all the liberalizing measures you are putting into immediate effect. If the individual measures were not disclosed in advance, such across-the-board announcement of genuine liberalizing measures would, we believe, have a most beneficial effect on the people of Viet-Nam and on world opinion. It is certain that such an announcement would do a great deal to correct any erroneous impressions that have been given to world opinion in recent months and encourage the world press and government spokesmen to support you in your tireless effort to eliminate the Viet Cong threat and continue the fine progress attained in Viet-Nam in such a short period of time."

Congress, House, Committee on Armed Services, Ambassador Elbridge Durbrow, "Memorandum Handed to President Diem by Ambassador Durbrow on December 23, 1960," 1956 French Withdrawal - 1960, in United States - Vietnam Relations, 1945-1967, d. Volume IV, Book 10 of 12, pp. 1353 - 1355.

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the Vietnamese leader extremely concerned. When Durbrow suggested that the 64,000 Civil Guards should be able to handle the new security threats Diem reminded the American Ambassador that the Civil Guard were barely trained and would need the backing of at least another 20,000 well-trained reservist soldiers. As far as press relations were concerned, Diem reiterated that the onus was on the foreign press to try and be more objective as they only sought out those stories which were sensational and inflammatory while they ignored many favourable success stories associated with GVN undertakings. Finally, he shut the Americans down on their attempts to make his government executive more answerable to the elected assembly. He conveyed his worries about liberalising his government while trying to fight a war with a subversive enemy – an enemy who would use his own government against him and the people if they could. ³²

Footnotes

³² “While Diem was pleasant during hour and three quarters of discussion, he was basically negative. Diem did not reply to my remarks immediately but insisted essential have additional 20,000 troops since would do no good to put in reforms, build factories, roads and bridges, etc., unless these things and people could be protected. He referred several times to the need for 20,000 men stressing need because of deteriorating Lao situation. I then remarked we had just learned that he had increased force level of Civil Guard to 64,000 and asked if this increase would not fill security force needs. Diem replied civil guard not trained so needs bring back 20,000 reservists. He asked that I urge Dept to give favorable consideration force level request and I reiterated matter under careful study in Washington.

Referring to my remarks he again attacked the viciousness of foreign correspondents, particularly the French, who only seek sensational news. He then reviewed in some detail economic and social progress made in Viet-Nam in the past six years which have raised standard of living here above most SEA countries and asked why correspondents didn't report this instead of picking up Radio Hanoi reports spread by disgruntled Vietnamese intellectuals. As I had done in my remarks, I reiterated if he and other ministers had periodic press conferences and if Ministers would have frank talks with correspondents they would write more objective stories.

Referring our suggestion allow Assembly to carry on investigations, Diem pointedly stated that since under the constitution the Executive and legislature are completely separate, and it would not be right for the Assembly to investigate Executive Departments.... Before leaving I again expressed hope that he would accept our suggestion that he announce all liberalizing programs at one time in order to make best impact. Diem replied that he would think about this but made no comment...I also received impression he very reluctant to adopt reforms and is still basically thinking in terms of force to save the day, hence his insistence several times that we approve force level increase and his action raising Civil Guard ceiling by 10,000. While I still believe it absolutely essential he adopt more liberal programs, it is not certain from his attitude and remarks that he will take effective action in these matters, although I learned later he has agreed to engage the services of a public relations expert suggested by CAS to make a survey of GVN Foreign Public Relations needs.

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One of the most significant points that needs to be underscored, again, is that, quite apart from the fact that Diem did not like being told what to do by the Americans, there was a divergence in counter-insurgency strategy that was substantial even at this relatively early date. This divergence is clearly displayed in the preceding footnoted telegram from Durbrow to the State Department. In effect, Diem had subscribed to the British understanding of counter-insurgency warfare. This understanding began with the premise best expressed in a saying from the southern United States (also, an expression liked by William Colby): that “it is hard to talk about draining the swamp when your up to your...in alligators.” Which, in British counter-insurgency doctrine translates as: there is no point in talking about the mechanics of a liberal democracy when the people’s very lives are under threat. To implement village elections and open political debates etc., was pointless and counter-productive if such gatherings merely made better targets for guerrilla terrorist action. Robert Thompson was unmistakably clear on this point and that emergency law and government must, out of rational necessity, be a far cry from American-style liberal democracy:

Some very tough laws were enacted in Malaya. One enabled the government to seize and deport all Chinese found in a declared bad area. Another allowed the government to impose a collective fine on all the inhabitants of an area where the people were unco-operative...laws imposing strict curfews, a mandatory death penalty for carrying arms, life imprisonment for providing supplies or other support to terrorists, restricted residence or detention for suspected terrorist supporters and so on were introduced and used effectively. The main point about them was that they were seen by the population to be effective and were applied equally to all.³³

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Durbrow”

Congress, House, Committee on Armed Services, Elbridge Durbrow, “Telegram Sent To The Department of State - From Saigon on December 24, 1960 - No. 1216,” 1956 French Withdrawal - 1960, in United States - Vietnam Relations, 1945-1967. D. Volume IV, Book 10 of 12, pp. 1348 - 1351.

³³ Thompson, Defeating Communist Insurgency, p. 53.

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In this context, the significance that news media manipulated negative political imagery played in destroying the relations between Ngo Dinh Diem and the Kennedy Administration should not be underestimated. William Colby believed that this was the area wherein Diem made his fatal error, indeed, an error that superseded all others:

Ted Gittinger: "With benefit of hindsight, would you say that one of the problems that Diem created for himself in this context was the failure for some kind of loyal opposition to achieve viability, to sort of defuse dissent?"

*William Colby: "Not really. I think the real problem was that he allowed the negative images to grow without adequately presenting what his philosophical effort was and what he was actually accomplishing in the country. Because a more vigorous program of telling the world, telling lots of the world, what that was about, he didn't do very well, frankly...Therefore he let the issue grow as to whether Vietnam was democratic enough, rather than the issue grow as to whether Vietnam was progressing. Because if the latter had become the main issue, then I think he would have had support. **But there was no way, no way in the world in which he could retain the necessary authority and go through the liberalization technique [the bold Italics is my emphasis]."**³⁴*

Footnotes

³⁴ William Colby, "William E. Colby on Vietnam, Interview I." Recorded interview by Ted Gittinger, June 2, 1981, p. 11, Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, Oral History Program, Austin, Tx.

The Americans placed Diem in a 'Trap' between Implementing American-styled Democracy and Winning a War against Communist Insurgents –

Unwittingly, perhaps, the message made clear to Diem and Nhu, via the Durbrow communications, was that they, and their government, were expendable to America's foreign policy goals and its methods of attaining them.³⁵ Diem was, in effect, trapped between the increasing demands for American style democracy and winning a guerrilla war. For, it was plain to Diem that he had to achieve a viable sense of security in South Vietnam if stability, confidence and, indeed, the political legitimacy of his government were to grow.

Under the increasing pressure of burgeoning guerrilla warfare, which had truly begun to expand exponentially in 1959, maintaining security had become an increasingly difficult task.³⁶ Moreover, it was a task that was practically impossible if such Western democratic principles, like freedom of movement or search warrants for the invasion of private dwellings, were implemented. The Communists were well-aware of this dilemma of Diem's and they realised that the tensions growing between Diem and the Americans could be exploited to their own significant advantage if they increased the pressure in the villages and invited even further undemocratic responses from Diem.

The simple and profound truth, which must be underscored and held in constant consideration when measuring the qualities of democracy and violent revolution, was that these

Footnotes

³⁵ "Their [American] support was based on the belief that Diem shared their own ideals: but when it became increasingly clear that he did not, a loud debate began in American circles as to whether they should continue their support or not. Relations between Saigon and Washington were strained by the knowledge that this debate was going on, and Diem seems never to have wholly trusted his allies despite his initial dependence on them. In the end his doubts proved justified, when the Kennedy administration finally decided to abandon its former protégé to the wolves." Ralph Smith, Viet-Nam and The West, (Ithaca, [New York]: Cornell University Press, 1971), p. 176.

³⁶ Congress, House, Committee on Armed Services, Rebellion Against My-Diem, Evolution of the War - Origins of the Insurgency, 1954 - 1960 in United States-Vietnam Relations: 1945-1967. IV. A., 5. Tab 2., Book 2 of 12, p. 46.

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two contradictory demands could not be reconciled within the context of the political reality that existed in South Vietnam at that time. Nonetheless this was the truth that perennially evaded the educated men of power in Washington and the emotional responses of the American press in Vietnam.³⁷ Diem's former vice-president, Tho, several years later recalled that Diem had been caught in a terrible dilemma owing to the "crushing and contradictory demands of the Americans that he win the war and at the same turn South Vietnam into an American-style democracy."³⁸

Prior to the December memorandum to Diem, Durbrow had been working on some ideas to make Diem's government more 'democratic.' These preparations reveal a common pattern in the relations of Ngo Dinh Diem and the Americans, which had consistently reappeared down through the years of US involvement with Ngo Dinh Diem. When problems arose, in this case the increase in guerrilla activity in the rural areas and Diem's refusal to follow American direction, then, the Americans lost confidence and considered withdrawing support from him. Indeed, this ambivalence in American faith toward the Government of South Vietnam was made manifest in a telegram that Ambassador Durbrow sent to Washington in September of 1960. Durbrow, as he had indicated to William Colby, wanted to administer a "shock" to the Communists and non-Communists alike and his measures to achieve this included, amongst other things:

"...making Vice President Nguyen Hgoc Tho, a Southerner totally subservient to Diem, Minister of the Interior; Diem giving up the Ministry of Defense and appointing a full-time Minister; sending Nhu to a foreign embassy together with his henchman Tuyen; and naming one or two members of the opposition to the Cabinet. These moves were to be supplemented by an announcement of the disbanding of Nhu's Can Lao Party and publication of its membership; lifting of controls on the press and publications; stimulating of National Assembly investigations, on the American model, into corruption and mismanagement, and

Footnotes

³⁷ Hammer, *A Death In November*, p. 38.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 37-38.

a series of economic measures such as subsidies to farmers for their rice production."³⁹

Colby, who was privy to the motivation and details of these recommendations before they were even sent Washington or 'moderated' for presentation to Diem, believed that Durbrow was making a significant mistake. The Colby analysis was that Durbrow's suggestions would change the locus of power in Vietnam while not giving any clear or definitive picture of what the results would be on the war in the rural areas. Colby understood that Durbrow believed that South Vietnam should be democratic but his suggested methods and timetable were not relevant to the nature of the Vietnamese situation and were, specifically, hostile toward Diem. In fact, Colby believed that the 'psychological shock' that Durbrow wished to administer to Diem would lead to nothing but confrontation with no requisite gain for the United States.⁴⁰

The confrontation, which Colby noted and disapproved of, became manifest in a memorandum handed to President Diem by Ambassador Durbrow in October of 1960 wherein

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³⁹ William E. Colby (with James McCargar), Lost Victory: A Firsthand Account of America's Sixteen-Year Involvement in Vietnam, (Chicago, [Ill]: Contemporary Books, Inc., 1989), pp. 74-75.

⁴⁰ "But I strongly disagreed with him and his Embassy subordinates when they advocated American political practices that would change the locus of power in Vietnam with no clear perception of what the results on the war in the countryside would be. However desirable the political structure and procedures they prescribed might have been in a developed nation, it was plain that they were essentially irrelevant to the nature of the Vietnamese situation and society, aside from being transparently hostile to Diem and his Mandarin mission.

What Durbrow's September 1960 message was suggesting was the adoption by a Southeast Asian developing nation of the system of legislative controls and checks and balances that characterize the United States Government. What is more, it was being suggested in the confident belief that this would simultaneously be enthusiastically welcomed as an alternative to the national and social revolution propagated by the Communists in the countryside, and overcome the criticisms of the sophisticated urban intellectuals unhappy with Diem's Mandarin regime.... In other words, we defined the necessary "psychological shock" in terms totally counter to Diem's personality and the realities of the Vietnamese power structure and society (and, in retrospect, of dubious value in themselves in any case - National Assembly investigating committees?). Then followed the suggestion that we might have to look for "other leaders" if Diem did not take our advice as to what was "proper" for him to do. The confrontation with Diem had begun." Ibid.

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several of the ambassador's far-ranging suggestions were made for the improvement of the Government of Vietnam.⁴¹ It should be noted that the contents of this memorandum were, essentially, the same as those recommendations that Durbrow had sent, in September, to Washington (for obvious reasons there was no mention of seeking a replacement for Diem). Again, these were similar to the demands of the memorandum Durbrow delivered to Diem later in December of the same year which was made mention of earlier in this chapter. Many of the suggestions were concerned with circumventing corruption of lower level petty officials,⁴² for Ambassador Durbrow believed that some of the government's problems could also be traced to administrative deficiencies in the villages. But he was also specific about the need to remove certain cabinet officials and to send Diem's brother, Nhu, on an extended vacation out of the country.⁴³ Diem's reaction was to defend his brother, and he implored Ambassador Durbrow to consider that many of the rumours being spread about Nhu were coming from the Communists. He also stated that the ongoing guerrilla campaign made it difficult to implement reform in the countryside:

When I had finished reading, [the] President stated that most of the suggestions I had made conformed to his basic ideas, but added [that] as much as he would like to put these into effect, stepped-up activities of the Viet Cong made it most difficult. He added that many people had been intimidated by the Viet Cong and some had been won over so that it would be difficult to carry out some steps regarding countryside.⁴⁴

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⁴¹ Ambassador Durbrow, "English Text of Memorandum Handed to President Diem," FRUS: Vietnam, 1958-1960, Vol. I., John P. Glennon, editor in chief, (Washington, [DC]: United States Government Printing Office, 1986), pp. 598-602.

⁴² ibid., p. 601.

⁴³ Ambassador Durbrow, "Telegram From The Ambassador in Vietnam (Durbrow) to The Department of State," FRUS: Vietnam, 1958-1960, Vol. I., p. 596.

⁴⁴ ibid., p. 595.

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Essentially, Diem was asking the Americans for patience and time. He could not react to the various problems merely as an American puppet: the solutions had to be his, and they had to be Vietnamese.

Mutiny in Saigon, 1960, and American reactions -

Communist attacks increased during 1960, and, as the South Vietnamese Army command became impatient with the deteriorating security situation in the countryside, Colonel Nguyen Chanh Thi, commander of the airborne brigade attempted a coup on November 11.⁴⁵ The mutineers had blamed Diem for all the security failings in the South and hoped that his ouster would allow the military and the country's other non-communist politicians to crush the insurrection.⁴⁶ But they also acted because of their assessment of the American political situation, which would have included the facts that the Americans had taken a 'wait-and-see' approach before, when Diem had been under attack in 1954, and that in 1960 the Durbrow mission had grown critical of Diem. George Carver, a CIA operative in Saigon made specific reference to this:

*The military coup planners were a bit hazy on the finer points of U.S. constitutional procedure and more familiar with European parliamentary practice in which one government's "fall" was promptly followed by the opposition's acquisition of power. They wanted to give President Kennedy's incoming administration a fresh Vietnamese hand to play. They also wanted to pre-empt any risk that a new Catholic American president might throw the full weight of American support irrevocably behind the Catholic Ngo Dinh Diem.*⁴⁷

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⁴⁵ Duncanson, Government and Revolution in Vietnam, p. 268.

⁴⁶ Congress, House, Committee on Armed Services, Rebellion Against My-Diem, Evolution of the War - Origins of the Insurgency, 1954 - 1960 in United States-Vietnam Relations: 1945-1967. IV. A., 5. Tab 2., Book 2 of 12, p. 44.

⁴⁷ George A. Carver Jr., An Unheeded Firebell: The November 1960 Coup Attempt, (unpublished contract monograph for US News Books) in William J. Rust's, Kennedy In Vietnam, (New York, [NY]: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1985), p. 2.

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Diem was able to weather the coup attempt and remain in office, but he never forgave the army's senior officers, such as Major General Duong Van Minh ('Big Minh') for sitting calmly on the sidelines and waiting to join whichever party prevailed.⁴⁸ Furthermore, the Vietnamese President believed that he now had additional reasons to doubt the reliability of his American sponsors.

Brigadier-General Lansdale, who personally knew Diem very well, knew exactly how the Vietnamese President would interpret the American response to the coup attempt. Accordingly, on November 15, 1960, he sent a memorandum to Deputy Secretary Douglas (Department of Defense) on the subject which had several detailed critical observations about American treatment of Diem. Lansdale drew the Secretary's attention to the fact that Diem would be making comparisons between the 1954 coup attempt and this current one and, specifically, how the Americans reacted. For example, the Americans had persuaded Diem not to jail the coup leaders of 1954 who then, within a few weeks of that earlier coup, started instigating revolt against Diem by stirring up the religious sects which led to much violence and bloodshed. During both coup attempts the coup leaders, who were military men, had links to and support from the deposed emperor Bao Dai. Similarly, the coup leaders appealed to vague ideals of 'democracy' which coincided with what the Americans wanted to hear. Lansdale was even concerned that Diem would see a linkage between the coup and Durbrow's recent attempts to pressure democratic reforms from the GVN. Durbrow had been urging Diem to acquiesce to the rebel's demands while the coup was still on and had tried to get other diplomats to urge Diem to compromise with the rebels. As such, Lansdale was worried that the most charitable view Diem could hold of Durbrow was that he was badly misinformed. Lansdale pointed out, however, that regardless of how much leniency Diem was prepared to allow for Durbrow's lack of support for

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⁴⁸ Rust, Kennedy In Vietnam, p. 7.

his government at a critical moment, combined with the State Department's lack of positive direction over this issue, Ambassador Durbrow's mission would only be regarded with ever deepening suspicion on Diem's part. In short, Lansdale was questioning the viability of the US mission as it stood in South Vietnam during November of 1960 after the coup attempt. He told the Secretary, bluntly, that the US position and policy in Southeast Asia had been weakened as a result of this.⁴⁹

President Diem did not fail to perceive that the Americans had employed a 'wait-and-see' policy during the critical moments of the coup. As William Colby, the CIA - Saigon Station

Footnotes

⁴⁹ Here is the Lansdale estimation: "In determining U.S. policy towards Vietnam in the immediate future, you might find the following personal observations to help: President Ngo Dinh Diem will have the 1954 coup attempt of General Minh in mind as he deals with the leaders of the 1960 coup attempt and receives U.S. advice about punishment. In 1954, Diem was persuaded to let Minh and his key officers leave the country unpunished. A few weeks later, they were instigating a revolt by the sect forces against Diem which led to considerable bloodshed in March and April 1955. President Diem always felt that a little more firmness with a few individuals would have cooled many of the hot-heads who later listened to Minh.

The 1954 and 1960 events have enough similarities to make the 1954 lesson fresh in his mind. Both coup attempts were in November. The military leader of each claimed inspiration from Nasser of Egypt and had rather close ties with former chief of state Bao Dai. Both had imprecise programs of political aims, stated as generalized ideals which sounded as phoney as a \$3-bill to the people they hoped would rally to their cause, but which coincided with a French analysis of the desires of the U.S. Ambassador and his political staff. Both were certain that Army units wouldn't act against them; both wooed the sect organizations and the same political parties; both seem to share the same friends and acquaintances in France and Cambodia.

The actions of the U.S. Ambassador undoubtedly have deepened President Diem's suspicions of his motivations. Diem cannot help but wonder at U.S. objectives as voiced by such a spokesman. At the most critical moment of the coup attempt, the U.S. Ambassador urged Diem to give in to rebel demands to avoid bloodshed. Earlier, he had urged others to urge Diem to compromise with the rebels. The most charitable view that Diem could take would be that the Ambassador is a badly-informed man, but he would also then believe that the Ambassador has been far too prone to listen to the wrong people in Vietnam, people who are Diem's enemies.

Actually, Ambassador Durbrow is not entirely to blame for these blunders. The invitation to engage in this badly-timed and demoralizing meddling in Vietnam's affairs was given the Ambassador by the Southeast Asia desk staff in State message 775. This action, on top of many others which seem to have weakened both the U.S. position and the cause of freedom in Southeast Asia in the immediate past, should make us note that advice and actions of this staff carry definite hazards to the security of the U.S. ..." Congress, House, Committee on Armed Services, Brigadier-General Edward Geary Lansdale, "Memorandum For Deputy Secretary Douglas," 1956 French Withdrawal - 1960, in United States - Vietnam Relations, 1945-1967. d. Volume IV, Book 10 of 12, pp. 1330-1331.

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Chief, noted: "I think President interpreted U.S. even-handedness as disloyalty to him...I think he felt we should have been much more supportive, much more positive."⁵⁰ Colby was being circumspect though with Rusk as he told this writer in the spring of 1993 that the American treatment of Diem during these crucial times was a mistake of strategic proportions.⁵¹ Colby also told Gittinger that the revolt of 1960, while expressed in violent terms by a few excited soldiers, was really the work of the spoiled Saigon elites:

Well, the army eventually turned on them [i.e., it turned on Diem and Nhu], but that's another feature. I mean, we caused that, let's face it. No, I think the weakness was that Diem first started thinking in terms of creating a new trained elite out of the National Institute of Administration and so forth. Nhu later turned to this new idea of a new popular elite coming out of the villages. There's a contradiction between the two obviously. The beneficiaries of Diem's effort were the elites in the cities who were able to still be there and not be eliminated as they were in the North. They certainly turned on Diem, as they turned on him because of an idealistic feeling that he hadn't made things good enough and that certainly he had changed the old systems to their detriment, and yet had not solved the problems by his changes. Then they got intoxicated, some of them, by the idea that if we just have more democracy everything will be all right. I just don't think that would have been the case...⁵²

Owing not only to his official position as CIA station-chief but also to the fact that his residence was located across the street from the Palace, William Colby could give first-hand, eye-witness testimony to the attack of the parachutists coup.⁵³ Accordingly, he was able to surmise (having witnessed the violence of the coup attack and the ambivalent American response) that Diem had drawn the conclusion that American support for his government was less than

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⁵⁰ Rust, Kennedy In Vietnam, p. 19.

⁵¹ These discussions took place at the first conference on Vietnam (entitled: Paris & 20, April, 1993) given by the Centre For The Study of The Vietnam Conflict at Texas Tech University, Lubbock, Texas. This writer had the opportunity to discuss American-Diem relations with William Colby in the context of the argument put forward in this thesis wherein Ambassador Colby affirmed the validity of this argument.

⁵² William Colby, "William E. Colby on Vietnam, Interview I." Recorded interview by Ted Gittinger, June 2, 1981, pp. 19 & 20, Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, Oral History Program.

⁵³ Colby, Lost Victory, pp. 77-79.

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complete.⁵⁴ Ambassador Durbrow was also aware that Diem was suspicious of American intentions and recommended that something be done to stop further erosion of effective relations.⁵⁵

A Breach between Washington and Saigon (1960): The Coup and the Nhus

There is little doubt that 1960 heralded the beginning of a severe breach between Diem and Washington. Diem could not forget the coup, and he especially resented American requests to get rid of his brother Nhu and sister-in-law, Madame Nhu.⁵⁶ This had to be one of the most unnecessary elements of the developing tragedy in Vietnamese-American relations, for the Americans completely failed to take into account Diem's past and how he would react to attacks on family members. Somehow it escaped the Americans' attention that Diem had been prepared to sacrifice both his political career and even himself over the death of his brother, Khoi.⁵⁷ Being a man of consistent, integrated character, he would not hesitate to do the same for his brother Nhu.

Nhu was disliked within Vietnam because of the negative effects of his Movement for National Revolution and the secretive Can Lao Party (Can Lao Nhan Vi) which was accused by its detractors of being the Vietnamese equivalent of Hitler's S.S. A more objective analysis of Nhu's Can Lao was rendered by Michael Field:

Footnotes

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

⁵⁵ Congress, House, Committee on Armed Services, *U.S. Perceptions of The Insurgency, 1945-1960*, in *United States-Vietnam Relations: 1945-1967*. IV., A., 5., Tab 4., Book 2 of 12, p. 65.

⁵⁶ On October 14, 1960, Ambassador Durbrow handed Diem a note suggesting improvements for his government. Incredibly, he actually gave Diem a written document that seriously suggested that Diem transfer his brother and his wife out of Vietnam to an Ambassadorial position abroad. Clearly, all Durbrow accomplished with this request was the further alienation of the Ngo-Dinhs from the American government. *FRUS: Vietnam, 1958-1960*, Vol. I., John P. Glennon, editor in chief, (Washington, [DC]: United States Government Printing Office, 1986), p. 603.

⁵⁷ Shaplen, "A Reporter In Vietnam: Diem," *The New Yorker*, (September 22, 1962), p. 110.

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It was no ordinary party and can best be described as a sort of ginger group within the regime, organised and acting like a secret society which reported on the attitudes and actions of politicians, officials and the population. Closely associated with the Can Lao was a secret political intelligence service which reported direct to Nhu himself.⁵⁸

A Pentagon analyst was even more thorough in his assessment of Can Lao and he indicated that Nhu's purpose was truly similar to the Communists - in that he wanted to create a party that could bring political discipline to the people en masse. The analyst noted the Can Lao's increasing effectiveness in bringing government control over affairs in South Vietnam. Accordingly, the Pentagon analyst found the Can Lao to be organised very much like the Kuomintang of China or a Communist party as it was based on a system of cadres and cells. This structure permitted the Can Lao to be active at every level of Vietnamese life. In addition to this the analyst found that to advance in South Vietnamese professional circles one had to have Can Lao connections or credentials – again emulating the Communist parties of China and Russia. The Can Lao could boast that at least one third of the GVN cabinet were members and up one half of the elected assembly were as well. The Can Lao, similarly, controlled the government's official political party, the National Revolutionary Movement. There was one notable area where the Can Lao had no jurisdiction and that was in Ngo Dinh Can's administrative region around Hue. For Ngo Dinh Can's control of this area was almost medieval in its absoluteness and near-Stalinist in its intelligence gathering capabilities on any and all dissidents operating in the area.⁵⁹

Footnotes

⁵⁸ Michael Field, The Prevailing Wind: Witness In Indo-China, (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1965), p. 314.

⁵⁹ “12. An increasingly important and effective mechanism employed by the Diem regime to maintain control over the affairs of South Vietnam is the Can Lao, a semicovert political apparatus. Its structure, like that of the Kuomintang or a Communist party, is based on the cell and cadre system. The Can Lao is organized on a regional basis. The southern region is run by Nhu, an articulate, pragmatic activist. It is loosely organized and administered. The northern region is ruled with an iron hand by Can, a withdrawn eccentric feared by most Vietnamese, who seldom ventures from his headquarters in Hue. Although there is considerable rivalry and tension between the two brothers, there is no evidence that either is less than completely loyal to Diem. Diem apparently finds it advantageous to continue the division of authority as a means of controlling the ambitions of Nhu and Can.

Footnote continued on next page:...

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In fairness to Nhu, it should be noted that the United States Foreign Service had endorsed the Can Lao where the ideas for its inception had first been formulated. Indeed, Lansdale had warned his fellow Americans, particularly Ambassador Durbrow, that the creation of the party could cause significant problems:

Ambassador Durbrow seemed genuinely surprised when I told him that the Can Lao Party in Vietnam was originally promoted by the U.S. State Department and was largely the brain-child of a highly respected, senior U.S. Foreign Service professional. Several weeks after this action was undertaken originally, I learned of it and warned that the benefits were extremely short-term and that great lasting harm could result by a favoured party forcing older parties to go underground. However, the decision had been made, the Can Lao party had been started, and we had to start working from that reality.⁶⁰

In addition to fears, unwarranted as they may have been, about Nhu's political machinery, his intellectual capabilities played a significant role in building apprehension and resentment amongst the government's opponents. By most diligent accounts, he was a brilliant man almost impossible to defeat in an intellectual debate. Furthermore, Nhu had an uncanny eye for detail and a true believer's attitude with regard to the correctness of the direction toward which Diem's government was embarked.⁶¹

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13. Can Lao members are active at virtually every level of Vietnamese political life. Membership is becoming increasingly important for professional advancement. One-third of the cabinet members and over one-half of the National Assembly deputies are probably Can Lao men; the actual figure may be higher. The Can Lao controls the regime's mass political party, the National Revolutionary Movement. It apparently has its hand in most important business transactions in South Vietnam and is engaged in dubious business practices. Recently the Can Lao has stepped up its campaign to recruit key officers in the GVN military establishment, probably to establish a control mechanism within the only organization in South Vietnam strong enough to challenge the Diem regime." Congress, House, Committee on Armed Services, "Major Trends in South Vietnam," 1956 French Withdrawal - 1960, in United States - Vietnam Relations, 1945 - 1967. d. Volume IV, Book 10 of 12, p. 1192.

⁶⁰ Congress, House, Committee on Armed Services, Brigadier-General Edward Geary Lansdale, "Memorandum For The Secretary of Defense, Deputy Secretary of Defense", (January 17, 1961), U.S. Perceptions of the Insurgency, 1954 - 1960, Evolution of the War - Origins of the Insurgency, 1954 - 1960, in United States - Vietnam Relations, 1945 - 1967. IV. A. 5. Tab 4. Book 2 of 12, p. 74.

⁶¹ John Osborne, "The Tough Miracle Man of Vietnam: Diem, America's newly Arrived Visitor, has Roused his Country and Routed the Reds," Life, No. 42, (May 13, 1957), p. 166.

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For Nhu, though a bookworm, who busied himself for years in libraries and graduated at the Ecole des Chartes in Paris, was equally at home among the cards and files of the surete. He was a philosopher with a taste for criminology, a palaeographer with a hankering for the Inquisition. To listen to Nhu discussing the political errors and deviations of his countrymen was like listening to a Jesuit discoursing on heresy.... Nhu's persuasiveness was considerable. In the space of an hour's conversation he almost broke down the most sceptical resistance to his beliefs, which he held with quietly fanatical conviction.⁶²

Ngo Dinh Nhu, in many ways was indispensable to Diem's government as he was not merely an appointment by nepotism but, instead, much more to Diem, in practical political terms, than any of the Kennedy brothers were to the American president:

His (Diem's) most important asset however was one which the Americans did not really appreciate until much later: the younger brother whom he made his Counsellor, and who was undoubtedly one of the most astute Vietnamese politicians of his generation. It was probably Ngo Dinh Nhu who created the situation in 1954 in which his elder brother was the most obvious candidate for the premiership, and it was probably he who worked out the tactics by which the Caodaists and the Hoa-Hao were out-manoevred in Cochinchina during the following year.⁶³

Indeed, Ngo Dinh Nhu had already assumed the role of advisor to Diem whilst the Geneva conferences of 1954 were underway and this was duly noted by the Department of State.⁶⁴ Nhu was with Diem every step of the way in planning the necessary moves to offset the myriad political intrigues and plots hatched by the nouveau-riche discontented politicians and generals in Saigon. Political genius and intellectual rigour made Ngo Dinh Nhu an exceptionally dangerous man for the opponents of Diem's government to cross, and thus he was feared and hated.

Before Frederick Nolting had been officially appointed as United States Ambassador to South Vietnam (as a replacement for Ambassador Elbridge Durbrow), he became quite well-

Footnotes

⁶² Field, The Prevailing Wind, p. 314.

⁶³ Ralph Smith, Vietnam and the West, (London: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., 1968), p. 152.

⁶⁴ John P. Glennon, editor-in-chief; FRUS: 1952-1954; Indochina, Vol.13, Pt.2, Department of State; (Washington, [DC]: United States Government Printing Office, 1982), pp. 1762-1763.

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acquainted with Ngo Dinh Nhu in a variety of social and informal settings.⁶⁵ Nolting, as the reader will see, was a perceptive and thoughtful individual who was not given to either hurried analysis or extreme views. Accordingly, his testimony about Ngo Dinh Nhu is worth examining given the bearing this understanding had on American - Vietnamese relations, in the context of counter-insurgency warfare:

*Ngo Dinh Nhu was a complicated person, in my judgement. A scholar by preference.... [and] he was a strong anti-Communist patriot.... With me, he never put himself forward as a spokesman for the government. Unlike Attorney General Robert Kennedy, he held no official position. But like Bobby Kennedy, he was considered to be (rightly, I think) his President's closest advisor.... "Personalism" [the philosophy that Nhu wanted to imbue the Vietnamese people with] was not a doctrine directed toward oligarchy or family rule, as was frequently implied in the press. On the contrary, it was a doctrine of individual development, self-realisation (together with self-sacrifice), and Confucian social compassion. Quoting Aristotle, I said to Nhu, "You mean that the essence of man is to strive to be human." With some elaboration he agreed.*⁶⁶

As Nolting took over the reigns of the American Embassy in Saigon, and as he came into increasing contact with Diem and Nhu, he came to understand that much of what the American advisors had been blaming on Nhu, such as intransigent resistance to new policies, actually was the result of stubborn opposition from Diem. Diem simply refused to be cajoled by the Americans in what he declared were internal Vietnamese affairs.⁶⁷

Footnotes

⁶⁵ Frederick Nolting, From Trust To Tragedy: The Political Memoirs of Frederick Nolting, Kennedy's Ambassador to Diem's Vietnam, (New York, [NY]: Praeger Publishers, 1988), p. 101.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid., pp. 103 -104.

Lansdale Encourages Ambassador Durbrow's Transfer out of South Vietnam –

Lansdale made it clear, in his reports to Washington, that the complexities of Vietnam had exhausted Durbrow and that his actions, whether he liked it or not, were held suspect by the Diem government; he also made a number of suggestions for what kind of Ambassador was needed to replace Durbrow:

e. Ambassador Durbrow should be transferred in the immediate future. He has been in the "forest of tigers" which is Vietnam for nearly four years now and I doubt that he himself realizes how tired he has become or how close he is to individual trees in this big woods. Correctly or not, the recognised government of Vietnam does not look upon him as a friend, believing that he sympathized strongly with the coup leaders of 11 November.

f. The new Ambassador should arrive as many weeks as possible before the April elections, for which the Communists are now actively preparing with their "political struggle" tactics almost unhindered. The new Ambassador should be a person with marked leadership talents who can make the Country Team function harmoniously and spiritually, who can influence Asians through understanding them sympathetically, and who is alert to the power of the Mao Tse Tung tactics now being employed to capture Vietnam and who is dedicated to feasible and practical democratic means to defeat these Communist tactics.⁶⁸

Lansdale was right, of course, Ambassador Durbrow had been in "the forest of tigers" too long which had led to a deterioration in relations between Saigon and Washington and, certainly, as Lansdale pointed out, Durbrow was no longer seen as a friend by the Diem government. As such, Nolting's appointment was timely and, regardless of the change in administrations in the United States, this change of Ambassadors in Vietnam, it could be argued, should have already taken place. For Nolting had to spend a great deal of time and effort overcoming the diplomatic obstacles that Durbrow's 'memos' to Diem and Washington had created. There was no way of

Footnotes

⁶⁸ Congress, House, Committee on Armed Services, Brigadier-General Edward Geary Lansdale, "Memorandum For Secretary of Defense - Deputy Secretary of Defense," U.S. Involvement in The War - Internal Documents; The Kennedy Administration: January 1961 - November 1963 - Book I, in United States - Vietnam Relations, 1945 -1967. V.B.4., Book 11 of 12, pp. 3 - 4.

getting around the fact that Diem was now more suspicious of Washington's motives than he had ever been. After all, and as pointed out in detail previously in this chapter, during the coup attempt of 1960 he had experienced the same unnerving phenomenon as he had back in 1954: the Americans waited to see which way the coup was going to go and they even had suggested that he give into the rebels demands. In conjunction with this less than loyal affirmation by the Americans, Diem had also endured attacks on his brother Ngo Dinh Nhu. These were not the actions of true friends and Diem knew it. Because of this basic understanding of Diem's, that had predisposed him to counter any American suggestion, American policy in South Vietnam was, for all practical considerations, in disarray when Frederick Nolting took over the post of United States Ambassador in 1961.

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Edward G. Lansdale had a shrewd and accurate assessment of what was required from the United States Government in order to undo the disarray that Ambassador Durbrow's mission had left American – Vietnamese relations in. As such, he told his superiors that the new Kennedy Administration had the difficult task of restoring Ngo Dinh Diem's faith in what the Americans were about in Southeast Asia. In conjunction with this, Lansdale stated that the weight of this responsibility for restoration would rest on Frederick Nolting's shoulders, as he was Kennedy's new Ambassador to South Vietnam. Lansdale noted that success or failure depended on Nolting's ability "...to get on the same wave-length with Diem." ¹

What of Ambassador Frederick Nolting and what was his background that he could converse with Ngo Dinh Nhu on matters of philosophy or overcome the cultural barriers that existed between Western and Confucian philosophy/ world-view in order to establish meaningful communication between his mission and President Ngo Dinh Diem? The answers to these salient questions will reveal that this gentleman was, amongst other things, superbly trained for the role of diplomatic ameliorator.

Footnotes

¹ "Increasing the confidence of President Diem and his government in the United States must be the starting point of our new approach to Vietnam. Fortunately a number of circumstances are favourable; a new administration in the United States, a new ambassador going to Vietnam, and the fact that President Diem has received a new mandate. Nevertheless, the going will not be easy. Given Diem's personality and character and the abrasive nature of our recent relationships, success or failure in this regard will depend very heavily on Ambassador Nolting's ability to get on the same wave-length with Diem." Congress, House, Committee on Armed Services, Brigadier-General Edward Geary Lansdale, "Annexes to a Program of Action for South Vietnam - Annex 3 - Political," U.S. Involvement in The War - Internal Documents, The Kennedy Administration: January 1961 - November 1963, in United States - Vietnam Relations, 1945 -1967. V.B.4., Book I within Book 11 of 12, p. 102.

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Biographical Sketch of Frederick (Fritz) Ernest Nolting, Jr. -

A brief biographical sketch of Frederick (Fritz) Ernest Nolting, Jr. would have to include the following: he was born on August 24, 1911 in Richmond, Virginia to Frederick Ernest Nolting, Sr. and Mary Buford Nolting.² His family background was deep-set in Virginia, going back to the Revolutionary War, and the family was well respected.³ He spent his early childhood and student years in Richmond attending the St. Christopher's School and later, as an undergraduate, he attended the University of Virginia in Charlottesville and in 1933, after only three years of study, he had earned himself a four-year BA degree in history.⁴ The Depression intervened powerfully into his life as it had devastated the Nolting family business and, as such, his skills and education were required to help out.⁵ Accordingly, upon graduation from College, Nolting went to work for five years as an investment banker within the family business in Richmond.⁶

In 1939, Frederick Nolting returned to his studies at the University of Virginia where he earned himself an MA (1940) and, in rapid order, a Ph.D. (1942) in philosophy which permitted

Footnotes

² Jeanne C. Pardee, editor, "Biographical Sketch," p. 1, in rg-21/102.921, The Papers of Frederick Ernest Nolting, Jr., compiled by Philip J. Benedetto, (Charlottesville, [Virginia]: Special Collections of the University of Virginia Library – The Alderman Library, 1993).

³ Nolting's grandfather (on his father's side) had emigrated from Germany in 1839 and immersed himself in the tobacco business in Virginia. His father, before the Depression, had been involved in the business of investment banking in Richmond, Virginia. Nolting's mother could trace her American heritage back to the Revolutionary War in Virginia. This biographical material was related to this writer in a telephone interview with Mrs. Lindsay Nolting; the interview was conducted on February 3, 1999 from Winnipeg, Manitoba (between 4:30 p.m. and 5:00 p.m.).

⁴ Telephone interview conducted by this writer with Mrs. Lindsay Nolting; the interview was conducted on Thursday, February 4, 1999 from Winnipeg, Manitoba (between 4:20 p.m. and 4:30 p.m.). Also see Pardee, ed., "Biographical Sketch," p. 1, in rg-21/102.921, The Nolting Papers.

⁵ Telephone interview conducted by this writer with Mrs. Lindsay Nolting on February 4, 1999.

⁶ Pardee, ed., "Biographical Sketch," p. 1, in rg-21/102.921, The Nolting Papers.

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him to serve as a lecturing fellow in that field. Owing to his extraordinary capabilities, he was able to win a fellowship to attend Harvard for graduate studies in 1940. One of his professors at that prestigious institution was none other than Lord Bertrand Russell and, regardless of his philosophical disagreements with Russell, Nolting was able to earn top marks.⁷ By 1941 he had earned himself another MA in philosophy at Harvard.⁸ Between the years 1939 and 1942, Frederick Nolting had been an extremely busy graduate student but he had also found time, in 1940, to marry Olivia Lindsay Crumpler who remained his life-long partner and friend.⁹ Having just completed his graduate education and having just married, the war intruded very abruptly into his life. Mrs. Nolting recalled that he had been extremely fortunate in completing his university education before signing up with the United States Navy after Pearl Harbour had been bombed in December of 1941.¹⁰

Nolting was promoted through the ranks of the USN during the Second World War where he attained the rank of Lieutenant Commander. His naval service was not without peril as he served on a munitions ship in the very active Mediterranean theatre, which, of course, had him involved with military operations in North Africa and Italy.¹¹ After serving in the USN overseas during the war,¹² Nolting then entered the service of the U.S. Department of State in 1946 and

Footnotes

⁷ Mrs. Nolting still has one of his papers upon which Bertrand Russell wrote: "If you had agreed with my book – I would have given you an A plus." As it stood, he had been given an A minus on this paper. Telephone interview conducted by this writer with Mrs. Lindsay Nolting; the interview was conducted on February 4, 1999.

⁸ Pardee, ed., "Biographical Sketch," p. 1, in rg-21/102.921, The Nolting Papers.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

¹⁰ Telephone interview conducted by this writer with Mrs. Lindsay Nolting on February 3, 1999 from Winnipeg, Manitoba (between 4:30 p.m. and 5:00 p.m.).

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Pardee, ed., "Biographical Sketch," p. 1, in rg-21/102.921, The Nolting Papers.

served in a variety of postings in Washington and overseas.¹³ To this service he brought a very capable mind and the ordered discipline of the military training he had received in the United States Navy.¹⁴ As in his academic and war-time achievements, Nolting brought his considerable talents to bear in his Foreign Service career for the next eighteen years.¹⁵ Because he had held a post as Special Assistant to the Secretary of State for Mutual Security Affairs he was also heavily involved with NATO.¹⁶ The posts he held with NATO were that of Alternate U.S. Representative to the North Atlantic Council and deputy chief of the U.S. Mission to NATO in Paris,¹⁷ positions that he had held since 1955.¹⁸

In his memoirs, Nolting admits, candidly, that most of his experience in Washington and elsewhere had been concerned with European countries. Yet, as a student he had spent several months in Japan and North China and, as an assistant to Secretary John Foster Dulles, he had heard Premier Pierre Mendes-France's last desperate plea for U.S. naval and air support in

Footnotes

¹³ Nolting, From Trust To Tragedy, p. 11.

Mrs. Nolting told this writer that her husband had no special contacts within the Department of State that would have guaranteed him a career in that bureaucracy. Nevertheless, with his war service record, his considerable academic achievements and his interest in foreign policy, which had been enhanced with his service during the war, he was able to enter into the Foreign Service. Telephone interview conducted by this writer with Mrs. Lindsay Nolting on February 3, 1999.

¹⁴ During his studies at university, Nolting had also undertaken a great deal of research within the field of religion. He combined this with his studies in philosophy and this combination of intellectual disciplines put him in a rather unique position to be able to converse with Ngo Dinh Diem. Diem and his brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu, were educated in the best French tradition that schools could offer in Vietnam. Ngo Dinh Nhu also had the advantage of having pursued academic studies in France. Nolting, From Trust To Tragedy, p. 23.

¹⁵ Pardee, ed., "Biographical Sketch," p. 1, in rg-21/102.921, The Nolting Papers.

¹⁶ Nolting, From Trust To Tragedy, p. 11.

¹⁷ "I was serving as the second man in the U.S. delegation to NATO -- as Alternative U.S. Representative to the North Atlantic Council -- when I was asked to go to Saigon as U.S. Ambassador." Frederick E. Nolting, Recorded Interview by Joseph E. O'Connor, May 14, 1966 (Paris, France), p. 1, John F. Kennedy Library, Oral History Program, Boston, Ma.

¹⁸ Nolting, From Trust To Tragedy, p. 11.

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France's war with the Viet Minh. From that point on Nolting began to develop a special interest in developments in Indo-China; however, when Secretary of State Christian Herter had asked him to go as Ambassador to Laos, Nolting's chief, Ambassador Randolph Burgess, had urged that he remain at NATO.¹⁹

Concurrent with Nolting's growing interest in Southeast Asia, the Pentagon Papers' analyst/historian noted that there was a growing realisation within Washington that a crisis was developing in South Vietnam:

When Kennedy took office, the prospect of an eventual crisis in Vietnam had been widely recognised in the government, although nothing had yet been done about it. Our Ambassador in Saigon [Durbrow] had been sending worried cables for a year, and twice in recent months (in September 1960 and again in December) had ended an appraisal of the situation by cautiously raising the question of whether the U.S. would not sooner or later have to move to replace Diem.²⁰

Footnotes

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Congress, House, Committee on Armed Services, B. Counter-insurgency: The Kennedy Commitments, 1961-1963; 1. The Kennedy Program and Commitments, 1961, in United States - Vietnam Relations, 1945-1967. Book 2 of 12, p. i.

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Early 1961 Witnesses the Kennedy Administration's attempt to re-buttruss a Policy of Support for Ngo Dinh Diem and the GVN –

At the time of Nolting's appointment, in April of 1961, as United States Ambassador to Saigon, US policy was under review. A task force, headed by Roswell L. Gilpatric, was reshaping this policy during the late winter and the early spring of 1961.²¹ The new US President, John F. Kennedy, and his administration were concerned over the pronounced deterioration in relations between Washington and Saigon. As noted previously, this deterioration had occurred during the mission of Ambassador Elbridge Durbrow and, thus, a new initiative was seen as necessary. The purpose of this task force was to extend and put new-life into the, then, current policy toward South Vietnam.²²

In an interview given by Nolting in 1966 to Joseph O'Connor of the JFK Library, the former Ambassador to South Vietnam recalled that there was continuity in policy between the Eisenhower and Kennedy administrations. Fundamentally, policy remained the same in that it was designed to assist the GVN in strengthening itself and, similarly, this policy was intended to help South Vietnam defend itself from subversion.²³ Nolting also recalled, however, that the new Kennedy program for South Vietnam was markedly different from Eisenhower's in that it substantially increased materiel aid and training to the ARVN. This aid was delivered to the various departments and military personnel through the GVN. According to Nolting's recollections, the Kennedy Administration believed that this increase in aid was necessary in order to offset the increasing pressures being forced on the GVN by the Viet Cong who were, in

Footnotes

²¹ Frederick E. Nolting, Recorded Interview by Joseph E. O'Connor, May 14, 1966 (Paris, France), p. 2, John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program.

²² ibid.

²³ "The policy remained essentially the same as under the Eisenhower Administration, namely, to assist South Vietnam to strengthen itself and to defend itself against subversion." ibid., p. 3.

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turn, receiving substantial increases in aid and support from Hanoi.²⁴ In addition to this, Vice President Lyndon Baines Johnson, his wife and members of the Kennedy family were sent out to Saigon only two days after Nolting had arrived in order to show President Kennedy's commitment to Ngo Dinh Diem and his government.²⁵

Defense Department papers support much of what Nolting declared was the purpose of the new initiative headed up by Gilpatric. As Deputy Secretary of Defense, Gilpatric had been asked by the President to appraise the situation and recommend a series of actions.²⁶ Nevertheless, the Deputy Secretary had other problems to contend with in addressing a proposed

Footnotes

²⁴ "The program was different, involving more materiel aid and training to South Vietnam, through its elected government, in view of the additional pressures that the South Vietnamese were under because of the Viet Cong activity and Hanoi's increased support of them." *Ibid.*

Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., supports the accuracy of Nolting's recollections concerned with why President Kennedy believed it was necessary to increase aid to South Vietnam: "At first the communists hung back, but, as the success of Diem's economic policies convinced Ho Chi Minh that he could not wait passively for the Diem regime to collapse, he sent word to his comrades in the south to join the guerrillas....By this time Ho Chi Minh was supplying the Viet Cong with training, equipment, strategic advice and even men – perhaps 2000 a year by 1960." Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House*, (Boston, [MA]: The Houghton Mifflin Company, 1965), pp. 538 – 539.

²⁵ "...we'd been there only two days when Vice President Johnson and his wife and entourage arrived...This was to give emphasis to the new determination of the Kennedy Administration to back up the efforts of South Vietnam to remain free. And, I must say, the Vice President was very strong in speaking out on this. He was very forthright; he was very energetic; he was extremely cordial to President Diem and the members of his family and his government, both publicly and privately. There was a strong joint communiqué issued at the end of that visit which, in effect, underlined the determination of both governments to maintain the independence of South Vietnam." Frederick E. Nolting, Recorded Interview by Joseph E. O'Connor, May 14, 1966 (Paris, France), p. 3, John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program.

Ellen Hammer's research concurs with Nolting's assessment with regard to why the Vice President and Kennedy family members were sent to Vietnam: "In May 1961, Vice-President Lyndon B. Johnson arrived in Saigon to demonstrate support for the Southern regime. The Americans had decided to increase their aid to the Vietnamese, to pay the expenses of another 20,000 men in the army who would be trained in guerrilla warfare, and to add 100 American advisers to the 685 men in the U.S. Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG)." Hammer, *A Death In November*, p. 34.

²⁶ Congress, House, Committee on Armed Services, *B. Counter-insurgency: The Kennedy Commitments, 1961-1963; I. The Kennedy Program and Commitments, 1961; The Spring Decisions -I, Chapter III*, in *United States - Vietnam Relations, 1945-1967*. Book 2 of 12, p. 19.

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new initiative for Ngo Dinh Diem's South Vietnam. Not least of these problems to be considered by Gilpatric was the crisis in Laos.

Introduction to the Laotian Problem -

Laos was a strategic nightmare for the United States policy planners because, as the soldierly instincts of Eisenhower had discerned, it was the lynch-pin to, on the one hand, securing the Southeast Asian theatre or, on the other, opening it up to assault. Elemental geography dictated that the Laotian border not only ran the entire length of North Vietnam and much of South Vietnam but it also had substantial borders with Communist China, Burma, Thailand and South Vietnam's other neighbour: Cambodia as well.²⁷ Kennedy, however, was not the soldier Eisenhower was but he was a formidable politician, and he recognised that attempting to defend Laos had the makings of political disaster – quite apart from the military concerns which would only be compounded after his 'Bay of Pigs' experience.²⁸ Accordingly, in the Kennedy estimation Laos would have to be declared 'neutral' but this presented substantial problems all of its own. As the Pentagon Papers analyst noted, neutrality would be extremely embarrassing and, perhaps, costly for the United States in Southeast Asia as it would involve abandoning a non-communist leader. This Laotian leader, Phoumi Nosavan, had come into power because of the

Footnotes

²⁷ "Before leaving the White House Eisenhower had warned Kennedy he might have to go to war in Laos, and he would have to fight alone if America's allies in the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) refused to help: the royal government had to be defended against the Pathet Lao.

The outgoing president had decided Laos was 'the key to the entire area' because American planners assumed that if North Vietnam, China, or both launched an attack, they would move through the Mekong River valley from Laos into Thailand and perhaps Burma." Hammer, *A Death In November*, p. 28.

²⁸ "Kennedy would have had Eisenhower's personal support if he decided to fight in Laos. But the young president was chastened by one disaster – the rout of the invasion he had authorised against Fidel Castro at the Bay of Pigs – and did not want to risk another. When Kennedy put hard questions to the chiefs of staff, he found them ready to go to war in Laos but unable to promise an easy victory, or any victory at all, without the right to use nuclear weapons." *Ibid.*, pp. 28 – 29.

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full support and assistance given him by the United States Government.²⁹ Now to abandon Phoumi for a 'neutralist' government, one that the United States had helped Phoumi overthrow, would place the Kennedy Administration in a very hypocritical stance in relation to its former policy in the region. This hypocrisy, and its accompanying embarrassment, was never fully compensated for by Washington's attempts to assuage other Southeast Asian government's fears about being similarly abandoned. Indeed, Washington's 'banging-on-the-table' in order to convince Diem to make his government more democratic hardly decreased his suspicions of just what the Americans meant by 'more democratic' when coupled with what they had been doing in Laos.³⁰

Evidently, Ngo Dinh Diem was wise in harbouring his suspicions about the integrity of U.S. support which involved their questionable tenacity and staying-power and, above all, the U.S. Administration's apparent lack of that most trusted of Oriental virtues: the virtue of patience. Back as early as 1957, in meetings with American officials, Diem had pointed out that Laos was going to prove critical to the security of South Vietnam and that the Laotian question had to be addressed with firmness and resolve by the Americans. The American officials who attended

Footnotes

²⁹ Schlesinger maintains that there was some disagreement between the Department of State and the CIA over where US support should go in Laos. In the end, the Department of Defense and the CIA won out in their support of Phoumi because he dominated non-communist Laos. Schlesinger, A Thousand Days, pp. 325 – 326.

³⁰ "After all, the heart of the Laos embarrassment was that the U.S. was (with some face-saving cover) dropping an anti-Communist leader who had come into power with the indispensable assistance of the U.S. This dropping of Phoumi in Laos in favour of support for the neutralist government Phoumi had overthrown with U.S. encouragement and assistance remained an essential part of whatever outcome developed in Laos. In the wake of this embarrassment, the U.S. was now trying to reassure other governments in Southeast Asia. Was it possible to carry out this reassurance while threatening Diem [essentially what Durbrow had been doing] unless he reformed himself according to U.S. prescription?" Congress, House, Committee on Armed Services, B. Counter-insurgency: The Kennedy Commitments, 1961-1963; 1. The Kennedy Program and Commitments, 1961, in United States - Vietnam Relations, 1945-1967. Book 2 of 12, pp. 50-51.

these early meetings included Ambassador Elbridge Durbrow and Kenneth Young of the State Department - along with representatives of the Pentagon.³¹

Deputy Secretary of Defence, Roswell Gilpatric and the Presidential Task Force on South Vietnam -

Kennedy's government was well-aware of their growing lack of credibility amongst their Southeast Asian allies and gave Deputy Secretary of Defence, Gilpatric, a near carte-blanche in order to assist him in designing a policy that would restore trust, especially with President Diem.³² Thus, Gilpatric was concerned, in his proposals, with the following salient factors, which weighed heavily on US policy:

- 1. The security situation in Vietnam.*
- 2. The Administration's special interest in counter-insurgency.*
- 3. The apparent futility and divisiveness of the Durbrow (pressure) tactics for dealing with Diem.*

Footnotes

³¹ Congress, House, Committee on Armed Services, R.A. Robbins, Jr., Captain, USN - Regional Director, Far East, "Meeting Between President Diem and Deputy Secretary Quarles," (10 May 1957, 1040 to 1210 Room 3E924, The Pentagon), 1956 French Withdrawal - 1960, in United States-Vietnam Relations, 1945-1967, d. Volume IV, Book 10 of 12, pp. 1103 - 1107.

³² "There is no mistaking the deep - and long lasting - impact of recent developments in Laos...Country to country, the degree differs but Laos has created doubt and concern about intentions of the United States throughout Southeast Asia. No amount of success at Geneva can, of itself, erase this. The independent Asians do not wish to have their own status resolved in like manner in Geneva.

Leaders such as Diem, Chiang, Sarit and Ayub more or less accept that we are making "the best of a bad bargain" at Geneva. Their charity extends no further." Congress, House, Committee on Armed Services, B. Counter-insurgency: The Kennedy Commitments, 1961-1963; I. The Kennedy Program and Commitments, 1961, The Spring Decisions I. Chapter III, in United States - Vietnam Relations, 1945-1967. Book 2 of 12, p. 53.

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4. Eventually most important, and substantially narrowing the range of options realistically open to the Administration, the weakness of US policy in Laos, and the consequent strongly felt need for a signal of firm policy in Vietnam.³³

It is important to note that Frederick Nolting did not go to South Vietnam with any preconceived notions that Diem was someone whom the United States Government must support one hundred per cent. To the contrary, he had heard a number of negative reports on Diem; he had never met the man and was neutral - if not sceptical - about what it was Ngo Dinh Diem was trying to accomplish in Southeast Asia.³⁴ Just before being assigned to South Vietnam, Nolting had held in-depth discussions with various European officials and Vietnamese exiles in Paris, most of who were stridently against Diem and, thus, Nolting's own initial scepticism was increased. He was concerned about how negative the reports on Diem were and he was equally concerned that President Kennedy's special Task Force on South Vietnam was headed-up by Roswell Gilpatric - a man who, by his own admission, knew nothing about South Vietnam.³⁵ Based on these concerns, the new Ambassador had developed a sense of forbidding about his mission before he had even arrived in Saigon.³⁶ Nolting's concerns about Roswell Gilpatric and the expertise of most of the Presidential Task Force were based on an, almost, prescient

Footnotes

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

³⁴ Nolting, *From Trust To Tragedy*, p. 12.

³⁵ Membership of the Presidential Task Force on South Vietnam consisted of: Gilpatric; Lansdale (Operations); Colonel Edwin F. Black, Military Assistant to the Deputy Secretary of Defense (Executive Secretary and Defense-Department Representative); Walt Rostow (White House Representative); Major General Charles H. Bonesteel III, Secretary of the General Staff, United States Army (Joint Chiefs of Staff Representative); Thomas C. Sorenson, Deputy Director, USIA; U. Alexis Johnson, Deputy Under Secretary of State; and for the CIA, Desmond Fitzgerald. John P. Glennon, editor-in-chief, "31. Creation of The Presidential Task Force on Vietnam and Drafting of A Program of Action on Vietnam, April-May," in *FRUS: Vietnam, 1961*, Vol. 1, 1961 - 1963; Department of State Publication 9625, (Washington, [DC]: United States Government Printing Office, 1988), p. 74.

³⁶ Nolting, *From Trust To Tragedy*, p. 12.

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discernment; for in their second meeting,³⁷ wherein they were drafting recommendations for Nolting's mission, Lansdale had to make them reconsider what they were doing. Essentially, Lansdale wanted them to avoid the kind of condescension that had plagued the Durbrow period of relations with Diem. He did not want Nolting to go and meet Diem with introductory letters that insisted that Diem "be a good boy" or comply with various other US conditions as this would only work against what he understood to be Asian psychology.³⁸

According to Nolting's memoirs, which consistently reflect his decisions and actions in South Vietnam, the most knowledgeable member of the Presidential Task Force was, without question, Colonel Edward Geary Lansdale.³⁹ For, in the Ambassador's estimation, Lansdale had such an obvious affinity for this area and work that President Kennedy had even considered

Footnotes

³⁷ Nolting had other concerns about the emphasis on defence (Gilpatric) over diplomatic and civil, which he elaborated on in an interview: "No, it was a puzzle to me from the beginning why, in this situation which was more political and economic and social than it was military at that time -- it was a puzzle to me why the Task Force was chaired by the Deputy secretary of Defence rather than by, let's say, the under-secretary of State. It was a puzzle to me why the State Department, throughout my tour of duty out there, abdicated as much as it did to the Department of Defense. Bob McNamara was in Vietnam or met with us in Honolulu every month for two years. Dean Rusk never set foot in the place or in Honolulu to talk about this.

When I wanted to talk to the State Department about it, aside from telegrams, which were daily, I came back to Washington, and then sometimes had some difficulty in getting the attention of the Secretary of State, who at the time seemed altogether concerned [elsewhere]. I'm sure this is not quite accurate, but to me, it appeared that his major focus of interest was East-West relations, namely U.S. - Russian affairs, and this was quite a side issue. So, it is true that the Defense Department stepped into the breach, even though I think it's fair to say that McNamara realized, himself, that it was not principally a military situation -- it was principally a political, psychological, social, economic struggle. Frederick Nolting, interviewed by Dennis O'Brien, "Second Oral History Interview With Frederick Nolting," May 6, 1970, New York, pp. 36 - 37, John F. Kennedy Library, Oral History Program.

³⁸ "General Lansdale stated that if it was implied that the letter from President Kennedy to Diem should contain an insistence on Diem's "being a good boy" and otherwise insisting on various conditions this would be exactly contrary to Asian psychology and would place Ambassador Nolting in "the same trap as Ambassador Durbrow found himself in." "43. Draft Memorandum of the Conversation of the Second Meeting of the Presidential Task Force on Vietnam, the Pentagon, May 4, 1961," in FRUS: Vietnam, 1961, Vol.1, 1961 - 1963, p. 121.

³⁹ Lansdale later became a Brigadier-General officer and has the distinction of being honoured by the USAF Special Operations School, at Hurlburt Field in Florida, as a leading American thinker on revolutionary warfare and counter-insurgency.

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making him Ambassador to South Vietnam.⁴⁰ Lansdale expressed a very solid faith in Ngo Dinh Diem and his capabilities and he had been persuasive in his arguments to the Presidential Task Force in favour of increased U.S. support for Diem's government. "He did acknowledge that 'there are a lot of criticisms that can be levelled against this government in South Vietnam, but compared to others in Southeast Asia, it's a beaut.'"⁴¹ Yet, quite apart from Lansdale's expertise,⁴² there were salient problems manifest within the focus that the Task Force was taking, and these were duly noted by the new Ambassador. Nolting was particularly concerned with the fact that the Task Force was focussing almost entirely on Vietnam while not including Laos and Cambodia in an overarching theatre view. He knew this was a mistake at the time and only time would show just how erroneous it was for the American planners to try and deal with Indo-China on a piecemeal basis rather than as a strategic whole.⁴³

William Colby had substantial first-hand experience about what was going on in Vietnam, as he was involved with CIA directions and operations in Southeast Asia. Accordingly,

Footnotes

⁴⁰ Nolting, From Trust To Tragedy, p. 13.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Lansdale's effectiveness and understanding of Southeast Asia, quite contrary to the insults hurled his way in Graham Greene's The Quiet American, was profound and was verified as such by the like of Sir Robert Thompson and General Nguyen Khanh. In this writer's interviews with Khanh, when the subject of American expertise in Southeast Asia was broached, the former Prime Minister of South Vietnam always seemed to accord Lansdale a mantle of greatness. This was a respect that was clearly lacking in the general's estimations of nearly every other American advisor that he had anything to do with (with the notable exceptions of William Colby and Frederick Nolting).

According to Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., Lansdale was known for his expertise in Southeast Asia vis-à-vis his assistance given to Magsaysay in his struggle against the Communists in the Philippines. Schlesinger, A Thousand Days, p. 320.

⁴³ "The Task Force devoted its attention almost exclusively to Vietnam. The closely related problems of the rest of Indo-China - in particular Laos and Cambodia - were not extensively treated. In retrospect, this must be considered an error of great consequence, for it became apparent soon enough that the interlocking problems of Indo-China could not successfully be dealt with separately. In Washington, the planning for the Indo-China area in 1961 was piecemeal, while our Communist adversaries, I soon found out, regarded the Indo-China peninsula as one strategic area and did their planning accordingly." Nolting, From Trust To Tragedy, p. 14.

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he described the inertia-mechanics of the burgeoning U.S. bureaucracy of foreign aid and military assistance officers as, arguably, the most substantial element in diverging U.S. policy from Diem's direction and, thus, why U.S. policy was being reshaped for South Vietnam. Evidently, the everyday functioning of this bureaucracy was creating most of the friction between Diem and the Americans. These agencies were supposed to be in Vietnam to help the Vietnamese, yet, ended up developing policy directions that were more in keeping with their own purposes of career-advancement and agency review ratings.⁴⁴

Essentially, Colby had come to understand that during the early years of the Diem government, while the Communists were growing in power, an entirely different 'battlefront' was being forged. This other arena of conflict was based on the ever-increasing hostility that grew between Americans and Diem's GVN. Colby believed that Diem was fully aware of this conflict and deplored it, yet, was unable to do anything about it because American attitudes were shaped by so many factors that he simply had no control over.⁴⁵ For example, amongst the many American aid workers and bureaucrats in Saigon there were very few that had any experience of the earlier French regime, neither had they witnessed Diem's heroic struggle of forging an orderly, legitimate government out of a region rife with violent chaos and gang warfare. The

Footnotes

⁴⁴ "The representatives, even the chiefs, of the various American agencies in Saigon were career officers whose hopes and futures lay in their agencies. An officer's success or failure - that is, his subsequent assignments and professional progress - would be determined by his fulfilment of the agenda of his own agency. In these estimations of performance, there was a possible escape hatch: shortfalls attributable to the failings of the local government could be exempted from the officer's personal responsibility. Physical problems from the weather or geography could be engineered around; human weaknesses could be attributed to the Diem Government and its officials. Hard-driving Americans frustrated by cultural differences or by a maddening lack of compliance with their formulae for the solution of Vietnamese problems; thus found the answer in Governmental fault or fecklessness rather than in the possible fallibility of their own prescriptions." Colby, *Lost Victory*, pp. 104 - 105.

⁴⁵ "During the years of growth of Communist power and Diem's and the American's developing responses to it, another battlefront was taking shape. This was the hostility growing between the Americans and the Diem regime. As the conflict emerged, Diem, who was aware of it and deplored it, was nevertheless severely handicapped in manoeuvring in and around it. American attitudes were influenced by many factors about which he could do little or nothing." *Ibid.*, p. 104.

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tranquil, quieter years that followed in Saigon were a direct result of Diem's epic battle to bring into being the Republic of South Vietnam from 1954 to 1956. Most Americans working in Saigon in their air-conditioned offices, listening to the political gossip and intrigue in the cafes, had no clue, whatsoever, of what Diem had accomplished.⁴⁶

Colby argued that there were other factors that compounded the cultural and political ignorance so manifest amongst the Americans. The sheer abundance of American agencies and aid workers, who spent so many long hours in co-ordination meetings, tended to encourage a prevailing attitude which could best be described as 'them against Diem.' Ironically, in their zeal to combat Diem's GVN the Viet Cong hardly counted at all in terms of whom had to be confronted:

The multiplicity of American agencies, and the consequent tendency to spend many hours in co-ordination meetings among themselves, encouraged the Americans to think of the Diem Government in confrontational terms, the shadowy Viet Cong hardly counting in the balance sheet. Like the blind men around the elephant, the Foreign Service Officers of the State Department, the Agency for International Development, the United States Information Service, the CIA, and the comparatively large contingent of the American military - Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marines - gathered about the Diem Government, each dealing with different pieces and sections of its problems and defining the animal accordingly."⁴⁷

Kennedy's Administration recognised that the atmosphere of American/Vietnamese relations was being poisoned and there was, similarly, a recognition that the Durbrow tactics of pressuring Diem had, if anything, been counterproductive and had stiffened resistance to US

Footnotes

⁴⁶ "Among the American civilians in Saigon, there were few who had experienced either the French regime or Diem's early days at the helm when, against all odds, he fought off the various tendencies to anarchy to form the Republic and extend it writ. The quieter years that followed - which he had in fact created - were also reflected in a more tranquil life for the Americans, the vast majority of them resident in Saigon and working in their air-conditioned offices on economic assistance programs and other developments of interest to Washington." Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 105.

direction.⁴⁸ As such, a new United States Ambassador to Saigon was needed who could smooth over the rift that Durbrow had created and Frederick Nolting filled the role of ameliorator in the judgement of senior officials at the State Department. Indeed, in a memorandum from the President's Deputy Special Assistant for National Security Affairs (Walt Rostow) to the President, Nolting was given a substantial endorsement even over Lansdale:

7. On Lansdale as Ambassador, he may have been good. I believe so, but Diem never had to deal with him when he bore the full burden of an Ambassador, with all the awkward inevitable problems of negotiation. I think we must go with Nolting, whom I know well personally. You will find him a man of rare strength and character. But I am sure we must find a way to send Lansdale for a visit to Viet-Nam soon in a way that will strengthen Nolting's hand - not weaken it. This is wholly possible.⁴⁹

Nolting was truly seen as the best diplomat for re-establishing good faith and good relations with Ngo Dinh Diem and his government, so much so, that his appointment was expedited through the normal bureaucratic and diplomatic process.⁵⁰

The final draft of Roswell Gilpatric's proposals, which were delivered to President Kennedy, made it clear that Nolting's role as ameliorator had strategic implications for United States policy in South Vietnam. Gilpatric warned President Kennedy that there were no alternatives to Diem and that Diem had lost confidence in the United States. In specific terms, the American vacillation vis-à-vis the November 11, 1960, coup attempt had only made matters

Footnotes

⁴⁸ Congress, House, Committee on Armed Services, B. Counter-insurgency: The Kennedy Commitments, 1961-1963; 1. The Kennedy Program and Commitments, 1961, The Spring Decisions I. Chapter III, in United States - Vietnam Relations, 1945-1967. Book 2 of 12, p. 21.

⁴⁹ Walt W. Rostow, 30. "Memorandum From the President's Deputy Special Assistant for National Security Affairs (Rostow) to the President," (Washington, April 15, 1961), [Source: Kennedy Library, National Security Files, Vietnam Country Series. Secret.] in FRUS: Vietnam: 1961, Volume 1, 1961-1963, pp. 72-73.

⁵⁰ Elbridge Durbrow had been in Vietnam for an over-lengthy mission term of four years and, when it was realised that Nolting would be the perfect man for the job in replacing Durbrow, he did not have to appear before the Senate or any other investigative body. Nolting, From Trust To Tragedy, p. 11.

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worse. As a result of his understanding that American relations with Diem were moving toward a disaster, the Deputy Secretary stated that it was essential that the United States re-acquire Diem's full confidence as rapidly as possible. Gilpatric then repeated Lansdale's warning, almost verbatim, that American success or failure depended heavily on Nolting's ability to "...get on the same wavelength with Diem." ⁵¹

Nolting, himself, was given the official mission brief, which was focussed on the special understanding that good relations had to be restored with Ngo Dinh Diem, and that American support would continue to be improved and that promises would be honoured. In an interview with Dennis O'Brien of the John F. Kennedy Library, Frederick Nolting revealed the exact details of the understanding:

*There had been in the past considerable doubt and suspicion in the Saigon government about U.S. motives and vice versa; there had been a certain standoffishness; there had been issues of various sorts, although U.S. aid had continued throughout that seven year period. The new element in my instructions was to get this thing on a firm footing, to get a rapport between the two partners, to create confidence in each other's motives, and to use that confidence to build real advances in social, political and economic matters, as well as in the more military part of the anti-subversion campaign, because it was completely recognized that this whole effort was of a piece, that you couldn't put down the Viet Cong or pacify the country without a very broad and deep program of winning the people.*⁵²

Footnotes

⁵¹ "...we must continue to work through the present Vietnamese government despite its acknowledged weakness. No other remotely feasible alternative exists at this point in time which does not involve an unacceptable degree of risk... **Diem is not now fully confident of United States support** [my emphasis]. This confidence has been undermined by our vigorous efforts to get him to mend his ways, and partly by the equivocal attitude he is convinced we took at the time of the November 11, 1960, attempted coup. **It is essential that President Diem's full confidence in and communication with the United States be restored promptly** [my emphasis]...Given Diem's personality and character and the abrasive nature of our recent relationships, **success or failure in this regard will depend very heavily on Ambassador Nolting's ability to get on the same wavelength with Diem...** [my emphasis]." Congress, House, Committee on Armed Services, B. Counter-insurgency: The Kennedy Commitments, 1961-1963: 1. The Kennedy Program and Commitments, 1961; The Spring Decisions -I, Chapter III, in United States - Vietnam Relations, 1945-1967. Book 2 of 12, pp. 47-48.

⁵² Frederick E. Nolting, Recorded Interview by Joseph E. O'Connor, May 14, 1966 (Paris, France), p. 4, John F. Kennedy Library, Oral History Program.

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In order to underscore the fact that the new government in Washington wanted to secure and maintain good relations with President Ngo Dinh Diem, President Kennedy sent Diem a letter, dated, Washington, April 26, 1961, in which he outlined the following critical points:

Dear Mr. President: I wish on the occasion of your second inauguration to offer to you and to the Vietnamese people my personal congratulations and those of the American people. We have watched with sympathy your courageous leadership during your country's struggle to perfect its independence and its efforts to create a better life for its people. The United States stands firmly with you in this struggle and in these efforts.⁵³

The new United States Ambassador to Vietnam, Frederick Nolting, exemplified Kennedy's attempts to start with a fresh slate and a new, more positive direction in relations. According to Colby, the US President could not have picked a better man for the task at hand as Nolting had all the necessary personal qualities for establishing an on-going rapprochement with President Ngo Dinh Diem. The CIA Director noted that though Nolting had no real Asian experience, his quiet but tough approach had proved invaluable in smoothing relations with allies in Europe right after the trauma of World War II. Colby was quick to add to this list of Nolting's abilities by drawing attention to the Ambassador's ready grasp of the complex nature of the American relationship with Diem's Vietnam. It was Colby's understanding that Nolting practised the diplomat's art of influencing Diem as a friend and not by pressuring him as if he were a foe. Moreover, Nolting stood by the view that the United States had to support the constituted and legitimate government that Diem represented.⁵⁴ Thus, Nolting had no hesitation in following

Footnotes

⁵³ John F. Kennedy, 34. "Letter From President Kennedy to President Diem," (Washington, April 26, 1961), [Source: Washington National Records Center, RG 84, Saigon Embassy Files: FRC 66 A 878, 350 GVN Elections.] in FRUS: Vietnam, 1961, Volume 1, 1961-1963, pp. 81.

⁵⁴ The second significant indication of the new approach was Frederick Nolting's appointment as Ambassador in the place of Durbrow. Soft-spoken but tough when necessary, Nolting came to Vietnam with no experience of Asia. But his work in post-war Europe, smoothing relations with sensitive allies just beginning to reassert themselves after the trauma of the Second World War, stood him in good stead. He was quick to grasp the greater complexity of the relationship with Vietnam. Nolting exerted his influence

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Washington's instructions that he should convince Diem that the Americans would be reliable in their support of him and the GVN. Similarly, Nolting did not hesitate to tell Diem that Washington understood the special problems that both he, as President, and South Vietnam faced; and that their two governments, in concert, would be able to devise a strategy and campaign that would defeat the Communist offensive. ⁵⁵

Vice-President Lyndon Baines Johnson Visits South Vietnam in order to Underscore Kennedy's Commitment to Diem –

Even though Nolting's appointment to the United States Embassy in Saigon was officially listed as beginning in April it was not until May 9, 1961, that he arrived in Vietnam with his family. The new American Ambassador presented his diplomatic credentials to President Diem and his cabinet in a short ceremony the very next day. Nolting then had to prepare for the arrival of Vice-President Johnson and his wife on May 11, within two days of his landing in Saigon.⁵⁶

The purpose behind the official visit of Lyndon Baines Johnson to South Vietnam was many layered.⁵⁷ While on one level it was an excellent photo opportunity in the Western news-
...*footnote continued from previous page:*

by persuasion as a friend, not by pressure as an adversary. He adhered to the view that the United States should support the constituted authority that Diem represented." Colby, Lost Victory, pp. 109 – 110.

⁵⁵ "The new Ambassador took upon himself the charge - which originated in the White House - of convincing Diem that the Americans would be reliable support, of understanding the special problem Diem and Vietnam faced, and of creating a relationship of confidence on which, Nolting hoped, the two governments together could forge a strategy and effort that would stop the Communist offensive." Colby went on to indicate that: "The approach owed a great deal to Lansdale (even if he did not become its instrument) and the May 1961 visit of Lyndon Johnson expressed it firmly (and, incidentally, convinced Johnson that the United States should support South Vietnam, specifically including Diem as its leader). Colby, Lost Victory, p. 110.

⁵⁶ Nolting, From Trust To Tragedy, p. 19.

⁵⁷ It should be noted that this visit was part of a Southeast Asian tour that the Vice-President had undertaken, at Kennedy's request which had an overarching diplomatic-strategic goal: "...his primary purpose was to reassure Chiang Kai-shek in Taiwan, Diem in South Vietnam and Sarit in Thailand that the new American policy toward Laos did not signify a general intention to withdraw from the area....Our mission arrested the decline in confidence," he [Johnson] reported to Kennedy on his return. "It did not - in

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media to show US support for Diem's struggle against Communism, as noted earlier, Johnson's visit held a deeper purpose, according to Nolting, and this subtler purpose was not lost on Ngo Dinh Diem.⁵⁸ For, President Kennedy had sent members from his own family along, Jean Kennedy and Stephen Smith, to accompany Vice President Johnson in Diem's presence. This presence was to assure Diem that "...the Kennedy administration appreciated strong family ties, and, unlike its predecessor, did not want to divorce Diem from his family [i.e., Ngo Dinh Nhu]."⁵⁹ By all accounts, Vice-President Johnson's visit to South Vietnam was a significant diplomatic success that ended with a very powerful joint communiqué issued to the press just before Johnson left in which Diem was highly praised by the Vice-President and promised an increase in American moral and material support. As Nolting recalled, the formal dinner and speeches coupled with the strength of the communiqué the following day, could not be misconstrued by anyone as anything less than the strongest American support for Diem. ⁶⁰

There have been rumours, maintained primarily by those young American journalists who did not like Diem or what he represented, that Vice-President Johnson only waxed eloquent and praiseworthy about Diem because he was "...the only boy we've got out there." But the fact remains that Johnson did admire Diem and consistently advised against any moves to remove

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my judgement - restore any confidence already lost.... If these men I saw at your request were bankers, I would know - without bothering to ask - that there would be no further extension on my note." Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days*, pp. 541 - 542.

⁵⁸ Nolting, *From Trust To Tragedy*, p. 20.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ "At the farewell dinner given for him on a very hot evening just before the monsoon rains began, Vice President Johnson responded to President Diem's toast in unforgettable terms. He spoke of President Kennedy's wish to establish firm and understanding relations between our two countries and governments. That, he said, was why he was sent by President Kennedy to Vietnam. He praised Diem for his strong and unwavering resolve to protect his hard-pressed country from Communist domination and promised increased American moral and material support to the government and people of South Vietnam...The same enthusiasm was reflected in the joint communiqué issued to the press at the end of Vice President Johnson's visit. Usually these statements are rather flat documents that very politely say nothing. But this one strongly declared U.S. support for South Vietnam and implied that America would increase this support if necessary." *Ibid.*, p. 21.

Diem from office; this support of Johnson's was made manifest in his memoirs: The Vantage Point: Perspectives on the Presidency 1963-1969.⁶¹ Furthermore, in his written report, which summed up his visit to Southeast Asia and which included a number of recommendations, Johnson placed the sensationalism of the journalists in its proper perspective while supporting Ngo Dinh Diem. In other words, Johnson reported that South Vietnam was a lot more stable than what the newspapers were suggesting to Americans simply because the journalists were colouring their reports in order to sensationalise events which, in turn, would sell more newspapers.⁶² The Vice President went on to note that because there was an obsession with security amongst many of the American mission personnel in Vietnam this, in turn, was creating a distorted view about South Vietnam, a distortion that was indicating that the country was about to disintegrate. In addition to this, Johnson noted that American officials relied too much on disgruntled Vietnamese intellectuals for opinions about the GVN. These were people who opposed Diem's government and were constantly plotting against it in their café groups and grandstanding interviews given to American reporters. Thus Johnson appealed to Washington to not panic, as that would only make matters worse in Vietnam.⁶³ He went on to elaborate that Diem would either have to be

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⁶¹ Lyndon Baines Johnson, The Vantage Point: Perspectives of The Presidency, 1963 - 1969, (New York, [NY]: Popular Library, 1971), pp. 54 - 62.

⁶² "The situation in Viet Nam is more stable than is indicated by newspaper and other reports reaching Washington in recent weeks...The picture we receive at home has been colored by journalistic sensationalism." Lyndon Baines Johnson, 60. "Report by the Vice President: Viet Nam, A. General Observations," (Washington, undated [May 1961]), in FRUS: Vietnam, 1961, Volume 1, 1961-1963, pp. 152 - 154.

⁶³ "1. An obsessive concern with security on the part of many of our mission people and a tendency to incorporate this concern into interpretations of the general situation. After all, occasional murders in Rock Creek Park, deplorable as they may be, do not mean that the United States is about to fall apart...3. An excessive reliance by our mission on the evaluations of the situation by Vietnamese government officials, often checked only against other governmental sources of discontented Vietnamese intellectuals who are in opposition to the present government....To say that conditions in Viet Nam are not as they appear to be in Washington is not to say that they are not serious. There are certainly Viet Minh terrorists in the jungles and rice-paddies. Vietnamese government officials are being assassinated in significant numbers. There is anti-government, non-communist plotting going on in the city of Saigon. Yet, we must keep our perspective. We must not react in panic and in consequence, perhaps, do precisely that

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assassinated by the Communists or thrown out of power by a palace-military coup in order to bring about the destabilisation South Vietnam in depth.⁶⁴ Johnson concluded his report by stating, as had Roswell Gilpatric, that there was no other realistic non-communist leadership alternative to Diem and that there was no question of Diem's will and capability to resist the Communist insurgents in South Vietnam. ⁶⁵

Diem truly liked and was impressed by the U.S. Vice President and he was positively influenced by the warm and friendly manner displayed by Johnson during his visit. Nevertheless, the South Vietnamese leader warned Ambassador Nolting during a discussion on American politicians' practices, just after Johnson had left Vietnam, that: "There are profound differences between the Vietnamese and American people, in customs, outlook, political training, and philosophy. I hope we can find a bridge between Eastern and Western cultures."⁶⁶ Nolting - on his part, after becoming acquainted with Diem, his outlook and direction, and while being singularly impressed with the Vietnamese leader, did not want to jump to conclusions too quickly. Nolting declared himself obligated to scrutinise the South Vietnamese situation and to

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which will worsen the situation." Lyndon Baines Johnson, 60. "Report by the Vice President: Viet Nam, A. General Observations," (Washington, undated [May 1961]), ibid.

⁶⁴ "The perspective which seems closest to reality is that the existing political-military structure based largely on Ngo Dinh Diem and a palace bureaucracy in Saigon is not in danger of imminent collapse. The structure is not likely to be suddenly upset except by one or more of the following contingencies:

1. The removal of Diem through assassination by communist or non-communist opponents.
2. The removal of Diem by a palace-military coup - not an impossibility but an improbability for the present...." Lyndon Baines Johnson, 60. "Report by the Vice President: Viet Nam, A. General Observations," (Washington, undated [May 1961]), ibid.

⁶⁵ "B. Principal Conclusions: 1. The existing government in Saigon is the only realistic alternative to Viet Minh control in South Viet Nam. At this time, there is no other non-communist leadership which, in all realism, may be expected to replace the present military-political-bureaucratic structure that has been developed in Saigon. 2. There is no question of the will of the Diem government and its military forces to resist the Viet Minh communists;..." ibid.

⁶⁶ Nolting, From Trust To Tragedy, p. 22.

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determine for himself if American support for Diem was in fact in the United States' best interests.⁶⁷

Nolting's Ambassadorial Mission Inaugurates the Kennedy' Policy Directive –

Proceeding from his sense of a diplomat's responsibility and caution, throughout the early tenure of his mission Nolting diligently investigated what had been going on between the Americans and the Vietnamese in Saigon. As such, he conducted numerous interviews and meetings with his diplomatic colleagues and the representatives of the numerous U.S. government agencies who had anything to do with foreign affairs.⁶⁸ As a consequence of these investigations within the bureaucracy of the various U.S. Government agencies and foreign service representatives Nolting determined that the mission was, indeed, divided on the issue of support for Ngo Dinh Diem's regime.⁶⁹ He noted that the division seemed to be worse amongst the Department of State's representatives. Joseph Mendenhall, the Embassy's Counsellor for Political

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⁶⁷ "Even though the very strong joint communiqué had been issued and the United States, through Vice President Johnson, had gone all out in support of the government and its stand against the Viet Cong, I felt an obligation to take another look at the situation in Vietnam and to determine for myself whether support for the Diem government was in the United States' best interests." *Ibid.*, pp. 23 - 24.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

⁶⁹ In describing his understanding of his mission, right from its outset, Nolting declared: "The principal thing was whether or not the independence of South Vietnam was supportable through the Ngo Dinh Diem Government, which was, as you know, the duly elected constitutional government that we had been supporting since 1954.

There had been a lot of questions raised about this in previous administrations. There was a certain lack of understanding, I think, between the American mission and the government of South Vietnam from the beginning. There'd always been this division of opinion on the American side as to whether President Diem and his way of running the government was going to be ultimately successful, and therefore, whether we should try to support the country through that government. There had been attacks on him in our press before. There had been attacks on his brothers, particularly Ngo Dinh Nhu and his wife, Madame Nhu.

And the question was, really, is this a viable thing and should the United States continue to support South Vietnam through the only available vehicle, which was the government of South Vietnam. Frederick Nolting, interviewed by Dennis O'Brien, "Second Oral History Interview With Frederick Nolting," pp. 32 – 33, John F. Kennedy Library, Oral History Program.

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Affairs, led other American diplomats into a position of expressing critical doubt about the abilities of Diem and his government to bring peace to South Vietnam or to help its people.⁷⁰ John Anspacher, Counsellor for Public Affairs and Arthur Gardiner, Counsellor for Economic Affairs, were two diplomats who followed the Mendenhall lead. In fact, upon returning to the United States, Mendenhall wasted no time in gathering his thoughts for a written critique of Diem and the GVN. He wrote a thesis at the National War College, which recommended that a military regime would serve South Vietnam best and, while not recommending a coup, "...the government he envisioned was like the one that succeeded the Diem government after the 1963 overthrow."⁷¹ Nolting assessed Gardiner as being disillusioned and disheartened as a result of his lengthy stay in South Vietnam.

Some of Nolting's fellow diplomats remained negative about the whole U.S. - Diem relationship. The Ambassador, however, did not fail to note that those Americans who were actively gathering intelligence in the field about the success and failure of various government efforts against the Viet Cong were actually quite positive about the whole endeavour. Not least to be considered amongst these individuals was the calm and competent William Colby, a man who gained and held Diem's and Nolting's trust and admiration:

William Colby was another old Vietnam hand. Listed officially as First Secretary in the Embassy Political Section, he was really CIA Station Chief, head of CIA operations in Vietnam. Colby became not only a friend, but one of my most trusted advisors. One of the ablest members of our Task Force in Washington. Despite the doubts of some of his peers and some members of the Vietnamese armed forces, Bill Colby had confidence in our policy and programs. He conferred often with Ngo Din Nhu, President Diem's brother and political

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⁷⁰ Nolting, From Trust To Tragedy, pp. 24 - 25.

⁷¹ "Gardiner was the Counsellor for Economic Affairs and thus head of the large, active U.S. Operations Mission (USOM). He had been in the country since February 1958. Arthur was an old friend, and I suspect that, rather than being anti-Diem, he was disillusioned and disheartened. He had worked very hard and ably and felt that the Vietnamese economy should have responded better to the infusions of money it was receiving, as well as to his and the USOM's efforts in training and advice." Nolting, From Trust To Tragedy, pp. 24 - 25.

*counsellor, about specific CIA operations and the need for them. President Diem trusted and admired Colby, as did I.*⁷²

The U.S. Military Assistance Advisory Group, headed by Lieutenant Lionel McGarr, was independent from, yet, required to work closely with the Embassy. Nolting recalled that McGarr had a difficult and demanding soldier-diplomat role and, as such, he was obviously under instructions from Washington to keep Diem from interfering in military operations while, at the same time, not annoying the Vietnamese president.⁷³ Regardless of their occasional clash over the military issue there was a mutual respect that existed between Diem and McGarr.

Ambassador Nolting's keen perception was such that he recognised, almost, from the very beginning of his posting to Saigon that the way to better relations with Ngo Dinh Diem was to allow him to be independent of American direction. Perhaps, more importantly - at least in the context of Vietnamese nationalist credentials – it was crucial that Diem be permitted to appear to be independent. Once he became acquainted with his new posting and having thus relinquished his previous foreboding, Nolting came to truly believe in the Kennedy directives for his mission, which had been endorsed by the Presidential Task Force on Vietnam. The position that Nolting had arrived at was not simple nor was it lock-step with US policy merely for the sake of being 'with the program.' Instead, Nolting's full-fledged support for Diem had come about as a result of the Vietnamese leader's undeniable qualities and abilities, not least of which included a real integrity and dedication. The American ambassador was not blind to the fact that Diem was inept when it came to public relations, especially with the American press, but the man's whole-hearted attempts to bridge the gap between American and Vietnamese culture were as genuine and sincere as his steadfast fight against the Communists. Thus, the new ambassador saw in the

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⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ *Ibid.*

Kennedy directives the potential for displaying a diplomatic maturity that would give full-latitude to the indigenous government:

I went to Saigon with a completely open mind on this subject. The conclusions of the Task Force were a very definite yes, that this was a viable situation and we should continue to support South Vietnam through its elected constitutional government; namely, the Diem government. But, as is the case with anybody new, one wants to find out by getting to know a person and getting to know his philosophy and his way of doing things, his character, and that of his principal assistants. And, so I spent a lot of time when I first got out there on this.

And I came out with what I felt was a fresh conclusion: that this was an extremely able and dedicated man, working in a very difficult situation, subject to a great deal of unjust criticism, having weaknesses, of course, as all of us do. But [he was] a person of real integrity, whose philosophy I could agree with and would agree with, [he was] doing his best, working his head off, inept in the handling of public relations and particularly American public relations, but terribly concerned to try to bridge the gap between the mores and customs and traditions of his own people and those of the West, trying to put together the best parts of both and drop off the other parts, and very much concerned with the deeper, philosophical problems of government as well as with the question of survival against the Viet Cong and the attacks that they were mounting on him.

So, I would say, in answer to your question -- I've gone a little far afield on this the sixty-four dollar question: is this a viable, sustainable thing through this government? And my conclusion to it was completely in accord with the Task Force -- which constituted pretty much my briefing, which was very short, indeed, but rather intensive. My conclusion was yes.⁷⁴

In the interview with Dennis O'Brien Nolting was not trying to suggest that he was aware of all the difficulties that his particular mission would entail right from the outset. Indeed, the former ambassador admitted that there were whole areas, such as the American news media and their influence on the politics of the situation, that he had not considered in his initial enthusiasm for his ameliorator role. He was quite blunt in his self-criticism especially with regard to how he

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⁷⁴ Frederick Nolting, interviewed by Dennis O'Brien, "Second Oral History Interview With Frederick Nolting," pp. 34 – 35, John F. Kennedy Library, Oral History Program.

had overestimated "...the understanding, fairness, and wisdom of the American press."⁷⁵ Nolting believed that the United States Government's effort in South Vietnam would add substantial credibility to other American assistance programs for beleaguered countries elsewhere around the globe. This credibility, however, would only be legitimised if the Americans working in South Vietnam made manifest their restraint, wisdom and consideration when approaching Ngo Dinh Diem and his government with advice and aid. While recalling that he had the greatest hopes for the American effort he also remembered his concern that the United States mission had a very tough course to follow.⁷⁶

Diem and his brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu, were highly sensitive to the charges, made by the Communists in rural South Vietnam, that they were mere lackeys of the neo-colonialist Americans. The Viet Cong charge that the South Vietnamese government was "My-Diem" (American-Diemist) was particularly galling to the nationalist sensitivities of President Diem. Nolting understood that a great deal of patience would have to be dispensed by the Americans toward the Vietnamese as many unilateral actions which came right from Diem's government, before consultation with the various U.S. aid missions, would run counter to what Americans might believe was best. The American ambassador understood that this was an absolutely necessary cost of supporting an independent government. Indeed, such disagreements that might surface would at least be a good indicator that Diem's government was not a puppet of the United

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⁷⁵ "No, I was eager about this job. I thought it was a great thing to do, and I am convinced it was succeeding. I was, perhaps, a little naive in not recognizing how difficult it would be to work in this way with the Diem government and have it understood by the American public. Here I overestimated the understanding, fairness, and wisdom of the American press." Frederick E. Nolting, Recorded Interview by Joseph E. O'Connor, pp. 10 - 11, John F. Kennedy Library, Oral History Program.

⁷⁶ "But, no, I was very keen on the job. I felt if we could get this sort of thing done in a newly emerging country where the pressures and the divisions and the cross currents were enormous, it would be great not only for Vietnam, but as an example of what the United States could do by helping with restraint and wisdom and consideration. This would, I thought, have a profound effect, not only in Southeast Asia but around the world where other communist inspired subversive movements were already underway. I had the greatest hopes for this program, but I must say I recognised that it was a narrow path we had to walk; it wasn't an easy thing." *Ibid.*

States. This was a most crucial consideration, which had strategic implications, given that much of the contest between Ho Chi Minh and Ngo Dinh Diem was based on who had the best nationalist credentials for governing Vietnam. The Communists played this political, nationalist contest propaganda consistently and with great fervour. For example, they linked (John Foster) Dulles and Diem together whenever the subject came up and wherever they could; indeed, the Australian sympathiser with the Communist cause, Wilfred G. Burchett, noted and endorsed this linkage in much of his written work on the subject.⁷⁷

Ambassador Nolting was not unaware of the Communist design and capabilities to cause doubt, with regard to Diem and his government, and to make the government appear to be far more inept or corrupt than it actually was while manufacturing and seizing the moral high-ground. Sir Robert Thompson, whom Nolting liked and admired, while not subscribing without reservation to all of his counter-insurgency prescriptions, described these instruments of Communist insurrection best:

Every insurgency, particularly a communist revolutionary one, requires a cause. Resistance to the Japanese was no longer valid, but it had given an air of respectability to the Communist Party, which was a valuable heritage not to be lightly discarded. For this reason every effort was made to adopt causes which appeared legitimate, progressive and desirable. The basic cause was ready at hand: anti-colonialism. It was on this that the Emergency was based and also the war against the French in Indo-China. It did not quite fit the situation prevailing in South Vietnam after 1954, but by twisting the cause to anti-imperialism it could be made to apply to the United States' presence in South Vietnam at the invitation of and in support of the Ngo Dinh Diem government.

Given a basic cause, many other issues can be tacked onto it, such as land for the landless, exploitation of labour on estates and mines, regional autonomy for ethnic minorities and political equality for immigrant races with the indigenous races. At the same time, all local seeds of conflict within a community can be exploited, as between young and old, between progressive and traditional, between different religions and races, and even between local

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⁷⁷ Wilfred G. Burchett, Vietnam: Inside Story of The Guerrilla War, (New York, [NY]: International Publishers, 1968), p. 177.

*capitalists and foreign capitalists. There is always some issue which has an appeal to each section of the community, and, even if dormant, an inspired incident may easily revive it in acute form [i.e., such as the 1963 Buddhist Crisis in South Vietnam]. This particularly applies during the course of the insurgency itself, when new causes can be developed from events, and, if necessary, old ones be forgotten.... All governments are vulnerable to criticism, and every grievance, shortcoming or abuse will be exploited. Waste in government expenditure, failure to fulfil promises and the incidence of taxation are just as lively issues in the East as in the West, and even more so in remote rural communities, where the tax collector and the policeman are the central government's more prominent representatives. (When the insurgents gain control over such areas, they are careful to reduce taxes on land and crops well below the government level or even to remit them for a period. This they can afford to do, having no overheads, and still not lack for money.) Corruption is always another credible charge and rarely fails to stick."*⁷⁸

In essence, the Communists had a much easier task than did Ngo Dinh Diem and his government for, as author Weldon A. Brown noted: "We built; the Vietcong destroyed."⁷⁹ Evidently, Elbridge Durbrow, Nolting's predecessor, had lost sight of this elemental reality and had, as a consequence, lost patience with Diem - a point not misspent on Ambassador Nolting - as witnessed in the fundamental direction of his mission right from the beginning. In accordance with this understanding, after being in Saigon for approximately three months, Nolting sent a telegram to the State Department which expressed his views, based on several meetings that he had held with Ngo Dinh Diem and other members of the Government of South Vietnam. First of all, Nolting drew Washington's attention to the fact that Diem was no dictator who relished power for its own sake. In fact the reality about Diem ran in the opposite direction as Nolting described him as a man who harboured sound and good philosophies and objectives for his

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⁷⁸ Thompson, Defeating Communist Insurgency, pp. 21 - 22.

⁷⁹ Brown elaborated on this truth with some substance: "By very costly and careful efforts we sought to influence the villages to support Saigon through appeals to their hopes; while by terror and murder the Vietcong tried to win power through popular fears. only as long as American or Saigon troops stayed in the village to protect it was security possible. With their departure the enemy returned and resumed his destruction. Rural turbulence made life a nightmare for millions." Weldon A. Brown, Prelude To Disaster: The American Role in Vietnam, 1940-1963, (Port Washington, [NY]: Kennikat Press Corp., 1975), p. 160.

country. He noted that Diem seemed almost monk-like in his dedication to high principles for his people and himself and, in this sense, he was not a politician; for Diem did not enjoy the trappings of power or the exercise of it. Moreover, according to the Ambassador's report, Diem was certain and confident of his carefully groomed Confucian skills which would permit him to govern South Vietnam better and more equitably than any other leader around. Nolting concurred with Diem's confident self-assessment but feared that because the man was such an exemplary leader, and quite irreplaceable, it would prove to be a weakness for South Vietnam and the United States involvement there. This was because, quite simply, his stature made him a very vulnerable target for both his Communist and non-Communist enemies alike.⁸⁰

Nolting's assessment of Diem's 'Personalist' philosophy was that it was sound, good and entirely compatible with U.S. interests but perhaps too lofty for the average Vietnamese to understand. Accordingly, he told Washington that there was nothing on moral grounds that should prevent the Kennedy Administration from "...backing Diem to the hilt."⁸¹ In this regard,

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⁸⁰ "Saigon, July 14, 1961 (70. Deptel 35) - Regarding (a), I think President Diem's philosophy of government, and his objectives for his country, are sound and good. After many hours of fundamental discussions, I am convinced that he is no dictator, in the sense of relishing power for its own sake. On the contrary, he seems to me to be a man dedicated to high principals by himself and his people; a man who would prefer to be a monk rather than a political leader; a man who does not fundamentally enjoy power or the exercise of it. He is, nevertheless, an egoist in the sense that he believes (in my judgement, with some justification) that he can govern in South Vietnam, in general and in detail, better than anyone else now available; and he knows more about the Communist movement in this area and how to combat it than anyone else. His own strong convictions, energy, and his faith in himself are both a strength and a weakness - a strength in providing a counter-dynamic to communism, a weakness in causing over-concentration of governmental power and authority, consequent lack of governmental efficiency, and in offering a vulnerable political target." Nolting, From Trust To Tragedy, p. 146.

Nolting is quoting from his own cable sent to Washington and duly noted as Document # 92; "Telegram From The Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State", Saigon, July 14, 1961 - 7 p.m., [Source: Department of State, Central Files, 751K.00/7-1461. Secret; Priority; Limit Distribution.] in FRUS: Vietnam, 1961, Volume I, 1961-1963, pp. 217 - 218.

⁸¹ "His philosophy of "personalism" (which does not mean personal dictatorship but rather the requirement for individual development much in the Aristotelian sense) is perhaps too lofty for popular understanding, but is certainly in my judgement sound and right, and compatible with US interests. (Please note July 7 expression of this philosophy sent Task Force Washington). Thus, I think the United States should have no hesitation on moral grounds in backing Diem to the hilt." Nolting, From Trust To Tragedy,

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Nolting also told Washington that where they thought Diem was wrong they could gradually bring about changes and improvements. He added the caveat that these 'ameliorations' could be made only in "...proportion to the confidence which he [Diem] has in us and his ability to make concessions without slipping."⁸² Of course this seemingly innocuous warning proved to contain the stumbling block upon which American hubris would dash effective United States' policy for South Vietnam to pieces – as the reader shall see.

In a section of his report to Washington that was classified Nolting addressed the problems of Diem's confidence in the United States and his popularity in South Vietnam. Essentially, the ambassador reported that there was no question that Diem and the GVN had experienced a strengthening in confidence in the United States in the most recent months and this was despite the negative developments in Laos. Actions of substance were backing up American positive expressions about the Diem government and this was starting to win over political 'fence-sitters' to the GVN side. Consequently, Nolting was able to tell Washington that the first commitment of the Presidential Task Force – to build confidence – was, in his judgement being carried out effectively and being reciprocated by Diem and the GVN.⁸³

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p. 146. Document # 92. "Telegram From The Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State", Saigon, July 14, 1961 – 7 p.m., [Source: Department of State, Central Files, 751K.00/7-1461. Secret; Priority; Limit Distribution.] in FRUS: Vietnam, 1961, Volume I, 1961-1963, p. 218.

⁸² Nolting, From Trust To Tragedy, p. 146. Document # 92, "Telegram From The Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State", Saigon, July 14, 1961 – 7 p.m., [Source: Department of State, Central Files, 751K.00/7-1461. Secret; Priority; Limit Distribution.] in FRUS: Vietnam, 1961, Volume I, 1961-1963, p. 218.

⁸³ "Re (B), my (Limit Distribution -[classified]) assessment is less clear-cut. There is no question that Diem and his government have felt an increasing, upsurge of confidence in the US over the past 6 months, despite developments in Laos. High US expressions of support, backed by concrete and continuing actions, have had real effect. First commitment of the Task Force report - to build confidence was, in my judgement soundly conceived, is being carried out, and is being reciprocated. Strong and evident US support has brought to the government side a certain number of fence-sitters, and has probably considerably reduced the likelihood of a military coup d etat." Nolting, From Trust To Tragedy, p. 146. Document # 92, "Telegram From The Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State", Saigon, July 14, 1961 – 7 p.m., [Source: Department of State, Central Files, 751K.00/7-1461. Secret; Priority; Limit Distribution.] in FRUS: Vietnam, 1961, Volume I, 1961 - 1963, pp. 218 – 219.

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In the Nolting estimation there was, however, a tricky and negative aspect to these improved relations of trust and reciprocity. Simply put, the Communists were able to exploit the 'My-Diem' propaganda which, in turn, caused Diem to stress that the victory over the insurrectionists had to be one that the Vietnamese people gained. If it were to be believed that the GVN stood or fell because of American and Free World protection and not because of Vietnamese sacrifices then Diem's political legitimacy would be increasingly challenged by the Communists.⁸⁴ In other words, Nolting was warning Washington that there had to be a subtlety of execution in their support of Diem and that, regardless of the Communist hypocrisy on this issue,⁸⁵ they had to find a way of not feeding the propaganda mills of their enemy.

Another salient problem that Nolting had mentioned in his report to Washington was that Diem's popularity amongst the Vietnamese had not risen that much regardless of what he had accomplished. He noted that there was a popular distortion about the leader that suggested he had little interest in the welfare of the common people and was detached or aloof from their reality. Nolting pointed out that this misinterpretation was completely at odds with the man, his interests

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⁸⁴ "It has at the same time made Diem an even more vulnerable target of Communist attack, which has, I fear, carried some people, into the enemy's camp. Diem himself realizes this and that is why he is so eager to get across the thought that victory of the Vietnamese people over Communist subversion has [to be] gained through Vietnamese sacrifices and not directly through American or Free World protection." Nolting, *From Trust To Tragedy*, p. 146. Document # 92, "Telegram From The Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State", Saigon, July 14, 1961 – 7 p.m., [Source: Department of State, Central Files, 751K.00/7-1461. Secret; Priority; Limit Distribution.] in *FRUS: Vietnam, 1961*, Volume I, 1961-1963, p. 218.

⁸⁵ That the North Vietnamese Communists, who were clearly supporting the insurrectionists in the South, were receiving all manner of support from their allies in China and Russia never seemed to bother the critics of the GVN. The debate will probably continue for some time as to whether or not the North Vietnamese could have survived on their own but the obvious fact that foreign material and training personnel support grew for them exponentially, on an annual basis, cannot be denied. Stephen Young, a scholar of North Vietnamese documents, displayed some of his most recent acquisitions at the last conference on Vietnam hosted by the Center for the Study of The Vietnam Conflict at Lubbock, Texas. The figures which he translated from the original North Vietnamese records show that they had sent 1,759 cadres south in 1961. This figure continued to expand so that by 1964 their own records declare that they had sent at least 39,341 trained military personnel into South Vietnam for the purpose of supporting the insurrection there. Mr. Young's conference presentation is on file at the Vietnam Center in Lubbock and can be attained via the Internet. He first presented these figures on April 18, 1996.

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and his actions. For Nolting had accompanied Diem on his many trips into rural Vietnam where the Vietnamese leader seemed to be most at ease. Indeed, his interest and expertise in matters concerned with farming, fishing, and all manner of practical things was so manifest that the picture of him as an aloof disinterested mandarin was utterly false. Yet, it was this false picture, which had been manufactured by his enemies, that was being promulgated effectively in the news media and, as Nolting surmised, it was hurting Diem and his administration. This was so much the case that Nolting indicated that Diem could not afford to allow this problem to drag on indefinitely or he would suffer from another coup attempt or worse. It was Nolting's belief that Diem had to make a public relations 'breakthrough' in this regard. ⁸⁶

The ever-watchful William Colby kept a steady eye on how Nolting conducted himself and how he went about directing his diplomatic mission. He noted that the US Ambassador, unlike his predecessor Durbrow, became close to the leadership of the Government of South Vietnam. Likewise, Colby observed that the ambassador got to know the opposition; furthermore, Nolting spent a considerable amount of time and effort attempting to get to know the ordinary Vietnamese in Saigon and even more so in rural Vietnam. Colby discerned that the US Ambassador was not naive about the cruel realities of Vietnam and that he certainly did not view the Southern regime as a perfect model for democratic institutions. Nolting recognised the

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⁸⁶ "Nevertheless, I do not think it is true that US support has given President Diem's government as yet a net increase in popularity among the Vietnamese people. Oddly enough, Diem's own keen personal interest in knowledge of [practical] things of life, such as farming, fishing, disease, teaching methods, construction methods and techniques, are misinterpreted distorted by many Vietnamese into the picture of a remote and aloof man who has little interest in the welfare of the common man. This is due in part, I think, to his manner and in part to Communist propaganda. It is definitely a false picture, judging from many trips and much discussion. In any case, it seems to me clear that in some way the Diem government must make a "break-through" to regain popular support. If the situation drags on in an inconclusive manner for many more months, either a military coup, or an open proclamation of a Communist Government and underground civil war, is likely." Nolting, *From Trust To Tragedy*, p. 146. Document # 92, "Telegram From The Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State", Saigon, July 14, 1961 - 7 p.m., [Source: Department of State, Central Files, 751K.00/7-1461. Secret; Priority; Limit Distribution.] in *FRUS: Vietnam, 1961*, Volume I, 1961-1963, pp. 218 - 219.

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political reality that necessitated Diem's mandarin regime during this period of unparalleled modernisation in Vietnam. Concurrent to this, the CIA Station Chief also made note of the fact that Nolting, wisely, recognised that Diem had a purpose and direction for South Vietnam. Conversely, the civilian opposition, made up of vociferous coffee-swilling intellectuals in Saigon bars, was of no particular significance and, in fact, represented the ancien regime (the old French colonial system of perks and education etc.). Meanwhile the true opposition was to be found in the Communist cadres whose methods of opposition included, amongst other things, the gun, the bomb, and political terror.⁸⁷

The former CIA -Station Chief of the US Mission to Saigon went on to praise Ambassador Nolting for being one of the very few Americans who avoided the popular mental image of the struggle being like Korea and as a conventional soldier's war. Nolting seeming to discern, perhaps intuitively, from his earliest days that the real war was in the villages and that it was not a war of big guns and area bombardment but, instead, a fight wherein the approach had to be political. The important key to winning this fight for the "hearts and minds" (this phrase was originally coined by Sir Robert Thompson) of the Vietnamese villagers was not the democratic appeals of Diem as, indeed, Western-styled democracy was an alien concept in Southeast Asia, but, instead, his nationalist credentials. And, thus, Nolting understood that: "They could not do our will, as Americans are wont to expect foreigners to do in every possible circumstance; they had to assert their nationalism if they were to contest the nationalist appeal that the enemy was offering to the population."⁸⁸

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⁸⁷ William Colby's speech to the Miller Center at the University of Virginia, in Diplomacy, Administration and Policy: The Ideas and Careers of Frederick E. Nolting, Jr., Frederick C. Mosher, and Paul T. David, ed. Kenneth W. Thompson (Lanham, [Maryland]: University Press of America, Inc., Co-published by arrangement with the Miller Center of Public Affairs, University of Virginia, 1995), p. 8.

⁸⁸ Ibid., pp. 8 - 9.

Nolting's introduction to Vietnam bolstered within him the soundness of applying, in full, the Kennedy Administration's official rapprochement policy with Ngo Dinh Diem and his government. This firm belief of Nolting's had come about as a result of having become acquainted with the realities of politics in South Vietnam and with the Confucian leadership that Diem so superbly emanated and displayed - in all facets of his thoroughly integrated life. Diem, in the carefully considered Nolting estimation was well-worth the American investments of time and patience - any other possibility dictated chaos and the destruction of political legitimacy which, in turn, would dissolve any effective counter-insurgency program. The only dangerous "tiger" that the Americans had to ride out was, not Ngo Dinh Diem - as the young, inexperienced American journalists were wont to believe and write,⁸⁹ but, instead, their own inherent and internal political impatience. The unpredictable element in American - Vietnamese relations, truly, was to be found in Washington and, indeed, was made manifest at the close of Nolting's mission as it was this unstable element which compelled the Ambassador to resign from the State Department, in protest against the Kennedy Administration's faithlessness.

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⁸⁹ Diem's character, by all informed accounts was integrated, steadfast and predictable - he was, in essence, an honest man and his goals were straightforward; notwithstanding the inscrutableness of his Confucian approach to Western modes of thinking, there were no surprises to be found in the man.

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Chapter Three: The Continuing Laotian Question and Its Impact on South Vietnam

The word "Indochina" is used here advisedly; for, as events tend to show more and more, it is impossible to conceive a coherent policy for, say, Cambodia or South Viet-Nam that does not affect Laos or North Viet-Nam as well.¹

Bernard Fall was absolutely correct in linking "Indochina" together as a strategic whole. This was a concept that had not passed by Dwight Eisenhower unnoticed, and, thus, he had focussed much attention on the strategic lynchpin to the theatre: Laos. Yet, it was recognition of this very strategic reality, one dictated by geography, which continued to evade John F. Kennedy's administration, to the peril of the United States and its allies in the region. As such, the Kennedy administration's miscalculations over Laos caused substantial strains for the American ambassadors throughout Southeast Asia and, particularly, in Saigon.

In fairness to Nolting's predecessor, Elbridge Durbrow, the question of how to deal with the burgeoning Communist infiltration in Laos was aggravating relations between the United States and Ngo Dinh Diem's government. This created a problem that would bring a powerful faction within the State Department into direct conflict with the GVN. As things worked out, it was Ambassador Durbrow who had to absorb the initial shock of Diem's displeasure over Laos.

Owing to its natural terrain and geography, the strategic salient that Laos formed within the context of an entire Southeast Asian theatre had not been missed by the keen soldier's eye of President Eisenhower. In late 1960, intelligence reports indicating sizeable movements of North Vietnamese troops into Laos, in support of the Pathet Lao resistance, caused real concern in

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¹ Fall, Last Reflections On A War, p. 118.

Washington and especially in the President's office.² With a flood of intelligence information streaming into the White House it appeared, very much, that the Pathet Lao, supported and supplied through Dien Bien Phu in North Vietnam, had managed to secure the entire Province of Phong Saly.³ In fact, the Pathet Lao, the 'Free Laos' government-in-exile under Vietnamese suzerainty, was established many years before by Vo Nguyen Giap's Viet Minh. Biographer John Colvin noted that cautious Americans, such as President Eisenhower, were beginning to discover that, indeed, Giap's "reach was as long as his grasp,"⁴ and that Laos was subject to both.

While Eisenhower emphasised that he needed more information before he could react with US troops, nevertheless, he argued to his National Security Council that the US could not afford to stand by and wait for Laos to fall into the hands of the Communists. Accordingly, he stated that the time was drawing close for the deployment of the Seventh Fleet with its

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² "Memorandum of a Conference With the President, White House, Washington, December 31, 1960, 11:30 a.m.," (Department of State, Central Files, 611.51J/12-3160), FRUS: East Asia - Pacific Region; Cambodia; Laos, 1958 - 1960, Vol. XVI, p. 1025.

Previous to this, CIA Director, Allen Dulles, had given his own report which confirmed the deterioration and Communist interference in Laos: "Mr Dulles believed the situation in Laos had not changed much since last week. The three Bloc partners - Moscow, Peiping, and Hanoi - were still supporting Kong Le and the anti-government forces. The extent of the Communist build-up was, however, difficult to determine. He believed that considerable supplies had reached Sam Neua and Dienbienphu. The Soviets had expanded the total Communist airlift capacity in the area by bringing in AN-12's. Khrushchev on December 26 had indicated to the UK Ambassador that Moscow regards current activity in Laos as a long-term operation which might last for seven years without a major war resulting." John P. Glennon, editor in chief, Editorial Note #496, Ibid, p. 1021.

³ "Memorandum of a Conference With the President, White House, Washington, December 31, 1960, 11:30 a.m.," (Department of State, Central Files, 611.51J/12-3160), Ibid, p. 1025.

⁴ John Colvin, Giap: Volcano Under The Snow, (New York, [NY]: Soho Press Inc., 1996), pp. 116 - 117.

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contingent force of marines.⁵ In a memorandum concerned with a conference held in the White House on December 31, 1960, it was noted that President Eisenhower made a number of recommendations about Laos. First of all, he stressed the need for co-ordinated action that was decisive. He emphasised that the State Department would be in charge of overall planning, as the US was not at war yet with anyone in Laos. Eisenhower stressed that the most important thing was to get the non-communist Laotian leader (at that time – Boun Oum) legitimised and to make sure America's allies were in agreement over what had to be done in the land-locked Southeast Asian country. Nevertheless, Eisenhower was determined to act in Laos if war became necessary and he stressed that the United States would take unilateral action on its own as he believed that the US could not stand by and watch a strategically vital area fall to the Communists.⁶

The American President then proceeded to enumerate specific points for a US Government plan of action in Laos: 1.) They would persuade the current Prime Minister, Prince Souvanna Phouma to resign and to leave the country for retirement in France;⁷ 2.) They would

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⁵ "Memorandum of a Conference With the President, White House, Washington, December 31, 1960, 11:30 a.m.," (Department of State, Central Files, 611.51J/12-3160), FRUS: East Asia - Pacific Region; Cambodia; Laos, 1958 - 1960, Vol. XVI, p. 1025.

⁶ The President then stressed the need for co-ordinated and decisive action. At this state of the game, since we are not in war, the State Department should chair our overall planning. Most important is to legitimatise Boun Oum and solidify our allies on our side. We should see then if we are faced with going into war. If war is necessary, we will do so with our allies or unilaterally, since we cannot sit by and see Laos go down without a fight...." Ibid., pp. 1028 -1029.

⁷ Since 1956 the Americans had been keeping a watchful and concerned eye on Prince Souvanna Phouma. Prince Phouma was seen as neutralist, at best, as he had come to political terms with the Communist Pathet Lao in the past. "By early August 1956 Souvanna had reached agreements in principle with a Pathet Lao delegation headed by his half-brother, Prince Souphanouvong, on the need for a cease-fire in the disputed areas, a foreign policy of neutrality, and the political rights of the Pathet Lao. The Prime Minister then reactivated Washington's concern by making a two-week trip to Peking and Hanoi.

This trip was the turning point for many people in Washington – proof that Souvanna would knuckle under to the Asian Communist leaders. American officials tried hard to prevent the trip by repeated warnings of the dangers of getting too close to the Communists. Coming so soon after the agreement with Souphanouvong, the journey was symbolic confirmation that Souvanna meant to work

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motivate Prince Boun Oum to permit his government to be legitimised by the Laotian Assembly;⁸ 3.) The United States Government would take immediate steps to consolidate their positions with both the British and the French; 4.) The Eisenhower Administration would alert the SEATO Council about the serious issues being contested in Laos without calling for immediate military action; 5.) The United States would make the necessary changes and redeployments of its own military assets so as to bring maximum force to bear on the North Vietnamese should an attack become essential.⁹

President Eisenhower then authorised Ambassador Llewellyn Thompson to convey a very serious warning directly to the Russian Premier, Khrushchev.¹⁰ Thompson was told to inform the Soviet leader that the United States viewed the deteriorating Laotian "...situation with grave concern, that we are moving the positions of our forces to assure, if necessary, that the legitimate government will not be destroyed, and that in the event of major war we will not be

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with the devil." Charles A. Stevenson, The End of Nowhere: American Policy Toward Laos Since 1954, (Boston, [MA]: Beacon Press, 1972), pp. 40 – 41.

⁸ Although Prince Boun Oum of Champassak became politically associated with General Phoumi, a military man with whom he never truly got along with, he also had a legitimacy of his own, which was respected in Laos. Prince Oum's regime was officially recognised by the US Government in mid-December of 1960. Ibid., pp. 87 & 100.

⁹ The President then summarised the actions we should take at this time. They are (1) induce Souvanna Phouma to resign as Prime Minister and possibly induce him to depart for France; (2) induce Boun Oum to allow his government to be legitimated by the Assembly; (3) consolidate our positions with the British and the French; (4) alert the SEATO Council to the dangers which exist while not requesting specific overt action at this time; (5) make such changes and redeployments of our own forces as to maximize their usefulness in the event they must intervene against the North Viet-Nameese... "Memorandum of a Conference With the President, White House, Washington, December 31, 1960, 11:30 a.m.," (Department of State, Central Files, 611.51J/12-3160), FRUS: East Asia - Pacific Region: Cambodia; Laos, 1958 - 1960, Vol. XVI, pp. 1028 -1029.

¹⁰ Llewellyn Thompson was the United States Ambassador to the Soviet Union at this time. Patrick Anderson, The President's Men: White House Assistants of Franklin D. Roosevelt, Harry S. Truman, Dwight D. Eisenhower, John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson, (Garden City, [NY]: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1969): p. 285.

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caught napping.”¹¹ These were very strong words indeed as Eisenhower was telling the Russians, straight-out, that the United States viewed a non-communist Laos as strategically vital and was prepared to go to war to protect that status.

Of real significance, with regard to the future problems that would occur between Washington and Saigon, both the Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles, and the President were very concerned as to how Diem would view the Communist assault in Laos and the American reaction to it thus far. Accordingly, President Eisenhower reiterated to his NSC that they should inform the press that they would not allow Laos to fall to the Communists, even if such prevention meant that the U.S. had to act with or without allies.¹²

During early 1961, when President Eisenhower was handing over the reins of power to President-elect Kennedy, the security of Laos became an issue, which the former President believed was crucial for Kennedy to come to grips with in terms of Southeast Asian policy in general.¹³ Clearly, Eisenhower wanted to establish a continuity and integrity of foreign policy

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¹¹ “Memorandum of a Conference With the President, White House, Washington, December 31, 1960, 11:30 a.m.,” (Department of State, Central Files, 611.51J/12-3160), FRUS: East Asia - Pacific Region: Cambodia; Laos, 1958 - 1960, Vol. XVI, pp. 1028 -1029.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 1029.

¹³ The following chronologically-ordered list of events should give the reader an approximate idea of what was occurring in Laos in the early 1960's and what President Kennedy's new Administration was faced with: 1.) May 28-31, 1959: A major offensive was initiated by the Pathet Lao against the Royal Laotian Government; this offensive was carried out mainly by North Vietnamese units against the Royal Laotian Government's frontier posts. 2.) During July of 1959 the Royal Lao Government protested to the United Nations about the North Vietnamese invasion in support of the Pathet Lao. 3.) In Autumn of 1959 the United Nations sent an investigating team to Northeast Laos. 4.) During the elections of April 24, 1960, the Pathet Lao representatives are eliminated from the National Assembly. 5.) On August 9, 1960, unwilling to abide by the elections Kong Le of the so-called “Neutralists” unleashes a successful coup attempt which is endorsed by the Pathet Lao. 6.) Because Kong Le, a paratrooper, recognised his own political limitations he made sure that “Neutralist” Prince Souvanna Phouma was returned to power as Prime Minister on August 31 of 1960. The Communists benefited from the confusion that had followed the Kong Le coup and continued to make territorial gains. The United States Government, under the Presidency of Dwight Eisenhower, was highly suspicious of the supposed neutrality of Kong Le and Prince Souvanna Phouma, and not encouraged by the official opening of Diplomatic relations with the USSR, -

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with regard to the Laotian problem, not least of all, because of the need to assure allies, such as Diem, that the United States would not abandon them. There was a memorandum made of this conference, which occurred on January 19, 1961, between Eisenhower and Kennedy and it is worth noting - given what would occur under Kennedy's administration with regard to Laos:

President Eisenhower opened the discussion on Laos by stating that the United States was determined to preserve the independence of Laos. It was his opinion that if Laos should fall to the Communists, then it would be just a question of time until South Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand and Burma would collapse. He felt that the Communists had designs on all of Southeast Asia, and that it would be a tragedy to permit Laos to fall.

President Eisenhower gave a brief review of the various moves and coups that had taken place in Laos involving the Pathet Lao, Souvanna Phouma, Boun Oum, and Kong Le. He said that the evidence was clear that Communist China and North Vietnam were determined to destroy the independence of Laos. He also added that the Russians were sending in substantial supplies in support of the Pathet Lao in an effort to overturn the government.

President Eisenhower said it would be fatal for us to permit Communists to insert themselves in the Laotian government. He recalled that our experience had clearly demonstrated that under such circumstances the Communists always ended up in control. He cited China as an illustration.... President Eisenhower said with considerable emotion that Laos was the key to the entire area of Southeast Asia. He said that if we permitted Laos to fall, then we would have to write off all the area. He stated that we must not permit a Communist take-over.... Commenting upon President Eisenhower's statement that we would have

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cut off its aid to the Royal Lao Government. 7.) The Thais alarmed at the Laotian slide toward the Communists put into place an economic blockade of Laos in September - October of 1960. 8.) The Lao Government moved closer with the Pathet Lao and the Soviet Union during October of 1960 and the Soviet Union responded by sending its first Ambassador to Laos. In addition to this diplomatic support, the Soviet Union began an airlift of arms from Hanoi to Kong Le's forces. 9.) During September of 1960 the leaders of the conservative forces in Laos, Boun Oum and Phoumi Nosavan, retook Vientiane which forced Souvanna Phouma and Kong Le to flee. 10.) The Soviet Union began to airlift arms directly to Pathet Lao forces in January and February of 1961. 11.) In the Spring of 1961 the Communists seized Tchepone and Muong Phine; the North Vietnamese and the Pathet Lao pushed the Royal Laotian Government's forces back to Hien Heup from north of Vang Vieng on Route 13 and the right wing was almost completely defeated as they had lost effective administrative control of nearly all upland Laos. 12.) In April of 1961 the US and the USSR agreed on a cease-fire in Laos which culminated in the signing of the Geneva Agreements on Laos, which included a Declaration of Laotian Neutrality on July 23, 1962. Paul F. Langer and Joseph J. Zasloff, North Vietnam and the Pathet Lao: Partners in the Struggle for Laos, (Cambridge, [MA]: Harvard University Press, 1970), pp. 202 - 205.

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to go to the support of Laos alone if we could not persuade others to proceed with us, President-elect Kennedy asked the question as to how long it would take to put an American division into Laos.¹⁴

Yet, when it came to action, Kennedy was loath to place the same emphasis on defending Laos as Eisenhower had. The new President was confronted with crises nearly everywhere and simply responded to early questioning about Vietnam as secondary to Laos.¹⁵ This position, however, quickly changed once he was able to digest how serious the Vietnamese situation had become. Indeed, it was reported that in this early period of the new administration Kennedy shouted: “[President] Eisenhower briefed me about everything – but Vietnam.”¹⁶

Kennedy did not stop with just blaming Eisenhower as he rapidly began to doubt the efficiency and professionalism of the State Department. He believed that they stumbled through one muddle after another and he was even quoted as saying: “Damn it, Bundy and I get more done in one day in the White House than they do in six months in the State Department.”¹⁷ The young President did not let his dismay with the Department of State’s obfuscation stop there as

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¹⁴ Congress, House, Committee on Armed Services, “Memorandum of Conference on January 19, 1961 between President Eisenhower and President-elect Kennedy on the Subject of Laos,” (Memorandum sent from Clark Clifford to President Kennedy, [September 29, 1967]), D. 1956 French Withdrawal – 1960: the Situation in Laos in United States-Vietnam Relations, 1945-1967, Volume IV, Book 10 of 12, pp. 1360 - 1363.

¹⁵ “Given its high-level panoply, the Vietnam war never had the benefit, ideally at least, of intensive participation from the start and from the ground up by the responsible Far East Bureau... This writer recalls talking to Theodore Sorensen, Special Counsel to President Kennedy, within the first two weeks after the inauguration in 1961. Asked what were the administration’s foreign policy priorities, Sorensen said flatly, ‘Laos.’ In reply to the question, ‘What about Viet Nam?’ he repeated ‘Laos.’” John P. Leacacos, Fires In The In-Basket: The ABC’s of the State Department, (Cleveland, [Ohio]: The World Publishing Company, 1968), p. 89.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Smith Simpson, Anatomy of the State Department, (Boston, [MA]: Beacon Press, 1968), p. 228.

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he was also quoted as saying: "They never have any ideas over there...never come up with anything new...The State Department is a bowl of jelly..."¹⁸ Strong words no doubt but also words coming from a man who was afraid of what he saw in Southeast Asia.¹⁹

To be sure, it was part of the natural process of changing administrations that the new President would want to correct what he perceived were errors in the former chief executive's policies and Kennedy certainly wanted to embark on some new initiatives of his own.²⁰ Initially, and on the surface, Kennedy's Laos Task Force would appear to be pro-interventionist with U.S. forces deployed, on the ground, as their potential solution. Nevertheless, Kennedy's own instincts ran in the opposite direction as he preferred a diplomatic solution as opposed to a military one and in the end it was these instincts that won the day.²¹

The membership of the Kennedy' Laos Task Force included Assistant Secretary Parsons, his Deputy John Steeves, Paul Nitze, men from CIA, and the Joint Staff, Walt Rostow, representing the White House, and some lower echelon State Department officials.²² According to historian Charles A. Stevenson these individuals were the type to most likely take a hard-line approach to the Communist intervention in Laos. Parsons and Steeves had detailed knowledge of

Footnotes

¹⁸ ibid.

¹⁹ "If the President were inclined to favor a military solution to the problems in Laos, he was soon disenchanted with the prospects. His [Kennedy's] military aide has written that he showed 'stunned amazement' on learning that if only 10,000 men were sent to Southeast Asia, there would be practically no strategic reserve left for any other contingencies. Nor could those troops be deployed with the speed necessary to counter ant large-scale intervention by the Chinese." Stevenson, The End of Nowhere, p. 135.

²⁰ ibid., pp. 130 -131.

It should be noted, however, that the Kennedy policy on Laos was more the "brainchild" of Chester Bowles than President Kennedy himself and, as the reader shall see, the Chester Bowles' notions of how to solve the Laotian problem, notions that were supported and carried out by Averell Harriman, proved to be ruinous to a firm foundation for US policy in the region.

²¹ Stevenson, The End of Nowhere, p. 133.

²² ibid., pp. 132 - 133.

what was going on in Laos and they also brought a distrust of Souvanna to the task force. They were indeed willing to support military intervention if it became necessary and they did not perceive of that as being a problem with a President who spoke so much in favour of taking action, whatever that really meant.²³ As has already been noted, Kennedy liked to talk action but there was something about Laos that made him afraid and the Task Force had not discerned this fact.

As things worked out, before the task force could complete their review of policy and submit credible recommendations, Kennedy found himself being assailed with questions about Laos by the news media and his caution won the day. His on the spot reaction was to move away from arguing for intervention with force to a diplomatic solution.²⁴ A good example of this can be found in his first news conference, on January 25, 1961, where he stated that the United States was seeking to establish an “independent, peaceful, uncommitted country” in Laos.²⁵ Kennedy reiterated this hoped-for solution to the Laos question at a news conference on March 23, 1961:

First, we strongly and unreservedly support the goal of a neutral and independent Laos, tied to no outside power or group of powers, threatening no one, and free from any domination.... We are earnestly in favour of constructive negotiation among the nations concerned and among the leaders of Laos which can help Laos back to the pathway of independence and genuine neutrality.... We are always conscious of the obligation, which rests upon all members of the United Nations to seek peaceful solutions to problems of this sort.... I want to make it clear to the American people and to all the world that all we want in Laos is peace, not war; a truly neutral government, not a cold war pawn; a

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²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 133.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

settlement concluded at the conference table and not on the battlefield... We will not be provoked, trapped, or drawn into this or any other situation...²⁶

These were, of course, early signals given by the new U.S. President, indicating that a neutral Laos would be preferred and that the United States Government wanted to achieve this preference by negotiation and not by armed force. Nevertheless, Kennedy had to couch this preference with what he hoped would be a credible threat of the use of force if the Communists thwarted a deal toward Laotian neutrality.

Historian Martin E. Goldstein summarised the hammering-out of the Kennedy position best, in his book, American Policy Toward Laos. Accordingly, Goldstein focussed on Roger Hilsman's interpretation that sustained that most of the discussion concerned with military intervention was held against the backdrop of the Korean War.

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²⁶ John F. Kennedy, #92 - [1] "The Presidents News Conference of March 23, 1961," in Public Papers of the Presidents of The United States: John F. Kennedy, 1961. (Washington, [DC]: United States Government Printing Office, 1962), p. 214

Roger Hilsman, the 'Intellectual' Guerrilla Fighter:

Roger Hilsman, by all accounts a brilliant and often annoying man, fancied himself an expert on martial thought as it pertained to guerrilla warfare. He held his views supported with some remarkable field and study experience. During the Second World War he had led a commando of native troops behind Japanese lines in Burma.²⁷ These operations were conducted under the auspices of Ray Peer's OSS detachment that was based out of 'Fort Hertz' on the Burma-China border.²⁸ Hilsman had, in fact, become the leading Kennedy Administration "...proponent of what he described as a 'political approach' that emphasized 'political, economic and social action into which very carefully calibrated military measures were interwoven.'"²⁹ His ideas on fighting Communist guerrillas approximated Sir Robert Thompson's, a thinking soldier whom Hilsman respected and admired.³⁰ As such, this American intellectual soldier noted: "...protect the people, don't chase the Viet Cong, just use the troops to protect the people. Then behind the screen you have social and political reform – education, everything.' And the sea of people in which Mao said the guerrillas swim like fish would dry up."³¹ Robert McNamara had referred to Hilsman as a "...smart, abrasive, talkative West Point graduate who had been involved in guerrilla combat in World War II and had subsequently become an academic."³² Hilsman had indeed been a professor of international politics at Princeton during

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²⁷ Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days*, p. 212.

²⁸ Cable, *Conflict of Myths*, p. 197.

²⁹ Hammer, *A Death In November*, p. 39.

³⁰ Cable, *Conflict of Myths*, p. 197.

³¹ Hammer, *A Death In November*, p. 39.

the 1950's and he had entered service with the Kennedy Administration as the State Department's director of research and intelligence.³³ On April 25, 1963, Hilsman became Harriman's successor as head of the Far Eastern Bureau of the State Department.³⁴

Hilsman, as a party to the debate on whether or not the US should use force in Laos, noted that many of the leading military planners in the US considered the Korean War a humiliation. For these soldiers and thinkers had come to see restrictions placed on bombing north of the Yalu River, and other constraints on the use of force, as circumventing the possibility of military victory.³⁵

The Joint Chiefs of Staff came to position that was more like a tenet: that the United States should never again fight a restricted or limited ground war in Asia. The corollary to this tenet was that if the United States were to engage in land warfare in Asia again then such an engagement of American military assets had to be unlimited which, of course, included the use of nuclear weapons.³⁶ As a result, discussions on whether or not to use military force in Laos

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³² Robert S. McNamara (with Brian VanDeMark), In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam, (New York, [NY]: Times Books/Random House, Inc., 1995), p. 52.

³³ John S. Bowman, general editor, The Vietnam War: An Almanac, (New York, [NY]: Bison Books, 1985), p. 484.

³⁴ John P. Glennon, editor in chief, "List of Persons," in FRUS: Vietnam, January – August 1963, Vol. III, (Washington, [DC]: United States Government Printing Office, 1991), p. XXII.

³⁵ "Roger Hilsman, who was a party to the debate, reveals that the discussion surrounding military intervention took place in a context that derived from the Korean War. Many high-ranking military personnel considered the Korean War a humiliation. Restrictions placed on the use of force - especially limitations on bombing north of the Yalu River - prevented the military from winning an outright victory, or so many in the military believed." Martin E. Goldstein, American Policy Toward Laos, (Cranbury, [NJ]: Associated University Presses, Inc., 1973), p. 234.

³⁶ "By 1961 the Joint Chiefs of Staff (hereafter: JCS) had come to feel that the United States should never fight a limited ground war in Asia. The majority sentiment within the JCS was that if the United States were to use force again in Asia, such force must be unlimited, including the use of nuclear weapons." Ibid.

were subject to this tenet. The reasoning went like this: if Laos fell under the sway of the Communists then they would have access to a north south invasion route that sliced through the very heart of Southeast Asia. In turn, this strategic route would allow the Communists to mount pressure on South Vietnam, Cambodia and Thailand through the Mekong lowlands.³⁷

Serious as the above noted consideration was, military reality dictated that if American troops were introduced into such a scenario in a limited amount then a Korean-style war would probably ensue. Conversely, an unrestricted deployment of American armed force could possibly escalate into World War III. Neither one of these potential scenarios appealed to President Kennedy nor did the political cost of being the 'President to lose Southeast Asia.'³⁸ Thus he came to believe that he was restrained to the use of a political solution instead of one that called for the use of American troops in Laos. The President held on to the vain hope that a negotiated compromise would remove the need for the use of military force. According to Goldstein, Kennedy's reasoning was self-deceptive as he clung to the notion that if negotiations proved fruitless then the US could still use the threat of force.³⁹ This was a bluff and all that was

Footnotes

³⁷ "The debate on whether to use force in Laos was conceived within this frame of reasoning. If the communists gained control of Laos, it was thought, they would have access to the north-south route through Southeast Asia which lay along the Mekong lowlands, from which they could mount pressure on South Vietnam, Cambodia and Thailand." Ibid.

³⁸ "On the other hand, a limited commitment of American troops might result in another Korean type war, a lengthy and indecisive conflict. An unrestricted application of American force could escalate to World War III. None of these military alternatives looked especially inviting to the new President." Ibid.

³⁹ "President Kennedy hoped to find a political solution instead of a military solution to the Laotian situation. In other words, he hoped that a negotiated compromise would obviate the need for military action. If a political solution proved unattainable, the United States still retained the option of a military response.... The answer seemed to lie in the threat of American intervention. In order to effect a political solution, as President Kennedy desired, the United States needed to persuade its adversaries in Laos that Washington would intervene, if necessary, to prevent the neutralists - Pathet Lao from gaining more ground." Ibid.

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required to undo Kennedy's Laotian 'deal' was for the Communists to perceive it as such and, as events unfolded, that is precisely what they did.

Chester Bowles:

It needs to be noted at this point that the notion of a negotiated settlement that would lead to Laotian neutrality had not automatically or spontaneously blossomed forth out of the President's fears. Instead, all indications, which can be corroborated with documents, seem to suggest that the policy was 'whispered into his ear' by the mephostophelean Chester Bowles. President Kennedy proclaimed Chester Bowles to the American news media, during his election campaign (February, 1960), as his designated chief adviser on foreign policy.⁴⁰ With his background as a critic on foreign affairs in the Congress, Bowles was also every-inch a "new-Frontiersman" and revealed as much in his own testimony about himself:

The only realistic approach, I believed, was to buy whatever time we could by maintaining a military power balance, but with no illusions about its fragile nature. We could only hope that within this period the necessary peacekeeping apparatus could somehow be created within a strengthened United Nations, which ultimately would become the basis for a system of world order.... As the leader of the kind of world-wide liberal movement which I envisioned, a new American President would be faced with the opposition of many powerful vested interests committed to the status quo. But on his side would be all the human forces for freedom, proclaimed in our own Revolution, which had been gradually evolving and were now inspiring young leaders in every corner of the world.⁴¹

Armed with this idealism, and having been made the senior Under-Secretary of State in the new Kennedy Administration,⁴² Chester Bowles, was soon confronted with the Laotian question. Feeling no particular restraint on his ideas and how they might affect real people in the real world, Bowles never wavered in his advice to Kennedy on Laos, and it was this advice that eventually won the day:

Footnotes

⁴⁰ Chester Bowles, Promises to Keep: My Years In Public Service, 1941-1969, (New York, [NY]: Harper & Row, 1971), p. 285.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 286-287.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 302

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On several occasions before his election, I had discussed with Kennedy the potential dangers of the situation in Laos in relation to the whole Southeast Asia region. "The program on which the Eisenhower Administration embarked in Laos," I wrote in a memorandum to him, "Strikes me as one of the most appalling, naive, misguided and badly administered efforts that has come to my attention in the last few years, and we have seen some bad ones." I believed that some form of neutralization was the only practical answer, and Kennedy agreed.⁴³

Footnotes

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 334.

Vo Nguyen Giap, Clear and Unfettered Strategic Thought:

Regardless of whatever Bowles and Kennedy thought or hoped would work to stabilise Laos, Vo Nguyen Giap knew exactly what had to be done in Laos in order to secure his assault on the salients of South Vietnam. For Giap was a brilliant yet sober-minded and practical man who understood the capabilities and the use of armed might in place of mere rhetoric.

Vo Nguyen Giap was born on the twenty eighth day of August 1911, in the village of An Xa situated in the Province of Quang Binh. Thus, like Ngo Dinh Diem and Ho Chi Minh, Giap was from central Vietnam or, more traditionally, Annam. There can be no denying the fact that he was an extraordinary individual, from his youth on he had demonstrated remarkable intelligence and unique powers of leadership and organisation. Politically involved since his teens, he joined the Communists in the early 1930's. He acquired a degree in law and political economics from the University of Hanoi in July of 1937.⁴⁴ He worked as a journalist for revolutionary newspapers for a couple of years and, by 1940, was teaching history at a private school near Hanoi.⁴⁵ On December 22, 1944, Giap oversaw the inception of the first military/propaganda unit of what would become the People's Liberation Army of Vietnam.⁴⁶ Starting out with thirty-four soldiers he ended up by commanding a million more during his war with the Americans and, while he made several disastrous mistakes during his campaigns against the French and the Americans, he remained, ultimately, undefeated in the end.⁴⁷

Footnotes

⁴⁴ Peter Macdonald, Giap: The Victor in Vietnam, (New York, [NY]: W.W. Norton & Company, 1993), pp.16 – 17 and 22.

⁴⁵ William J. Duiker, The Communist Road to Power in Vietnam, second edition, (Boulder, [Colorado]: Westview Press, 1996), p. 69.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 83.

⁴⁷ Macdonald, Giap, p. 17.

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Giap was a great admirer of Napoleon Bonaparte and could recite the French commander's campaigns and battles, in detail, in rapid-fire lectures accompanied by precise maps drawn on a blackboard. Though he also studied Lenin, Marx, Engels, and Mao religiously, in order to understand the nature of revolutionary warfare, he, nevertheless, admitted to the French General, Raoul Salan, that it was from an English soldier's work that he had discovered the secrets to successful guerrilla warfare. TE Lawrence, better known as Lawrence of Arabia, had written a seminal work, The Seven Pillars of Wisdom, which gave Giap "...practical examples of how to apply minimum military force to maximum tactical and strategic effect."⁴⁸ Accordingly, Giap brought two invaluable understandings to the creation of his army: a sound grasp of Vietnamese history and a natural genius in the discipline of the history of warfare.

Vo Nguyen Giap's firm grasp on the practical realities of conducting unconventional warfare in Indochina had made him consider Laos as his strategic lynchpin from very early on. Communist though he was, Giap also manifested many of the intellectual predilections of a traditional Confucian thinker. He had a love and respect for Sun Tsu's martial thought, he had the incredible patience of a true Confucian philosopher/ leader and he had the ability to look at strategy in the long view of decades.⁴⁹ Thus, to Giap's far-sighted strategic vision, Laos was part of an integrated seamless whole in the planning and conduct of war in Vietnam.⁵⁰ In this context, his biographer gave a poignant history of how Giap had always viewed Laos and, indeed, how he had used it against the French:

"Giap had set his face from the beginning against the kind of confrontation inherent in the Korean War, still more against the positional battles of the First

Footnotes

⁴⁸ Ibid. p. 23

⁴⁹ Ibid., pp. 41 – 42.

⁵⁰ John Colvin, Giap: Volcano Under The Snow, (New York, [NY]: Soho Press Inc., 1996), p. 113.

World War, with their emphasis on mass fire-power and enforced absence of mobility.... After the Black River campaign of 1952, Giap withdrew to regroup, replace losses of men and equipment, and to plan the assault on Laos. French forces were still weaker in that country and more accessible to Viet Minh attack than in Cambodia or the Bassac. Laos, because it was politically 'favourable' to France, could not be neglected by the high command, still less after the Matigon Treaty or Mutual Defence in 1953. The opportunities for dividing the forces of the French Union once again and concentrating the Viet Minh against a weakened and dispersed enemy in the Red River Delta, Laos, Tonkin or the Central Highlands, were strategically evident to Giap. In April 1953 his troops advanced in multi-divisional strength into Laos..."⁵¹

The importance of Laos remained constant in Giap's strategy for final victory in Indochina. There is no evidence to remotely suggest that he ever viewed Laos as not integral to this victory even when the French had gone and the Americans had taken over with their support of the Government of South Vietnam.

Kennedy's ultimate decision to engage in a political-diplomatic solution, involving the talents of his roving Ambassador, Averell Harriman, seemed to many observers to overlook how the North Vietnamese perceived the whole Laotian question. Eisenhower's concern was founded on a more clear-sighted understanding than Kennedy's,⁵² in as much as the former President recognised the depth of the problem in Laos as it related to North Vietnam and their strategic

Footnotes

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² This is not to say that Kennedy had not been warned by his own advisors, such as Theodore C. Sorenson, on the reality of what was going on in Laos and its direct effects on South Vietnam. Indeed, in late April of 1961, Sorenson delivered a memo to the new President which warned him about this serious situation: "Mr. Bundy, Mr. Bell and I urge approval at Saturday's NSC meeting of only the basic concept of an all-out internal security effort to save Vietnam, indicating that the Task Force Report is only a first draft to be reviewed, reshaped and then carried personally by the Vice-President on his trip.

1. We need a more realistic approach.

To the extent that this plan depends on the communists being tied down in Laos or lacking further forces, on our blocking land corridors through which communist support flows, or on our obtaining effective anti-infiltration action against Laos, Cambodia and the Laotian negotiations, the outcome is highly doubtful." Theodore C. Sorenson, "37. Memorandum From The President's Special Counsel (Sorenson) to The President," (Washington, April 28, 1961), [Washington National Records Centre, RG 330, OSD Files: FRC 65 A 3078, Vietnam], in FRUS: Vietnam, 1961, Vol. 1, 1961 – 1963, pp. 84 - 85.

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designs. Kennedy's own Presidential Task Force for South Vietnam supported the wary Eisenhower position on Laos. This Task Force assertion was made manifest in a lengthy document attached to a Memorandum from Deputy Secretary of Defense, Roswell Gilpatric. Indeed, they made the connection between the Pathet Lao and "neutralist" forces and North Vietnam's designs on destroying Diem and his government in South Vietnam:

Appraisal of the situation: After a meeting in Hanoi on 13 May 1959, the Central Committee of the North-Vietnamese Communist Party publicly announced its intention "to smash" the government of President Diem. Following this decision the Viet Cong have significantly increased their program of infiltration, subversion, sabotage and assassination designed to achieve this end.

At the North Vietnamese Communist Party Congress in September 1960, the earlier declaration of underground war by the Party's Control Committee was re-affirmed. This action by the party Congress took place only a month after Kong Le's coup in Laos. Scarcely two months later there was a military uprising in Saigon. The turmoil created throughout the area by this rapid succession of events provides an ideal environment for the Communist "master plan" to take over all of Southeast Asia.⁵³

In other words, things were looking grim in Southeast Asia and the co-ordination between declared Communist intentions and actual violent events was far too close to suggest anything other than a very well-organised campaign master-minded out of Hanoi. Accordingly, it had not escaped the expert judgement of Kennedy's Task Force members that the Laos talks and upcoming Accords played right into the Communists' hands - as they duly noted:

The effect of these negotiations on the situation in Vietnam will be threefold:

First, the very fact that the Fourteen Powers are meeting under essentially the same ground rules as the 1954 Geneva Accords, including the concept of an ICC mechanism in Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia, could have a politically inhibiting

Footnotes

⁵³ Roswell Gilpatric, "42. Memorandum From The Deputy Secretary of Defense (Gilpatric) to the President: [Attachment] - A Program of Action To prevent Communist Domination of South Vietnam," (Washington, May 3, 1961), [Department of State, Central Files, 611.51K/5-361. Top Secret] in FRUS: Vietnam, 1961, Vol. 1, p. 93.

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effect on any significant measures which the U.S. might undertake to prevent a Communist take-over in South Viet-Nam.

Second, as has been their practice in the past, the Communists can be expected to use the cover of an international negotiation to expand their subversive activities. In this case, close co-ordination of their efforts in Southern Laos, Cambodia and Viet-Nam can be expected. The 250-mile border between South Viet-Nam and Laos, while never effectively sealed in the past, will now be deprived of even the semblance of protection which the friendly, pro-western Laos offers.⁵⁴

Third, the three principal passes through the Annamite Mountains - the Nape Pass, Mugia Gap, and the pass that controls the road from Quang Tri to Savannakhet - lie in Southern Laos. These passes control three key military avenues of advance from North Viet-Nam through Laos into the open Mekong valley leading to Thailand and South Viet-Nam. A Lao political settlement that would afford the Communists an opportunity to maintain any sort of control, covertly or otherwise, of these mountain passes would make them gate keepers to the primary inland invasion route leading to Saigon and flanking the most important defensive terrain in the northern area of South Viet-Nam.⁵⁵

According to these documents it is made plain that Kennedy had been warned: Laos was no place to surrender in to the Communists by permitting unenforceable neutrality to be part of a Laotian agreement in Geneva. Such surrender would not even buy time and could only strategically threaten South Vietnam. The fear of all military commanders is to be out-flanked in their defensive positions and trails through Laos permitted the North Vietnamese to do that, precisely, in relation to South Vietnam.

There were other things to be considered about Laos as well which had to include more traditional Vietnamese designs and the history of the region. Thus, scholars familiar with the

Footnotes

⁵⁴ This was precisely the point that had Ngo Dinh Diem so upset and it was his stubborn objection to this that caused Harriman to dislike him, as Diem stood foursquare in the way of the American plan. This critical understanding will be illuminated in full later in this work as the reader will discern.

⁵⁵ Roswell Gilpatric, "42. Memorandum From The Deputy Secretary of Defense (Gilpatric) to the President: [Attachment] - A Program of Action To prevent Communist Domination of South Vietnam," [Department of State, Central Files, 611.51K/5-361. Top Secret] in FRUS: Vietnam, 1961, Vol. 1, pp. 94 - 95.

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Laotian problem and how it connected to Vietnam asserted that “The Lao War, therefore, contains several elements: Vietnam’s traditional attempts to assert hegemony over at least parts of what the French in the last century designated as Laos; an extension of the North Vietnamese struggle to take over South Vietnam....”⁵⁶ Regardless of Averell Harriman’s good diplomatic intentions and Kennedy’s hopes that neutrality could be achieved and maintained in Laos through the Geneva Accords (1962), the North Vietnamese had a much more aggressive agenda to follow.

Southeast Asian scholars Paul F. Langer and Joseph J. Zaslov noted that in compliance with the Geneva agreements on Laos, American and Filipino armed personnel were withdrawn from the country. The North Vietnamese, evidently, felt no similar need to comply with Geneva and left an estimated 10,000 men in Laos. This force formed up the backbone of the Pathet Lao’s military strength.⁵⁷ The thinly veiled Vietnamese role behind the Pathet Lao was made possible because of the built-in ineffectiveness of the International Control Commission. For the ICC’s Communist member, representing Poland, was able to veto or obstruct any investigative action that would uncover the North Vietnamese forces inside Laos.⁵⁸

It should have been obvious to the Kennedy Administration what was going to happen in Laos as the North Vietnamese and the Pathet Lao had openly displayed a negative attitude about international inspection and enforcement right from the beginning of the Geneva Conference.

Footnotes

⁵⁶ Langer and Zasloff, North Vietnam and the Pathet Lao, p. 1.

⁵⁷ “In compliance with the Geneva Accords, US and Filipino personnel who had been fighting on the side of the Royal Lao Government were withdrawn from the country. The same could not be said of the North Vietnamese forces (estimated at 10,000 men) who had been the backbone of Pathet Lao military strength. The North Vietnamese never admitted the presence of their fighting units,....” Ibid., p. 79.

⁵⁸ “This concealment of the Vietnamese role in Laos was possible only because the International Control Commission remained ineffective; in addition its Communist member (Poland) was able to veto or obstruct any investigative action that might reveal the continued Vietnamese presence in Laos or otherwise embarrass the Communist side.” Ibid.

For the North Vietnamese delegation had insisted that "...the neutrality of Laos should be mainly safeguarded by the Laotians themselves."⁵⁹ The Pathet Lao attempted to 'wrap-themselves-in-the-flag' by insisting on the recognition of Laos' sovereignty and neutrality which they would somehow uphold; and thus they threatened: "We should like to add that we will not tolerate guarantee or control by an international body, however constituted, of our country's sovereignty and neutrality."⁶⁰ Of course, what this did guarantee was that North Vietnamese troops were free to cross into the Communist controlled zone of Laos whenever it suited them. As a result, by the time the Geneva Accords were hammered-out in 1962, the North Vietnamese along with the Pathet Lao controlled approximately the same amount of territory as the Viet Minh had been able to at the end of the war with France, July 1954. In reality this meant that the largest portion of the Laotian highlands, approximately half the territory of Laos, was under Communist control.⁶¹ Kennedy's policy, then, had only deluded the Americans as the Communists had achieved a net gain out of the whole Laotian affair and the negotiated 'neutrality' settlement only served to cement this gain in writing.

The evidence is strong, therefore, that the Communist military success at the end of the 1961-1962 offensive in Laos was due primarily to the troop commitment from North Vietnam. From their own point of view, the North Vietnamese had made substantial gains: Not only was the area of the Ho Chi

Footnotes

⁵⁹ "The negative attitude of the North Vietnamese and of the Pathet Lao with regard to international inspection and enforcement of the neutralization of Laos was clearly stated by their representatives at the Geneva Conference. The DRV delegation insisted that "the neutrality of Laos should be mainly safeguarded by the Laotians themselves;" Ibid., pp. 79 - 80.

⁶⁰ "... the Pathet Lao expressed their view in these brutally frank terms: "We should like to add that we will not tolerate guarantee or control by an international body, however constituted, of our country's sovereignty and neutrality." Ibid., p. 80.

⁶¹ "North Vietnamese forces thus remained free to cross over into the Communist zone of Laos at will...By the time the Geneva Accords of 1962, the territory which the DRV and PL forces controlled was roughly the same as the territory the Viet Minh had held at the close of the war against the French in July 1954. This meant the bulk of the highlands of Laos, or about half the territory, although the population in these areas was only 20 to 30 percent of the country's total." Ibid.

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*Minh Trail now securely in Communist hands, but the northern provinces bordering on Vietnam were also clearly within Communist control, thereby providing a buffer between Vietnam and a potential enemy. In the future, this buffer zone could serve as a staging area for further advances into other parts of the country. Laos was now divided, and it seemed unlikely that peaceful reunification could be achieved without North Vietnamese consent."*⁶²

Considering the fact that the fortifications in the Dien Bien Phu valley had been placed there by the French in order to deny the Viet Minh strategic access to Laos,⁶³ the student of military history and strategy can only reasonably assume that Kennedy's leading advocates for a new policy toward Laos had strayed into serious error. Chester Bowles and Averell Harriman had either very short memories or were so exceedingly arrogant that they believed their ideas of a negotiated neutrality would succeed where arms and the very best efforts of the more experienced French had been unsuccessful.⁶⁴ The proof that Kennedy's men failed at what they set out to do in Laos became blatantly manifest years later when the Americans were heavily engaged with their own forces in South Vietnam, as Professor Douglas Pike duly noted:

Laos has great relevancy for Vietnam. Many of the more astute observers of the Southeast Asia scene have long insisted that any settlement of the Vietnam war must also involve a settlement in Laos, that stability is not possible in either place unless it exists in both. As of late 1968, at least 40,000 PAVN troops were in Laos and the DRV-Pathet Lao apparatus controlled about half the country. The Pathet Lao organization is permeated with DRV "advisers," both military and

Footnotes

⁶² *Ibid.*, pp. 79 - 80.

⁶³ "The commander-in-chief's (Navarre) view of the usefulness of Dien Bien Phu was as an air-supplied 'hedgehog' from which the enemy could be attacked on a scale sufficient to cause him substantially to disperse his forces, and thus delay if not halt the drive for Laos...The overriding argument for Navarre lay in his belief that the location and armament of the base would prevent Giap from seizing his main targets in Laos before the monsoon and the inevitable Viet Minh withdrawal during the rainy season." Colvin, *Giap*, p. 121.

⁶⁴ Sir Robert Thompson told the Americans, in very blunt terms, that they had ignored the French experience to their own cost: "...the French experience in Indochina was almost totally written off and disregarded." Thomas C. Thayer, "Patterns of the French and American Experience in Vietnam," in *The Lessons of Vietnam*, W. Scott Thompson & Donaldson D. Frizzell, editors; (New York, [NY]: Crane, Russak & Company, Inc., 1977), pp. 35 - 36.

*civilian; and they, rather than the Laotian Communist cadres, make the decisions, initiate actions, define doctrine, and in general keep the movement on the track and moving.... At any rate, it seems clear that a settlement of the Vietnam conflict must also involve the matter of DRV activities in Laos.*⁶⁵

Looking on in dismay at the Kennedy Administration's policy toward Laos, the President of South Vietnam, had his own serious doubts about the Americans reinforced; this became an area of substantial tension between Diem and the Department of State which required Ambassador Nolting's best efforts to ameliorate. Even then, this 'amelioration' was obstructed because, while Diem controlled his criticism, Harriman and his faction within the State Department became ever more venomous in their denigration of the Vietnamese President with the clear goal of having him removed from power. Yet, as the Americans were to find out, they could acquiesce to the removal from power and murder of Diem, but they could not destroy the reality that existed in Laos. This reality included the ever-increasing use of Laos by the North Vietnamese. For the mountain country had become the logistical support supply-line for their campaign in South Vietnam.

Footnotes

⁶⁵ Douglas Pike, War, Peace, and the Viet Cong, (Cambridge, [MA]: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1969), p. 44.

Averell Harriman, 'The Crocodile':

At this juncture it really becomes necessary to take a closer look at W. Averell Harriman. This was the man whose character and force of will steered American policy in Laos. Harriman also had a direct effect on Ambassador Nolting and his mission to Ngo Dinh Diem's South Vietnam. Thus, Averell Harriman, as an American State Department official who was well-established and well-known in elite American society,⁶⁶ wielded considerable domestic political power.⁶⁷ As Kennedy's Special Roving Ambassador and then Assistant Secretary of State for Southeast Asian Affairs,⁶⁸ Averell directly affected the outcome of American affairs and negotiations in Laos during this time period.

Harriman came from a wealthy family, originally from London, England, which had emigrated to New Haven, Connecticut, in 1795.⁶⁹ Averell's father, Edward Henry Harriman expanded the Harriman fortune considerably in America becoming the last "...and arguably, the mightiest of all the railroad barons, ruler of the far-flung Union Pacific and Southern Pacific

Footnotes

⁶⁶ George Ball, in his memoirs, indicated that Averell Harriman was viewed as being quite brazen with his political clout which apparently spilled-over during the 1956 Presidential campaign. For example, "Adlai [Stevenson] was irked by what he regarded as Harriman's lack of grace and subtlety in pushing himself forward..." George Ball, The Past Has Another Pattern: Memoirs, (New York, [NY]: W.W. Norton & Company, 1982), p. 134.

⁶⁷ This power of Harriman's was made mention of by President Kennedy when he declared: "I'm also grateful to Governor Harriman for becoming, after holding probably as many important jobs as any American in our history, with the possible exception of John Quincy Adams, for now taking on the job of Assistant Secretary for the Far East." John F. Kennedy, #488- [9] "The Presidents News Conference of November 29, 1961," in Public Papers of the Presidents of The United States: John F. Kennedy, 1961, (Washington, [DC]: United States Government Printing Office, 1962), p. 760.

⁶⁸ Harriman had received this posting at the same time that President Kennedy appointed George Ball to the office of Under Secretary of State. Ball, The Past Has Another Pattern, p. 172.

⁶⁹ Ruby Abramson, Spanning The Century: The Life of W. Averell Harriman, 1891-1986, (New York, [NY]: William Morrow & Company, Inc., 1992), p. 21.

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systems, a power behind the Illinois Central, and a moving force in boardrooms of other railroads from coast to coast."⁷⁰ It is important to note that Averell shared with his father many of the character traits which would lead him and U.S. policy into conflict with the realities in Laos and, subsequently, with Frederick Nolting and Ngo Dinh Diem in Vietnam. Edward Harriman was: "Secretive, ruthless, manipulative, relentless. He was also too proud to explain himself, too stubborn to change...."⁷¹ Having built and sold freighters (steamships) to the United States Government during the First World War and on into the 1920's,⁷² and as Chairman of the Board of the Union Pacific Railroad during the Depression,⁷³ Averell, indeed, developed the same ferocious reputation as his father.

Harriman had a long association with the Soviets that went back to the days of World War II when he had acted as President Roosevelt's chief expeditor of the lend-lease program of war materiel to Stalin's USSR.⁷⁴ In his early dealings with the Soviets, Harriman developed a

Footnotes

⁷⁰ Ibid.

Averell's father, in many ways, epitomised - in action and in character, the giants of commerce and industry who had such a profound impact on both Canada and the United States toward the end of the last century. Indeed, Edward Harriman competed with the like of J.P. Morgan and James Jerome Hill, often besting them in their titanic financial duels. "E.H. was a force of nature, a prodigy who arrived on Wall Street a scrawny, nearsighted fourteen-year-old with the cunning of a wolf and enough energy to light the stock exchange. When it counted, he could and did - while still a young man - outmanoeuvre and outwit even J. Pierpont Morgan, the corpulent captain of American high finance, administering the only defeats that the imperious Morgan could bring himself to acknowledge.

As a railroader, Harriman had no equal, unless it was his Morgan-financed northern rival, James J. Hill, who built the only railroad to the Pacific coast without benefit of government land-grants and who was as ambitious as Harriman to extend his domain all the way to the Orient." Ibid., p. 22.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid., pp. 112 - 138.

⁷³ Ibid., p. 209.

⁷⁴ Walter Isaacson and Evan Thomas, The Wise Men: Six Friends and the World They Made, Acheson, Bohlen, Harriman, Kennan, Lovett, McCloy, (New York, [NY]: Simon & Schuster Inc., 1986), p. 214.

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very good sense of how they negotiated and, generally, was able to interpret their intentions with a reasonable degree of accuracy.⁷⁵ It was this experience, negotiating with the Soviets, which convinced Harriman that he was interpreting their desire for a negotiated settlement in Laos correctly and that the Soviets could bring the necessary pressure to bear on the Pathet Lao and their direct sponsors, the North Vietnamese. As Ambassador Nolting explained:

Question: (by Denis O'Brien of the J.F.K. Library Oral History Program) Well, how does Harriman justify the Laotian Geneva Accords to you when you have these conversations with him?

Nolting: There were several rather vivid exchanges that took place that I remember. He justified it, in the final analysis, on the basis that he had a "fingertips feeling" -- that's in quotes -- that the Russians would police the Communist signatories and make them live up to this. And I remember replying that he'd had experience in Russia and that I had not, but that my "fingertips" told me just the reverse.⁷⁶

Harriman had garnered significant and substantial diplomatic accolades during the Second World War, as he had been United States' Ambassador to both Great Britain and the Soviet Union.⁷⁷ In addition to this he had become Secretary of Commerce, yet his real aspirations for attaining an important secretarial role, within Defense or State, continued to remain unfulfilled. Harriman believed that he would be the President's next choice for Secretary of State when Marshall was forced to retire owing to ill health. He held this belief because he had worked with the men whose job it had been to organise, set-up and implement the Marshall Plan in post-war Europe. Likewise, he had supported President Truman consistently in his policies. Regardless of Harriman's beliefs and hopes, President Truman announced in January of

Footnotes

⁷⁵ W. Averell Harriman, America and Russia In A Changing World: A Half Century of Personal Observation, (Garden City, [NY]: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1971), pp. 28, 29, 31, 33, 34.

⁷⁶ Frederick Nolting, "Third Oral History Interview with Frederick Nolting." Recorded interview by Dennis O'Brien, May 7, 1970, pp. 89 – 90, John F. Kennedy Library, Oral History Program.

⁷⁷ Abramson, Spanning The Century, pp. 413 - 414.

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1949 that the new Secretary would be Dean Acheson. Yet again, Averell had been disappointed in attaining the most coveted diplomatic post.⁷⁸

In these early post-war years Harriman had been appointed as Special Assistant to the President, a role in which he was to work very closely with Truman and Dean Acheson as the Korean War unfolded.⁷⁹ Then, during the Eisenhower Presidency, Harriman had entered state politics and became the Governor of New York,⁸⁰ a title he liked to be referred by in the future (i.e., "Governor"). Nevertheless, Averell's love for a top posting in the diplomatic field, still, continued to haunt him in its elusiveness and with the election of a Democratic President, John F. Kennedy, Harriman sensed that the time was right to re-assert his diplomat's credentials.

Harriman had contributed over \$30,000 US to Kennedy's campaign and, out of his own pocket, had toured Africa and reported back to Kennedy on the situation in the Congo, which had erupted in secessionist civil-war in 1960. Even though the Kennedy's were clearly running with the whole youth movement in their campaign they could not ignore the contributions and prestige of Harriman. Arthur Schlesinger and John Kenneth Galbraith drove this point home to the new President who, upon election, had paid all his political debts except to Averell. They told Kennedy that a Democratic administration without Harriman was unthinkable. President Kennedy, subsequently, allowed Averell Harriman to basically design his own job within the State Department and, accordingly, Harriman was sworn in as Kennedy's Ambassador-at-large on December 30, 1960.⁸¹ The role was ideal for Harriman, as it had an historic precedent with Benjamin Franklin, and it allowed him to chart a relatively independent course - under State

Footnotes

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 435.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 440.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 515.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 578 -582.

Department supervision. With a fair degree of accuracy, authors Isaacson and Thomas describe Harriman's new circumstances and the importance of Laos to Averell's resurrected political career:

While Acheson (Dean) was "phasing out," Harriman was trying to scramble back in. Laos was his ticket; he and Kennedy were "fully in the same mood," he later recalled, about the need to avoid an armed confrontation over the tortured little country.... Harriman finally succeeded in getting what he called "a good bad deal." After fourteen months and millions of words, the major powers and bordering countries signed an accord in July 1962 guaranteeing Laos's neutrality. The North Vietnamese ignored the pact and continued to support the Pathet Lao...⁸²

In fact, the whole Laos negotiation manoeuvre had allowed Averell to 'scramble back in' as he became Kennedy's busiest international problem solver. During this process he built himself a formidable reputation for lulling his intended 'victims' during discussions with the appearance of docility and then, at the appropriate moment, he would suddenly switch to the attack. Indeed, thanks to the efforts of McGeorge Bundy, Harriman became known as the old 'crocodile' around Washington.

His episodes of impatient snapping in the genteel atmosphere of the White House caused McGeorge Bundy to liken him to an old crocodile arousing from a feigned doze with flashing jaws...With the help of Joe Alsop, who had firsthand experience with the crocodile phenomenon, Bundy's label stuck. Harriman was, Alsop disclaimed, "quiescent looking, even somnolent seeming, until the dictates of common sense or the great interests of the United States are attacked. Whereupon the great jaws open and another fool finds that he is figuratively missing a leg."

Harriman loved the image because it enhanced a reputation for toughness which he had valued and long cultivated by sprinkling cables and memoranda with references to how "blunt" or "brutal" or "tough" he had been with one foreign official or another. So, when he was showered with crocodiles of brass, crystal, silver, and cloth, he put them on display in his office and his

Footnotes

⁸² Isaacson and Thomas, The Wise Men, pp. 616 - 618.

*various residences, and sometimes used Crocodile as his code name in secret cables from abroad.*⁸³

While the Laos negotiations had seen the emergence of the *Crocodile* and had enhanced his reputation as a diplomat who got things done, in fact, the whole affair was much worse than “the best of a bad deal.” Laotian neutrality was a catastrophe for Southeast Asia. Harriman, himself, explained that Kennedy was in full agreement with a negotiated settlement and, laconically, broke down the failure of the Laos agreement in the following excerpt from his book

America and Russia in a Changing World:

*Throughout the period President Kennedy's position was unchanging. He fully supported the negotiations for a political settlement. In fact after one meeting with his advisers in late August, which I attended, he telephoned me personally to make sure I understood clearly his position. He said, "The alternative to an understanding with Souvanna is not one that I would like to contemplate."... However, due to Pathet Lao intransigence and the North Vietnamese violations of the agreement, a de facto partition of the country has resulted.... In violation of the specific terms of the agreement, the North Vietnamese have continued to use the Ho Chi Minh Trail and have supported the Pathet Lao in order to achieve this objective.*⁸⁴

What Harriman had failed to mention about the final settlement, which he engineered, was the critical issue of how to ensure compliance. Because it was concerned with facts on the ground in Laos, this was an issue that overwhelmed, in importance, just about every other aspect of the Laos Accords. Through the force of his remarkable will and skills Harriman had managed to forge an agreement on Laotian neutrality that had official support from all parties concerned, including the North Vietnamese. Regardless of this ‘legal’ triumph, in his haste to prove himself to Kennedy, Harriman had overlooked the fact that signatures on a piece of paper were one thing while the reality that the force of arms dictated on the ground in Laos, was quite another.

Footnotes

⁸³ Abramson, *Spanning The Century*, p. 603.

⁸⁴ Harriman, *America and Russia In A Changing World*, pp. 112 - 113.

The Soviets, of course, were more than willing to go along with Harriman's agreement as it gave them substantial prestige in the region at a relatively cheap cost. Thus, they agreed to ensure that all the Communist states would comply with the neutrality declaration. Furthermore, they accepted the agreement's language that stipulated that Laotian territory could not be used in the affairs of a neighbouring state. Specifically, this meant that the North Vietnamese could not use Laos as a logistics supply route to South Vietnam for their support of the insurgency therein.⁸⁵

The State Department, however, proved to be tougher customers than the Russians and this was so much the case that Harriman actually found it easier to agree with the Soviet negotiator, Pushkin, than with Washington. In fact Harriman collided, head-on, with leading State Department officials who insisted that the ICC (International Control Commission) had to have the authority to travel Laos at will in order to report on any violations of the accord. Dean Rusk championed this fight and went straight to the President with the issue. Rusk told Kennedy that the ICC's freedom of movement in Laos was absolutely critical "...especially on the routes for present [North Vietnamese] infiltration into South Vietnam."⁸⁶ Harriman, though, had already made his plans to secure the President's approval for his 'neutralised' Laotian accord. According to his wife, Pamela Churchill Harriman, and her biographers, Averell had calculated an artful 'end-run' on both Dean Rusk and George Ball as he had befriended Robert Kennedy.

Footnotes

⁸⁵ "The Soviets agreed to take responsibility for all the Communist states' compliance with the neutrality declaration and accepted the language declaring that Laotian territory would not be used in the affairs of neighbouring states - meaning the North Vietnamese could not use the trails through Laos to support the insurgency in South Vietnam." Abramson, Spanning The Century, pp. 586 - 587.

⁸⁶ "At times it was easier for Harriman to agree with Pushkin than with Washington. When the conference turned to arrangements for an International Control Commission to monitor violations of the accord, he collided with State Department officials, who insisted that the commission be given authority to travel the country at will. Freedom to move about the country, Rusk told the President, was critical 'especially on the routes for present [North Vietnamese] infiltration into South Vietnam.'" Ibid.

This friendship with the President's brother, in turn, brought Harriman and his policy on Laos directly to President Kennedy.⁸⁷ Dean Rusk, however, was not a man to be got around easily and thus he and George Ball arranged their administration of the State Department so that neither one of them was out of the country at the same time. Pamela Churchill Harriman claimed that the express purpose for this Ball-Rusk 'tag team' was to prevent Averell from ever becoming the Acting Secretary of State.⁸⁸

Confident of his White House connections, Harriman was unrelenting in his quarrel with the State Department and continued to insist that the ICC (International Control Commission) authority was an area where the United States would have to compromise. On this salient point, not only did Dean Rusk disagree with Harriman but also so did neutralist advocate Chester Bowles - as well as Deputy Under-Secretary U. Alexis Johnson, and Walter McConaughy, the assistant secretary for Far Eastern Affairs.⁸⁹

When the matter went before Kennedy, incredibly, he sided against his own Secretary of State and gave Averell official sanction for endorsing the restrictions on the ICC. Evidently, the political efficiency of Harriman's Machiavellian move to befriend the President's brother, Robert, and gain direct access to John F. Kennedy, had been confirmed. One other important point that should be associated with this success of Harriman's would be the fact that, with the President's endorsement, Harriman had proved that he was a locus of power within the Kennedy Administration and a force to be reckoned with. In the future, rather than quarrel with Harriman,

Footnotes

⁸⁷ Sally Bedell Smith, Reflected Glory: The Life of Pamela Churchill Harriman, (New York, [NY]: Simon & Schuster, 1997), p. 257.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Abramson, Spanning The Century, p. 587.

leading officers in the State Department would tend to either 'get on board' with his policy initiatives or 'look the other way' while Harriman proceeded with his course of action.⁹⁰

Frederick Nolting, however, remained critical of Averell's policy toward Laos, as did many others outside of State as well. Thus, Harriman's critics within the Kennedy Administration pronounced the grand opening of the 'Averell Harriman Memorial Highway' which, of course, also became known as the 'Ho Chi Minh Trail.'

With that concession, neutrality would amount to a partition of the country beneath the sophistry of coalition government. Harriman's critics, even those who argued partition was the solution, would always point to the concession as a fatal mistake that opened the way for North Vietnam to use the jungle trails through Laos for its invasion of the South - the Averell Harriman Highway, some would call it. At the State Department, John Steeves acerbically suggested that the next cable from Harriman's Geneva mission would probably be signed Pushkin.⁹¹

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⁹⁰ "He [Averell] had a political and social constituency that spanned decades and stretched around the world. When it suited him, he could ignore bureaucratic protocol and use his personal channels into far-flung governments, not to mention the White House and the inner circles of Kennedy's advisers. Before it was widely noticed, he had acquired his own coterie of career officers and Kennedy appointees to whom he was leader and mentor. He looked out for them, and they looked out for him.

Mike Forrestal and Carl Kaysen provided an avenue to the Oval Office through the National Security Council staff. Arthur Schlesinger, a longtime friend with vaguely defined responsibilities and constant access to the President, kept Harriman's views on politics, the Soviet Union, the condition of the State Department, and anything else that occurred to him before the President... His alliance with Robert Kennedy, solidified as the attorney general moved into the foreign policy and national-security picture, became as effective as his friendship with Harry Hopkins had been in the Roosevelt administration. Unlike Rusk, who personally and professionally resented the attorney general, Harriman courted the President's brother, serving as a contact, adviser, and sounding board. Though the collaboration was at the start calculated and self-serving on the part of both, they were natural allies, impatient, intolerant, sometimes ruthless, and consummately loyal to the President... The home base of the Harriman-Bob Kennedy team was eventually established in a high-powered National Security Council committee created to coordinate the United States' response to Communist-backed 'wars of liberation.'" *Ibid.*, p. 601.

Frederick Nolting, "Kennedy, NATO, and Southeast Asia," in Diplomacy, Administration, and Policy: The Ideas and Careers of Frederick E. Nolting, Jr., Frederick C. Mosher, and Paul T. David, Kenneth W. Thompson, editor; (Lanham, [Maryland]: University Press of America for the Miller Center - University of Virginia, 1995), pp. 34 - 35.

⁹¹ Abramson, Spanning The Century, p. 587.

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The effects of Harriman's concessions on the ICC's ability to patrol and report on Neutrality Accords' violations had an immediate impact in Saigon. From the United States Embassy on through to the Government of South Vietnam, a wave of substantial protest began in earnest; Ambassador Nolting recalled these serious events in his own words:

Well, before Mr. Harriman became Assistant Secretary for Far-Eastern Affairs, he was (as you know) negotiating the Laotian agreement. That was during the year 1961, and I think it was finally signed by all parties in early '62, if I recall the dates. During that period, we were asked from time to time in Saigon for views about the way the Laotian treaty was being shaped up. More and more, it became apparent that the safeguards with which we had started negotiating that treaty, safeguards... assuring the territorial integrity, neutrality of Laos against possible violations by the Communist signatories, or those that were negotiating on the Communist side. And I became somewhat concerned by this because if the treaty as originally envisaged making a real neutral out of Laos didn't come off that way, then it exposed the flank of South Vietnam and made our job much more difficult. And so, I would comment in this vein from time to time, and the South Vietnamese government likewise became more and more concerned. They had a representative at Geneva, and they were parties to the negotiation.

And when it finally shaped up so that practically all of the safeguards were removed, President Diem and his government had grave misgivings as to whether they should sign the agreement. By and large, I agreed with that point of view because I felt that without the safeguards, the treaty would be violated. The Ho Chi Minh Trail would be, in effect, opened up completely to the North Vietnamese for infiltrating South Vietnam. And this would make it very difficult to maintain, to carry out, the policy of the Kennedy Administration, vis-à-vis South Vietnam, - which was to support their independence. So, at that point, difficulties did begin to develop between our mission and Averell Harriman [my emphasis].⁹²

Ambassador Nolting was quick to point out that his mission in Saigon was not the only one in Southeast Asia to be placed in a very difficult position with their host government and Averell Harriman as similar problems arose in Thailand.⁹³ The response of the Secretary of

Footnotes

⁹² Frederick Nolting, "Third Oral History Interview with Frederick Nolting." Recorded interview by Dennis O'Brien, May 7, 1970, pp. 84 – 86, John F. Kennedy Library, Oral History Program.

⁹³ *Ibid.* p. 86.

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State was that the American ambassadors, in Thailand and Vietnam, should stick to their specific programs with their respective host governments and not to worry about the Laotian agreements.⁹⁴ Nevertheless, Laos became a spectre that haunted all of Southeast Asia and the unsatisfactory effects of the way the Accords were taking shape continued to reverberate throughout the Southeast Asian theatre. Regardless of these talks, which were generated as a result of the cease-fire agreement of early 1961,⁹⁵ the North Vietnamese continued their efforts to use their bases in northern Laos and move into South Vietnam through southern Laos. Thus, Nolting informed the State Department, via telegram, in August of 1961, that Diem was stressing the need to clean up the salient areas in southern Laos and that Sarit of Thailand could probably be convinced to help out in this effort:

5. Diem gravely concerned over deterioration southern Laos in recent months and would of course like to see action taken to clean up that area... Bangkok and Vientiane much better qualified than me to comment on likelihood Sarit and Phoumi co-operation in cleanup southern Laos. From Saigon it would appear that Phoumi could be persuaded without much trouble as we believe there is inclination on his part at times to throw in towel re northern Laos, withdraw his forces to south and attempt set up separate government there. Phoumi would probably regard co-operative effort in southern Laos as at least giving him greater assurance of being able to hold out there if he is obliged to give up north... We would assume if enough outside support thrown in (e.g., Pakistani troops) to conduct both operations, Sarit would willingly co-operate on southern Laos operation as well.⁹⁶

Officially, the State Department continued to ignore the realities of southern Laos and Nolting's assessment, which was really Diem, Phoumi and Sarit's' assessment, of the serious

Footnotes

⁹⁴ *Ibid.* p. 87.

⁹⁵ The basis of the Geneva talks was established with the cease-fire arrangements agreed too and sponsored by the Soviet Union and the United States in April of 1961.

⁹⁶ Ambassador Nolting, "120. Telegram From the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State," dated: Saigon, August 14, 1961 - 7p.m.; [Department of State, Central Files, 751K.00/8-1461. Top Secret; Priority] in FRUS: Vietnam, 1961, Volume 1, 1961 - 1963, pp. 280 - 281.

situation there. Flux and variance began to take over in U.S. policy and the Laos question became the demarcation line for this inconsistency. Ambassador Nolting remembered this point of departure, from previous policy, quite clearly and he noted that it emanated from Averell Harriman and his powerful faction within the State Department. He noted that the policy had, indeed, become inconsistent as a result of a genuine effort to make Laos a truly neutral buffer zone free the of insurgency warfare which plagued South Vietnam.⁹⁷ Nolting, however, stressed that this inconsistency was made manifest as the negotiations proceeded at Geneva. It became clear to the American negotiators that Laos was not going to be free of the North Vietnamese and that they were being rather badly duped. Nolting confronted Harriman with this recognition:

But as things shaped up, and as negotiations proceeded in Geneva, it became clearer and clearer, I think, that it wasn't going to turn out that way, that we were being had in negotiations. And I remember having it out rather hot and heavy with Mr. Harriman on this score on several occasions: once at a meeting in Bangkok and another time at a meeting in Manila...⁹⁸

Eventually, the Harriman/Nolting debate on Laos spilled over into the public domain as can be duly noted in the following editorial report gleaned from The Richmond News Leader (Saturday, June 9, 1962):

Columnist Robert S. Allen reported recently on a closed door row between roving Ambassador Averell Harriman and Richmond's own Frederick E. Nolting, Jr., ambassador to South Vietnam. Mr. Nolting was arguing vigorously against the administration's sponsorship of a Communist coalition government in Laos. He said that "in good conscience" he could not support the plan.

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⁹⁷ "No, it seemed to me inconsistent [State Department policy] that way.... I can understand why the original attempt was made to make a real neutral buffer state out of Laos, to remove it and all of the territory of Laos from the subversive warfare of the rest of the peninsula; namely, Vietnam." Frederick Nolting, "Third Oral History Interview with Frederick Nolting." Recorded interview by Dennis O'Brien, May 7, 1970, pp. 87 – 88, John F. Kennedy Library, Oral History Program.

⁹⁸ *ibid.*

*"You're not working for God," [my emphasis] Allen says Harriman snapped back. "You're working for the Kennedy administration [my emphasis]."*⁹⁹

William Colby, from his perspective of CIA Saigon Station Chief added to Nolting's appraisal with his own overall and typically wry assessment:

*President Kennedy and Mr. Khrushchev decided that they didn't want to have a crisis in Laos, they had too many other areas and that wasn't a very convenient place, and that if we could make a deal that we just wouldn't have a problem there. We made the Geneva agreement and we all [withdrew]. The Soviet air force withdrew and we withdrew our white star teams and the special forces and all that. The only ones that didn't comply were the North Vietnamese. They resumed the process of suppressing Northern Laos [my emphasis].*¹⁰⁰

It should be noted that, just prior to this time when the Accords were finally signed and the withdrawal of American and Soviet assistance was implemented, Averell Harriman was still not Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs. Clearly the roving ambassador had such a posting in mind as he maintained a singular determination to please President Kennedy with a signed neutrality accord for Laos, almost regardless of the cost.¹⁰¹ Roving ambassadorship had

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⁹⁹ The editors, The Richmond News Leader, (Saturday, June 9, 1962) Editorial P. "Week's End", p. 10. Article is also available through "The Papers of Frederick (Fritz) Ernest Nolting, Jr." – Accession No. of Collection: R621/102.92, Box number: 23, Folder Date and Heading: Professional Papers – Newsclippings 1 of 2; (Charlottesville, [Virginia]: Special Collections of the University of Virginia Library – The Alderman Library).

¹⁰⁰ Ted Gittinger, "William E. Colby on Vietnam, Interview I." Recorded interview by Ted Gittinger, June 2, 1981, p. 35, Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, Oral History Program, Austin, Tx.

¹⁰¹ One of the most lucid descriptions of Harriman's new-found path to diplomatic ascendancy within the Kennedy Administration was forcefully noted by a scholar who served with the Research Staff of the Council on Foreign Relations, Ellen J. Hammer. As such she noted the following about Harriman's diplomatic success: "For Harriman, once Franklin Roosevelt's ambassador and now Kennedy's, the conference [on Laos at Geneva] was a personal triumph. He had wished to give Kennedy an alternative to military intervention in Laos and had succeeded. An old hand at negotiating with the Russians, he worked out an agreement with the Soviet deputy foreign minister G.M. Pushkin whereby the Russians accepted responsibility for assuring the compliance of their Communist allies with the accord that neutralised Laos: the North Vietnamese would remove their troops and refrain from using Laotian territory for military or subversive action against the South. (Harriman would have liked to arrange a peaceful settlement in Vietnam too, and had approached the delegation from Hanoi about that and been rebuffed. He did not

Footnote continued on next page:...

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been a polite nod from the Kennedys but a man of Harriman's stature and ambition was not likely to be satisfied with mere courtesy for long. This determination of Harriman's over-rode his earlier public statements wherein he claimed that "In the view of my Government," [Harriman said,] "we cannot have an effective cease-fire agreement without the widespread investigation by the ICC and co-operation from the parties in Laos...."¹⁰² In the end, Harriman moved aside all pretences at diplomacy with America's allies in the region and came out to Vietnam and proceeded to 'lay down the law' with President Ngo Dinh Diem:

He [Harriman] finally came out after the treaty had been shaped up to a point that we were willing to sign: the British, French, and the Chinese and the North Vietnamese and the Russians; and the South Vietnamese and the Thais were unwilling to sign. Mr. Harriman came out to Vietnam, to Saigon, and had a long talk with President Diem and rather forcefully told him that he'd better sign it despite President Diem's well-founded misgivings. And this was a rather rugged interview between the two of them.... Well, we knew what we were doing, and we were his powerful ally, and therefore, he'd better sign it. Afterwards, I recall talking to President Diem, who was rather offended by this high-handed treatment from Mr. Harriman. I said to him that I thought he really was in a situation where he had to choose, because it was clear that President Kennedy wanted a negotiated settlement in Laos, that these negotiations which his government had been a party to had been going on for a year, that this seemed to be the best treaty that was possible even though it was, in my opinion, as well as his, inadequate and unprotected and probably unenforceable. Nevertheless, I felt that, in order to maintain the full support of the Kennedy Administration for the effort in South Vietnam, it would be better for him to sign it, and he did.¹⁰³

Ellen Hammer, the one American scholar whom her peers from France praised as actually having a solid insight into Vietnamese history and politics, uncovered the ugly reality of
...*footnote continued from previous page:*

consult the South Vietnamese, who had strict instructions to reject any and all proposals for international negotiations on Vietnam, something many other delegates expected to follow the conference on Laos.) Hammer, A Death In November, pp. 29 - 30.

¹⁰² Goldstein, American Policy Toward Laos, p. 249. Goldstein extracted these statements made by Harriman from statements made at Geneva on May 31, 1961, in U.S. Department of State, American Foreign Policy, (Washington, [DC]: United States Government Printing Office, 1961) p. 1013.

¹⁰³ Frederick Nolting, "Third Oral History Interview with Frederick Nolting." Recorded interview by Dennis O'Brien, May 7, 1970, pp. 88 - 89, John F. Kennedy Library, Oral History Program.

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what lay at the heart of the growing antagonism between Diem and Kennedy's Administration. For she interviewed South Vietnamese Government officials about the Harriman - Diem exchange over Laos and their reply about what took place did not bode well for American - Vietnamese relations: "They took a violent dislike to each other from their first meeting in 1961,' Secretary Thuan said years later. 'It was very unfortunate. Diem did not understand Harriman's role in the Democratic Party and Harriman did not understand Diem.'"¹⁰⁴

Laos continued to haunt United States - Vietnam relations as the solution hammered out by Harriman and the State Department was perceived by the South Vietnamese Government as being worse than no solution at all.¹⁰⁵ Nolting's more recent recollections on this critical issue were consistent with the telegrams that he sent back to Washington in 1961. The veracity and the integrity of Nolting's position becomes manifest as one peruses these telegrams and compares them with the oral history interviews that the John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program

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¹⁰⁴ Hammer, A Death In November, p. 31.

Hammer placed the reasons for Diem's alarm at Harriman's diplomatic triumph in the historical context of the Viet Minh's use of Laos: "Diem was not impressed with Harriman's triumph. He had sent a delegation to Geneva to oblige the Americans, but he was at a loss to understand how the Americans could talk about the neutrality of Laos while pursuing the opposite policy in South Vietnam. Hanoi, for one, regarded the two countries as part of the same strategic area, as had other Vietnamese over the centuries, at least in wartime. At the start of the war against France, Viet Minh troops had been ordered out of Hue westward into the mountains and jungles of Laos, far from the unprotected Vietnamese coast that was vulnerable to air and sea attack. Other Viet Minh forces, the fierce Ba To guerrillas, had preceded them. These troops sought out the pathways needed by the Ho Chi Minh government to maintain its lifeline with the safe Laotian hinterland and with the Vietnamese south. It was the beginning of the network of trails and roads that would enable the Communists to supply and reinforce the Viet Cong and come to be known as the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Ibid., p. 30.

¹⁰⁵ "In 1961, Diem might have accepted a partitioned Laos if that were the only way to cut the Ho Chi Minh Trail, even (he said) a hostile Laos where he would have been free to harass Communist bases and communication lines. But not this "neutrality" preached by Harriman that would stigmatise South Vietnamese forces as aggressors if they entered Laos, while leaving the North Vietnamese free to use Laotian territory as they chose because the treaty lacked any enforceable safeguards." Ibid.

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undertook with the former U.S. ambassador. Accordingly, in a telegram dated: Saigon, October 16, 1961 - 1 p.m., Nolting informed the State Department of the following:

As previously reported, a major factor causing GVN anxiety and leading to substantial additional requests of US by GVN in last week is situation in Laos and GVN view that approaching solution there is going to transfer communist pressure and force from that country to SVN. Not only GVN, but also ARVN (at least its leaders) strongly hold this view. To what extent it is a factor in public morale is not yet clear. This mission has already (Embtel 373 and others) submitted its recommendations on this subject as it affects SVN. All indications, however, point to a negotiated solution in Laos, eventuating in a neutral govt under Souvanna Phouma. The main focus of US attention and diplomatic endeavour seems now to be on how to assure strict neutrality, including the prevention of the use of Laotian territory for Communist aggressive purposes against Laos' neighbours, by means of a proper composition of a Laotian Govt and an international treaty. I should point out in this connection that the GVN cannot be brought to believe (at least, I cannot bring them to believe) that paper guarantees on this score, plus any ICC mechanism comprising Poland, India, and Canada, will in fact protect SVN's western border. They have had similar guarantees in their own country, and these have not worked. All evidence that we have here points to conclusion that, if the Communist strategists are willing to settle for a neutral Laos at this time, it is for the purpose of concentrating their attack upon SVN, utilising a neutral Laos for the purpose to whatever extent proves necessary.... They [the South Vietnamese Government] have made up their minds that the presently envisioned settlement [in] Laos is going to make things harder for them, and they are now trying to build hedges against that. 106

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¹⁰⁶ Frederick Nolting, "171. Telegram From the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State," (Saigon, October 16, 1961 - 1 p.m.), [Department of State, Central Files, 751K.5 - MSP/10 - 1661. Secret] in FRUS: Vietnam, 1961, Volume 1, 1961 - 1963, pp. 383 - 384.

A secondary but important point, which Nolting stresses in this telegram, is that it is the problem of "neutrality" in Laos which is compelling Diem to go against his previous judgement that the fight must be fought with South Vietnamese and to actually request US troop assistance. As Nolting indicates: "This is the major reason for their request for US reinforcements, involving Diem's breaking away, in part at least, from his long held belief that victory over communism here, if it is to be enduring, must be achieved by Vietnamese sacrifice and manpower alone. In requesting US reinforcements (and thinking about inviting Chinese), he has adopted an expedient which runs against his own convictions, and he is apparently willing to accept the attendant diminution of his own stature as an independent and self-reliant national leader. Frederick Nolting, "171. Telegram From the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State," [Department of State, Central Files, 751K.5 - MSP/10 - 1661. Secret] in FRUS: Vietnam, 1961, Volume 1, 1961 - 1963, p. 384.

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In comparison, the interviews that Nolting gave over twenty-five years later were remarkably consistent with the views he had cabled to Washington in 1961:

*Our cause would be disadvantaged because of the long history and the probability: the long history of the Communist signatories for not living up to this kind of agreement, and the probability that they wouldn't do so in this case. And it was the enforceability of it that looked to me very doubtful....But as you remember, immediately after the signing, we withdrew advisors from the Laotian people who were on our side, from the Meo [Hmong] tribesmen. We stopped supporting them, and the Communists, the North Vietnamese and the Chinese, did not do anything to live up to the provision to take out all supporting forces. So we were left at a great disadvantage. And the government of Souvanna Phouma, which was supposed to have jurisdiction over the whole of Laos, never, I believe, got a single one of its agents - government people, government officials, into the territory of the Pathet Lao. So the treaty was a dead letter so far as the Communists were concerned. They didn't live up to it, not for one minute. And this was exactly what this government of South Vietnam and the government of Thailand and I, myself, feared would happen, and it did happen. As a consequence, the defense of South Vietnam was made much more difficult [my emphasis]."*¹⁰⁷

William Colby also corroborated this consistent testimony of Ambassador Nolting's when he noted in his usual laconic style:

*"The reports from the two CIA observers [left in Laos] became more and more ominous. The North Vietnamese were not content simply to remain in Laos in violation of the Accords. They began to move aggressively to expand the area controlled by their puppet Pathet Lao, using regular North Vietnamese troops to do so."*¹⁰⁸

Overall though, Nolting espoused the best summation of what went on in Laos at this time and the impact of Averell Harriman's determination to carve out a new diplomatic niche for himself many years later during a conference at the University of Virginia:

Footnotes

¹⁰⁷ Frederick Nolting, "Third Oral History Interview with Frederick Nolting." Recorded interview by Dennis O'Brien, May 7, 1970, pp. 90, 91, 92, John F. Kennedy Library, Oral History Program.

¹⁰⁸ Colby, Lost Victory, p. 195.

Sorensen [one of Kennedy's biographers] also said that the Laotian settlement of 1962 was a great diplomatic triumph. Well, if that was a triumph of diplomacy, I don't know the meaning of the word. Averell Harriman was the negotiator. He told me that he was under instructions from President Kennedy to get a settlement of the Laotian question at any cost. In the early days of the Kennedy Administration, President Kennedy went on television and said we were going to take a stand in Laos. Those of you who know the inaccessibility of Laos can understand how horrified the Joint Chiefs of Staff were to hear that the President had decided to make a stand in Laos. There wasn't any way to get in there except by air and that didn't make much sense. So the President backed-off of that idea and decided Vietnam was the place to make the stand. But then, as if in order to open up the flank of Vietnam, he ordered the Laotian settlement. This treaty definitely weakened, both physically and from the point of view of morale, the chances of the successful defense of South Vietnam.¹⁰⁹

What proved to be one of the most damaging and ultimately, fatal ramifications of the whole Laotian question,¹¹⁰ at least for Ngo Dinh Diem, his brother Ngo Dinh Nhu, and his government, was the ill-will it gave rise to. For an ever-widening gulf was fixed between Averell Harriman and his faction within the State Department on the one side and Diem, Nolting, and their DOS and DOD supporters on the other. The fabricators of the Kennedy Laos "solution" had caused this gulf to be formed between these factions and this breach grew in intensity to the point where Kennedy's original promise to Diem's government of non-interference was completely compromised. The foundation for the dynamics of the long-lasting tragedy of American involvement in Vietnam can, effectively, be attributed to this divorce created by the Laotian question. Nolting recalled this new direction and how it began, almost, without much

Footnotes

¹⁰⁹ Nolting, "Kennedy, NATO, and Southeast Asia," in Diplomacy, Administration, and Policy: Thompson, ed., p. 20.

¹¹⁰ "The Saigon government under pressure from the Americans reluctantly signed the treaty neutralising Laos in July 1962. The Hanoi government also signed, under pressure from the Soviet Union. Foreigners could decide what they liked at Geneva; Diem knew as well as the Northern leaders themselves that the heirs of the Viet Minh were not going to surrender their hard-won positions in Laos." Hammer, A Death In November, p. 30.

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noticeable effect and then how it burgeoned into an about face in Kennedy Administration policy toward the government of South Vietnam:

O'Brien: "Is there any shift that you can see now when Harriman does become influential in attitudes toward Vietnam, relations between the Embassy and the Department with the White House in Washington, are there any changes that take place when Harriman comes in as assistant secretary"?

Nolting: "Not immediately that I recall, but little by little there were. And so much so that after -- I've forgotten how long -- but maybe six months or a year, on one occasion having received some instructions different from my original instructions, I asked Mr. Harriman (I believe it was he) whether he had read the original instructions under which we were supposed to be operating. And his reply, as I recall, was roughly that no, he hadn't, but he knew what he was doing. But it seemed to me, at any rate, from out there, that there was never a formal review given to changing any instructions. It just happened, little by little, sending me a telegram to do something which was quite contrary to what the original basic instructions had been, including, for example, instructions to cultivate the opposition to President Diem, to get closer to the opposition....But if you meant by cultivating them, to give any outward sign that we were interested in their becoming an alternative government to the government that we were supposed to be supporting, that this had enormous consequences internally in Vietnam, that it was interfering in the internal politics of Vietnam which President Kennedy had promised not to do, and through me had made it very clear that we were not going to use our leverage of increased aid to interfere in the internal politics of South Vietnam -- meaning who was going to rule the place. This was a very serious change of instructions, and I questioned it very strongly."¹¹¹

Thus, while the negotiated solution to the Laotian question began its insidious effects on American policy in Vietnam other questions started to come to the fore. These questions resulted directly from the increasing Communist insurgency that was being supplied via the Ho Chi Minh Trail which, of course, only increased in its usage of communications lines through Laos.¹¹² The

Footnotes

¹¹¹ Frederick Nolting, "Third Oral History Interview with Frederick Nolting." Recorded interview by Dennis O'Brien, May 7, 1970. John F. Kennedy Library, Oral History Program, pp. 92, 93, 94.

¹¹² Wall Street lawyer and Vietnamese document specialist, Steven Young, revealed (in his latest collection of top-secret documents purchased and then smuggled out from Hanoi) that the Ho Chi Minh
Footnote continued on next page:...

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question, which began to take on the most importance, in the perceptions of American policy makers, was how to counter the Communist insurgents and their political infrastructure in South Vietnam. Accordingly, after much debate and questioning, the Department of State and the Pentagon came to an uneasy and temporary truce which permitted the C.I.P. (Counter Insurgency Plan) for South Vietnam to develop, albeit, in a very awkward and often self-defeating manner. It is important to note that this awkwardness and, indeed, the uneasy truce between DOS and DOD found their source in the fundamental divergence of the military's ideas on how to counter insurgents and the Department of State's. Further still, even within their respective departments, the military and the diplomats were divided over how to defeat the Communists in South Vietnam, as the reader shall see.

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Trail was active from the very beginning of the insurgency in the South. The North Vietnamese, as is widely known, were (and, apparently, still are) meticulous record keepers and they documented every piece of material and every man that ever went down the trail, through Laos, into South Vietnam. One of the most startling figures in Young's recently acquired top secret NV documents was the fact that from, approximately, 1959 through to 1975, a million men were transported into South Vietnam through this system of trails. Mr. Young's presentation at the 1996 Symposium on Vietnam (hosted by the Center For The Study of the Vietnam Conflict) and his figures are readily available from Texas Tech's Vietnam Conflict Study Center and should be accessible via the Internet.

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There was no gainsaying the fact that Kennedy's government had stumbled badly over the whole Laotian deal and now American plans to assist the GVN in countering the insurgents in the South would have to be conducted within the context of this blunt reality. Sir Robert Thompson's clarity of thought on this issue is worth considering because it drives home the point of just how badly the Kennedy Administration had handicapped itself and its ally, the GVN, by giving up so much in the Laos Accords.

Probably the most notable achievement of the North Vietnamese throughout the war was the manner in which they were able to defend their rear base by negotiation and diplomacy. Consider the Laos Agreement of 1962. It gave them free run down through Laos and Cambodia, and it kept the United States out of Laos [my emphasis]. True, you used various means of going back into Laos, but there was theoretically a total restriction on American action in Lao: That was the whole purpose of the Agreement. The war in the South could not have been pursued as it was if the North Vietnamese had not had a free run down the Laotian panhandle [my emphasis].¹

Thus, and as we have stated, the legacy of the Laotian question was reflected directly on how Kennedy's Administration approached the problem of countering the Communist insurgency in South Vietnam. Indeed, this correlation can be easily discerned in many of the State Department documents of late 1961 when the die was cast for the way things would go in Laos. For the insurgency was truly becoming a serious concern in the South and one of the best examples of this is clearly illustrated in a memorandum from Walt Rostow to President Kennedy

Footnotes

¹ Sir Robert Thompson, "Rear Bases and Sanctuaries," in The Lessons of Vietnam, W. Scott Thompson & Donaldson D. Frizzell, editors, (New York, [NY]: Crane, Russak & Company, Inc., 1977), p. 101.

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(Washington, November 14, 1961).² In this document Rostow tells Kennedy that everyone in his administration is in agreement with the objectives of inducing the Communists to cease infiltration into South Vietnam. Similarly, it is recognised that the Communists have to be 'encouraged' into compliance with Geneva Accords. At the same time, Rostow mentions that assistance has to be given to South Vietnam to help the GVN bring about a reduction in the guerrilla force operating against them. Thus, Rostow states that such a program of action will require extensive talks with the Communist Bloc countries which will, in turn, lead to formal negotiations.³

Rostow went on to inform Kennedy that the Vietnamese security situation was deteriorating very much like it had in Laos. Thus he noted that there were two potential bargaining chips which the United States had at its disposal: 1.) Withdrawal of US forces that were above the MAAG ceiling as an offer to the North Vietnamese to induce them to call off

Footnotes

² Walt W. Rostow was Deputy Special Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs until December 4, 1961. After that date he became Counsellor of the Department of State and Chairman of the Policy Planning Council; and Member of the Presidential Task Force on Vietnam, April-May 1961. This brief career summary of Rostow's can be found in the 'List of Persons' in FRUS: Vietnam, 1961, Vol. 1, p. XXI.

³ "SUBJECT: Negotiation about Viet-Nam

It is universally agreed that the objective of the proposed exercise in Viet-Nam is to induce the Communists to cease infiltration, return to the Geneva Accord, while assisting South Viet-Nam in reducing the force of some 16,000 guerrillas now operating in the country. This track unquestionably will require extensive talk with the Bloc countries and, at some stage, probably formal negotiations...." Walt Rostow, 251. "Memorandum From the President's Deputy Special Assistant for National Security Affairs (Rostow) to the President," (Washington, November 14, 1961), [Kennedy Library, National Security Files, Vietnam Country Series. Initialed by Rostow] in FRUS: Vietnam, 1961, Vol. 1, p. 601.

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their infiltration of the South through Laos; 2.) Quite possibly, the United States would have to develop a credible threat that could be imposed on North Vietnam.⁴

There was a severe caveat that Rostow attached to the United States postponing action in Vietnam in order to talk with the Communists and that was that a major crisis of nerve would occur throughout Southeast Asia. This crisis of nerve would be founded on the American allies' belief that the United States was unwilling to confront Communism. Rostow told Kennedy, quite bluntly, that based on the Laos performance, the unwillingness of the US to stand up to the Communists would be confirmed and real panic and disarray would result in the region. Certainly, Diem was worried about American tenacity in the face of the steady nerves and pressure they were facing in their common enemies in Hanoi.⁵ In this light, Rostow warned Kennedy to consider the fact that his actions, in the wake of the General Maxwell Taylor Mission to South Vietnam, would be scrutinised with great care on both sides of the Iron Curtain. First impressions of the Kennedy Administration's intentions and determination would be difficult to undo especially if the US negotiated with the Communists while infiltration of the

Footnotes

⁴ "A. As in Laos last Spring, we face a deteriorating situation. If we postpone action to talk, the Communists will do two things: they will extend that talk while continuing to dismantle South Viet-Nam; and (as the British and Desai have indicated) will focus the negotiation on elections. Only de facto stabilization plus the bargaining position which the potential withdrawal of U.S. forces above the MAAG ceiling would offer appears to make conceivable the notion that they would call off the infiltration guided from Hanoi. It may even require a credible threat to impose military action against North Viet-Nam." Walt Rostow, 251. *Ibid.*, p. 602.

⁵ "B. If we postpone action in Viet-Nam in order to engage in talk with the Communists we can count surely on a major crisis of nerve in Viet-Nam and throughout Southeast Asia. The image of U.S. unwillingness to confront Communism - induced by the Laos performance - will be regarded as definitively confirmed. There will be real panic and disarray." *Ibid.*

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South continued unabated. If this happened, Rostow warned, the US would be seen as weaker than it had been in Laos where at least they had insisted on a cease-fire before negotiations.⁶

The Rostow memorandum went on to ask the President some tough questions such as "...does a show of U.S. strength and determination on our side of the post-war truce lines tend to induce war?"⁷ He quickly suggested an answer to his own question by informing the President that: "The Korean War arose from the withdrawal of U.S. force from South Korea and the opening it appeared to offer the Communists."⁸ The Deputy Special Assistant went on to complete the picture he had sketched out for Kennedy by drawing on the examples of Northern Iran, Greece, the Berlin Blockade, Lebanon-Jordan and Quemoy-Matsu. In short, where the U.S. had acted tough things had worked out and, as such, Vietnam and Laos were not the places to start going soft as the repercussions would overwhelm American policy in the entire theatre.⁹

With considerable, perhaps unintended, prescience Walt Rostow spelled-out for Kennedy what the heart of the matter was in Vietnam. He warned Kennedy not to focus on whether or not Diem was a good leader as the man had already effectively displayed that fact. Instead, he told Kennedy that the real 'gut-issue' was concerned with whether or not the United States was going to take decisive action and stand up to the Communists and their obvious infiltration of South Vietnam. Diem needed American help immediately as the number of

Footnotes

⁶ "4. In the wake of the Taylor Mission, the moves we now make will be examined on both sides of the Iron Curtain with the greatest care as a measure of this Administration's intentions and determination. It will be very difficult to undo first impressions. If we negotiate now - while infiltration continues - we shall in fact be judged weaker than in Laos; for in that case we at least first insisted on a cease-fire." Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

infiltrators coming into South Vietnam had grown from 2,000 to 16,000 within two years. ¹⁰ Excessive fears on the American side, leading to indecision, would create excessive hopes on the insurgents' side possibly leading to an American over-reaction and, then, war. ¹¹

The Vietnamese were also concerned about the repercussions of Laos on countering the insurgents in South Vietnam. In October of 1961, Ngo Dinh Nhu invited the United States Secretary of Defense's Deputy Assistant for Special Operations, Edward Geary Lansdale, to a meeting concerned with the Laotian impact on politics and countering Communist-insurgency in Southeast Asia. In this meeting Nhu informed Lansdale that governments from Thailand through to the Philippines were in a state of psychological shock, as were the people of Southeast Asia as well, owing to the nature of the Laotian solution. ¹² Lansdale went on to say that the Communists were utilising the Laotian Accords, in their propaganda in the villages of South Vietnam, as a portent of further successes in Vietnam with the clear implication that the villagers had better get

Footnotes

¹⁰ These figures are a little in excess of Hanoi's own records but not by much for, as the reader will have perused earlier in this work, according to the Young translations Hanoi sent approximately 14,573 infiltrators to the South in this period.

¹¹ "7. In Viet-Nam the gut issue is not whether Diem is or is not a good ruler. That is important in a variety of ways; but he was doing fine from 1956 to 1959, by the standards we apply to other under-developed countries. The gut issue is whether we shall continue to accept the systemic infiltration of men from outside and the operation from outside of a guerrilla war against him, which has built up from 2,000 to 16,000 effectives in two years. The whole world is asking a simple question: what will the U.S. do about it? If our policy and action is focused sharply on this question, I believe there is a fair chance of avoiding a war. If we act indecisively now, I fear we shall produce excessive fears on our side and excessive hopes on the other side; and then we shall have to over-react to correct a disintegrating situation worse than the present. In those circumstances there would, indeed, be a danger of war." *Ibid.*, pp. 602 - 603.

¹² Edward Lansdale, 182. "Memorandum From the Secretary of Defense's Deputy Assistant for Special Forces (Lansdale) to the President's Military Representative (Taylor) - Saigon, October 21, 1961," [Saigon Embassy Files: FRC 66 A 878, Vietnam - Taylor. Nolting's copy]; in FRUS: Vietnam, 1961, Vol.1, p. 411.

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on the winning team (i.e., the Communist insurgent team).¹³ Lansdale contrasted the Communist's ability to turn Laos into a meaningful political victory, at the village level in rural Vietnam, while the West, particularly the United States, failed to appreciate the impact of these events and, further still, failed to do anything to counter insurgent propaganda effectively.¹⁴ Thus, Communist propaganda surrounding the Laotian settlement had also managed to figure prominently in the subversion and coercion being carried out by the Communist insurgents in South Vietnam.

With their supply and communications lines secured in Laos, as a result of the Geneva agreements negotiated from 1961 through to 1962, the Vietnamese Communists could now focus on destroying their most formidable obstacle: the political legitimacy of Ngo Dinh Diem.¹⁵ This kind of attack, on the political legitimacy of the incumbent leader or government,¹⁶ has always

Footnotes

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 412.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 412 - 413.

¹⁵ The DOD analysis concerned with Hanoi's involvement with the insurgency in South Vietnam duly noted the strategic necessity of the supply and communication lines through Laos to the North's overall assault on Ngo Dinh Diem's government. Their report, which was based upon interviews conducted with Southerners who had gone North at the time of partition (1954 Geneva Agreements) and had been placed and trained within the NVA (North Vietnamese Army), clearly illustrated, amongst other things, the following relevant points:

-- The DRV quite deliberately organized, and trained an infiltration force of Southerners.

-- The infrastructure for doing so -- the training centers and the infiltration routes south -- indicate extensive preparations for the process before it was started in earnest in 1960.

-- The DRV had specific political, as well as military, objectives in returning the Southerners, including the overturning of Diem, and eventually, reunification..." Congress, House, Committee on Armed Services, "Origins of the Insurgency: Hanoi and The Insurgency in South Vietnam," in United States - Vietnam Relations (1945-1967); Book 2 of 12, pp. 33 -34.

¹⁶ See Cable's Conflict of Myths, p. 283.

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been the focus of Communist insurgencies and the travail of South Vietnam was to prove no exception to this precept.

Owing to the increase in terrorist and insurgent activity in South Vietnam, the Americans began to search for ideas and military doctrine that would allow them to successfully combat the growing insurgency. The post-World War II years had not been kind to the American Armed Forces. Their budgets had been slashed along with their demobilised manpower and, more importantly, there had been no real new thinking in doctrine - other than the hangover-effect of massive retaliation with nuclear weaponry should the Soviets decide a Third World War was necessary. The Korean War, at best a stalemate, had exposed many of the flaws in the American armed forces, which had been obscured by Allied assistance during the Second World War.¹⁷ Consequently, when the Kennedy Administration was confronted with guerrilla warfare and insurgency in South Vietnam it had no conceptual way to approach the problem based on recent

Footnotes

¹⁷ Two former US military officers, Gabriel and Savage published one of the most illuminating study's about the crisis in the American army under the title of *Crisis in Command*. In their indictment of the American military they make a powerful case. They show that the business ethic of personal self-maximization (instead of leadership by self-sacrifice - which was the standard fare for the German and British armies) had so inundated the US army that it had become everything an army should not be. This indictment became especially true even as World War II came to a successful close for the Allies. Colonel Trevor Dupuy, one of the most respected scholars in the field of American military history, conducted exhaustive studies, which tend to support Gabriel and Savage. Based on combat reports from both sides of the war in Europe, Dupuy conclusively proved that German unit-cohesion and officer leadership in the field was more effective than American, by a significant margin, right up until the final collapse of the Third Reich. Specifically, the facts and figures he garnered together through exhaustive study clearly displayed the fact that the average German soldier, right up until the end of the war, was over twice as effective as the average American soldier in combat. Problems in leadership and general doctrine plagued the US Army all the way from the Second World War through to US involvement in Indo-China - inclusive. See Colonel T.N. Dupuy's "Mythos or Verity? The Quantified Judgement Model and German Combat Effectiveness," in *Military Affairs*, (October 1986), pp. 204 – 210. Likewise, see Colonel T.N. Dupuy's "A Response to 'The Wehrmacht Mythos Revisited,'" in *Military Affairs*, (October 1987), pp. 196 – 197. See Colonel T.N. Dupuy's *Numbers, Predictions, and War*, Second Edition, (Fairfax, [Virginia]: Hero Books, 1985).

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experience or new developments in martial thought within the United States Service Academies.¹⁸ In fact, Kennedy's advisors were so bereft of any new ideas that they reached back into some of the concepts that had been pieced together by the previous administration of Eisenhower's and,¹⁹ thus, they came upon the CIP (Counter-Insurgency Plan).

General S.L.A. Marshall argued that all the Kennedy Administration was doing was 'warming-over' the old Korean War model of limited warfare. This was a model that General Marshall believed had been proven bankrupt:

Footnotes

¹⁸ Noted American authority on Insurgency/Counter-Insurgency Warfare, David Galula, perceived that in the United States, at least, there was no rigorous analysis or theoretical doctrine of any substance in place even as late as 1964. In his own words: "What, then, are the rules of counterrevolutionary warfare? Here we can observe another curious fact. Although analyses of revolutionary wars from the revolutionary's point of view are numerous today, there is a vacuum of studies from the other side, particularly when it comes to suggesting concrete courses of action for the counterrevolutionary. Very little is offered beyond formulas - which are sound enough as far as they go - such as, 'Intelligence is the key to the problem,' or 'The support of the population must be won.' How to turn the key, how to win the support, this is where frustrations usually begin, as anyone can testify who, in a humble or in an exalted position, has been involved in a revolutionary war on the wrong - i.e., the arduous - side. The junior officer in the field who, after weeks and months of endless tracking, has at last destroyed the dozen guerrillas opposing him, only to see them replaced by a fresh dozen; the civil servant who pleaded in vain for a five-cent reform and is now ordered to implement at once a hundred-dollar program when he no longer controls the situation in his district; the general who has 'cleared' Sector A but screams because 'they' want to take away two battalions for Sector B; the official in charge of the press who cannot satisfactorily explain why, after so many decisive victories, the rebels are still vigorous and expanding; the congressman who cannot understand why the government should get more money when it has so little to show for the huge appropriations previously granted; the chief of state, harassed from all sides, who wonders how long he will last - these are typical illustrations of the plight of the counterrevolutionary." David Galula, Counter-Insurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice, (New York, [NY]: Frederick A. Praeger, Publishers [Published Under the Auspices of the Center For International Affairs, Harvard University], 1964), p. xii.

¹⁹ Congress, House, Committee on Armed Services, "Memorandum for the Secretary of Defense - Subject: Recommendations on South Vietnam," (signed by L.L. Lemnitzer, Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff, [April 11, 1961]) - JCSM-228-61, U.S. Involvement in the War - Internal Documents - The Kennedy Administration: January 1961 - November 1963 in United States - Vietnam Relations (1945-1967), Book I of V.B.4.-; Book 11 of 12, pp. 19 - 21.

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The new theory was called "limited war." Some of the Joint Chiefs, in particular General Maxwell D. Taylor, advocated it. Among its most vocal exponents was Defense Secretary Robert S. McNamara. Promoted ostensibly as a safeguard against the possibility of a small war getting beyond containment and mushrooming into an atomic eclipse, it postulated that a great power could conduct fighting operations with a stringent economy of force and could, in effect, buy success at the lowest possible price. I could not believe one word of it.²⁰

Indeed, General Marshall was suspicious of the whole background of the CIP as he had come to believe that McNamara was too enthralled to the concept of war 'on the cheap' via the means of counter insurgency. The mere beefing-up of the ARVN and Special Forces along with some helicopters thrown into the mix was not going to be the secret to defeating Communist guerrillas in Vietnam – in Marshall's professional estimation.²¹ Critics like Marshall, however, had nothing else to offer Kennedy or Diem other than for America to cut clean and withdraw or move in with massive force. To the politically astute Kennedy, neither option was particularly savoury and, thus, the President authorised the CIP to go ahead as planned.

Dean Rusk, upon receiving authorisation from President Kennedy, cabled the heart of the CIP to the American Embassy in Saigon. Essentially, the State Department and the Pentagon had agreed that the Vietnamese Army, Navy and Airforce should be funded for an increase allowing another 20,000 men into the services' respective ranks. In addition to this, DOS and DOD had approved an expansion of 32,000 Civil Guardsmen to bolster the GVN's presence and to provide security from terrorist attack in the hamlets and villages of South Vietnam. In order to

Footnotes

²⁰ General S.L.A. Marshall, "Thoughts on Vietnam," in The Lessons of Vietnam, Thompson & Frizzell, editors, p. 47.

²¹ Ibid., p. 48.

provide the training and equipment for expanding the regular South Vietnamese forces, Washington had approved the expenditure of \$28.4 million US dollars for that fiscal year alone. Another \$12.7 million American dollars was set aside for the Civil Guard with a bonus of \$660,000 US dollars to support psy-ops (psychological operations) and for the purchase of communications equipment.²² In 1961/1962 US funds, this was a substantial commitment on the part of the Kennedy Administration and the President himself had personally approved of this pledge.²³

Rusk noted that the immediate purpose of the CIP was to help the GVN defeat the insurgents via the means of the extra force levels it funded, however, he added that the plan also required that Diem move to liberalise his government and gain co-operation from the Vietnamese in Saigon.²⁴ There was an explicit threat to the GVN in this stipulation as Rusk was

Footnotes

²² "Joint State - Defense Message (2761); - Counter-insurgency Plan, including 20,00 men increase VN armed forces/(NVNAF) and provision training and equipment 32,000 Civil Guard, approved on basis following FY 61 funding: \$28.4 million MAP for expanded NVNAF and \$12.7 million MAP for Civil Guard. \$660,000 as proposed for psychological operations and communications equipment also approved." Congress, House, Committee on Armed Services, Secretary of State - Dean Rusk, "Joint State - Defense - ISA Message: Counter-insurgency Plan," [2761] Telegram to AMEMBASSY SAIGON, (February 3, 1961), U.S. Involvement in the War - Internal Documents - The Kennedy Administration: January 1961 - November 1963 in United States - Vietnam Relations (1945-1967), Book 1 of V.B.4. Book 11 of 12, p. 14.

²³ "Memorandum For: The Secretary of State, The Secretary of Defense

You should know that as a result of our meeting on Saturday morning, January 28, I authorize an increase of expenditure of \$28.4 million to expand the Viet-Nam force level by 20,000; and an increase of \$12.7 million for a program to improve the quality of the Viet-Nam civil guard.

Congress, House, Committee on Armed Services, "Memorandum For: The Secretary of State, The Secretary of Defense, (Initialed/J.F.K.)," The White House - Washington, (January 30, 1961), U.S. Involvement in the War - Internal Documents - The Kennedy Administration: January 1961 - November 1963 in United States - Vietnam Relations (1945-1967), Book 1 of V.B.4. Book 11 of 12, p. 13.

²⁴ "Highly command Ambassador, Country Team and staffs. Recognize Plan allows considerable latitude for changes and refinements as implementation worked out with GVN and as situation requires.

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quite blunt in his instructions to the ambassador that if the GVN did not co-operate in addressing the issues of control over funding for the CIP and liberalising itself then the US might suspend its contributions.²⁵

Other key aspects of the CIP included attempts to specify and limit the roles and relationships within Diem's government as they pertained to the counter-insurgency program.²⁶ In addition to this, the Americans also wanted, under the auspices of the CIP, to convince Diem of the necessity of abandoning his bilinear chain of command "...in favor of a single command line with integrated effort at all levels within the government, and to create the governmental

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However, U.S. would, as Plan provides, expect GVN absorb local currency costs these increases aid does not contemplate further US dollar grants to generate additional local currency for this purpose. [Next sentence is security censored]...In presenting plan to Diem recommend you emphasize implementation will require extraordinary effort US-GVN co-operation, but that if implemented promptly and vigorously, we believe it will give GVN means turn tide against VC and at same time improve GVN capacity resist overt aggression. Immediate purpose Plan is to enable GVN defeat insurgency, but Plan also envisages that GVN must move on political front towards liberalization to retain necessary popular co-operation; that various economic steps be taken; and that there be adequate co-operation with RKG on frontier control. It considered US view that success requires implementation entire plan." Congress, House, Committee on Armed Services, Secretary of State - Dean Rusk, "Joint State - Defense - ISA Message: Counter-insurgency Plan," [2761] Telegram to AMEMBASSY SAIGON, (February 3, 1961), U.S. Involvement in the War - Internal Documents - The Kennedy Administration: January 1961 - November 1963 in United States - Vietnam Relations (1945-1967), Book 1 of V.B.4. Book 11 of 12, pp. 14 - 15.

²⁵ "Should make clear our present commitment to support Counter-insurgency Plan is only for FY 61 part of program. Future funding will require congressional approval. Views Congress likely be influenced by developments in political as well as security situation. FY 61 component represents large increase in US support Viet-Nam. If GVN willing to accept obligations involved in its implementation, the US is ready give full and immediate support in carrying it out. - Suggest proposing to Diem that members US Mission ready confer with GVN opposite numbers work out agreed version Plan within, say, two weeks time limit. Urge changes be kept minimal to avoid necessity referred CINPAC and Washington.... If Ambassador considers GVN does not provide necessary co-operation, he should inform Washington with recommendations, which may include suspension US contribution.... - RUSK." *Ibid.*, pp. 15 - 16.

²⁶ Congress, House, Committee on Armed Services, Evolution of the War, The Strategic Hamlet Program, 1961 - 1963: An Appraisal - II. The Formulation of the Strategic Hamlet Program: C. U.S. Proposed National Plans in United States-Vietnam Relations, 1945-1967, IV. B. 2. Book 3 of 12, p. 7.

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machinery for co-ordinated national planning.”²⁷ A secondary, but important, aspect of the CIP was that it acted as a clear indictment of Diem and his government’s inability to organise and produce an effective, co-ordinated national plan to defeat the Communist insurgents or, at least, this was the American perception.²⁸

The one area where a glimmer of light shone through in the fleshing-out of the CIP was contained in a telegram sent from the Department of State to the ambassador in Saigon on March 1, 1961. Apparently it had occurred to the department that the British had considerable and successful experience in countering insurgency and that if they were approached they might be convinced to help in the training of the ARVN and the Civil Guard. Thus, there was some recognition that the Malaya experience might be helpful especially if British and Malay training personnel could be incorporated into a “...well defined part [of the] ARVN or [the] Civil Guard training program.”²⁹ Also, the State Department advised the ambassador that he should approve further counter-guerrilla training of ARVN Rangers and the further expansion of actual Ranger companies. According to DOS, this approval by the ambassador should occur immediately without waiting for the GVN’s acceptance of the CIP.³⁰

Footnotes

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

²⁹ “16. Telegram From The Department of State to the Embassy in Vietnam,” (Washington, March 1, 1961 – 8:50 p.m.) drafted by Chalmers B. Wood on February 24, 1961; cleared with Daniel V. Anderson (Director of the Office of Southeast Asian Affairs, DOS), Robert G. Cleveland (Special Assistant in the Office of Southeast Asian Affairs, DOS), John M. Steeves (Acting Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs, DOS), Edward E. Rice (Member of the Policy Planning Staff, DOS), Admiral Luther C. Heinz (Director for Far Eastern Affairs, International Security Affairs, DOD), [Source: Department of State, Central Files, 751k.5-MSP/1-2561. Secret; Priority; Limit Distribution.] in FRUS: Vietnam 1961, Vol. 1, pp. 40 – 41.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 41

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Before examining the conceptual flaws in this general outline of the CIP it is vitally important that the reader recognises the implicit threat to the GVN's sovereignty within Dean Rusk's telegram. Indeed, the last sentence of the telegram is tell-tale of the direction that relations would take: when Diem would not comply or co-operate to the extent that the State Department thought appropriate then threats would follow. Not once, until Lansdale sent a memorandum to the Secretary and the Deputy Secretary of Defense (DOD) telling them that Washington's treatment of Diem was hardly conducive to gaining his support and trust,³¹ did anyone in the Capitol question the obvious arrogance of such an approach.

At least in part, the Kennedy Administration's response to Lansdale's admonishments was to replace Ambassador Durbrow with Ambassador Nolting in the spring of 1961. Nevertheless, even after Nolting had taken over the US mission to Saigon the influential individuals within the State Department, such as Averell Harriman, continued to insist that the way to deal with Diem was to lay down the law with him. Indeed, during Durbrow's tenure as Ambassador, a State Department official, John Steves, had drawn up a security-sensitive (i.e., top secret) plan for replacing the Vietnamese President. Nolting was made aware of this plan as it was sent to him by the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs, Walter McConaughy.³²

Footnotes

³¹ Congress, House, Committee on Armed Services, Brigadier-General Edward Geary Lansdale, "Memorandum For Secretary of Defense, Deputy Secretary of Defense; Subject: Vietnam," (Memorandum written and sent by Brigadier General Edward Geary Lansdale USAF [no date given on document other than the memorandum is written up based on Lansdale's January 1961 official visit to South Vietnam]), Evolution of the War, Origins of the Insurgency, 1954 - 1960, U.S. Perceptions of the Insurgency, 1954 - 1960 in United States - Vietnam Relations, 1945 - 1967, Tab. 4, IV. A. 5. Book 2 of 12, p. 69 & 73.

³² John P. Glennon, editor in chief, 181. "Memorandum Prepared in the Department of State: Suggested Contingency Plan," (Washington, October 20, 1961), [Top Secret; Limit Distribution] in FRUS: Vietnam, 1961, Vol.1, pp. 408 - 411.

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Returning to the problems associated with the CIP a brief perusal of how the Americans viewed the ARVN at the beginning of the 1960's would be of some utility to this study. The Department of Defense analysts indicated (September 1960) that the Army of The Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) had the capability and the flexibility to fight either external aggressors (i.e., the North Vietnamese Army - [NVA]) or internal guerrillas (i.e., the Viet Cong).³³ There was, however, an acknowledgement that: "Militia type home guards and civil guards should be trained and equipped. Accelerated efforts should be undertaken to develop the paramilitary and police forces."³⁴ Indeed, there was even the suggestion made that, as the British had done in Malaya, "For the duration of the emergency campaign [a phrase borrowed from the British], operational control of all security activities should be under centralized direction."³⁵ We have also noted, previously, the State Department's interest in utilizing British and Malay experts in counter-insurgency warfare. Yet, and regardless of these memoranda between DOD and CINPAC, the focus of countering the insurgents remained conventional and controlled by MAAG through ARVN in the field.³⁶ As such, when it became apparent that ARVN was unable to contain and

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For all the details of the Contingency Plan please read Appendix C.

³³ Congress, House, Committee on Armed Services, Contrasting DOD and State Appreciation's (Defense 982994 to CINCPAC, 162156Z Sep 60), Evolution of the War, Origins of the Insurgency, 1954 – 1960, U.S. Perceptions of the Insurgency, 1954 - 1960 in United States - Vietnam Relations, 1945 - 1967, Tab. 4, IV. A. 5. Book 2 of 12, p. 62.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ President Diem balked at all perceived controls of his government through the CIP or MAAG's direction of ARVN and this resistance had started just before Nolting had taken over from Durbrow in 1961: "Ambassador Durbrow, General McGarr, and others urged acceptance of the CIP upon President Diem, but with only partial success. Diem stoutly resisted the adoption of a single, integrated chain of operational command, showed no enthusiasm for detailed prior planning, continued his practice of centralized decision-making (sometimes tantamount to decision pigeonholing), and continued to play off

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destroy the source for the insurgency, and thus the insurgents themselves, the solution appeared to be in the form of the CIP which, as previously indicated, called for substantial South Vietnamese armed forces increases.

Another major influence upon the design of the CIP was the fact that American advisors were reaching, almost, a fever pitch of criticism against South Vietnamese officialdom and general bureaucratic and military ineptitude. Again, the only significant official Americans advocating the need to tone-down this negativity were Lansdale and Nolting as they saw it as counter-productive to anything useful at all. Subtly yet clearly, Lansdale put the onus on the Americans to rectify these relations with the South Vietnamese. He was especially concerned that American political and military policy planners seize hold of a better understanding with regard to unconventional warfare and counter-insurgency.

In one of his many official memos to Maxwell Taylor, Kennedy's military representative engaged in a fact-finding mission to South Vietnam, Lansdale emphasised where the impetus had to come from. He asked Taylor to seriously consider precisely what kind of unconventional warfare techniques could be used to cope with the Viet Cong insurgency. Lansdale noted that there were all kinds of men and material being supplied to the South Vietnamese which, inevitably, seemed to get bogged down in futility owing to the government mechanisms used to

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the province chiefs against the generals. Some aspects of the CIP were accepted, but the basic organizational issues remained unresolved and the strategic approach unresolved by default.

The unsuccessful U.S. attempts to secure organizational reforms within the Diem government had assumed psychological primacy by the time of General Taylor's October 1961 mission to Saigon. The American position was essentially that no operational plan could succeed unless GVN was reorganized to permit effective implementation." Congress, House, Committee on Armed Services, Evolution of the War, Strategic Hamlet Program, 1961 - 1963: An Appraisal - II. The Formulation of The Strategic Hamlet Program: D. Initial Vietnamese Reactions in United States-Vietnam Relations, 1945-1967. IV. B. 2. Book 3 of 12, pp. 9-10.

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deploy this valuable aid. Lansdale attributed much of this red tape to poor relations between the Americans and the Vietnamese at the governmental level.³⁷ He suggested that the way to remove the bad feelings would be to get the right American advisors into the GVN offices where they could truly assist with their expertise. These American advisors, Lansdale noted, would have to be chosen by the Vietnamese themselves, as it would be counter-productive to force individuals on the GVN. He also noted that the pool of US advisors that the Vietnamese officials were to choose from would have to consist of individuals who had a genuine compassion and empathy for the Vietnamese and display an obvious talent for the job. This type of personnel planning, Lansdale argued, would streamline any course for unconventional warfare that the GVN and Washington might decide upon.³⁸

Footnotes

³⁷ "SUBJECT: Unconventional Warfare [Saigon, October 23, 1961]

1. What unconventional warfare techniques should be considered in coping with VC insurgency?

Perhaps the truest thing that could be said about the situation in Vietnam today is that the accomplishments do not match the efforts that are being made. In reviewing programs and plans, I was struck by the wealth of ideas, abilities, and equipment which the U.S. has put into Vietnam. Yet, the Vietnamese governmental machinery seems to be bogged down, and somehow things simply don't get done effectively enough. This might well remain true despite our sending in more people, new types of weapons, or changing organizational structures. Thus, just adding more of many things, as we are doing at present, doesn't appear to provide the answer that we are seeking." Edward Geary Lansdale, 185. "Memorandum From the Secretary of Defense's Deputy Assistant for Special Operations (Lansdale) to the President's Military Representative (Taylor): SUBJECT: Unconventional Warfare," (Saigon, October 23, 1961), [RG 330, OSD Files: FRC 63 A 1803, Vietnam - Taylor Group. Top Secret] in FRUS: Vietnam, 1961, Vol. 1, pp. 418 - 419.

³⁸ "The spark could well be to place the right Americans into the right areas of the Vietnamese government to provide operational guidance. These Americans should be collaborators, who quietly advise some key Vietnamese leaders on how to get things moving effectively, and are physically close enough to them to permit the guidance to be constant. Such work will require Americans of talent and compassion, who will engage in the task with considerable empathy. Perhaps the wisest method of selecting them would be to let each Vietnamese name the American he would like as an advisor; then the U.S. should go to work to make those people available." Ibid.

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The Lansdale emphasis was clear: it was the Americans, themselves, that were causing the Vietnamese to react in the lethargic manner that they had been. For many of the advisors simply treated the Vietnamese with frustration and/or contempt which, in turn, only engendered more distrust and slowness of action from the GVN's officials. In stressing the great damage that this was causing in the attempt to defeat the Viet Cong, Lansdale warned Washington that the future of South Vietnam hung in the balance. For he believed the Vietnamese were going to lose unless the Americans could help them in a far more positive manner.³⁹

Lansdale wrote several other memoranda in this series of communications to Taylor and the remarkable and insightful direction of his writing illustrated that it was the Americans who had to correct the way that things had been going with the Vietnamese. It was US policy that was, for all practical purposes and considerations, 'bogging-down' the Vietnamese as well as the Americans.⁴⁰ This was a theme that remained consistent throughout the tenure of Lansdale's advice to Kennedy's administration. Indeed, it is worth noting that as events progressed, even within the year of 1961, Lansdale became convinced that many of Kennedy's advisors were steering U.S. policy toward a dangerous course. This was especially true with regard to their continued harangues against Diem; thus, he wrote a fairly tough letter to General Samuel T. Williams seeking support in holding the line against the growing strength of the anti-Diem group

Footnotes

³⁹ "I suspect that too many people we are counting upon to get things done are frustrated by red tape or by lack of real understanding of the problems confronting them, with the result that they simply go through the motions of their work like puppets. Mistrust, jealousy, and self-seeking compound the error. Yet, the Vietnamese are an able and energetic people. They don't seem to be themselves today. They are going to lose their country if some spark doesn't make them catch fire to go to work to win this war." *Ibid.*, pp. 418-419.

⁴⁰ The memoranda in this series of communications were primarily concerned with assisting the Taylor Mission to South Vietnam.

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in Washington. The reader should peruse this letter with considerable care because it lays bare the depth of the problem with regard to those powerful Americans who wanted to achieve a 'quick-fix' in Vietnam by getting rid of Diem. Lansdale was nobody's fool and he knew what he was up against in Washington – as he notes: "... folks of Durbrow's ilk - but much subtler." General Williams was known to be a 'tough customer' who had influence at the Pentagon and within DOD and Lansdale knew he needed some powerful men on his side when he went up against the like of Averell Harriman.

Washington, November 28, 1961.

Mon General - Warm thanks for your letter.

Upon return here, the boss had another crash project for me to work on, so I've been quite apart from most of the follow-through of the Taylor group's reports and activities.... One of the conclusions drawn in town, and both Taylor & Rostow say it isn't one of theirs (although I'm suspicious) is that we cannot help the VN win against the VC as long as a dictator (Diem) holds power.⁴¹ So, one of the thoughts being ginned up is that I go over as his personal advisor and, presumably, clobber him from up close. I pointed out that this was a duty without honor and I'd be damned if I'd do that.... Diem has been getting worn out by all the vicious attacks on him. The first evening I was there, he looked really down in the dumps - so I told him to go to bed instead of talking to me. During the next several days, I went to work to keep him up, and he started becoming the fighter we knew of yore. However,

Footnotes

⁴¹ Averell Harriman figured prominently in this anti-Diem opinion group as best noted in his own words: "3. The Internal Situation in South Viet-Nam: The best any international settlement can do is to buy time. If the Government of South Viet-Nam continues a repressive, dictatorial and unpopular regime, the country will not long retain its independence. Nor can the United States afford to stake its prestige there. We must make it clear to Diem that we mean business about internal reform. This will require a strong ambassador who can control all U.S. activities (political, military, economic, etc.) and who is known by Diem to have the personal intimacy and confidence of the President and the Secretary." Averell Harriman, 239. "Letter From The Ambassador at Large (Harriman) to the President," [Washington, November 12, 1961, Kennedy Library, National Security Files, Vietnam Country Series. Personal. Hand-written by Harriman.] in FRUS: Vietnam, 1961, Vol. 1, pp. 580 - 582.

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these latest attacks on him - seemingly stemming from the Taylor group - apparently really got him down. Also, the wording of some of the U.S. proposals made it look as though the U.S. was going to act the same way the French have. I jumped back into the act long enough last night to straighten out this aspect.... Incidentally, Diem, Thuan, and the others think highly of Fritz Nolting. Too bad you didn't have someone like him as ambassador while you were there.... We probably will be boosting our help by a lot more men, money & material. However, what's really lacking is something of the spirit, something of leadership qualities on our part, which would give meaning to our aid. It's pure hell to be on the sidelines and seeing so conventional and unimaginative an approach being tried...Rather than end this on a gloomy downbeat, let's noodle out how to lick the crowd. One of the main problems is here at home, with Washington being only one phase. Do you feel up to entering the fray again - against folks of Durbrow's ilk - but much subtler?⁴²

Regardless of all Lansdale's suggestions in his numerous memos and letters concerned with the treatment of Ngo Dinh Diem and counter-insurgency warfare he had little effect on policy. The CIP as envisioned in Washington, began to take on a form and substance that was contrary to the proven and sound principles of countering Communist insurgents as manifested by the British in Malaya.

The CIP that was envisioned by the Americans had several important reasons for coming into being and for being adopted the way it was. The British counter-insurgency advice and President Diem's preference for it over that offered by the Americans were not least of these salient reasons.

Footnotes

⁴² Edward Geary Lansdale, 293. "Letter From the Secretary of Defense's Assistant for Special Operations (Lansdale) to General Samuel T. Williams," [Hoover Institution Archives, Williams Papers, 1961, Letters. Hand-written by Lansdale.] in FRUS: Vietnam, 1961, Vol. 1, pp. 687 - 689.

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The British Concept of What Constituted the Insurgent Challenge and Counter-Insurgency Doctrine:

Prior to any serious American involvement in South Vietnam, the British had brought a long and thorough counter-insurgency campaign to a successful close in the Southeast Asian country of Malaya. What had made this campaign such a success, albeit one that was twelve years in the making, was the fact that they had understood from the beginning that military force must not and could not replace proper civilian authority. They had understood, perhaps out of the raw necessity that their impecunious position had placed them in the aftermath of World War II, that bombs and bullets could not replace the order of law, applied equally to all. For the insurgent challenge in Malaya was the same as it was in Vietnam: the insurgents were contesting the incumbent regime's legitimacy and right to govern; offering, instead, themselves as the legitimate voice of the people.⁴³

The fundamental difference between the British campaign in Malaya and the American sponsored endeavour in Vietnam was that the British never lost sight of the paramount necessity of maintaining political legitimacy and, by their very actions, in the hurly-burly of 1963, the Americans did! No amount of pointing out Ngo Dinh Diem's shortcomings,⁴⁴ and he had

Footnotes

⁴³ Thompson, Defeating Communist Insurgency, p. 20.

⁴⁴ Sir Robert Thompson kept a steady and critical eye on the American's ability to be swayed by the Communist agenda in the insurrection in South Vietnam. Thus, he noted: "Once the organisation for People's Revolutionary War has been established and its techniques are in operation, the cause becomes less and less relevant. The threatened government is not going to be overthrown through the cause which the insurgents are promoting, but through the contradictions within the country and society which become more exploitable as the war continues. It is only necessary to look at the chain of events in South Vietnam since 1963, from the time of the Buddhist controversy which led to the fall of President Diem, to realise that, if the Vietcong had had a good cause within South Vietnam, the whole country would have collapsed long ago. This does not mean that there may not have been a good cause at some time in the past before the present conflict, because that was essential to establish the basic organisation for People's Revolutionary War in the first place.... The original organisation was built up during the Japanese War and then forged during the Vietnam War against the French colonial power. This organisation could not have been created

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several, can ever rationalise the complicity, in illegitimacy, with dissident Vietnamese generals, that the Kennedy Administration mired American effort in. For the President of South Vietnam was murdered and, thus, removed from power by the ARVN generals and it was these very Generals who had been supported by Washington in this, essentially, criminal undertaking.

Having outlined the problem in broad terms, it becomes imperative that the reader is made aware of just what the British Counter-Insurgency advice was and why the Americans in the end, ignored it. This is of particular relevance, considering the good rapport that was established between Ambassador Nolting, the CIA Saigon Station Chief William Colby, and the head of the British Advisory Team, Robert Thompson.

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from scratch in South Vietnam, on the basis of the cause which the Vietcong were promoting at the beginning of the present war in the short time available between 1954 and 1959. If that had been the case President Diem would have had little difficulty in dealing with it as he dealt with the Binh Xuyen bandits in Saigon immediately after he came to power. The Vietcong's basic organisation was already in existence and was inherited from the Vietminh. **The shortcomings of the Diem regime and the contradictions within Vietnamese society were the excuse rather than the reason for the insurgency and, with the organisation ready to be reactivated, they made its promotion a practical proposition [my emphasis].**" Sir Robert Thompson, No Exit From Vietnam, updated edition 1970, (New York, [NY]: David McKay Company, Inc., 1970), pp. 30-31.

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The British Counter-Insurgency Advice for South Vietnam:

Sir Robert Thompson, one of the leading British advisors to the Americans and the Vietnamese in South Vietnam, stated: "The three indispensable qualities in counter-insurgency are patience, determination and an offensive spirit, but the last should be tempered with discretion and should never be used to justify operations which are merely reckless or just plain stupid."⁴⁵ Accordingly, the British advice incorporated all of this wisdom for a program of counter-insurgency adapted to Vietnamese political, military and geographical realities.

Thompson also had observed that the most serious liability in the American counter-insurgency effort in Vietnam was to be found in the American approach itself: for Americans were impatient and they expected quick results to flow from their obvious wealth and power. It was precisely these impatient expectations that Hanoi could count upon in frustrating American goals by, simply, denying them a quick or easy victory in South Vietnam. Thus, in Thompson's expert analysis, the Communists had carefully considered four main avenues to victory and they were as follows: 1.) A failure of American resolution; 2.) A failure of Vietnamese resolution; 3.) A failure of the Americans and the Vietnamese to adopt the correct counter-strategy; 4.) A failure of the South Vietnamese to build, even with American aid, a stable and viable state and government.⁴⁶ If even one of these channels was left open, then, Hanoi stood a good chance of winning and achieving its minimum war aim: reunification. The Communist's maximum war

Footnotes

⁴⁵ Thompson, Defeating Communist Insurgency, p. 171.

⁴⁶ "If victory could not be won by a decisive military campaign or battle, what then were Hanoi's possible channels to victory? There were four: a failure of American resolution; a failure of Vietnamese resolution; a failure of the Americans and South Vietnamese to adopt the correct counter-strategy; and a failure of the South Vietnamese to build, with American help, a stable and viable state and government." Thompson, No Exit From Vietnam, pp. 63-64.

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aim, in addition to reunification, was, of course, to visit a humiliating defeat on the United States and this maximum aim was always possible if one or more of these channels remained open.⁴⁷ The key to Hanoi's strategic planing, then, was American impatience as all four channels to Communist victory incorporated varying degrees of this crucial lack in American virtue.

Vo Nguyen Giap was a student of history and military history in particular. Given Giap's intellectual predilections and his obvious talent for fighting protracted campaigns one could be certain that he was well versed in how America fought its wars. Thompson recognised this and he also knew that Giap would be considering the fact that the Americans had never fought a long and bloody war, with the exception of their Civil War, and that the prospect of fighting a fifty-year campaign would frighten them while not daunting the Vietnamese significantly.⁴⁸ Further to this, it was Thompson's estimation that the Communists would be depending on pressures within American domestic public opinion to mount over time owing to the necessities of countering a lengthy insurgency, necessities that would most likely offend the American collective conscience. Dissent, a perceived sense of futility, and a failure of the American public to understand the nature of this kind of warfare would create a growing antagonism to the war. Accordingly, Thompson estimated that Hanoi would make the war a test

Footnotes

⁴⁷ "If one or more of these channels remained open then, in the end, Hanoi would win and would achieve its minimum aim of reunification if not its maximum aim of inflicting a humiliating defeat on the United States. The channels were, of course, all interrelated and could be combined to achieve victory...." Ibid.

⁴⁸ "Americans are by nature an impatient people, eager for quick results and, with wealth and power available, expectant of them. A protracted war could therefore be counted on to try American patience particularly when, after an enormous outlay, there was still no light at the end of the tunnel. Americans have never fought a long war and seldom a bloody and bitter one except in their own Civil War. Hanoi might not be frightened by the prospect of a fifty years' war, but Washington certainly would be [my emphasis]." Ibid.

of wills not a test of strength and, in such a test, the Communists believed the Americans, regardless of their manifest power, would prove as faltering as the French had.⁴⁹

Robert Thompson arrived in Saigon in the fall of 1961 and, as head of the British Advisory Mission to South Vietnam, his primary task was to advise on the implementation of the Strategic Hamlet program.⁵⁰ Thompson advised the Vietnamese government to select an area that could be adequately cleared and held by the army and then made safe through protected

Footnotes

⁴⁹ "In addition to this, because the war would be total and bitter, there would be many aspects that could be expected to offend the American conscience. Futility and dissent would therefore combine to create growing antagonism to the war within the United States. A failure to understand the nature of the war would also add to the confusion. While, therefore, the Americans might have greater wealth, power and stamina than the French, they could, if greater pressures were applied, be expected to react in much the same way. If Hanoi could apply this greater pressure by keeping the costs high then, with or without a Dien Bien Phu, American resolution might falter. The war had to be made a test of will rather than a trial of strength [my emphasis]." *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Robert B. Osprey, *War in the Shadows: The Guerrilla In History*, Revised and Updated, (New York, [NY]: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1994), pp. 739-740.

Ambassador Nolting recalled the following about Robert Thompson in his memoirs: "At about this time, the idea of bringing in the British counter-insurgency expert Sir Robert G.K. Thompson arose. Thompson had been the British Permanent Secretary of Defense in Malaya and had great success in helping the Malaysians defend themselves, during a ten-year period in the 1950's, against the insurgents there, most of whom were Chinese in origin. I welcomed the British initiative. The Malaya experience was something of a counterpart to Vietnam, and we could learn from it. I felt this even more strongly after the British Advisory Mission, Vietnam, was established and we began working with Bob Thompson. Although Thompson consulted with Harry Hohler, the British Ambassador in Saigon, and probably used British Embassy communications to report back to Britain, he worked very closely with our mission. The British Foreign Office was not keen to get involved in the nitty-gritty of counter-insurgency in South Vietnam, so Thompson and his people worked rather independently as advisors.

Thompson had only about half a dozen people working for him, all of whom, I think, had served under Sir Gerald Templar in Malaya. They did not have much more than their individual experience to work with, but they were effective. They worked closely with the South Vietnamese and with us, advising on pacification and anti-infiltration methods. Thompson himself was very persuasive and had considerable influence with President Diem. We would sometimes go together to present a proposal to President Diem, who could see that Thompson knew what he was talking about and trusted him. In this he may have been influenced by the Tunku (President of Malaya), a close friend of President Diem, who spoke highly of Bob Thompson." Nolting, *From Trust To Tragedy*, p. 37.

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hamlets within the village enclaves; it was these hamlets that formed up the foundations of the “Strategic Hamlet Program.”⁵¹

It should be remembered that in Thompson’s ideas and plans for counter-insurgency, Ngo Dinh Diem found relief: relief from the impending American control of his government via the means of an undiluted U.S. formulated CIP. There were Americans who recognised that, potentially, Robert Thompson was offering Diem a way out of having to submit to U.S. government scrutiny and, accordingly, labelled Thompson’s ideas as “advice without responsibility.”⁵² Thompson’s rival plan to that of the American’s would, amongst other things, rescue Diem from appearing to be an American puppet:

*Thompson provided Diem his initial “appreciation” (or, in U.S. terminology, “estimate of the situation”) in October 1961. 35/ His assessment was well received by the President [Diem], who asked him to follow it up with a specific plan. Thompson’s response, an outline plan for the pacification of the Delta area, was given to the President on 13 November. Thus, Thompson was in the process of articulating one potentially comprehensive strategic approach at the same time that the U.S. was deeply involved in fashioning a major new phase in U.S. - GVN relations in which major new U.S. aid would be tied to Diem’s acceptance of specified reforms and, inferentially, to his willingness to pursue some agreed, co-ordinated strategy. Thompson’s plan was, in short, a potential rival to the American-advanced plans represented by the CIP and the geographically phased MAAG plan of September 1961.*⁵³

Footnotes

⁵¹ Cable, Conflict of Myths, pp. 196-197.

⁵² Congress, House, Committee on Armed Services, Evolution of the War, Strategic Hamlet Program, 1961 – 1963: An Appraisal - II. The Formulation of The Strategic Hamlet Program: E. Thompson’s Counterproposals in United States-Vietnam Relations, 1945-1967. IV. B. 2. Book 3 of 12, p. 10.

⁵³ Ibid.

There was much more, however, to Thompson's plan than just the possibility of saving Diem from further US controls. Simply put, it was a plan based on recent Southeast Asian experience and it had a common-sense logic to it that the ever-practical Diem was truly attracted to. According to the Pentagon analysts, Thompson's ideas, as put forward to Diem, shared a common understanding with Maxwell Taylor's in that both saw the Viet Cong attempting to force a political outcome in their favour. The Communist tools for such an objective were combined military and political actions as opposed to a straight-out attempt to take over the country by brute force.⁵⁴ Likewise, Thompson's ideas found similar expression in McGarr's understanding that the Viet Cong would attempt to control the unpopulated areas in order to use them as a secure area from which to threaten the capital – Saigon (such an area existed Northeast of Saigon and was known as War Zone 'D'). Furthermore, both men realised that such a base would be used by the Viet Cong to project an image of political control and legitimacy to the people of South Vietnam.⁵⁵

The Americans' and Thompson's similarities in views on what the Communists were about were limited as Thompson believed that the real thrust of the Viet Cong was the political stability of the populated rural areas. In other words, while recognising the Communist secondary threat to assail Saigon was valid, Thompson believed the real war, the contest for political legitimacy, would be fought in the small hamlets and villages of the heavily populated

Footnotes

⁵⁴ "Like Taylor (with whom he talked and to whom he gave a copy of his initial "appreciation" at the latter's request), Thompson saw the VC objective to be one of political denouement by combined military and political action rather than a military take-over of the entire nation." *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁵⁵ "Like McGarr and the other U.S. military advisors, he recognised the probability and danger of VC attempts to control the unpopulated areas and to use them both as a base from which to project an image of political strength and as secure areas from which (in the case of War Zone D, Northeast of Saigon) to threaten the capital." *Ibid.*

agricultural areas of South Vietnam. American planners, like Lionel McGarr and Maxwell Taylor, were still thinking in terms of classic military assault albeit via the means of guerrilla action. Thus, their plans were based on the belief that the Communists' political and military objectives could be smashed if the Viet Cong forces were destroyed. In this planning, Thompson believed that the Americans were not focussing on the correct target.⁵⁶ Thus, Thompson argued that the main GVN and American target should not be to merely destroy the Viet Cong's field forces but, rather, to offer the people of South Vietnam an attractive, constructive and positive option in place of the Communists' appeals. The focus, then, for the GVN and the Americans would have to be national reconstruction and physical infrastructure development in the populated rural areas.⁵⁷

The program envisioned by Thompson would require thoroughgoing and very tight security measures but these were procedures that could be successfully undertaken by police as opposed to soldiers. His experience dictated that policemen could establish a close rapport with the people because they would live and go to work in the very communities they were protecting, in short, they would be 'cheek-by-jowl' with the people. Army units could not do this as they were constantly needed in other areas where fighting required their resources. Indeed, if an Army unit spent too long in a given area daily life for the average Vietnamese would take on the regimen of military occupancy. Obviously it was not even practical to force the army to establish

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⁵⁶ "But unlike the U.S. military advisors, Thompson viewed the primary threat to be to the political stability of the populated rural areas. 36/ Consequently, he regarded McGarr's proposed initial operation in War Zone D to be a step in the wrong direction." Ibid.

⁵⁷ "The main government target, Thompson argued, should not be simply the destruction of VC forces. Rather, it should be to offer an attractive and constructive alternative to communist appeals. This could only be done by emphasizing national reconstruction and development in the populated rural areas." Ibid.

a rapport with the people as it simply would not work. Therefore, in the Thompson understanding, the Army's purpose was to keep main Viet Cong units off-balance in order to prevent them from being able to carry out insurgent attacks in the very areas that the GVN was trying to stabilise with reconstruction and police programs.⁵⁸

Thompson's ideas were more fully developed in a draft plan he penned for the pacification of the heavily populated rural Delta area. He presented this plan to President Diem on November 11, 1961, and he told the Vietnamese leader that the whole purpose was to win loyalties rather than to kill Viet Cong. Because of the importance of 'winning heart and minds' over killing Communists, Thompson had made sure that the trial area he selected in the Delta had seen little Viet Cong main force activity. He argued that the GVN needed to 'clear and hold' this area and that such a direction had to replace the counter-productive ARVN 'search and destroy' sweeps. He acknowledged that the ARVN could be used to protect the villages, temporarily, while the villagers were organising in order that they might protect themselves. Thompson recognised that the ARVN could be used to come to the aid of a village that needed reinforcement but the big 'sweeps' through an area and then, subsequently, leaving it had to be abandoned by the army. All these 'sweeps' had done was to destabilise the villagers and their way of life when what they really needed from their government was the assurance of physical

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⁵⁸ "To do so would require extensive and stringent security measures, to be sure, but these measures required primarily police rather than military forces. The police could establish a close rapport with the populace; the army could not. The army should have the mission to keep the VC off balance by mobile action in order to prevent insurgent attacks on the limited areas in which GVN would concentrate its initial pacification efforts. 37/" Ibid.

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security so that the economic and social improvements being attempted, could proceed without violent and destabilising interruptions.⁵⁹

At this point in his plan, Thompson introduced the concept of 'strategic hamlets' which was a strategic and tactical means through which the villagers could defend themselves. The normal 'strategic hamlet' would be a lightly guarded village because it would exist in a relatively low risk area. 'Defended hamlets' would be more heavily defended and would involve more relocation of people because of the influence of Viet Cong in that area. 'Defended hamlets,' for example, would be particularly useful in areas closer to the Cambodian border where Viet Cong were constantly moving through. ⁶⁰

Of course, Thompson's ideas and his alternate plan for countering Communist insurgency caused real and immediate problems for the Americans, as Diem seemed prepared to act upon them to the exclusion of the Americans. Ambassador Nolting was well-aware of these Thompson-inspired problems and immediately cabled Washington about this issue which was critical to American policy in South Vietnam. As can clearly be discerned in the telegram, which Ambassador Nolting sent back to the State Department, Thompson's plan, if Diem decided to act

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⁵⁹ "This line of argument was more fully developed in Thompson's draft plan for the pacification of the Delta area, given to President Diem on 11 November. 38/ The objective of the plan was to win loyalties rather than to kill insurgents. For that reason Thompson selected a populous area with relatively little VC main force activity. The thrust of his proposal was that "clear and hold" operations should replace "search and destroy" sweeps. ARVN might be used to protect the villages while the villages were organizing to protect themselves and mobile ARVN forces must be available to reinforce local defense units, but the process should be abandoned of "sweeping" through an area -- and then leaving it. The peasants must be given the assurance of physical security so that economic and social improvements, the real object of the plan, could proceed without interruption." Ibid.

⁶⁰ "The means by which the villagers would be protected was the "strategic hamlet," a lightly guarded village because it was -- by definition -- in a relatively low risk area. more heavily defended centers, called "defended hamlets" and involving more relocation, would be employed in areas under more VC influence, particularly along the Cambodian border." Ibid.

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upon it, would allow an almost complete circumvention of American influence upon the direction that the GVN took with counter-insurgency. Nolting freely admits that the detailed written paper that Thompson submitted was first-rate and something that the United States could readily agree with. Nolting observed that American support would be far more likely if the Thompson plan was submitted through the proper procedure wherein the Americans, who were paying the costs, could have the real say in just how it came into effect and how it was implemented.⁶¹

This telegram needs to be observed from several perspectives as it challenges the orthodox school's presumptions that Nolting was in 'lock-step' sympathy with Diem to the exclusion of United States policy directives.⁶² Clearly, that presumption 'falls down' in the face of this evidence as Nolting was, in fact, attempting to make sure that Diem could not circumvent Washington's policy for counter-insurgency warfare. Moreover, the telegram expressed some annoyance at the British for having assisted Diem in such circumvention as their actions made the Americans' job that much more difficult. This annoyance with British interference in Washington's policy was strong enough to compel Nolting to hold a meeting with the British Ambassador, Henry Arthur Frederick Hohler, Robert Thompson, Lionel McGarr and William Trueheart wherein he bluntly expressed Washington's disapproval over what the British had

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⁶¹ Frederick Nolting, 299. "Telegram From Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State - Saigon, November 30, 1961 - 8 p.m.," [Department of State, Central Files, 751K.00/11-3061. Secret; Limit Distribution.] in FRUS: Vietnam 1961, Vol. 1, pp. 698 - 700.

⁶² The entire document can be found in Appendix D.

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done.⁶³ In short, this is not the sort of document that a diplomat suffering from 'localitis' would pen. Another perspective, which is revealed in this telegram, is that Nolting supported Lionel McGarr and MAAG over the issue of where to move first as the American soldiers want to go after the Viet Cong infested area of War Zone D north of Saigon.⁶⁴ This, of course, was the area that Thompson was not interested in wresting immediately from the Communists as he saw the Delta as more crucial to the purpose of counter-insurgent rural pacification.

Nolting finished off his telegram by informing Washington that he told the British that the US government would have to openly disagree with the command structures Thompson had proposed to Diem if Diem raised the issue with the American Embassy.⁶⁵ It should not be forgotten that it was these "command arrangements", that Thompson had proposed, which held the potential for Diem to go around the field command of ARVN and, thus, MAAG. The Vietnamese President could then direct operations straight from the palace - something that the Americans were already trying to eliminate, in all areas of the GVN, in order to facilitate delegation of authority.

Nolting was caught in a dilemma of some substance over this whole issue concerned with British advice and Ngo Dinh Diem's suspicions about American attempts to require delegation of authority from him. The American ambassador genuinely liked both Diem and Thompson and could see the value of the very practical, non-military approach that Thompson

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⁶³ Nolting, 299. "Telegram From Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State - Saigon, November 30, 1961 - 8 p.m.," [Department of State, Central Files, 751K.00/11-3061. Secret; Limit Distribution.] in FRUS: Vietnam 1961, Vol. 1, pp. 698 - 700.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

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was advocating. Yet, and at the same time, it was his duty, as U.S. mission chief in South Vietnam, to adhere to his instructions from Washington and to implement American policy. Nolting also had to placate the frustrations of MAAG chief Lionel McGarr and somehow reconcile the differences of Diem, McGarr and Thompson. Nevertheless, there was one aspect of Thompson's advice that had, clearly, won everyone over and, indeed, as can be seen in the following quotation, truly frightened the Communists with its long term strategic implications as it struck at the salient of the Communist effort. For Thompson had stressed that the real contest was for the hearts and minds of the peasants in rural South Vietnam.

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Agrovilles & Strategic Hamlets

"In Hanoi, in July 1963, the Communist general Nguyen Chi Thanh called the idea of establishing strategic hamlets in order to isolate the Viet Cong "a relatively clearheaded conclusion...Unfortunately for them [the Americans], they are beginning to be assailed by serious misgivings about the correctness of the plan."⁶⁶

There was a Vietnamese predecessor to the British inspired Strategic Hamlets program that was known as *Agroville pacification*. The main purpose of this earlier concept was to strengthen the government's ties with the rural population.⁶⁷ President Diem initiated the agroville program in 1959 and, like the later Strategic Hamlet program, agrovilles involved moving the rural peasants into stronger rural settlements where they could be physically protected from guerrilla coercion, propaganda and terror. The agrovilles were to have facilities such as schools, medical centres, electricity, and other basic social services plus education and training in new agricultural techniques. In addition to this, it was Diem's hope that the agrovilles would "...stabilize the government's authority in the face of increasing incidents of assassination and kidnapping of rural officials."⁶⁸ While the United States government supplied nearly 60 percent of the funding for the agrovilles, through non-defence budgetary expenditures,

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⁶⁶ Hammer, *A Death in November*, p. 41.

⁶⁷ Richard A. Hunt, *Pacification: The American Struggle for Vietnam's Hearts and Minds*, (Boulder, [Colorado]: Westview Press, 1995), p. 20.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

it had hardly any control of the program.⁶⁹ This fact, alone, would weigh substantially in future American involvement with counter-insurgency in South Vietnam, as they would demand more control of program direction and expenditures. For their part, the Viet Cong recognised a potential threat in the agrovilles and thus they "...mounted some small raids on the new settlements but most often employed terrorism and threats against government officials to intimidate people and impede work."⁷⁰ The agrovillage program failed but the reasons why it failed are more complex than allowed by the standard version of their history, which allots the failure to poor planning and mismanagement.⁷¹ As such, William Colby best illuminated this difficult issue in a detailed explanation he gave to Mr. Ted Gittinger of the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library.

Colby noted that the agrovillage program had lots of theoretical potential but developed problems in how it came to be in the real world. Colby's recollection was that Diem had observed how people were stretched out along the canals in the Delta area in such a manner that there could be no central amenities for them to share as a homogenous community.⁷² His plan to change this began in 1959 and it incorporated the concept of moving people closer together so that schools and hospitals, which he had been building, could be accessed by many. This was one

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⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ In this context the reader should peruse Stanley Karnow's work for arguments against the agrovilles. Karnow, *Vietnam*, p. 231.

⁷² According to Dennis Duncanson, an acknowledged authority on the political history of South Vietnam, the agrovilles, or Khu Tru Mat – 'Closer Settlement Areas,' were not initially directed for bringing all rural South Vietnamese closer together. Instead, Duncanson argues, they were to bring 'unreliable families' together in order to divorce them from the sway of the Viet Cong. Duncanson points out that these families were never secure from the Communists' pressures and actions. Duncanson, *Government and Revolution in Vietnam*, pp. 261 – 262.

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of his main thrusts in modernising and organising rural South Vietnam. He wanted all Vietnamese to be aware of and have access to better schools and medical facilities and, thus, encourage in them a modern sense of community which, up until that point, simply had not existed.⁷³

As the families were drawn closer together in the agrovilles they became distanced from their rice-fields but by no great distance as Colby observed. The real problem occurred with defending the space where the families actually lived. For Diem had to allow the agrovilles to incorporate a plot of land with each family dwelling for growing vegetables and maintaining family livestock. These plots of land extended the distance between dwellings to the point that, on average, there were ten family dwellings per square kilometre. This was still closer than they had been when they were stretched out along the canals and it certainly permitted them to access new schools and hospitals. Had there been no insurgency going on the agrovilles probably would have worked but violent reality dictated otherwise and, as such, the agrovilles could not be defended owing to the large areas that the guerrillas could freely move through. Setting up a

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⁷³ "The agrovillage program was one of these theoretical programs, which might have worked, in a different circumstance. It came about because of the nature of South Vietnam and the Delta area, which is a whole series of canals and the people live sort of one-by-one along the canals and stretch out for miles. In 1958 and 1959 when Diem was in this program of developing schools, aid and marketplaces, just the general social and economic structure for the country, it was obvious that this was really a tough thing to handle. How do you handle a school, and particularly a high school, if people are scattered all over the place? So he had a thought that if he could move people closer together to make them into agrovilles, still agriculturally based but in a kind of a city rather than a village or hamlet structure, that that would give population base for a hospital, a decent administration, a school system, not only primary but high school system and so forth. And this looked fine. Move the people together and then give them these amenities, these steps toward modernization and organizing and so forth." William Colby, "William Colby on Vietnam, Interview I." Recorded interview by Ted Gittinger, June 2, 1981 (at Mr. Colby's office in Washington, [DC]), pp. 15 – 16, Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, Oral History Program.

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defended perimeter around several families spread out over a few square kilometres was beyond the resources of the GVN.⁷⁴

The agrovillage program was launched in mid-1959, which was approximately the same time that the Communists in Hanoi had made the decision to resume a policy of violent insurrection in the South. With no defensible centre or perimeter, Viet Cong patrols were able to walk right through the agrovillages. In other words, the agrovillages were wide-open to terrorist penetration, intimidation, and Communist propaganda teams. In this regard, Colby addressed the issue of moving ancestral graves (a point often blown out of proportion by Diem's critics)⁷⁵ as a minor problem compared to the real difficulty of Viet Cong penetration.⁷⁶ In other words, the

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⁷⁴ "Now of course you couldn't separate -- they depended mainly on their rice growing for their livelihood. That they could go out to, no great problem. It's only a couple of miles, no great concern. But they needed something as a plot for vegetables, things local, a pig or something like that, something they could have for their family development, aside from the main cash crop out here. So, the consequent design was -- I've forgotten how much, but let's say a hundred square meters or something like that, which the house was this much and the rest was this garden patch that they could use. Well, that meant, in other words, that [there were] ten families a kilometre square. It spreads kind of far. There is still accumulated enough so that they can support these various economic things. And in a world in which no opposition had occurred, this would have worked, at least it might have worked. Let's give it a half and half. It's worth the experiment and certainly might have brought about these things." *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ Stanley Karnow made the classic complaint with regard to the agrovillage program: "For one thing, peasants assigned to the agrovillage had been uprooted from their native villages and ancestral graves, and their traditional social pattern disrupted, for reasons they could not fathom." Karnow, *Vietnam*, p. 231.

Gabriel Kolko was one of these critics who, nevertheless, remained sufficiently vague in his criticism of the agrovillage program. He merely tells the reader that it was detested by the South Vietnamese and that they did not co-operate with the program but he gives no details or facts. Gabriel Kolko, *Anatomy of a War: Vietnam, the United States, and the Modern Historical Experience*, (New York, [NY]: Pantheon Books, 1985), pp. 96, 103 & 131.

⁷⁶ "The problem was that this launched in about mid-1959, just about the time the communists were deciding it was time to resume the rebellion. Well, when you spread this ten families per kilometre you obviously don't have a defensible center and so an enemy patrol can walk right through the whole thing and there's no way to put up a perimeter that will defend the entire area. This was the Achilles heel of the program, that it came in, would have got going about 1960 at exactly the time that the insurgency was arising and making it fruitless. All this stuff about moving graves and all the rest of it, sure, that's a part of

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agrovillage program failed because the Communists for the purposes of political and physical disruption specifically targeted them and, subsequently, they were effectively destabilised by the actions of Viet Cong operatives.

With the foundering of the agrovilles, Diem began to listen to what Thompson had to say about the necessity of protecting the South Vietnamese rural population from a Communist orchestrated campaign of coercion, intimidation and outright terror. Both Diem and his brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu, recognised the political potential of what it was that Thompson was expounding and, indeed, other Vietnamese leaders testified to this potential:

The strategic hamlet remained a judicious national policy, a true antidote to Communist subversive and total warfare. Its chief merit lay in the fact that it had been comprehensively designed to improve the people's living standards through socio-economic developments at the rice-roots level. It was a sound strategic concept whose objective was to neutralize and counter balance the effects of a war without front lines by transforming the countryside into a system of mutually-supporting fortifications. It sought to build and consolidate the spirit of self-assurance, self-reliance, and voluntary participation which would sustain the nation's efforts in a protracted war of attrition.⁷⁷

Oddly enough, Roger Hilsman, who was no fan of Diem's, agreed with the Vietnamese President over what Thompson was advocating. Hilsman, according to historian Larry Cable, saw great merit in Thompson's "Delta Pacification Plan." He wished to see a reduction on the

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the problem, but if it had developed some economic momentum, I suspect it would have overcome that. But what it couldn't overcome was the deliberate effort to destroy it by the enemy and the inability to defend it." William Colby, "William Colby on Vietnam, Interview I." Recorded interview by Ted Gittinger, June 2, 1981 (at Mr. Colby's office in Washington, [DC]), pp. 15 – 16, Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, Oral History Program.

⁷⁷ General Cao Van Vien and Lt. General Dong Van Khuyen, Reflections on the Vietnam War (Indochina Monographs), Vietnamese Conflict 1961-1975, (Washington, [DC]: United States Army Center For Military History, 1980), p. 9.

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emphasis for traditional military answers in favour of more political pacification programs. "To Hilsman, Thompson's notion offered not simply a tool with which one fought insurgents, but a 'strategic concept based upon a true understanding of the nature of internal war.'"⁷⁸

William Colby, who was in Vietnam at the time of the inauguration of the strategic hamlet program and who had a great deal of contact with Ngo Dinh Nhu with regard to this effort, claimed that, indeed, strategic hamlets worked. Colby's assertions on this were not based upon a false or unrealistic understanding of some of the failures and difficulties associated with the program but, in fact, upon the recognition of the weaknesses and the program's abundant strengths even when these flaws were fully accounted for. He recalled that both he and Diem knew about the stories of hamlets being put together with fake reports of barbed wire being in place when there was none. In fact, Diem had on-going internal reports coming to him, which indicated that there was mal-administration and corruption in the creation of some strategic hamlets. Diem had sent out inspectors whose purpose it was to uncover these very sorts of problems and then report them back to him. Even when his officials were not forthcoming with such evidence he had other channels that relayed what was really going on. Diem's attitude was that these problems were bound to come up during the implementation of such a massive program and that they could be dealt with and fixed along the way. Both Colby and Diem understood that the program was a war-winning one and that it would have to be corrected during and after full implementation.⁷⁹

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⁷⁸ Cable, Conflict of Myths, p. 197.

⁷⁹ "...it's my contention that the strategic hamlet program basically worked the first time. And I know I'm a little contentious about this, and I know the stories about the fake barbed wire and all that sort of thing, and sure, so did Diem. We had some internal reports given to him by some inspectors that he sent out, which were reporting to him the fact that some provinces were cheating on the figures and that there

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Colby went on to relate how Ngo Dinh Nhu perceived something much more positive in the strategic hamlets than even effective protection of the Vietnamese people. Nhu discerned that the strategic hamlets were much more than merely wrapping barbed wire around people, for they engendered a sense of community. They became practical politics in action and thus gave the people a sense of accomplishment and pride in what they were doing. This greater sense of community, then, was new to the people of South Vietnam and it was absolutely necessary if the people were to withstand the onslaught of monolithic Communist politics.⁸⁰

The concept of the strategic hamlet in South Vietnam was not as intrusive as some of its detractors have tried to suggest. For French and Vietnamese scholars, most familiar with the history of Vietnamese settlement in Cochin China, argued that the settlement patterns that were in place at the time of the introduction of the strategic hamlets were, in fact, of recent date.⁸¹

Further to this, it was noted that "As the Vietnamese advanced into the southern areas, in the

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was abuse of the peasantry and all the rest of it. This wasn't a surprise to him, that his machinery was keeping secrets from him, because he had those reports, we know of it. Those are the problems you have when you take on a major program and try to make it work. In some places it doesn't work and you go out and tinker with it and fix it. That's the purpose of having that kind of independent inspection and reporting and so forth about the vulnerabilities and the abuses and the wrong things that happened, so that you can correct them. That's the whole idea of the thing. And the fact that you get these reports doesn't mean that the program is no good. If you just let it go, yes, then the program is no good. But if you then fix it, and fire somebody or change the program in some area to match the problem or whatever, which he was gradually doing...." William Colby, "William Colby on Vietnam, Interview I." Recorded interview by Ted Gittinger, June 2, 1981 (at Mr. Colby's office in Washington, [DC]), pp. 17 – 18, Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, Oral History Program.

⁸⁰ "Because he [Nhu] was stressing that what you were interested in here was a political movement, a political action to generate a sense of community on the part of these people, not to wrap barbed wire around them, but to get them to take a role and a pride in what they're doing and in participating. I think he [Nhu] was right, and it was essentially that philosophy that we returned to later, there's no question about it." *Ibid.*

⁸¹ Milton E. Osborne, *Strategic Hamlets in South Vietnam: A Survey and a Comparison*, Data Paper: Number 55, Southeast Asia Program - Department of Asian Studies, (Ithaca, [New York]: Cornell University - Southeast Asia Program, 1965 - Second Printing 1968), p. 20.

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seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, they made use of settlement techniques which sound an echo of fortified hamlets of more recent years."⁸² Again, there seems to be some evidence to suggest that the strategic hamlets were not as alien and intrusive to Vietnamese culture as some American critics have tried to claim.⁸³

Strategic hamlets, as envisioned by both Diem and Nhu, held out the promise of overcoming an historical political flaw in South Vietnam's rural political culture, as Milton Osborne explains:

But while it seems likely that in the early period of Vietnamese settlement the colonists grouped together in the traditional close pattern of settlement, this did not remain the norm. Villages in the Mekong Delta area of Viet-Nam spread out along the rivers, canals [- as noted earlier in this discussion on agrovilles by William Colby] and paths in a long, extended fashion with each farmer living close to his land. Hickey in his study [G.C. Hickey, "Problems of Social Change in Viet-Nam," in Bulletin de la Societe des Etudes Indochinoises, n. ser., Tome XXXIII, No. 4, 1958, p. 413] of southern villages maintains that the relatively recent establishment of these villages has lessened the attachment to old Confucian ideals and forms of behaviour. One may need, therefore, to qualify the comments made by Paul Mus [a leading French scholar on the history of Indochina] on the Vietnamese village as a close-knit entity when one considers the south, since there is some suggestion that the sense of cohesiveness was not so great.... Mus' picture of the peasant within the village as isolated from the central authority of his country seems true for the south, as do his comments on the peasants' view of the 'mandate of heaven (see Paul Mus, Viet-Nam, Sociologie d'une guerre, [Paris, 1952], pp. 23-32).' In the case of this concept, it seems clear that the peasants' estimation of the Government's authority and desirability would hinge on the effectiveness of the

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⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ This writer has participated in this debate amongst historians in the United States and calls upon the authority of both William Colby and Sir Robert Thompson for supporting the strategic hamlet concept. To be fair, it should be noted that there are other notable authorities, such as Dr. Larry Cable, who do not concur with the findings of the pro-hamlet argument and claim that the strategic hamlets were, indeed, alien, intrusive, and counter-productive.

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*administration. If the Government proved unable to protect him and his family, then it was, presumably, no longer blessed by the 'mandate'.*⁸⁴

Ngo Dinh Diem and his brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu, understood perfectly well the Confucian concept of the 'mandate of heaven' as they had been raised with such principles by their father, who had been a traditional Confucian mandarin to the Emperor's Court in the city of Hue. The Ngo Dinh brothers accepted the fact that before the Western academic constructs of "democracy" could be even looked at it was paramount that protection be granted the rural Vietnamese if they wanted their support. Thus, strategic hamlets fit like hand in glove to the necessity of Diem's political legitimacy in South Vietnam. Indeed and as previously noted, there was even an historic precedent for the strategic hamlets in South Vietnam and, yet, for the most part, this Vietnamese imperative seemed to escape the analysis of most Americans. Excluding Colby, Nolting, et al., Washington would continue to 'pound-the-table' about enacting democratic freedoms while Diem would continue to implore that such luxuries could only come later after he had been shown to have the 'mandate of heaven.' To the Vietnamese way of thinking, and this was certainly the way that Diem thought, the peasants had to be protected first, then given a sense of community and the strategic hamlet program offered the GVN just this.

While the North had an actual tradition of fortifying villages the first modern effort under the Diem government actually took place in 1960 directed by the province chief of Ninh Thuan, Colonel Khanh.⁸⁵ Khanh had gained experience assisting the French in fortifying

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⁸⁴ Osborne, Strategic Hamlets in South Vietnam, p. 20.

⁸⁵ William A. Nighswonger, Rural Pacification in Vietnam, [Praeger Special Studies in International Politics and Public Affairs] (New York, [NY]: Frederick A. Praeger, Publishers, 1966), p. 54.

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villages in North Vietnam's Red River Delta and was able to transfer this knowledge to the South wherein he had several villages set-up with volunteer militia and fences.⁸⁶ Another early experimental defended village took place in Darlac province, in the village of Trung Hoa under the direction of a Catholic priest "...the Catholic priest had led in the construction of defences and had asked in May, 1961, for thirty shotguns to help defend the village from Viet-Cong incursions."⁸⁷ It was Ngo Dinh Nhu who managed to weld all the former Vietnamese experiences with defended villages or hamlets together with the British advice and thus he "...created the conceptual framework for the plan and set its pace for completion."⁸⁸ The best overview and summary available in the documents, that are concerned with strategic hamlets and Ngo Din Nhu's attempts to bond them into an ideological/ strategic whole, is found in William Colby's recollections on the subject. For Colby, quite correctly, placed the concept of strategic hamlets in the context of a variety of counter insurgency ideas that were being reviewed, not only by the American mission in Vietnam but, also, by the British in concert with Ngo Dinh Diem and Ngo Dinh Nhu.

As Colby pointed out, the initial American response to the escalating insurgent effort was entirely predictable and formed up the backbone of the Taylor report and recommendations. This was, in effect, a ruse that Taylor had thought up to get an American combat unit deployed into the Delta region of South Vietnam's Mekong River under the pretence that it would be engaged in "flood relief."⁸⁹ Colby noted that the Pentagon also wanted to counter the proposals

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⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 55.

⁸⁹ Colby, Lost Victory, p. 98.

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of the British Advisory Mission by stressing that the real focus for fighting the insurgents had to be a military one and not the police approach which Thompson had spoken to Diem about. General Lyman Lemnitzer, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, was particularly adamant on this issue and would not countenance the idea of police replacing the military even for local force work.⁹⁰ The American military were, clearly, not happy with the British ideas and they resented Diem's gravitation toward the non-military police approach advocated by Thompson.⁹¹ Ngo Dinh Nhu, however, was far ahead of everyone else in thinking of counter insurgency and political legitimacy as they pertained to the particular nuances of South Vietnam, as Colby recalled.

Ngo Dinh Nhu met on a weekly basis with William Colby when the two men would discuss the strengths and organisation of the Communist insurgents and, then, attempt to come up with viable alternatives for rural South Vietnam. Clearly, Nhu was impressed with the Communists' ability to recruit and organise the rural population from small guerrilla units through to main force battalions. Nhu admitted to Colby that it was obvious that the ARVN could not stop the organisational juggernaut that the Communists had put into action. He also realised that infinite detailed planning in Saigon, in the various Ministries, translated into little

Footnotes

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 98 - 99.

⁹¹ "The JCS was far from happy with the shift toward the Malaya-inspired Strategic Hamlet system. The Chiefs had not embraced the notion joyously, but had accepted it as a necessary expedient. The fear was that the Hamlet approach was not only essentially one of a defensive nature, but one more suitable for a police than a military force. In the estimate of many, the situation in Vietnam had degenerated to a level which police mechanisms could not deal with effectively." Cable, Conflict of Myths, p. 191.

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out in the countryside and that the political depths of his own Can Lao Party was insubstantial compared to the Communists' political apparatus.⁹²

With the recognition that the GVN was failing to motivate the rural peasants in a cohesive manner Colby and Nhu began to explore the various means through which such inspiration could come. They realised that the rural communities had to be stimulated into defending themselves from the nocturnal infiltration and raids that the Viet Cong were so masterfully carrying out. Even a few armed villagers would be able to prevent the Communist agit-prop teams from assembling villagers for night-time political harangues and recruiting. Most important of all, these armed villagers would be able to prevent the collection of taxes by the Viet Cong.⁹³

Footnotes

⁹² "But one Vietnamese did begin to rethink the strategy of the war - Ngo Dinh Nhu. In my weekly meetings with him, we laboriously thought our way through the Communist strategy, and success in organising the rural population and building a "people's army" from local defense forces to guerrilla units to local and main force battalions. It was clear that the Vietnamese Army, however well equipped with helicopters, artillery, and bombers, was not going to arrest this process. Nhu was also convinced that the Ministerial bureaucracies, with the development programs they planned in infinite detail in Saigon offices and then sent to the provinces for implementation, would not be able to stem the flow either. Nhu also began to realize that his Can Lao Party apparatus had no roots in the rural communities where the contest with the Communists was taking place." Colby, Lost Victory, pp. 98 -100.

⁹³ "We thus began to discuss how a community could be inspired and stimulated to organise itself under its own local leaders and set up at least rudimentary defenses that would be effective against the infiltration of recruiting and proselytising schools. A determined military or guerrilla attack would, of course, require help from the nearby territorial forces. I had stressed to Nhu the obvious point that a very few armed Communists could not only enter but totally dominate a village whose local security unit had buttoned itself into its fort for the night. Even a few armed villagers who gave the alarm and fired a few shots at them, however, would make it impossible for them to carry out their program of assembling the villagers for speeches, recruiting and - a vital item - collection of taxes." Ibid.

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Nhu, according to Colby, was looking beyond static defence in the strategic hamlets as he began to envision them as a strategic political weapon of the offensive.⁹⁴ He recognised that they held a more realistic potential for nation-building than had the ill-fated agrovilles. More than this, however, he believed that the strategic hamlets could constitute the foundation for a new and unprecedented social and political order. This new polity, then, would find its roots in rural South Vietnam and it would replace the spoiled decadent elite in Saigon that had become a spectre of French Colonial days. Nevertheless, Nhu had some concerns that if the Americans had too large a hand in the strategic hamlets that they would undo the necessary desire within the South Vietnamese for self-reliance. Douglas Pike recalled, in 1966, that Nhu was very strident about this point.⁹⁵ He was worried that the sheer bounty and wealth of American economic aid programs would spoil the nation-building spirit that he had come to observe in the strategic hamlet program. For his part, Colby was not as concerned about the 'spoiling' effects of

Footnotes

⁹⁴ Colby was not the only one to realise what Nhu had envisioned in the strategic hamlet program as Dennis J. Duncanson had also drawn attention to this revelation of Nhu's: "... Nhu soon came to the conclusion that the regime would have to forge itself a new weapon if it was to survive. It took him a whole year to work out what the weapon would be – it was in fact the 'strategic hamlet' -," Duncanson, Government and Revolution in Vietnam, p. 271.

⁹⁵ Douglas Pike ran head-long into Nhu's adamant stance on the Vietnamese becoming too dependent on aid: "The author attended a dedication of a strategic hamlet at which Ngo Dinh Nhu spoke. Afterwards a delegation of village elders approached Nhu with a request for aid in building a school. He replied 'The government's means are stretched now to their limit. Do not rely on outside aid. First build a revolution within yourself. Then build the school with your own hands.' After the delegation left, Americans present pointed out to him that he was in a barter-economy village, that obviously the people did not have the money to build a school, equip it with books and supplies, and hire a teacher. He brushed aside their comments with 'You do not understand these villagers. Satisfy one demand and they would return with ten more.'" Douglas Pike, Viet Cong: The Organization and Techniques of the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam, (Cambridge, [MA]: The Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1967), pp. 66 – 67.

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American largesse as he was excited over the fact that Nhu had grasped a plan that held the necessary political elements for defeating the Communists.⁹⁶

Colby was able to convince Nhu that he should get out into the rural areas of South Vietnam and witness the inception of strategic hamlets. Nhu listened to Colby and became convinced that it was, indeed, the right approach to defeating the Communists while building a nation. With his combined theoretical knowledge and subsequent practical understanding of strategic hamlets Nhu was able to convince Diem to make the program a major national undertaking.⁹⁷ Diem's past practical experience as an exemplary village and district chief would have predisposed him to the pragmatic benefits of the strategic hamlet program as he was deeply concerned with how to improve the lives of the people at the 'rice-paddy' level.⁹⁸

Footnotes

⁹⁶ "As I described developments at Buon Enao and some of the other experiments we were conducting, Nhu looked beyond their potential contribution to defense against the Communists to how they could constitute the basis for a new Vietnamese social and political community, built up from the rural areas to replace the elites left over from French Colonial times. He was concerned that too great an American role in such a program could corrupt this process, tempting the peasants to become dependent on American economic aid programs and other tangibles, instead of developing self-reliance. All of this was long on theory and short on practicalities, but it was exciting to watch Nhu's mind work and gradually formulate elements of what I thought could be a basic strategy for the government to follow to build a real political foundation of new and locally based rural leaders. From them could develop the leadership of a free and authentic Vietnam, neither Communist nor Western in culture or character." Colby, Lost Victory, pp. 98 -100.

⁹⁷ "Eventually I was able to persuade Nhu to leave the Palace to see on the ground some of our experiments and confirm the positive reports he and Diem were receiving from those involved in them. By the end of 1961, Nhu was sufficiently convinced of the validity of the approach - and his own concepts had matured enough - that he was able to convince Diem to make a major national program of the technique, under the name of "strategic hamlets." Ibid.

⁹⁸ Anne Miller, And One For The People: The Life Story of President Ngo Dinh Diem; Volume II; Unpublished Manuscript, dated July 30, 1955. (Professor Douglas Pike gave this copy to the writer in 1995); pp. 337 - 346.

Copies of this manuscript will be available through the Indochina Archive at the Vietnam Center, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, Texas.

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For his part, throughout the process of negotiating a counter insurgency plan with the GVN, Ambassador Nolting had followed Washington's instructions. With regard to Sir Robert Thompson's alternate counter insurgency proposals to Ngo Dinh Diem, Nolting had been absolutely scrupulous, above-board, and cordially blunt. The American ambassador had liked much of what he had heard in the British ideas but he had also openly and frankly objected to the procedural and substantive problems with these ideas which permitted the Vietnamese to circumvent American controls on their own Counter-Insurgency Plan. In other words, throughout the process of formulating the CIP for South Vietnam Nolting had been faithful to the United States Government's directions. There is simply nothing in the historical record that could even remotely validate the claims of Nolting's detractors with regard to him being not objective in his ambassadorial role and under the sway of the Ngo Dinhs.⁹⁹

Footnotes

⁹⁹ These detractors would have to include the subtle Karnow, *Vietnam*, pp. 262 – 263. The reader can also count on the not so subtle Fitzgerald, *Fire In The Lake*, p. 169. With regard to studying the works of those writers who acted upon the belief that there is no such thing as objectivity, one can peruse the not subtle at all Halberstam, *The Making of a Quagmire*, pp. 208 – 209.

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Chapter Five: Policemen Versus Soldiers, the Debate Leading to MAAG Objections & Washington Rejections of the Core of the British Counter-Insurgency Advice

Ngo Dinh Nhu's Perspective on the Thompson Counter-Insurgency Advice:

William Colby gave full-acknowledgement to Robert Thompson's impact on the discussion of designing a strategic hamlet program.¹ Nhu had obviously taken to heart Thompson's argument that the direction MAAG and the GVN had taken was wrong. For Thompson had told the Americans that the real fight was between the Communists and South Vietnam's citizens not between Diem and the Viet Cong.² Thus, Colby claimed, Nhu acted upon Thompson's advice and went even further with his own contributions to the British counter insurgency advice.

There was, in fact, a subtle but substantial difference between the two men's concepts of how a strategic hamlet should be initially conceived. It was Thompson's experience that dictated that there had to be an administrative action that surrounded the fledgling strategic hamlet community with security.³ The purpose of this initial police/military action was to control and protect the hamlet inhabitants and, thus, sever their links with the guerrillas outside. Nhu and Colby, however, had worked out the direction that argued for the security beginning from within

Footnotes

¹ Colby, Lost Victory, p. 100.

² Colonel Howard L. Burris, "136. Memorandum From the Vice President's Military Aide (Burris) to Vice President Johnson," Washington, March 30, 1962, [Source: Johnson Library, Vice Presidential Security Files, Memos from Colonel Burris, Jan. 1961 – June 1962. Secret.] in FRUS: Vietnam 1962, Volume II, 1961 – 1963; John P. Glennon, editor in chief, (Washington, [DC]: United States Government Printing Office, 1990), pp. 284 – 285.

³ "While all this is being created during the hold phase of operations, the close defence of the hamlet must be provided by the paramilitary forces, with the army holding the ring to prevent attacks by major insurgent units. Both the paramilitary forces and the army should be so deployed at this stage that they can rescue hamlets if attacked by more than local village guerrilla squads, which the hamlet militia should be capable of keeping at bay." Thompson, Defeating Communist Insurgency, p. 124.

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the hamlet itself. The necessary security, they believed, would emanate out from a strong political core in the strategic hamlet.⁴

Ngo Dinh Nhu took over the formal leadership and public responsibility for the strategic hamlet program and acknowledged as much in a memorandum sent to Harriman in April of 1962.⁵ In order to inaugurate the program, Nhu put together committees that held lectures and discussions with special cadres whose purpose it was to organise the strategic hamlets.⁶ Nhu established three salient goals for the program: first of all, the government would link the peasants in the strategic hamlets into a communications network, while also providing them with local defence units who could fight off insurgent raids.⁷ In addition to this, it was planned that the local defence units could establish an emergency reserve that could rapidly deploy to meet immediate security needs.⁸ Secondly, it was planned that the program should be able to motivate the people to unite and get involved in governmental affairs and overcome the traditional apathy

Footnotes

⁴ "Robert Thompson of the British Advisory Mission (whatever General Lemnitzer's view back in Washington of the adaptability of Thompson's successful technique in Malaya to an American supported Vietnam) certainly influenced the process, but Nhu stressed that the security of the hamlet should begin within it and gradually build the necessary defences around that essentially political core. Thompson's Malayan experience suggested essentially an administrative action, surrounding the community with security so that its inhabitants could be controlled and their links to the guerrillas outside severed. I share Nhu's view, of course, having argued its advantages with him, so this difference between Thompson and myself persisted for years. We so closely agreed on the necessity of a village-based approach, however, over the military one that we remained the closest of friends and collaborators [my emphasis]." Colby, Lost Victory, p. 100.

⁵ Nhu's executive control of the strategic hamlet program was noted in a memorandum sent by the Director of the Vietnam Task Force, Sterling J. Cottrell, to Averell Harriman on April 6, 1962. Sterling J. Cottrell, "149. Memorandum From the Director of the Vietnam Task Force (Cottrell) to the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs (Harriman)," Washington, April 6, 1962, [Source: Department of State, Vietnam Working Group Files: Lot 67 D 54, Pol. 7. Secret.] in FRUS: Vietnam 1962, Vol. II, p. 311.

⁶ Osborne, Strategic Hamlets in South Vietnam, p. 26.

⁷ Hunt, Pacification, p. 21.

⁸ Ibid.

to politics in the peasants' lives. Thirdly, and most important to the practical-minded Ngo Dinh Diem, the program was supposed to improve the living standards of the rural Vietnamese.⁹

With above noted goals in mind, and as intimated in the previous chapter, Nhu was attempting to come up with a comprehensive political and practical alternative to the Communist attempts to seize political legitimacy in the countryside. To his reasoning, it was essential that the people have something that was tangible and that they could take pride in as their own.¹⁰ Nhu went into some detail to explain the mechanism for achieving these goals and the reason for their existence in the first place in a conversation with Rufus Phillips,¹¹ CIA operative subordinate to William Colby and Special Consultant for Counter-insurgency, United States Operation Mission.

What is particularly important for the reader to note is the fact that, true to what Colby had claimed about Nhu, he was out in the field trying to determine just how his theories were impacting on real people. Contrary to the bias of the New York Times reporters,¹² Nhu was not merely a disembodied intellect brooding in his study in Saigon. Rufus Phillips recalled that Nhu had told him he had been uncertain about strategic hamlets until he was able to get out into the

Footnotes

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ William Colby, "William Colby on Vietnam, Interview 1." Recorded interview by Ted Gittinger, June 2, 1981 (at Mr. Colby's office in Washington, [DC]). Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, Oral History Program (the University of Texas at Austin); p. 18.

¹¹ Rufus Phillips, 227. "Memorandum From the Special Consultant for Counter-insurgency, United States Operation Mission (Phillips), to the acting Director of the Mission (Fippin)," (Saigon, June 25, 1962), [Washington National Records Center, RG 84, Saigon Embassy Files: FRC 67 A 677, 350. Counter-insurgency Plan. Secret.], in FRUS: Vietnam 1962, Vol. II, pp. 470 - 471.

This writer has had the opportunity to meet with Rufus Phillips at a conference given by the LBJ Library (Ted Gittinger, et al.) in the fall of 1993. Phillips touched upon the strategic hamlet issue at that time, amongst other topics. His recollections seem to have been consistent with the memorandums that he was writing back in 1962.

¹² A classic example of this 'New York Times' writer's bias can be gleaned straight from David Halberstam's own writing: "Nhu made no attempt to conceal his lack of interest in the needs of the Vietnamese people; he was an intellectual and an aristocrat, and they were not." David Halberstam, The Making of a Quagmire, (New York, [NY]: Random House, 1965), p. 51.

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rural areas, visit the hamlets, and hold meetings with strategic hamlet teams, hamlet chiefs, district chiefs and their respective committees. These trips convinced Nhu that the theory was starting to work itself out in reality, in the field.¹³

Nhu related to Phillips his view that the strategic hamlets could defeat the Communists while the program could also, simultaneously, assist the Vietnamese people in their drive to overcome problems of underdevelopment in the rural areas. He envisioned the concept of 'grass-roots' democracy blossoming out of the strategic hamlets because they incorporated democratic principles at a practical level that the people could understand. Nhu saw this as much more desirable than attempting to impose democracy from Saigon. For the Saigon imposed model had only brought anarchy and the need for more dictatorial powers to be exercised by the central authority in order to combat the anarchy.¹⁴ Relatedly, Nhu stated that it was his belief that in war-torn Vietnam it was possible to win the war against the Communists by expanding the 'grass-roots' democracy at the hamlet level. Thus he argued, this was the strategy to win the war: "...we

Footnotes

¹³ "1. Mr. Nhu said that although he had originated the strategic hamlet program, it was only an idea, a "pipe-dream", to him until the last four months. Since that time he has been making constant trips to the provinces, particularly to the south. During his more recent trips, all ceremonies were eliminated and he insisted on only single course meals. Most of his time was consumed by visits to hamlets and meetings with strategic hamlet teams, hamlet chiefs, province chiefs, district chiefs and committees. These discussions often lasted as long as five hours. He found the trips very tiring but at the same time exhilarating because he had been able to test out his theories about strategic hamlets through actual experience." Rufus Phillips, 227. "Memorandum From the Special Consultant for Counter-insurgency, United States Operation Mission (Phillips), to the acting Director of the Mission (Fippin)," (Saigon, June 25, 1962), [Washington National Records Center, RG 84, Saigon Embassy Files: FRC 67 A 677, 350. Counter-insurgency Plan. Secret.], in FRUS: Vietnam 1962, Vol. II, pp. 470 - 471.

¹⁴ "2. He viewed the strategic hamlets as a means to defeat communism while, at the same time, overcoming the problems of an underdeveloped country. These problems, in addition to communism, were separatism among various groups of the population and inherited systems of privileges. He said the imposition of democracy at the top in a under-developed country brought anarchy, which resulted in dictatorship. Democracy must be instituted at a level where the people can understand it and where it can be a revolution to eliminate the existing system of privileges and the defeatism and separatism which exists in the minds of the people." Ibid.

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shall use war against communism as a means to introduce democracy and we shall use democracy to win the war.”¹⁵

Ngo Dinh Nhu was absolutely consistent and adamant on the issue that democracy must flow from out of the strategic hamlets. He perceived that free election of the hamlet chiefs and hamlet councils was a central pillar to the successful structure of the entire program. He was so concerned that this point was understood by the people in the hamlets that when he visited them he conducted investigations into how their local elections were held. For example, Nhu would tell hamlet councils and district committees that elections held by a show of hands were not good enough. Hamlet governments elected by these means could only be considered provisional and they would have to be replaced or they had to be endorsed by elections with secret ballot voting. Nhu was adamant in his instructions to the GVN cadres working in the strategic hamlets that they could not tell the people whom they should vote for.¹⁶

Nhu was also very clear about his belief that the Viet Cong should be allowed to surrender and rejoin the GVN side as they became demoralised by the successes of the strategic hamlet program. His ideas on this issue were in keeping with the British experience in Malaya

Footnotes

¹⁵ “3. In time of war people think you must suppress democracy to win. To the contrary, he said, we shall use war against communism as a means to introduce democracy and we shall use democracy to win the war. This is the strategic concept.” Ibid.

¹⁶ “4. Free elections of the hamlet chief and hamlet council are the key to success of the strategic hamlets. The first thing Nhu asks when he visits a hamlet and talks to hamlet council is how were the elections conducted. He tells the district committees (for strategic hamlets) that hamlet governments elected by a show of hands are only provisional. If they are not sure of a hamlet, they may have an initial provisional election through a show of hands. However, they must have an election by secret ballot before the strategic hamlet (civic action) team goes on to another hamlet and before the hamlet can receive a charter (which Nhu describes as a social contract between the province and the hamlet). He tells the cadres working in the hamlets that they must not tell the people who to vote for; otherwise the election defeats its own purpose. If the cadres want a particular person to be elected, that person must prove himself to the people working harder than the others. If he deserves to be elected, he will be elected.” Ibid.

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where the guerrillas had been encouraged to switch sides. The idea was not to kill Viet Cong but to win them over and this concept later became known as the 'open arms' program.¹⁷

For his part, William Colby discerned that Nhu had embarked on a program that had real potential for stopping and reversing Communist political advances in the countryside. As such, Colby directed that all CIA special projects should be incorporated and, in some cases, subordinated to Nhu's revolutionary program:

Those local officials who had a CIA-sponsored project in their area (and by 1962 there were some 30,000 armed members of such projects throughout the country) had an advantage of course, as they could - and did - simply fold their projects into the strategic hamlets program, giving them an instant accomplishment to report. And despite some grumbling, from the Station about the loss of our direct influence over the experimental communities we had armed, I saw their incorporation into the strategic hamlets program as a means by which the approach they represented could become the much-needed fundamental strategy of the Diem Government to fight the people's war it faced. I thus welcomed this as a step taking us beyond the limited capabilities of the CIA to a national effort.¹⁸

According to Colby's account, he was not the only influential American to swing full-support behind Nhu's rapidly expanding program as Ambassador Nolting directed the entire United States mission in South Vietnam to assist the South Vietnamese:

The Americans were somewhat bewildered by the sudden appearance of a major activity that had not been processed through their complex co-ordinating staffs. Under the leadership of Ambassador Nolting, however, they subordinated their injured pride and swung into support of what appeared to be a genuinely Vietnamese initiative.¹⁹

Footnotes

¹⁷ "5. In answer to a question whether he did not think the Government should attract the Viet Cong to surrender, he said that this was very necessary. He said he had indications that the strategic hamlets were demoralising the Viet Cong. He felt that the Government should urge them to surrender and rejoin their families. Special fortified or combat hamlets might be established with these families as volunteers to fight the Viet Cong." *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Colby, *Lost Victory*, p. 101.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 101 - 102.

What also should be noted here is the fact that Roger Hilsman tried to claim credit for the Strategic Hamlet program when, in fact, his ideas were, essentially, borrowed from Thompson and, if any American

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Ambassador Nolting was not silent on the issue of his support for the counter-insurgency direction that the strategic hamlets program was going in and, indeed, he defended it on a number of occasions, such as in his telegrams to the Department of State. For example, he argued that the American Task Force on Counter Insurgency did have the means of carrying out US Government policy in the allocation of resources and funding for the strategic hamlets and, regardless of the GVN/Thompson direction preferences,²⁰ this was happening.²¹

Nolting informed Washington that it was absolutely clear that the GVN was committed to carrying out the strategic hamlet program on a nation-wide basis. He emphasised that, while there were obvious risks for local failures in such a massive program, the experts in Vietnam held that there was no substantial risk that the program would prove fatal to the GVN. Contrary to the negative position that Averell Harriman took on this issue,²² the impression amongst the counter

... footnote continued from previous page:

did have a direct influence on the actual conceptualisation of Nhu's program, it would have been William Colby. Nevertheless, Hilsman would go on record as being one of the major critics of the way Nhu implemented the program. Roger Hilsman interviews with Graduate Student Kent M. Streeb of Reston, Virginia (November 26, 1994): [this paper/interview is available through Douglas Pike and the Indochina Archive]. Hilsman's criticisms, for what they are worth, can be seen in his memoirs To Move A Nation, (Garden City, [NY]: Doubleday Publishers, 1967), p. 464.

²⁰ The American Task Force concerned with Counter-Insurgency Planning had drawn up their geographically phased approach in January of 1962. This Outline Plan placed the emphasis on defending the environs of Saigon – War Zone D, etc. before defending the Mekong River/Delta Zone outlined by Thompson. This Task Force document can be perused by the reader in Appendix E.

²¹ “84. For Viet Nam Working Group. Deptel 61. Although Task Force Saigon fully appreciates importance establishment geographical priorities for Strategic Hamlet program, we favor somewhat different approach from that suggested refel. As Dept aware, Task Force some time ago agreed on geographically phased counter-insurgency program including priorities (Emb despatch 429). This program has served as basis US advice to GVN on Strategic Hamlet Program and in deciding allocation of US resources to specific clear and hold operations. Believe we now have more effective means of applying these priorities de facto to ongoing Strategic Hamlet Program....” Frederick Nolting, “ 245. Telegram From the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State,” Saigon, July 20, 1962 -7 p.m., [Department of State, Central Files, 751k.5/7-2062. Confidential; Priority.], in FRUS: Vietnam, 1962, Vol. II, pp. 539 - 540.

²² “Harriman doubted the upbeat military reports and dismissed General Harkins's assessment that defeat of the guerrillas was in sight. He was dubious about what he heard from the American embassy because he considered Ambassador Frederick Nolting too close to Diem. ... What troubled him...was the mess made of the strategic hamlet program. The enclaves had not been located in a manner to create an expanding secure zone. Instead, they had been set up at breakneck speed across the country, many of them

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insurgency experts in Saigon was that even where the program was stretching itself 'thin' it was causing enormous problems for the Viet Cong.²³ Thus, Nolting told Washington that the task force in Saigon believed the Diem/Nhu drive in the program was causing an undeniable momentum that should be welcomed by the US Government.²⁴

Ambassador Nolting assured the State Department that the American task force in Saigon was in constant touch with Thompson and that he seemed to agree with the way the program was

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no more secure than the old villages whose inhabitants had been uprooted and driven into hamlets as virtual prisoners." Abramson, Spanning the Century, pp. 608 & 610.

The reader should note that it was quite obvious that Harriman had 'purchased' the anti-Diemist line which emanated from the American Press as, indeed, his 'concerns' were not warranted by the facts that the like of Thompson had observed in rural South Vietnam. Here, in direct refutation of the Harriman stance is the Thompson analysis: "When the strategic hamlet programme was started in Vietnam at the beginning of 1962 (although some good work in this direction had already been done in a few provinces during the previous two years), it was estimated that about 11,000 strategic and defended hamlets would be required, of which about 50 per cent would require only minor regrouping, i.e. the relocation of only a few scattered houses nearer to the centre of the hamlet; that about 30 per cent would require major regrouping, i.e. about half the houses would have to be relocated; that about 15 per cent would have to be completely regrouped, i.e. considerably more than half the houses would have to be relocated; and that the remaining 5 per cent might have to be moved to completely new sites. In all the first three cases it was not the intention that any householder should be relocated more than a reasonable distance from his land, i.e. up to a maximum of three miles. Only in the remaining 5 per cent was it likely to be necessary to move all houses entirely to a new site, a measure that would entail loss of existing land.... It may come as a surprise to learn that, both in Vietnam and in Malaya, there were many occasions when large numbers of the population asked to be moved and did so voluntarily without any pressure being brought to bear on them. In fact it can be said that, throughout, the Vietnamese peasant understood perfectly well the whole purpose in the programme, and was prepared to play his part in carrying it out even to the extent of devoting full-time labour for the construction work involved." Thompson, Defeating Communist Insurgency, pp. 122 & 127.

²³ "GVN is firmly and publicly committed to pushing program on nation-wide basis. While this is bound to result in some failures, we do not think that there is any substantial risk that these will be "fatal to GVN". Our impression is that even where the program appears to be spread quite "thin", it is causing VC trouble. Moreover, GVN, specifically Nhu and MinInterior, are aware of risks and are now insisting that hamlets be established in most secure areas first." Frederick Nolting, " 245. Telegram From the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State," Saigon, July 20, 1962 -7 p.m., [Department of State, Central Files, 751k.5/7-2062. Confidential; Priority.], in FRUS: Vietnam, 1962, Vol. II, pp. 539 - 540.

²⁴ "In sum, Task Force Saigon believes should welcome undeniable momentum behind Strategic Hamlet Program, seek to impose priorities on it by device of concentrating resources under US control on areas considered most important, and accept as divided any benefits which flow from operations of program in other areas." Ibid.

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moving ahead.²⁵ Nolting, however, was pressed hard by the like of Averell Harriman over the effectiveness of the strategic hamlets and other GVN counter-insurgency tactics.²⁶ Similarly, the news media, particularly the New York Times reporter, David Halberstam, and AP reporter, Neil Sheehan, had been pressing their own attacks against Diem's government and Nolting's support of the counter-insurgency campaign.²⁷

Thompson and the British Advisory viewed the strategic hamlets as a means whereby they could 'gut' the Communists of any political legitimacy. The British recognised that armies tended, by their very nature, to lend a certain amount of political legitimacy to their opponents. On the other hand, proper police forces maintained an air of law and order and, accordingly, by their nature, cast a mantle of criminality upon their opponents. After all, policemen arrest and jail

Footnotes

²⁵ "We are in regular touch with Thompson and believe above is in accord with his own thinking.... In discussion with Pres Diem July 19, he raised question priorities in Strategic Hamlet Program, saying he understood our desire to gear our aid programs to the Strategic Hamlet Program, and need for priorities. He said that general priorities are: (a) in white areas extending into blue and eventually red; (b) in the richest and most heavily populated parts of the Delta, roughly the ten provinces of the Delta Plan; (c) in areas, especially coastal plains of central provinces, where Viet Cong pressure greatest and danger of cutting the country greatest." Ibid.

²⁶ In a letter from Harriman, addressed to "Dear Fritz," the Assistant Secretary for Far Eastern Affairs masterfully raises questions that, in effect, amount to criticisms of the whole counter-insurgency effort and Diem's government. For example: "I would like your views on whether we are doing everything possible to put in administrative support in villages which have been recently liberated...While I realize that progress is being made in improving the GVN's image, for example President Diem's speech at the opening of the National Assembly, I am still concerned that the Viet Cong propagand machine is more effective. In general I think that the question will be solved through concrete steps taken to help the villagers, while unfounded public claims by the GVN will only hurt their cause.... In general I feel that we are doing better militarily but that more must be done to help the villagers themselves, not only by arming them more rapidly but also socially and economically." Averell Harriman, 300. "Letter from the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs (Harriman) to the Ambassador in Vietnam (Nolting)," Washington, October 12, 1962, [Department of State, Vietnam Working Group Files: Lot 66 D 307, Vietnam Correspondence. Secret;] in FRUS: Vietnam, 1962, Vol. II, pp. 693 - 696.

²⁷ Halberstam, for one, seemed almost blind in his cynicism vis-à-vis the strategic hamlet program. His descriptions of the preceding agrovillage program and his lack of detailed historical depth managed to create a completely false picture of where the concept had come from, who thought it up, and how it was implemented. He attacked it with such emotion that he overlooked nearly all its justifiably worthwhile points and, indeed, positive accomplishments. Halberstam, The Making of a Quagmire, pp. 184 - 187.

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criminals - they don't necessarily want to slay them as enemies on a battlefield or put them in prisoner of war camps. It was this fundamental principle which seemed to be missed, almost continually, by the Americans in their search for greater efficacy in counter-insurgency (which always translated into haste). Thompson, however, was quite clear about this on a number of occasions, as he duly noted in his plan, which was presented to President Ngo Dinh Diem, for pacification for the Mekong Delta. Amongst other things, Thompson, in fact, had to overcome some of Diem's toughest fears that such a program would be too disruptive to the Vietnamese farmer at that time.

*"...It should lead by stages to a reorganisation of the government machinery for directing and co-ordinating all action against the communists and to the production of an overall strategic operational plan for the country as a whole [my emphasis] defining responsibilities, tasks and priorities. At the same time it will lead to the establishment of a static security framework which can be developed eventually into a national police force [my emphasis] into which can be incorporated a single security intelligence organisation for the direction and co-ordination of all intelligence activities against the communists. I agree with Your Excellency that it would be too disruptive at the present moment to try to achieve these immediately and that they should be developed gradually. Using a medical analogy, the remedy should be clinical rather than surgical."*²⁸

In addition to this first enclosure of his despatch to Diem, Thompson had a second enclosure that, with considerable detail, took pains to outline a very specific Counter-Insurgency plan that would be suited to South Vietnam's particular political and military dilemmas.²⁹ In his

Footnotes

²⁸ Congress, House, Committee on Armed Services, Evolution of the War, Strategic Hamlet Program, 1961 - 1963: An Appraisal - II. The Formulation of The Strategic Hamlet Program: E. Thompson's Counterproposals in United States-Vietnam Relations, 1945-1967, IV. B. 2. Book 3 of 12, p. 12.

²⁹ Congress, House, Committee on Armed Services, "Memorandum for His excellency, Ngo Dinh Diem, The President of the Republic of Vietnam: Counter Insurgency Plan," Robert Thompson (British Advisory Mission), (Enclosure No. 1 - a two page letter to President Diem, is dated November 11, 1961; the accompanying Enclosure No. 2, Despatch No. 205 From Saigon, which explains Thompson's Counter Insurgency Plan, is dated November 13, 1961) U.S. Involvement in the War - Internal Documents - The Kennedy Administration: January 1961 - November 1963 in United States - Vietnam Relations, 1945 - 1967, Book I of V.B.4. Book 11 of 12, pp. 347 - 358.

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overall aims for the plan, Thompson emphasised that the point was to win over the people not just to kill Communists. Thus he noted: "If the main emphasis is placed merely on killing terrorists there is a grave risk that more Communists will be created than are killed. Winning the people must, therefore, be kept in the forefront of the minds of every single person, whether military or civilian, who is engaged in anti-terrorist operations."³⁰ Thompson stated that these goals were consistent with the means of his plan and that this would be seen in the following tangible results:

- (a) Extended protection of the population in the rural areas;
- (b) Increased mobility for the security forces and, in particularly, for the ARVN;
- (c) There would be a greater flexibility in the use of forces where required within the whole area where insurgents were operating;
- (d) As a result of increased mobility, flexibility and better communications, there would be an improvement in the economy of force;
- (e) All of these results would instil a greater sense of confidence in the population and, similarly, the morale of the security forces would be improved;
- (f) This new found confidence of the people's toward their government and its security forces would lead to better intelligence about the Communist insurgents and their organisation;
- (g) Better intelligence would lead to more kills of the hard-line Communist cadres.

According to Thompson's argument, if these results were achieved then protection, confidence and kills should become an ever-expanding circuit which would end with the effective destruction of the Communist insurgent infrastructure and its ability to wage any kind of war.³¹

Footnotes

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 347.

³¹ "34. The main results of establishing a framework as proposed should be:

- (a) protection for the population; (b) increased mobility for the security forces particularly the Army; (c) greater flexibility in the use of forces where required at any given time in the whole area; (d) with mobility and flexibility and improved communications there should be greater economy of force; (e) all this will instil greater confidence both in the population and in the security forces; (f) this, in turn, will lead to better

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In order to show Diem that these results were linked to realistic step-by-step achievements in his plan to rid South Vietnam of Communist terrorists, Thompson specified the following expected achievements:

- (a) A corridor cleared of all Viet Cong along the line of the Mekong River would be the first achievement;
- (b) 'White' areas could then be declared in the provinces where such an achievement had occurred and this, in turn, would raise morale throughout the whole country;
- (c) The rice crop would be safeguarded;
- (d) ARVN troops could be released from the 'white' areas in the Delta in order to be used against the Communists in operations north of Saigon (i.e., War Zone 'D');
- (e) A solid security framework could be achieved which would then be relatively easy to keep in place;
- (f) This model of achievement and results emanating from out of the Delta area could be transferred to the remaining areas of the country resulting in the Communists being steadily defeated as their source of power was destroyed.³²

President Diem had requested Thompson's presence in South Vietnam. For Diem desired experienced third country nationals such as Robert Thompson in Saigon as he wanted some balance to the advice and pressure he was receiving from the Americans. Thus, Thompson, who

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intelligence; and (g) better intelligence will result in more kills. Protection, confidence, intelligence and kills should become a constantly expanding circuit." Ibid., pp. 357 - 358.

³² "Summary of Expected Achievement

37. (a) The first achievement should be a cleared corridor along the line of the Mekong followed by (b) the declaration of 'white' areas in the provinces concerned which will raise the morale of the whole country; (c) the safeguarding of the rice crop; (d) the release of troops from the Delta area for more specific military operations North of Saigon and in the Highlands; (e) the establishment of a solid security framework which will be comparatively easy to maintain, and (f) a model for operations in the remaining parts of the country, particularly, in the area immediately North and East of Saigon and along the coastal plain." Ibid.

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had been the Permanent Secretary for Defence in Malaya, found himself in South Vietnam advising Diem on civic action programs which would counter the Communists efforts in the villages. In October of 1961 Thompson put his preliminary plan for pacification before President Diem and his comprehensive version was submitted to Diem a month later, in November. This plan indicated just how the GVN could pacify the turbulent Delta area and Diem liked the Thompson approach.³³ Indeed, given his own background as a village chief, Diem warmed to the British proposals that placed the emphasis on protecting the people before worrying about an American-styled democracy being established.³⁴ While the military certainly had an effective role to play, Diem also liked Thompson's ideas for utilising non-military means for defeating the Communist influence at the village/hamlet level.

*The main government target, Thompson argued, should not be simply the destruction of VC forces. Rather, it should be to offer an attractive and constructive alternative to communist appeals. This could only be done by emphasising national reconstruction and development in the populated rural areas. To do so would require extensive and stringent security measures, to be sure, but these measures required primarily police rather than regular military forces. The police could establish a close rapport with the populace; the army could not. The army should have the mission to keep the VC off balance by mobile action in order to prevent insurgent attacks on the limited areas in which GVN would concentrate its initial pacification efforts.*³⁵

Footnotes

³³ Congress, House, Committee on Armed Services, Evolution of the War, Strategic Hamlet Program, 1961 – 1963: An Appraisal – II. The Formulation of The Strategic Hamlet Program: E. Thompson's Counterproposals in United States-Vietnam Relations, 1945-1967, IV. B. 2. Book 3 of 12, p. 10.

³⁴ On this issue alone, there was a real divergence between the American and British advice, as the British experience had proven that during a Communist insurgency, it was vastly more important for the people to feel protected from terrorist coercion than to be overly concerned with wide-open democratic rights. Indeed, the British Emergency measures and laws in Malaya were far tougher and more undemocratic than anything the Americans were prepared to countenance in Vietnam. Yet, recognising the political reality within an insurgency context seemed to have come much easier to Diem than to the lofty-minded men in Washington.

³⁵ The Senator Gravel Edition, "The Strategic Hamlet Program, 1961-1963," in The Pentagon Papers: The Defense Department History of United States Decisionmaking on Vietnam, Volume II, (Boston, [Ma.]: Beacon Press, 1971), pp. 139 - 140.

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The instigation of this most notable debate, as its outcome greatly affected American policy, centred on how the Viet Cong insurgency was to be destroyed. The reader should note that there were many other types of civic action programs being carried out in South Vietnam by various U.S. Government agencies, simultaneously to and in conjunction with the CIP. Nevertheless, the most salient point, where contact came, occurred between the government and the insurgents, was always concerned with violence and, thus, the GVN and American concerns about how to best protect the civilian populace and, indeed, all the various civilian agencies at work throughout South Vietnam. In this regard even the most democratically minded Americans realised that one could not even set up a polling station if it could not be protected from insurgent assault.

With these considerations held in mind, the U.S. military advisors and the ARVN believed that the Viet Cong was a force that had to be separated from the people, via the means of the strategic hamlet program. They could then be forced to give battle on terrain where they would be destroyed by the superior firepower that MAAG had been training ARVN with.³⁶ MAAG had heavily ingrained ARVN with the doctrine that its primary purpose would be to repel a formal attack from the NVA (North Vietnamese Army) very much as the U.S. and allies had done in Korea. There was little doubt, amongst the like of Lionel McGarr, that programs such as the strategic hamlets were secondary in importance to making the ARVN more aggressive and

Footnotes

³⁶ In a classic military understanding there was nothing wrong with this conventional concept as, indeed, it was endorsed by such great soldiers as Erwin Rommel. In his 1937 publication, Infanterie Greift an: Erlebnisse und Erfahrungen, Rommel had summed up his considerable experience of war by stating the equivalent of: "He who fires first, wins." Erwin Rommel, Infantry Attacks, First translated by The Infantry Journal, Washington, DC, in 1944, (London: Lionel Leventhal, 1990), p. 30. There is no doubt about it, if you can subject an enemy to superior firepower you will win the battle. The problem for the Americans became what to do when the enemy didn't accept defeat after losing the conventional battles. Indeed, recognising that the real battlefield in Vietnam didn't necessarily include military means but, instead, political means would prove difficult for any soldier. The American commanders and MAAG advisors, capable though they were, found this reality almost unacceptable.

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efficient. In short, military means and strategy was to predominate over other considerations that translated in the field to: kill more Viet Cong, more efficiently.³⁷ The protection of civilians within strategic hamlets or defended villages was all well and good to MAAG but it was second, at best, to the necessity of utilising military means to destroy the insurgents.

At the opposite pole to MAAG and their advice, Thompson, and the British Advisory Mission were advocating a strategic concept that was foreign to the military thought popular amongst MAAG officers. The British wanted to deny the Communists the battleground, upon which the latter wanted to fight, which was the battleground of political legitimacy. As previously emphasised, the British did not want to give the Communists the political legitimacy that the use of a government army would give to their opponents.

It is worth re-emphasising that police forces, on the one hand, tend to deny the psychological initiative to their opponents as they impute an air of criminality upon them. For it is the job of policemen to arrest and, through due process, jail convicted criminals. On the other hand, when an army captures prisoners as a result of battle, it is obliged, under international law, to accord such prisoners of war a non-criminal status.³⁸

It was vital to the British counter-insurgency concept that the public understood the process wherein policemen were seen doing their justifiable duty conferred upon them by the lawful authority of the state. Thus it was crucial that justice not only had to be done as it had to be seen

Footnotes

³⁷ Lt. General Lionel McGarr, "Letter From Chief of MAAG Lt. General Lionel C. McGarr to Admiral Heinz", Progress of CIP Plan, Jan-Feb-Mar-Apr., 1961, Spector Files, RG 319, Box 11, SEA-RS-798, pp. 1-6; & Kent M. Streeb, "A Fragmented Effort: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States Military and State Department and the Strategic Hamlet Program of 1961-1963," (George Mason University - December 10, 1994) [available through Professor Douglas Pike at the Center For the Study of The Vietnam Conflict at Texas Tech] p. 15.

³⁸ Indeed, POW status involves a whole process of legitimating international conventions and laws which can only serve to protect the guerrilla or insurgent from civil and criminal law. This has been a very complex issue since 1945 as the United Nations has had to grapple with the problem of legal combatant status for insurgencies.

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by the people to be done as well. This foundation of civil legal authority superseding armed might was never entirely accepted in American thinking on the subject. Nevertheless, Thompson had made it very clear that it was essential to subordinate the military to civil/police directives. Indeed, in the formulation of his Delta Plan, Thompson maintained a steady eye on the strategic goals of winning the people over and maintaining their support, which could only be achieved, in his estimation and experience, if strong civil authority had full reign over the means of protecting the populace. Of course, this did not mean that the military was eliminated from the process, far from it, instead the military's role was one of working in concert with the police in isolating and eliminating the Viet Cong.³⁹

The aim of this Policy Directive is to outline the Plan measures to be taken for the clearance of the Vietcong from the whole Delta area Vung Chien Thust 3)...The aims of the Plan are: (a) to control, protect and win the population with particular emphasis on the rural areas; (b) to obtain the intelligence necessary to break the Vietcong organisation within the population; (c) to isolate the armed Vietcong from the population and then to eliminate them; (d) to establish and maintain "white" areas which have been cleared of Vietcong.

General Concept: 4. This is a battle for the control of the villages and the protection of the population. If security and Government control are restored, then, with the assistance of the people themselves, the elimination of the Vietcong will automatically follow. The Vietcong cannot exist unless they can intimidate and gain the support of elements in the population. They depend on these elements for supplies, food, intelligence and recruits. This is a continual traffic and represents the weakest link in the Vietcong organisation.⁴⁰

Footnotes

³⁹ After all, the British had used some very formidable military units in Malaya to engage the Communist guerrillas. For example, the SAS and the Gurkhas were used to take over from the police at the jungle's edge in what Americans might call a 'tag-team' effort. Noel Barber, War of the Running Dogs: Malaya 1948 – 1960, (London: Arrow Books, 1989), p. 184.

See also Anthony Kemp's The SAS, Savage Wars of Peace: The Full Account of the SAS's Colonial Campaigns and Counter-Terrorist Activities, 1947 to the Present, (London: Penguin/Signet Books, 1995), p. 22.

⁴⁰ Robert Thompson, "51. Draft Paper by the Head of the British Advisory Mission in Vietnam (Thompson): National Security Council, Policy Directive No.... Delta Plan," Saigon, undated, (Sent to Hilsman under an undated memorandum for J.B. Denson of the British Embassy in Washington. At the top
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Thompson spelled out the roles of the civil guards and the army, precisely. This was in order to emphasise that the main work of defence in the villages and hamlets was to be conducted by civil guards (what the British called special constables in both Kenya and Malaya) and that the military was to assist and support them:

7. The framework will depend for close defence mainly on the Self-Defence Corps supported by the Republican youth as part-time members of the Self-Defense Corps. Immediate close support in a mobile role will be provided by the Civil Guard. Where defended hamlets are established in areas which have been heavily penetrated by the Vietcong it may be necessary to employ Civil Guard in their close defence until such time as reliable Self-Defence Corps units can be called. During the establishment of the framework it will be the task of the Army to keep regular units of the Vietcong harassed and off balance so that the security framework can be consolidated.⁴¹

It would not be far-fetched to suggest that Thompson, having been made aware of Lionel McGarr's objection to the primary role of policemen over soldiers, had 'softened' the term 'police' with the use of paramilitary descriptions such as 'Self-Defence Corps' and 'Civil Guard.' Nevertheless, Thompson spelled out exactly what he was getting at with these terms, and why the police or special-constabulary forces were so important, not more than four years later in the seminal work on counter-insurgency warfare, Defeating Communist Insurgency: Experiences From Malaya and Vietnam.

In Malaya, Thompson noted, there were basically two government forces: the police and the armed forces. The strength of the police force was deliberately maintained at more than twice that of the army, and this remained the case even when Commonwealth battalions were factored into this equation. The Home Guard, arguably a third force, operated under the direction of the police force even though it was recruited and administered separately. When the Emergency in Malaya first broke out the police had a strength of 11,285 men in all ranks. During the course of

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of Denson's transmittal memorandum is written in pencil: "For 6 p.m. appt 2/7/62."), [Kennedy Library, Hilsman Papers, Vietnam, 1/62-2/62. Secret.], in FRUS: Vietnam, 1962, Vol. II, pp. 102 - 101.

⁴¹ Ibid., pp. 103 - 104.

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the insurgency this force was rapidly built up to incorporate 30,000 regular policemen and another 30,000 special constables. The special constables were assigned the tasks of defending villages, estates and mines. The Malaya Police also put into place a field force that was made up of platoons and companies which were equivalent to light infantry. All of these forces were carefully controlled and co-ordinated in such a manner as to allow the police to carry on with their normal functions while, at the same time, provide protection against insurgent attacks and undertake counter-insurgency operations that required units of company strength. The armed forces acted as a buttress to this civil power. This dominance of the policemen, Thompson pointed out, enhance political stability while making certain that there was a continuance of legitimate governing by law throughout the length of the insurgency. ⁴²

Thompson's description of the balance of forces in Malaya compared with that of Vietnam's in the early 1960's, warranted more serious consideration than it was given by the like of MAAG chief McGarr et al. Thompson pointed out that there was a serious problem as at least eight security organisations existed in South Vietnam during this period. In Thompson's approximate estimations of parallels he could draw between South Vietnam and Malaya he noted that the Civil Guards crudely equalled Malaya's police field force. The South Vietnamese Republican Youth and Hamlet Militia were roughly equivalent to Malaya's Home Guard. The

Footnotes

⁴² "Balance of Forces

In Malaya there were basically two government forces: the armed forces and the police. Their approximate strengths have already been mentioned, and it should be noted that the strength of the police force was more than twice that of the armed forces, including the Commonwealth battalions. There was a third organisation, the Home Guard, which operated under police control although it was separately recruited and administered. The original police strength at the outbreak of the Emergency was 11,285 all ranks. This was built up to nearly 30,000 regulars plus over 30,000 special constables. The latter were used mainly in a defensive role in villages and on estates and mines. As part of the police force there was also established a field force composed of platoons and companies equivalent to very light infantry. The police were therefore able to carry out their normal functions, to provide protection and to undertake semi-military operations requiring units up to company strength. The armed forces acted in support of the civil power, and this, coupled with the dominance of the police force, resulted in political stability and the continuance of the rule of law throughout the insurgency." Thompson, Defeating Communist Insurgency, p. 103.

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small force of 1,200 South Vietnamese Gendarmerie really had no counter insurgency equivalent in Malaya, as they were more like traffic police. These approximations, however, did not work out in reality as Thompson noted that they led to over-lap and confusion of roles and duties in the implementation of security measures in South Vietnam. Thompson noted that just co-ordinating their efforts proved to be problematic for the GVN. In Thompson's opinion many of these forces should have been amalgamated and their roles clearly defined. As things remained, the very size of the army, in addition to all of South Vietnam's paramilitary organisations, tended to enhance political instability and endorse the rule of force over the rule of law. ⁴³

Unfortunately for all concerned, there were political problems with the British advice as the Americans perceived such advice to be in direct competition with their new phase in U.S. - GVN relations. Most important of all, at least in American considerations, this new phase of relations tied the release of substantial sums of new aid to Diem with the GVN president's acceptance of United States specified reforms and willingness to co-ordinate counter-insurgency strategy with the experts from the United States.⁴⁴ In other words, Thompson's advice was

Footnotes

⁴³ "In Vietnam there were approximately eight organisations: the armed forces, the Civil Guard, the Self-Defence Corps, the Gendarmerie, the National Police, the special forces, the Republican Youth and the Hamlet Militia, not to mention Madame Nhu's Women's Solidarity Movement. It is not easy to compare their roles with the equivalent forces in Malaya, but, excluding the armed forces and the police, they approximated roughly as follows: the Civil Guard were equivalent to the police field force, the Self-Defence Corps to the special constabulary, and the Republican Youth and Hamlet Militia to the Home Guard. The main function of the Gendarmerie (a small force of 1,200) was to arrest the military for civil offences, normally traffic accidents. Obviously, such a collection of forces was bound to lead to confusion over roles and tasks, and the co-ordination of their effort alone was an insuperable problem. There would have been much greater prospects of success if many of these forces had been amalgamated and their roles rationalised. As it was, the size and ubiquity of the army, coupled with this conglomeration of para-military forces, led to a state of political instability and a situation in which the rule of force rather than the rule of law prevailed." *Ibid.*, pp. 103 - 104.

⁴⁴ Congress, House, Committee on Armed Services, Evolution of the War, Strategic Hamlet Program, 1961 - 1963: An Appraisal - II. The Formulation of The Strategic Hamlet Program: E. Thompson's Counterproposals in United States-Vietnam Relations, 1945-1967, IV. B. 2. Book 3 of 12, p. 10.

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viewed as a rival to "...the American-advanced plans represented by the CIP and the geographically phased MAAG plan of September 1961."⁴⁵

In addition to the problem of contesting GVN "turf" with the American CIP, Thompson's British Advisory Mission, in its assessment of what the Vietnamese Communists strategy entailed, appeared to criticise MAAG's identification of just what the primary threat was. For, "...unlike the U.S. military advisors, Thompson viewed the primary threat to be to the political stability of the populated rural areas. Consequently, and as noted previously, he regarded Lionel McGarr's proposed initial operation in War Zone D to be a step in the wrong direction."⁴⁶ Again and again Thompson, and his mission, would make the same advice manifest and, again and again it failed to truly strike home in American perceptions. The British advisors continued to stress that what should help assure the peasants of their physical security would be the "strategic hamlets,' which Thompson envisioned would consist of a lightly guarded village situated in low security risk areas. "Defended Hamlets," as previously noted, would require more substantial weapons and defences, as they would be placed in areas more subject to VC influence.⁴⁷

Footnotes

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

MAAG Objections to the British Advice:

Lieutenant-General Lionel C. McGarr,⁴⁸ was incensed by the British advice to Diem and his initial reaction made that unmistakably clear:

*"Following Mr. Thompson's medical analogy...we have the case of a doctor [Robert Thompson] called in for consultation on a clinical case, actually performing an amputation without consulting the resident physician [Lionel McGarr & MAAG] -- and without being required to assume the overall responsibility for the patient [the Government of South Vietnam & South Vietnam, itself]."*⁴⁹

It is paramount that the student of counter-insurgency doctrine understands that General McGarr's concerns about Thompson's advice and plans were not motivated out of professional jealousy, or any other pettiness, instead, they were based on a profoundly different philosophical approach to the art of fighting an insurgency. The MAAG chief had several objections to the British plan, which were stated by McGarr as the following:

*First, Thompson's recommended command arrangements, if adopted, would demolish the prospect of a unitary chain of command within ARVN, an objective toward which he [McGarr] had been working for over a year. Additionally, the Thompson proposals would leave Diem as the ultimate manager of an operation dealing with only a portion (the Delta) of RVN. The elimination of practices such as this had been an explicit objective of the entire U.S. advisory effort for a long time.*⁵⁰

According to Vietnam War scholar Kent M. Streeb's research, MAAG chief McGarr had been hoping that the utterly confusing web of the ARVN's command structure would be streamlined

Footnotes

⁴⁸ General McGarr became chief of MAAG on September 1, 1960 and maintained this position into 1962. Congress, House, Committee on Armed Services, Leslie H. Gelb, editor, "Evolution of the War - US Training of the Vietnamese National Army, 1954 -1959," in United States-Vietnam Relations, 1945-1967, Book 2 of 12, p. 6.

⁴⁹ Congress, House, Committee on Armed Services, "III. Developing a Consensus Among the Advisors," "A. Initial Reaction of U.S. Military Advisors," Evolution of the War: Strategic Hamlet Program, 1961-1963, in United States -Vietnam Relations 1945-1967, Book 3 of 12, p. 12.

⁵⁰ ibid.

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by strict adherence to Washington's CIP.⁵¹ The Americans recognised that Diem had kept this intricate interweaving and overlapping ARVN command structure in place in order to reduce the possibility of coup attempts through such a "divide and conquer" technique. MAAG, however, came to view Diem's command structure strategy as a hindrance to the proper functioning of the ARVN. Thus, they ignored the fact that for Diem "to accede to the American military's chain-of-command request would afford his forces the opportunity to co-ordinate and coalesce into numbers sufficient to overthrow him."⁵²

In effect, American advisors, such as McGarr, were reluctant to grant the Vietnamese president any more control over the counter-insurgency program than he already had as, indeed, it was Diem's inabilities that were presumed to be partially responsible for the need of greater American control. Thompson's plan was turning this approach on its head! The new National Police branch would incorporate, amongst other things, the direction and co-ordination of all intelligence activities - all of which would be, ultimately, under President Diem's control.⁵³ Yet, once again, the real substance of what Thompson was proposing was being lost, although, he spelt it out very clearly at the time and in his later, written publications on the subject:

'Let's go out and kill some Viet Cong, then we can worry about intelligence.' This remark by a newly arrived General lends weight to the old gag that there are only two types of generals in counter-insurgency - those who haven't yet learnt it and those who never will!... If subversion is the main threat, starting as it does well before an open insurgency and continuing through it and even afterwards, it follows that within the government the intelligence organisation is of paramount importance. In fact I would go so far as to say that no government can hope to defeat

Footnotes

⁵¹ Kent M. Streeb, "A Fragmented Effort: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States Military and State Department and the Strategic Hamlet Program of 1961 - 1963," (George Mason University, December 10, 1994), p. 8. [Available through Professor Douglas Pike at the Center For the Study of The Vietnam Conflict at Texas Tech].

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ Congress, House, Committee on Armed Services, "II. The Formulation of The Strategic Hamlet Program: E. Thompson's Counterproposals," Evolution of the War: Strategic Hamlet Program, 1961-1963, in United States -Vietnam Relations 1945-1967, Book 3 of 12, pp. 11 - 12.

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a communist insurgent movement unless it gives top priority to, and is successful in, building up such an organisation...Ideally there should be one single organisation responsible for all security intelligence within the country. If there is more than one, it is almost impossible to define the respective responsibilities of each organisation or to devise any means of co-ordinating their activities. All sorts of things will start to go wrong. For example, agents, especially the less reliable, will get themselves onto the payroll of several organisations and feed them the same unreliable information. Such information seemingly confirmed from different sources will be accepted as authentic. The different organisations will withhold information from one another in order to exploit it and obtain credit for themselves. A promising line of intelligence promoted by one organisation may well be cut inadvertently, or even intentionally, by another organisation. Mutual suspicion and jealousies will arise, quite likely with the result that the separate organisations merely end up spying on each other. The intelligence, on which government plans should be based, will be both patchy and unreliable.

The best organisation to be responsible for all internal security intelligence is the special branch of the police force rather than a completely separate organisation. It is a great advantage if intelligence officers have police powers and are able to call when necessary on the other branches of the police force for support and assistance in developing their intelligence network. The police force is a static organisation reaching out into every corner of the country and will have had long experience of close contact with the population. If it can possibly be avoided, the army should not be responsible for internal security intelligence. The army will have had little concern with subversion before the open insurgency breaks out; it will have had very limited experience of contacting the people, particularly rural communities, which are inherently suspicious of troops; and its units are always liable to be re-deployed throughout the country in accordance with the situation. Any intelligence lines which these units may have established are the immediately uprooted."⁵⁴

McGarr's whole martial approach, much like that of Colonel Harry Summers Jr., balked at the very idea of conducting a war from a static security framework,⁵⁵ i.e., defended hamlets and strategic hamlets.⁵⁶ To American military thinkers, like General McGarr, civic action in

Footnotes

⁵⁴ Thompson, Defeating Communist Insurgency, pp. 84 - 86.

⁵⁵ The Senator Gravel Edition, "The Strategic Hamlet Program, 1961-1963," in The Pentagon Papers, Vol. II, p. 141.

⁵⁶ 'Letter from Chief of MAAG Lt. General Lionel C. McGarr to Admiral Heinz,' February 27, 1961, "Progress of CIP Plan, Jan-Feb.-Mar-Apr., 1961," Spector Files, RG 319, Box 11, SEA-RS-798, pp. 1- 6.

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static positions smacked of too much reliance on the defensive; in fact, it constituted a switching over to the strategic defensive.⁵⁷ Yet, the British Advisory team had a completely different idea of what constituted going on the offensive in counter-insurgency warfare as, in fact, in their planning “Strategic Hamlets” were a key element in seizing the offensive as they were intended to be “...on the perimeter of the advance forming the front line against the Viet Cong.”⁵⁸ Thompson’s insistence that the role of the conventional military should be downgraded and that police forces brought to the fore would only have served to compound the mistrust of the British advice in the military minds of men like Lieutenant-General Lionel McGarr.⁵⁹ Even Thompson’s stress that the whole “strategic hamlet” program be implemented very slowly, in order to allow a new GVN organisation (i.e., the national police & hamlet administration) to grow organically from the effort, was seen as too slow. Accordingly, the Pentagon analyst noted the following:

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Kent M. Streeb, “A Fragmented Effort: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States Military and State Department and the Strategic Hamlet Program of 1961 – 1963,” (George Mason University, December 10, 1994), p. 9. [Available through Professor Douglas Pike at the Center For the Study of The Vietnam Conflict at Texas Tech].

⁵⁷ Thompson addressed such criticism directly: “At this point I should mention one criticism frequently levelled at the strategic-hamlet concept by military officers – that it is defensive. This shows a lack of comprehension. Certainly the first object of the programme is the protection of the population, and each hamlet must therefore be capable of defending itself. But the concept as a whole is designed to secure a firm base and then to expand from that into disputed, and finally enemy-controlled, territory. If the programme is strategically directed, and supported by the armed forces, it becomes an offensive advance which will wrest the military initiative from the insurgent. This is far more aggressive, because it is effective, than launching thousands of operations with hundreds of troops in each, all wading through the paddy fields with their rifles cocked to no purpose.” Thompson, Defeating Communist Insurgency, p. 126.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 141.

⁵⁹ These problems, concerned with military thought, were alluded to quite often in the Pentagon Papers; for example: “The ‘static security framework’ in the villages to which Thompson referred struck General McGarr as an unwarranted downgrading of the need for a sizeable conventional military force to play an important role in pacification. Thompson’s stated desire to emphasise police forces in lieu of regular military forces was regarded by the U.S. military advisory chief as unrealistic -- a transferral of Malayan experience to a locale in which the existing tools of policy were very different.” Congress, House, Committee on Armed Services, “III. Developing A Consensus Among the Advisors,” “A. Initial Reaction of U.S. Military Advisors,” Evolution of the War: Strategic Hamlet Program, 1961-1963, in United States - Vietnam Relations 1945-1967, Book 3 of 12, p. 13.

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*"The U.S. military advisory chief also wanted to go slowly -- but not that slowly. Not only would the Viet Cong not wait, it was simply unsound policy not to use the tools at hand. It would not do to reduce the ARVN and increase police forces while the VC continued their successes. It was necessary, in sum, to act in a limited area but to act quickly. Thompson's recommendations did not look to quick action, emphasised the wrong area, were designed to emphasises the wrong operational agency, and proposed unacceptable command lines."*⁶⁰

Nolting's Assessment of Robert Thompson's British Advisory Mission:

As the reader will have discerned from reading Nolting's initial cable about the Thompson advisory mission in the previous chapter, the American ambassador's immediate concerns were that United States Government policy was not circumvented in an end-run around the U.S. diplomatic and military machinery in South Vietnam. Once those concerns were addressed to the satisfaction of all concerned (the Americans, British and Vietnamese), however, Nolting developed a sincere appreciation of what it was that Thompson was advocating and he warmed to the man on a personal level:

Yes. Bob Thompson was very good. He had a very small mission -- six men. I think all of them had served at one point or another in Malaya under Sir Gerald Templar. Bob Thompson was the head of the British mission. He got there, I believe, shortly after I did. I liked him, worked closely with him, learned a lot from him. He was quite persuasive, vis-à-vis President Diem, who could see that he knew what he was talking about because of his experience in Malaya. We quite often went together to put up a proposal. Yes, they did a lot of good work. They did not have much to work with other than their experiences as individuals. They didn't have any supplies....But to answer your question as well as I can, I had a high respect for Bob Thompson. I

Footnotes

⁶⁰ *ibid.*

*think his knowledge and ability was very good, and I think he was quite influential with the President.*⁶¹

Washington's Initial Response to the British Advice:

Ambassador Nolting had sensed that a shift was coming in Washington's attitudes toward what was the most effective way to defeat the Communist insurgency in South Vietnam. Pressure for an American 'quick-fix' was manifest within the Taylor-Rostow report that President Kennedy had requested. Nolting recalled that he had expressed concern to Washington about the Taylor-Rostow report because it recommended the introduction of US combat engineers into the Mekong Delta area. Ostensibly, the purpose for this introduction of US troops was to help the GVN with the terrible flooding that had occurred in the Delta. This unit of 5,000 men had full military capability, which meant that it could defend itself if it were engaged in combat and cut off from the ARVN. Nolting told Washington that he was not in agreement with this part of the Taylor-Rostow report. The American ambassador was concerned that the introduction of US combat troops set a precedent that would, in his estimation, lead to the eventual redistribution of defence responsibility from the ARVN to the American troops, the latter being in a better state to handle such responsibility.⁶² Nolting realised that there was mounting pressure in Washington for a quick military fix but he also realised that such an answer was wrong for Vietnam.

Footnotes

⁶¹ Frederick Nolting, "Second Oral History Interview with Frederick Nolting." Recorded interview by Dennis O'Brien, May 6, 1970, ([NY]: New York), pp. 55 – 56, John F. Kennedy Library, Oral History Program.

⁶² "One item on the Taylor-Rostow report with which I did not agree was the recommendation to introduce a contingent of U.S. combat engineers into the Mekong Delta. The area had been badly flooded, and the report envisioned sending American combat engineers under the cover of flood relief. This would be a self-contained unit of some 5,000 men, able to defend itself in combat if cut off from South Vietnamese military support. Taylor and Rostow had added this idea during a layover in Baguio, where they actually wrote their report to the President, after their departure from Saigon. When I cabled my comments to Washington, I noted that I was in thorough accord with the ideas that had been discussed in Vietnam, but not with this new addition. My opposition stemmed from the conviction that the introduction of American combat forces would set a precedent and eventually lead to a shuffling of responsibility from

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Pressures for a quick military solution were not uncommon in Washington. They reminded me of a story about the country doctor who used to give all of his patients, no matter what disease they had, a dose designed to throw them into "fits" because, he was "hell on fits." In Vietnam there were many things that needed curing. I felt that it was better to treat each problem as best we could rather than send in American combat troops because we knew how to fight wars - of a different type.⁶³

Thus, Nolting was aware that there was a 'special relation' between Washington and those who advocated an American military solution, even if Kennedy did not initiate such a move straightaway,⁶⁴ and Thompson's advice was always going to be competing with this deep-seated American belief.

By early 1962, the British advice had managed to garner considerable interest in Washington at the highest levels. General Maxwell Taylor and Roger Hilsman liked much of what Thompson had to say and Hilsman actually drafted much of the Thompson advice into his plan entitled "A Strategic Concept For South Vietnam. [My emphasis]" In turn, Taylor presented this plan before President Kennedy who expressed that he was in favour of such a plan.⁶⁵ Nevertheless, there was still a fundamental misapprehension on the part of both the Vietnamese and the Americans as to the salient core of what the "strategic hamlet" program was, ultimately, designed to do.⁶⁶ Thompson argued that one of the primary goals of the strategic

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the Vietnamese Army onto the stronger, better equipped Americans." Nolting, From Trust To Tragedy, p. 36.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Nolting stressed that, while Kennedy approved the Taylor Report and recommendations, the President did not act upon the proposal for sending in U.S. Army combat engineers. Ibid., p. 37.

⁶⁵ Congress, House, Committee on Armed Services, "III. Developing A Consensus Among the Advisors," "B. Reactions in Washington," Evolution of the War: Strategic Hamlet Program, 1961-1963, in United States - Vietnam Relations 1945-1967, Book 3 of 12, p. 14.

⁶⁶ "Basically, the Vietnamese seemed unable to understand that the establishment of strategic hamlets would accomplish nothing unless the other necessary measures were taken to achieve their three objects: of protection, of uniting and involving the people, and of development, with the ultimate aim of isolating the guerrilla units from the population. Not only with regard to strategic hamlets but in other fields

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hamlets, properly implemented, was to make the civilian populace secure enough that they would have a legitimate choice in deciding who was to be their government. He noted, though, that the next step after security was established was to improve the lot of the civilian so that they would place their choice with the government.⁶⁷

The Rejection of the British Advice:

First of all, it should be noted that not all senior American military men wanted to reject, wholesale, the British advice given to Diem's government and, accordingly, General L.L. Lemnitzer, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, should be considered in this context. Lemnitzer, nevertheless, was concerned about a number of things that made him cautious of accepting the British advice in its entirety. First and foremost, he tended to defend MAAG's training of the ARVN, he also believed that the insurgency in South Vietnam had gone well beyond the police's abilities to contain it. The general brought up the issue that it took the British twelve years to defeat an insurgency which was, in his estimation, not as strong as the one the Americans and Diem were facing in South Vietnam, and he was even concerned about long-term British intentions in Southeast Asia. Thus, in October of 1961, Lemnitzer sent a memorandum to General Taylor that was concerned with the counter-insurgency question and the British advice; in this memo, the general made the following pertinent observations:

1. *You will recall that I recently had occasion to look into allegations that the United States is over-training the Vietnamese Army for a Korea-type war with little or nothing done to meet the terrorist problem in Vietnam. My inquiries have highlighted the following main points:*

... footnote continued from previous page:

as well, the Vietnamese tended to confuse the means with the end. It took over three years to establish 500 defended Chinese villages in Malaya. In under two years in Vietnam over 8,000 strategic hamlets were created, the majority of them in the first nine months of 1963. No attention was paid to their purpose; their creation became the purpose in itself." Thompson, Defeating Communist Insurgency, p. 141.

⁶⁷ *ibid.*, pp. 142-143.

2. a.) *The success of the counter-terrorist police organisation in Malaya has had considerable impact.*

b.) *The concept of using local police force to combat local insurgency is politically and diplomatically attractive.*

3. *I fully agree that we should make maximum use of these aspects of the British counter-insurgency experience in Malaya which are pertinent to the situation in Vietnam....c. Finally, it took the British nearly 12 years to defeat an insurgency which was less strong than the one in South Vietnam.*

4. *Closely associated with the allegation that the MAAG is "over-training" the Vietnamese Army is the concern frequently expressed over the length of time required to train military officers and NCO's. No one knows better than you do that well-trained officers and NCO's are not produced in brief training programs. I am sure you will want to discuss this in detail with General McGarr when you visit Saigon. It is most important to note that the heaviest casualties in the Vietnam insurgency have been suffered by the Civil Guard previously trained as police. Almost without exception, the Viet Cong have attacked the untrained Civil Guard rather than the better trained Army units. This has resulted in a heavy loss of weapons and equipment to the Viet Cong. Untrained Civil Guard units have, in fact, been an important source of weapons and supplies for the Viet Cong, and their known vulnerability has been an invitation for the Viet Cong to attack. General McGarr believes that reversion of the Civil Guard to police control would set back the counter-insurgency operation in Vietnam by at least a year.*

5. *With respect to training the Vietnamese Army for the "wrong war," it seems clear that in recent months the insurgency in South Vietnam has developed far beyond the capacity of police control. All of the Vietnamese Army successes this past summer have met Viet Cong opposition in organised battalion strength....6. In this regard, there is some concern that the Thompson Mission may try to sell the Malayan concept of police control without making a sufficiently careful evaluation of conditions in South Vietnam. Additionally, there are some indications that the British, for political reasons, wish to increase their influence in this area and are using the Thompson mission as a vehicle.... Despite repeated urging, the Government of South Vietnam has not yet written an over-all national plan for*

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*counter-insurgency. The question of police or military organization for combating Viet Cong insurgency should be laid to rest in that plan.*⁶⁸

In many ways the rejection of the British advice was not at all obvious to the outside observer and, in fact, a surface examination might lead the observer to conclude that the Americans whole-heartedly agreed with the implementation of such advice. Yet, in order to preserve good relations between the MAAG crew, Diem's government, and the British Advisory team, subtle but profound changes in the Thompson plan occurred on the ground in Vietnam. Unfortunately for the Republic of South Vietnam, the MAAG chief, McGarr, had a salient influence in this regard:

*Thompson's basic ideas were gaining wide dissemination at the highest level within the U.S. government in early 1962. What of his relations with the U.S. MAAG in Saigon? These had been significantly improved as the result of a meeting between Thompson, Ambassador Nolting, and British Ambassador Hohler. Thompson agreed to revise his paper so as to remove the objection to his proposed command arrangements.[my emphasis] Ambassador Nolting reported that Thompson was now working "closely and amicably" with MAAG. This took care of one of McGarr's objections. Thompson had apparently decided, too, to allow the issue to drop for the time being of police primacy in pacification vis-à-vis ARVN.[my emphasis]*⁶⁹

Truly, as noted above, some of the most important "teeth" of Thompson's plan of attack had been pulled and there can be little doubt that the counter-insurgency program in South Vietnam had suffered a serious blow as a result. Nevertheless, these blows were not mortal, at least at this juncture; what was required to make this so was the destruction of Ngo Dinh Diem's government. There were many American advisors (such as Douglas Pike, Edward Geary Lansdale, Ambassador Nolting, William Colby, et al.) who had a relatively clear vision of what

Footnotes

⁶⁸ Congress, House, Committee on Armed Services, General L.L. Lemnitzer - Chairman, JCS, "Memorandum for General Taylor - Subject: Counter-insurgency Operations in South Vietnam," 18 October, 1961, in United States - Vietnam Relations, 1945-1967: The Kennedy Administration (Book 1), Book 11 of 12, pp. 324 - 326.

⁶⁹ Congress, House, Committee on Armed Services, "III. Developing a Consensus Among the Advisors," "C. The Advisors Reach Agreement," Evolution of the War: Strategic Hamlet Program, 1961-1963, in United States - Vietnam Relations 1945-1967, Book 3 of 12, p. 14.

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Diem was trying to do and the efficacy of the British advice. In fairness to these advisors, their response is worth mentioning, and it is best summed up by Professor Pike's analysis:

"...for Diem fit neither the classical nor the contemporary American stereotype of a tyrant. He was not brutal, mean, or arrogant. He was educated, cosmopolitan, and far more liberally minded than the emperor Bao Dai who preceded him. Most important, he did not dispose of very much authority. And it differed in degree, for the central U.S. problem was not simply that a client's undemocratic behaviour engendered bad press at home and righteous umbrage in Congress. Most GVN policies resulted directly from the external challenge conceived by Hanoi, Peking, and Moscow. However politically misguided Saigon's undemocratic practices may have been, they were chiefly a military response to this external challenge. By that measure they were neither excessive nor unreasonable...Diem made the first moves toward constitutional government, even writing and promulgating a liberal constitution...by the sober view that South Vietnam was an ordinary East Asian society, except for a serious plague of imported difficulties. It was no more divided than such countries as Malaysia, but was subjected to much greater strains. In the face of an ubiquitous armed enemy, it could hardly avoid some authoritarianism. In truth, too, South Vietnamese were widely and often deeply anti-Communist, especially the 15 percent who were Catholics. The notion that the people did not care who won defies common sense. All evidence clearly indicates that most people wanted a good non-communist government in Saigon that could protect them from intimidation and extortion. Few wanted an outright communist victory (which is why today North Vietnam's army in the South remains on garrison duty, and why an extensive resistance movement fights on).

All of this was fairly clear from the vantage point of the U.S. Embassy in Saigon (where I worked...)."70

Douglas Pike, et al., recognised both the predicaments of the South Vietnamese and their first president, Ngo Dinh Diem, and concluded that the GVN was legitimate and viable. Evidently, Pike was aware of the same realities that Thompson and Diem had been facing squarely. Amongst these men of good will and common sense it was tacitly understood that it would "...take many years, perhaps a generation, to build up the desired administrative structure, and efficient professional and administrative services to staff it. [And that] This was one of the

Footnotes

⁷⁰ Douglas Pike, "Brief History of the Government of Vietnam (GVN) During the Vietnam War," or "South Vietnam: Autopsy of a Compound Crisis," in Friendly Tyrants: An American Dilemma, edited by Daniel Pipes & Adam Garfinkle, (New York, [NY]: St. Martin's Press, 1991), pp. 38, 47, 52 & 53.

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chief problems facing President Diem...”⁷¹ But the powers that held sway within the Department of State, in Washington, had grown weary and suspicious of Diem, his brother Ngo Dinh Nhu (who headed up the Strategic Hamlet program for the GVN) and their motives. It was no secret that the eminently powerful Averell Harriman had taken a severe dislike to President Diem, owing in no small part to Diem’s condemnation of the Laos neutrality accords. Even Harriman’s biographer, Rudy Abramson, acknowledged that this was the source of Harriman’s dislike for Ngo Dinh Diem.⁷² Harriman had engineered these accords for the purpose of establishing himself as the leading senior diplomat in the United States. In order to protect these hard-won and coveted credentials, he had garnered substantial support amongst other powerful senior members of Kennedy’s administration for the purpose of having Diem replaced.⁷³

Ambassador Frederick Nolting, as has been shown, was in a tough position with regard to the British counter-insurgency advice. His instructions, vis-à-vis the Kennedy CIP, were quite clear: Diem and the GVN had to subordinate their expenditure of US aid to American wishes and design in this crucial area. The issues of command structure and the use of the military over the police had been swayed in Washington’s favour. One is left with the sense that Nolting was not entirely pleased with this outcome, as he certainly liked Thompson’s concepts as they stood on

Footnotes

⁷¹ Thompson, Defeating Communist Insurgency, p. 79.

⁷² “He was hardly more patient with Washington’s ally in Saigon...When he [Harriman] first went to Saigon in the spring of 1961, he found President Diem rigidly opposed to Souvanna Phouma and to the Kennedy administration’s support for a neutral Laos. Diem not only backed General Phouma, he wanted the United States and its allies in the Southeast Asia Treaty Organisation to occupy Vientiane and towns along the Mekong River in southern Laos to stop infiltration from the north. That was not an unreasonable position considering Diem’s situation, ... On at least one occasion, Averell dozed while listening to Diem hold forth, and an American embassy official took it as calculated rudeness to demonstrate his disdain for him.” Abramson, Spanning The Century, p. 606.

⁷³ Henry Cabot Lodge, George Ball, Roger Hilsman, and Michael Forrestal were part of this powerful group who orchestrated Diem’s downfall. Patrick Lloyd Hatcher, The Suicide of an Elite: American Internationalists and Vietnam, (Stanford, [California]: Stanford University Press, 1990), pp. 144-145.

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their own, but as the United States' Ambassador to Saigon it was his professional duty to ensure that American policy was implemented and safeguarded.

Objectively, American insistence on a counter-insurgency command structure that did not answer to the palace alone may or may not have been a detriment to ensuring victory over the Communists. What was an impediment, however, was the fact that the psychology of the military taking precedence over the police managed to achieve a fairly rigorous foundation at this time. Unfortunately for both the Americans and the Vietnamese this was to prove very costly – for all the reasons that Robert Thompson explained.

Chapter Six: The Foundations of Washington's Abrogation of Nolting's Rapprochement with Ngo Dinh Diem

In February of 1962 a seemingly innocuous letter was sent from the Assistant Secretary of State, Averell Harriman, to the Ambassador in Vietnam, Frederick Nolting; the letter read as follows:

Washington, February 27, 1962

Dear Fritz: In the light of today's attack on the palace I have reviewed Walter McConaughy's letter to you of October 20, 1961 and the "Suggested Contingency Plan" of the same date which was enclosed with that letter.

It seems to me that the "Suggested Contingency Plan" is still valid. I regret that we did not have time to discuss it during your hurried visit to Washington.

If you have any comments to make on it in view of the present situation I would be glad to read them. Knowing that you are very busy I will assume that if I do not hear from you this plan remains satisfactory to you. We are very pleased with your handling of the reporting on today's attack on the palace.

With best personal regards, Yours very Sincerely,

Averell¹

The reality of the true thrust of this inquiry, however, was anything but harmless; for, Harriman was doing nothing less than 'sounding-out' just where Nolting stood with regard to the removal

Footnotes

¹ Averell Harriman, 89. "Letter From the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs (Harriman) to the Ambassador in Vietnam (Nolting)," Washington, February 27, 1962, [Washington National Records Center, RG 84, Saigon Embassy Files: FRC 68 A 5159, New Command Arrangements, 1962. Top Secret;] in FRUS: Vietnam, 1962, Vol. II, pp. 182 - 183.

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of Ngo Dinh Diem from power, because that was the precise nature and content of McConaughy's "Suggested Contingency Plan."²

The critical question here is, primarily, concerned with what was motivating Averell Harriman to inaugurate a process that would turn U.S. policy toward the Government of Vietnam (GVN) in an about-face? Harriman's early telegrams to Nolting, while giving some hint of his personal doubts about Diem, indicated that there was a body of authorities who concurred with his negative assessment. For example, Harriman sent Nolting a telegram from Geneva, on October 13, 1961, at 6 p.m. in which he proceeded to tell Nolting that during his travels over the last six months he had heard nothing but concern over Diem's "...dictatorial regime, Palace Guard, family and corruption."³ Having hit Nolting with such a negative overall picture of Diem, Harriman went on to assure the US ambassador that his sources for these comments were friendly to the United States. The picture that Harriman suggested had been given him was one that depicted Diem as having been good in the first years of his presidency but his later alleged isolation had been encouraging coups and speculation about the competency of his administration. Even the British, according to Harriman, were hoping that the Americans could pressure Diem to undertake major reforms across the board which would have to include

Footnotes

² For the exact details on this "Suggested Contingency Plan" of Walter McConaughy's please peruse all of Appendix C.

³ "369. From Harriman. I am much gratified to learn of Taylor's and Rostow's visit to Saigon. I trust that in addition to military appraisal, some analysis of political situation can be made. In my travels during past six months as well as here in Geneva, I find everywhere concern over Diem's dictatorial regime, Palace Guard, family and corruption." Forwarded by Averell Harriman, 164. "Telegram From The Consulate General in Switzerland to the Department of State (Martin)," Geneva, October 13, 1961 - 6 p.m., (Forwarded by Averell Harriman to President Kennedy at Hyannis Port on October 13, 1961), [Department of State, Central Files, 751K.00/10-1361. Secret; Priority.] in FRUS: Vietnam, 1961, Vol. I, pp. 363 - 364.

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“...elimination of undesirable family influence.”⁴ Harriman ended this curious and provoking cable by telling Nolting that he had no ‘recommendations’ and then he proceeded to suggest that even though they were “sitting on a powder keg that could blow up” this would not be a disaster “...if it was touched off by constructive forces.”⁵ The implications were clear enough and Nolting was not a stupid man: Harriman was suggesting that the United States might want to get behind a coup. He buttressed this incitement by telling Nolting that no amount of aid could overcome the political failing of the Diem government: “I only want to add my voice to those who believe more recognition must be given to political situation which no amount of military assistance or participation can cure.”⁶

Masterfully, Harriman was marshalling forces and, at the same time, once again sounding out how Nolting was feeling about the possibility of shifting policy away from his original instructions of supporting Diem to looking for an alternative. Nolting’s response was measured and sent straight to the State Department on October 16, 1961, three days after the Harriman contact. In this telegram he noted that there were some steps which needed to be taken in order to strengthen Diem and to preserve a free Vietnam. Nolting’s cable suggested that

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⁴ “These comments come from friendly sources, both highest and lower levels, expressing view that after good early record Diem has become increasingly isolated, particularly since attempted coup last year. Various accounts indicate lack of confidence among military, provincial government officials, intellectuals, business, professional and university groups. There is general prophesy that another coup is apt to happen, in which case insurgents will not be as considerate of Diem as last year. The British come closer to recognising our difficulties, since they see no alternative to Diem, but even they hope that increased pressures will be brought for major reforms, not alone in social and economic, but in political field, particularly elimination of undesirable family influence and broadening base of Diem Government.” Ibid.

⁵ “I recognise extreme difficulties of the situation and have no recommendations to make from this distance, but believe we may well be sitting on powder keg that could blow up, conceivably not disastrous if it was touched off by constructive forces. I recognise that these are matters with which everyone in Washington is familiar.” Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

Diem's critics were aiming at some kind of opaque ideal situation that was not attainable in the real world. Having intimated this, he went on to explicitly praise Diem's strengths and that any problems with the Vietnamese leader had nothing to do with the quality of his character.⁷

Thus, Nolting was sending his own early warning to the State Department and it was very clear: Diem wasn't perfect but he did have substantial qualities. In dealing with him and his government Washington needed to realise that diplomacy, like politics, had to be concerned with the art of the possible and the ideal had to be checked by this. Essentially, Nolting was trying to apply a braking action to those powers within the State Department, like Averell Harriman, who believed that "Diem's continuance at the helm" should be questioned and, perhaps, brought to an end.

Footnotes

⁷ "A. Govt organisation at both national and local levels. B. Mass support measures. C. Gaining broader support. D. Educational class. E. Tax reform. F. Financial reform.

None of these areas are new, and many have been previously tried, with some, but not rapid enough, results. A very careful balance has to be struck between the ideal and the possible, assuming Diem's continuance at the helm and given his extraordinary blend of quality, fortitude, deep conviction, determination, lack of political instinct, lack of organising and administrative ability and many others." Frederick Nolting, 171. "Telegram From the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State," Saigon, October 16, 1961 - 1 p.m., [Department of State, Central Files, 751K.5-MSP/10-1661. Secret; Niact.], in FRUS: Vietnam, 1961, Vol. I, pp. 383 - 386.

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John Kenneth Galbraith:

There is little doubt that Averell Harriman had taken a strong dislike to Ngo Dinh Diem. Nevertheless, Harriman was not alone in this position. There was another extremely influential individual who was a member of the Kennedy administration, John Kenneth Galbraith, and he had direct access to President Kennedy.

John Kenneth Galbraith was born in Canada in 1908. From an early age he was inculcated in Liberal ideology, as his father was an active participant in Liberal Party politics in Ontario.⁸ He did his undergraduate studies at the Ontario Agricultural College, which was then a part of the University of Toronto (later, the College became the University of Guelph). He moved on to the University of California at Berkeley where he completed his Ph.D. studies in 1934. Berkeley had a profound influence on Galbraith's own leftist tendencies, as it was well known for its left-wing radicalism in the 1930's. From Berkeley he moved out to the East Coast and began his long, and often interrupted, tenure at Harvard as a professor of economics. It was at Harvard where he penned his seminal work The Affluent Society and where he began to seriously involve himself in American Liberal/Left politics and causes.⁹ In 1947, the man became one of the liberal founders of the Americans for Democratic Action and from this time on his politics and academic career seemed to merge as one:

Footnotes

⁸ James Ronald Stanfield, John Kenneth Galbraith, (New York, [NY]: St. Martin's Press, 1996), p. 1.

⁹ Ibid., pp. 2 – 3.

Galbraith's ardent partisanship is quite unusual. To be sure, political activity is not uncommon among economists. There are highly visible advisers to candidates and administrations and frequent testimony to congressional committees. There are popular essays that convey the author's political slant. Economists at least tend to know each other as inclined to one political persuasion or another. But Galbraith's uninhibited partisanship coupled with his refusal to neatly separate his politics from his economics sets him well apart from his more conventional colleagues.¹⁰

Given this activist background of Galbraith's, it becomes easier to understand why he would be attracted to the dynamism of the 'New Frontier' preached, so exquisitely, by John F. Kennedy.

Galbraith's endorsement of Kennedy, as a liberal nominee for president, found its roots back in 1957. Kennedy eagerly sought Galbraith's support, as the latter was, by this time, a well-known and well-published Harvard economics professor.¹¹ By 1960 Galbraith was part of an elite group of influential liberals who were organised by John L. Saltonstall, Jr., and brought together for the purpose of endorsing Kennedy's presidential bid.¹² For his support and loyalty throughout the presidential campaign Galbraith received the appointment as American Ambassador to India.¹³

Galbraith, for all his Harvard pedigree, had also become known as an activist radical, decidedly on the left of the Democrats' liberal ideology and, as such, he had taken a negative view of the South Vietnamese president. In fact, the first truly anti-Diem telegram, which was sent back to Washington from a United States Embassy, appears to have emanated from Galbraith's mission in India. This telegram of Galbraith's betrayed an attitude that has always

Footnotes

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

¹¹ Schlesinger, Jr., *A Thousand Days*, pp. 11 – 15.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 28.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 152.

had some support in certain American interpretations of the history of insurgency in South Vietnam. For he was telling President Kennedy that Diem was responsible for the ongoing insurgency. In support of this damning contention, Galbraith stated that even a government that was moderately effective coupled with the relative military power would be able to take care of the Communist insurgents. When these statements of Galbraith's are taken in consideration with the fact that he told the President that there was hardly the slightest chance that Diem would reform his government then an astounding arrogance becomes manifest. For at the very least, Galbraith is showing a near absolute contempt for Diem and what he had accomplished in South Vietnam and a fatal underestimation of just how tough the Communist insurgents were. ¹⁴

Footnotes

¹⁴ "For The President From Ambassador Galbraith,

I have just completed three intensive days in Saigon which, with CINCPAC talks, gives me a much better feeling for this tangled situation. Tomorrow night I am sending you a full and, I trust rather close analysis which I pray you read at average speed. That concerns our longer course but meanwhile I must register conclusions on two or three matters on which action may be pending and I add a general thought or two.

(1) There is scarcely the slightest practical chance that the administrative and political reforms now being pressed upon Diem will result in real change. They reckon without deeper political realities and insecurities of his position and the nature of politicians of this age. He will promise but he will not perform because it is most unlikely that he can perform. Accordingly, it is important that in exchange of letters which I suppose now to be inevitable that our proposed aid be geared to demonstrated action not promises. This may slightly increase the effect. But mostly it will keep us from what otherwise will be a purely one-sided commitment to Diem. In the absence of fundamental reform, the help we are now proposing will not save the situation.... (6) As I will argue, there is no solution that does not involve a change of government. **To say there is no alternative is nonsense for there never has seemed to be where one man has dominated the scene. So while we must play out the ineffective and hopeless course on which we are launched for a little while, we must look ahead very soon to a new government [my emphasis].** On this more later. **Given an even moderately effective government and putting the relative military power into perspective, I can't help thinking that the insurgency might soon be settled [my emphasis]."** Congress, House, Committee on Armed Services, John Kenneth Galbraith, "To Director, CIA, From Bangkok, 20 November 1961, For The President From Ambassador Galbraith," in U.S. Involvement in the War – Internal Documents, The Kennedy Administration in United States - Vietnam Relations, 1945 – 1967, (Book I) V.B.4., Book 11 of 12, pp. 406 - 408.

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In his cable to President Kennedy not only was Galbraith suggesting that Diem needed to be removed from power but he was also making it very clear that the position taken by Nolting, and Diem's defenders, was "nonsense." Of course, the attack on Nolting's position was nothing new for Galbraith, like Harriman, was not the kind of man who countenanced resistance to his ideas. Accordingly, he personally attacked Nolting's position as United States Ambassador to Vietnam at an earlier date, in a paper he called "A Plan for South Vietnam."

I would recommend:

1. Replacement of Ambassador Nolting by an ambassador of the character and prominence of Governor Harriman.¹⁵ We need someone who can hold his own with both Diem and the United States military, who will insist once and for all on government reform, and who will understand the United States political implications of developments there. If Harriman himself is unavailable, I would suggest David Lilienthal or George McGhee.¹⁶

Evidently, Galbraith was unaware that Nolting's selection and rushed-through appointment as United States Ambassador to South Vietnam had Kennedy's personal endorsement.¹⁷ President

Footnotes

¹⁵ This is a very odd suggestion of Galbraith's as it is not in keeping with what he wrote to President Kennedy some twenty-five days later. On November 28, 1961, he wrote: "The Ambassador there [Fritz Nolting], a decent man who is trying to obey orders, has been treated abominably by the State Department. He first heard of Max's mission [the Taylor Mission] on the radio. He had no chance to comment on the orders resulting therefrom. I would reluctantly tell you who is responsible for this management were steps taken to overcome my natural grace and charity." John Kenneth Galbraith, Ambassador's Journal: A Personal Account of the Kennedy Years, (Boston, [Ma.]: The Houghton Mifflin Company, 1969), pp. 267 - 268. Not only is he, demonstrably, inconsistent about what he has to say about Nolting, although there is certainly a hint in this letter that Nolting, poor fellow, is not quite up to the task, but he is also quite clearly nurturing a grudge against Dean Rusk. For he certainly does manage to overcome his "natural grace and charity" via the method of innuendo.

¹⁶ John Kenneth Galbraith, 209. "Paper Prepared by the Ambassador to India (Galbraith): A Plan For South Vietnam," Washington, November 3, 1961, [Kennedy Library, President's Office File, Vietnam Country Series, Security 1961. Secret.] in FRUS: Vietnam, 1961, Vol. I, p. 475.

¹⁷ According to his own memoirs, Nolting made it clear that his appointment as United States Ambassador to South Vietnam was given the "express" treatment through the regular procedure. This was so much so, that he was not even required to submit to cross-examination by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee at the time of his appointment. Further to this, President Kennedy, himself, had personally

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Kennedy had made it personally clear to Nolting that United States policy toward Diem and his government would proceed based on the new Ambassador's assessment of what kind of man Diem was.¹⁸ Thus, the President had placed real weight on Nolting's capabilities and there is no indication that he ever, entirely, relinquished this view.¹⁹ Galbraith, nevertheless, persisted in his assaults on Diem and his government and, no doubt, found ample support in this with Averell Harriman; these were not men who were easily dissuaded once they perceived what the true course of action should be. Thus, on November 26, 1961, Galbraith sent a telegram to the State Department stating, innocuously, that

*"Unless there is penetrating and non-routine reason to contrary, I think I might see Hanoi representative if and when he comes to New Delhi, and with appropriate discretion hear what he has to say and indicate that while US and GVN are not menacing and do not intend menace DRV we are serious in determination maintain independence SVN. Indians doubtless willing put forward idea of meeting as their suggestion."*²⁰

...footnote continued from previous page:

instructed Nolting to open up real dialogue with President Diem and to find out what kind of man he was and, thus, advise Washington about the soundness of the American policy of commitment to Diem. Nolting, From Trust To Tragedy, pp. 11 & 16.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 16.

¹⁹ Harriman's biographer noted that even up until the time of Diem's death, President Kennedy liked to hear what Nolting had to say even when Harriman and Hilsman objected to Nolting giving any advice at all. "The tense White House meetings over five days produced the angriest exchanges heard in the Oval Office during all of Kennedy's administration. Hilsman defended the cable's content with as much determination as Harriman fended off the critics of their haste. Averell stormed at Krulak and accused Taylor of being wrong on everything since World War II. He sailed into Nolting for being too cozy with Diem. And when the former ambassador tried to defend himself, Harriman snapped that he should keep his mouth shut because no one cared what he thought. With that, Kennedy curtly interrupted. He was fond of Nolting, and he told Harriman that the President, for one, was interested in hearing what Nolting had to say." Abramson, Spanning the Century, p. 622.

²⁰ John Kenneth Galbraith, 282. "Telegram From the Embassy in India to the Department of State," New Delhi, November 26, 1961 - 5 p.m., [Department of State, Central Files, 751K.00/11-2661. Secret; Priority; Limit Distribution. Repeated to Saigon and to Geneva for Harriman.] in FRUS: Vietnam, 1961, Vol. I, p. 671.

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The subtlety of how Galbraith was re-routing his attack on Diem's credibility and, indeed by implication, that Diem was the problem which needed to be out-manoeuvred, was not lost on Secretary of State Rusk. As such, the Secretary of State promptly drew Galbraith "up short" in a telegram sent in reply on November 28, 1961:

Dept believes any meeting between you and Hanoi envoy would have bad effect Saigon. Diem and many influential Vietnamese seriously concerned US may seek negotiate Viet-Nam settlement which would result ultimate Communist control SVN. Since it is our policy give full support to GVN we must avoid any move that might appear, or which DRV propaganda could cause to appear, as prelude to US reduction its commitments to Viet-Nam.²¹

Rusk made sure that this message also got through to Harriman in Geneva and that a copy was sent to re-assure Nolting, first of all, in Saigon.²² One of the most remarkable points about Galbraith's attempt to open negotiations with the North Vietnamese was that it would be done at the expense of good relations with Diem and his government. Galbraith seems to have counted as naught the deep fears that the Geneva Accords on Laos were engendering in Southeast Asia and, particularly, in Saigon; and this was something that Rusk discerned straightway.

Notwithstanding the "slap" that Rusk had administered to him, with regard to the concept of negotiating with the DRV directly, Galbraith was winning converts to the idea of an alternative to Diem if the South Vietnamese leader failed to perform the way the U.S.

Footnotes

²¹ Dean Rusk, 290. "Telegram From the Department of State to the Embassy in India," Washington, November 28, 1961 - 8:41 p.m., [Department of State, Central Files, 751K.00/11 2861. Secret; Priority. Repeated to Saigon, Geneva for FECON and USUN.] in FRUS: Vietnam, 1961, Vol. I, p. 681.

²² Galbraith had made an enemy of Rusk but this did not seem to bother him as he believed that his own personal good relations with the President would ward off any evil Rusk could do. Thus he noted in his memoirs: "During the day, I also got a rather sharp letter from McGeorge Bundy complaining that I have been insufficiently pleasant to some of the more pompous people in Washington. He says that both Rusk and Alexis Johnson have come to suspect that I do not have a very high regard for them. This does credit to their perceptions." Galbraith, Ambassador's Journal, p. 294.

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Government wished him to. One of these converts was no less a person than Walt Rostow, Kennedy's Deputy Special Assistant for National Security Affairs, who mentioned, in a memorandum to the President, that he had no objection to Galbraith's 'Plan for Vietnam.' Rostow seemed to have warmed to the idea of replacing Diem if he did not do what Washington wanted. As he put it, his only problem with the Galbraith plan was: "The management of that crisis will take great skill to avoid exploitation by the Communists; but I think it not impossible."²³ Rostow also indicated that there would be no problem if "Contingency planning might quietly begin."²⁴

Galbraith continued to report to Kennedy, and to try to influence him, about what he perceived was the problem in South Vietnam.²⁵ In one of the letters that he sent to President Kennedy, he did not shy away from using derogatory illustrations of Diem's style of leadership, and, concurrently, he assaulted the South Vietnamese leader's character. Yet, these attacks simply did not correspond with any of the depictions given of Diem by those who knew him, friend or foe alike. Essentially, Galbraith intimated to Kennedy that Diem was so unpopular a leader that he had to be rushed through the streets of Saigon in a heavily policed motorcade

Footnotes

²³ Walter Rostow, 274. "Memorandum From the President's Deputy Special Assistant for National Security Affairs (Rostow) to the President," Washington, November 24, 1961, [Kennedy Library, National Security Files, Vietnam Country Series. Top Secret.... Under cover of a brief letter of November 25, Rostow sent to Galbraith a copy of his memorandum to the President...] in FRUS: Vietnam, 1961, Vol. I, p. 661.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ According to Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., Galbraith maintained a stridently anti-Diem perspective throughout the entirety of the Kennedy Administration's dealings with South Vietnam and its government. This was so much the case that Schlesinger quoted Galbraith, in a statement to Kennedy about Diem: "There was not 'the slightest practical chance,' Galbraith said, that the administrative and political reforms now being pressed upon Diem would result in performance." Galbraith went on to tell Kennedy about the negative prospects of staying the course with Diem: "While no one can promise a safe transition, we are now married to failure." Schlesinger, Jr., A Thousand Days, pp. 547 – 548.

whenever he wanted to get to the airport, for example. He also went on to imply that Diem was caught up in Confucian protocol which debilitated the ministers in his cabinet as they were forced to comply. Perhaps the most damaging thing he told Kennedy about Diem was that the South Vietnamese leader's alleged need to protect himself from a coup even went to the extent that fighting the Viet Cong had become a secondary consideration. Galbraith flippantly dismissed Diem's actions as simply those of another politician trying to hold on to office at all costs. ²⁶

Evidently and quite apart from the deliberate damage he was doing to Nolting's efforts with Diem, Galbraith also found it necessary to make another stab at Dean Rusk in his reference

Footnotes

²⁶ "Dear Mr. President,

You will already have had sundry more official communications from me on South Vietnam. This is by way of giving you something of the informal flavour and colour of the local scene.

It is certainly a can of snakes. I am reasonably accustomed to oriental government and politics, but I was not quite prepared for Diem. As you will doubtless be warned, whenever anyone reaches an inconvenient conclusion about this country, he has been duped. My view is derived neither from the Indians nor the Saigon intellectuals but my personal capacity for error. One of the proposals which I am told was made to Max Taylor provides an interesting clue to our man. It was that a helicopter be provided to pluck him out of his palace and take him directly to the airport. This is because his surface travel through Saigon requires the taking in of all laundry along the route, the closing of all windows, an order to the populace to keep their heads in, the clearing of all the streets, and a vast bevy of motorcycle outriders to protect him on his dash. Every trip to the airport requires such arrangements and it is felt that a chopper would make him seem more democratic. Incidentally, if Diem leaves town for a day, all members of his cabinet are required to see him off and welcome him back although this involves less damage to efficiency than might be supposed.

The political reality is the total stasis which arises from his greater need to protect himself from a coup than to protect the country from the Vietcong. I am quite clear that the absence of intelligence, the centralisation of Army control, the incredible dual role of the provincial governors as Army generals and political administrators, the subservient incompetence of the latter, are all related to his fear of being given the heave.

The desire to prolong one's day in office has a certain consistency the world around and someday somebody should explain this to the State Department with pictures. I would love to have come up with the conclusion that our man would be reformed and made into an effective military and political force. It would have given me similar hopes for...[some people near home]." Galbraith, *Ambassador's Journal*, pp. 266 - 267.

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to “It would have given me similar hopes for...[some people near home].”²⁷ All of this is not to suggest that Galbraith, alone, was responsible for inaugurating the anti-Diem faction in the State Department. Instead, the purpose here is to argue that there was definite disarray within the department.²⁸

Footnotes

²⁷ Master of both the subtle and not-so-subtle put-down, the best that Galbraith ever managed to say about the Secretary of State was in a letter to President Kennedy in May of 1962. “I am writing from Bombay where I have just spent an hour or two with your Secretary of State. We had a useful and agreeable session. While I do not find him the easy, confident, forthcoming, eclectic and commanding figure with which in my imagination I associate the diplomacy of the New Frontier, we get along much better than hitherto.” *Ibid.*, p. 372.

²⁸ Ambassador Nolting pointed out that Walter McConaughy had been the Assistant Secretary for Far Eastern Affairs when he was first sent out as Ambassador to South Vietnam and that McConaughy was in full accord with the instructions that he (Nolting) had received from the President and Dean Rusk. Nolting stated as much in his own words: “Yes, I thought so. I’d known Walt McConaughy for quite a number of years, and I think he was closely in agreement with the instructions which I went out there with, having helped to draw them up, I believe.” Frederick Nolting, “Third Oral History Interview With Frederick Nolting.” Recorded interview by Dennis O’Brien, May 7, 1970 (Washington, [DC]), pp. 83 – 84, John F. Kennedy Library, Oral History Program.

Quite apart from McConaughy’s agreement with the instructions given to the new Ambassador to South Vietnam, Nolting, nevertheless, discerned a distinct lack of wanting to get too closely involved with the whole issue of Vietnam on Dean Rusk’s part. For example, Nolting had seen this right at the beginning of his mission when the Kennedy Task Force had been formed up to deal with the whole issue of Vietnam and Laos. “It seemed to me, even then, more of a political than a military problem - a problem to be treated from the beginning in a foreign policy context, with military participation and advice, but under the continuous leadership of the Department of State. Placing the Deputy Secretary of Defense in charge of the Task Force put too much military emphasis on Vietnam.

I commented on this to Secretary Rusk, who responded to the effect that he had had such a rough time on Laos that he would just as soon let the Pentagon take the lead on Vietnam.” Nolting, *From Trust To Tragedy*, p. 12.

Ibid., p. 129.

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Secretary of State, Dean Rusk:

Dean Rusk came from humble beginnings, born into a small Southern farmer's family in Cherokee County, Georgia, on February 9, 1909.²⁹ Unable to keep the farm economically viable, the Rusk's were forced to sell off their property and move to Atlanta where they lived in relative poverty and where, as a boy, Dean was subjected to all the humiliations of being poor.³⁰ Nevertheless, Dean Rusk did well at school and, with a combination of intelligence, guts and determination, he won a Rhodes scholarship to Oxford in October of 1931.³¹ All the while, and despite the cynicism Oxford, the man was able to maintain a quiet, steady and devout Christian faith.³² When war came to the Pacific, Rusk actually ended up being in the same theatre of operation as Roger Hilsman because he was assigned as Deputy Chief of Staff to General Stilwell and Colonel Frank Merrill (Merrill's Marauders) in the China-Burma-India area (1942).³³ When he was demobilised from the Army in 1945 the State Department intervened and offered him a job that he did not refuse. Rusk brought his steady beliefs, which included a profound respect for international law based on the Anglo-Saxon tradition, to the Department of State:

His faith in the Anglo-Saxon tradition of law and liberty as a beacon for the entire human race led Rusk to be, paradoxically, a convinced anticolonialist. He accurately predicted the swift and inevitable dissolution of colonial empires

Footnotes

²⁹ Thomas J. Schoenbaum, Waging Peace and War: Dean Rusk in the Truman, Kennedy, and Johnson Years, (New York, [NY]: Simon & Schuster, Inc., 1988), p. 29.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 32.

³¹ Ibid., pp. 43 – 51.

³² Ibid., p. 53.

³³ Ibid., pp. 84 – 92.

after the war, and thought that the United States and Britain should assist this process. Nevertheless, he was enough of a realist to leaven these views with a dose of pragmatism. He did not believe in universal American intervention to set the world right, but in the limited use of American power based on what was possible in any given situation.³⁴

By March of 1947 Rusk was serving, effectively, as an Assistant Secretary of State in his official role as Director of Special Political Affairs.³⁵ In some ways Rusk had 'arrived' but, in many more subtle understandings, he never would. After all, he had invaded the heart of the Ivy League but this elite would never truly accept a Southerner of such humble origins:

It was a very exclusive group in which everyone was on a first name basis, and not without a certain haughtiness, a feeling of being anointed to decide questions of war and peace for the rest of the nation. Presidents might come from obscure origins in places like Independence, Missouri, but not the foreign policy establishment.³⁶

President Kennedy appointed Dean Rusk as Secretary of State in early 1961.³⁷ Rusk, however, was not given the opportunity to design the Kennedy Administration's State Department leadership to his liking as the Kennedy staff made all key appointments. Indeed, Kennedy interference in the DOS plagued Rusk from the outset of his tenure as Secretary of State during the Kennedy Administration.³⁸

Footnotes

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 135.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 142 – 143.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 143.

³⁷ Robert H. Ferrell, American Diplomacy: A History, Third edition, (New York, [NY]: W.W. Norton & Company, 1975), p. 853.

³⁸ Schoenbaum, Waging Peace and War, pp. 267 – 269.

There was a lack of acceptance of Dean Rusk as Secretary, and even Nolting had stated that Rusk had not shown much interest in the Far Eastern Bureau. Specifically, Rusk had told Nolting that he had had such a rough time over Laos that he would be happy if the Pentagon took the lead in Vietnam. Nolting's recollection of this key issue was quite clear and certain and it is well worth considering as it sheds some real light on the mechanics of just how Averell Harriman was able to take over the State Department's direction in Southeast Asia.

Rusk was not personally antagonistic, but he certainly remained aloof during this period, both at the State Department and at the White House meetings. This disappointed me. As a career officer who had worked with him, I was delighted when President Kennedy named Dean Rusk Secretary of State. But during my tenure as Ambassador, he never set foot in Vietnam, nor did he attend any of the Honolulu conferences. I could never get him to focus on our problems while I was in Vietnam. Policy fell by default first to Bob McNamara in Defense and then to Averell Harriman. As late as August 1963, when I went to ask Rusk to talk about Vietnam, he told me, "Averell's handling this."39

Rusk's apparent lack of enthusiasm extended so far as to allow the Far Eastern Bureau to be subsumed under Harriman's sway even before he had been officially appointed as Assistant Secretary for that region.⁴⁰ In short, the State Department was a house divided against itself. This fact was never made more manifest than when the related issues of fighting the burgeoning Communist insurgency in South Vietnam and impatience with Ngo Dinh Diem's administration began to be pushed into the foreground.

Footnotes

³⁹ Nolting, From Trust To Tragedy, p. 129.

⁴⁰ See the previous footnote.

"Dean Rusk, as Secretary of State, failed, in my view, to supply the oversight required in American policy toward Southeast Asia in the early 1960's, when the problems there were more political than military. True, he was preoccupied with larger issues, in particular the tense confrontation with the Soviet Union over Berlin and Cuba." Ibid., Preface pp. xiii - xiv.

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Galbraith's drive to distance the Kennedy Administration from supporting Diem continued on relentlessly as can be seen in the following memorandum he sent to Kennedy in April of 1962:

4. It must be recognised that our long-run position cannot involve an unconditional commitment to Diem. Our support is to non-communist and progressively democratic government not to individuals. We cannot ourselves replace Diem. But we should be clear in our mind that almost any non-communist change would probably be beneficial and this should be the guiding rule for our diplomatic representation in the area.⁴¹

Intellectual Constructs versus Reality –

Galbraith shared a common faith with Averell Harriman and Chester Bowles that held serious ramifications for United States' policy, particularly, as it pertained to Southeast Asia. This faith was based upon the dearly held belief that the pen was mightier than the sword and that negotiation had power all on its own. Their common faith had a critical impact on all of Southeast Asia because regardless of the "facts on the ground" with regard to the military force of their adversary, they clung to the belief that negotiation could succeed where guns had not or had not been used. Diametrically opposed to this intellectuals' faith was the British practical experience with the Communists in Malaya. For the British had steeled themselves to the harsh truth that what really worked with the Communists was a combination of "shoot then talk."⁴² In

Footnotes

⁴¹ John Kenneth Galbraith, 141. "Memorandum From the Ambassador to India (Galbraith) to the President," Washington, April 4, 1962, [Washington National Records Center, RG 330, OSD Files: FRC 77-131, Republic of Vietnam, 1961-1962. Secret.], in FRUS: Vietnam, 1962, Vol. II, p. 298.

⁴² As Robert Thompson pointed out: there was no point in talking to the Communists until it was made abundantly clear to them that they were militarily defeated and that their access to political means and political legitimacy had equally been curtailed. "As already stated, the main impact of government measures occurred during the period when Sir Gerald Templer was High Commissioner, from 1952 to 1954, and it was during this period that the communists' organisation and military strength were broken, so

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other words, the one thing the Communists respected was brute force intelligently and ruthlessly applied. The sentiments of American democratic, liberal-humanists did not rest easy with this tough British understanding. Indeed, many of the ideologues within the ranks of the “best and the brightest” in Kennedy’s Administration found such a rude reality unpalatable. For example, they were convinced that the Neutrality Accords for Laos held promise for all of Southeast Asia. Caught up in logic that defied reality Bowles elaborated, in a letter to Dean Rusk, the belief that the effort had to be made “...to transfer the debate from the military to the political arena....”⁴³ What possessed intelligent and powerful Americans, like Chester Bowles, to even entertain such folly when it was very obvious that the Communists, quite soberly and realistically,⁴⁴ viewed

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that by the end of 1954 their eventual military defeat became apparent. Their strength was declining rapidly; they were losing arms at a higher rate than the government, and their subversive political organisation was being uprooted. Politically, this enabled the British to set the date for independence in 1957 and to inaugurate countrywide elections for a Malayan government, which was established in 1955 with Tunku Abdul Rahman as Chief Minister.

When facing defeat both militarily and politically, there is only one gambit for a Communist Party to play, and that is to take the famous ‘one step backward,’ except that in this case it had to be considerably more than one step. With a new Malayan government in the saddle, pledged in its election platform to offer an amnesty to end war, the Communist Party accordingly put out peace feelers. The military pressure was temporarily taken off, and arrangements were made for peace talks to be held at Baling near the Malayan-Thai frontier.” Thompson, Defeating Communist Insurgency, p. 45.

⁴³ Chester Bowles, Promises to Keep: My Years in Public Life 1941-1969, (New York, [NY]: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1971), pp. 407, 408 & 409.

⁴⁴ Evidently, the Communists had read their Clausewitz and the like of Chester Bowles had not! “*War is thus an act of force to compel our enemy to do our will [editor’s italics].... War, therefore, is an act of policy...If we keep in mind that war springs from some political purpose, it is natural that the prime cause of its existence will remain the supreme consideration in conducting it; yet the political aim remains the first consideration. Policy, then, will permeate all military operations, and, in so far as their violent nature will admit, it will have a continuous influence on them.*”

24. War Is Merely The Continuation Of Policy By Other Means [editor’s emphasis]

We see, therefore, that war is not merely an act of policy but a true political instrument, a continuation of political intercourse, carried on by other means.” Carl Von Clausewitz, On War, Edited and Translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret, (Princeton, [New Jersey]: Princeton University Press, 1984), pp. 75 & 87.

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military action and political action as an integral whole, mocks rational explanation. Yet, that such vanity prevailed in the thinking of men like Chester Bowles is made self-evident throughout his letter to Rusk:

In February, 1961, I first urged Dean Rusk to consider the expansion of the neutrality concept established for Laos in the Geneva Accords in 1954, to embrace the rest of Southeast Asia, excluding North Vietnam and East Pakistan, but including Thailand, Burma, Cambodia, Malaysia, South Vietnam and Singapore.

Neutral status, I said, might be guaranteed by the United States, Britain, France, the Soviet Union, India and Japan. It was even conceivable that such a plan might appeal to the Soviet Union's interest in keeping Communist China from moving to absorb Southeast Asia into its sphere of influence.... In an effort to transfer the debate from the military to the political arena I again introduced my proposal for a neutralised Southeast Asia in a somewhat new form: i.e., that we expand the negotiations in regard to the neutralisation of Laos which were still under way in Geneva to the neutralisation of the entire area, including not only Laos but both Vietnams, Cambodia, Burma, Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore.

Averell Harriman reacted favourably to this proposal. As head of our negotiating team he had developed working relationships with representatives of the other side and, while recognising the difficulties, felt that some such plan might be feasible. The Soviet Union, he thought, might be persuaded to share responsibility for insuring the provisions of the agreement.⁴⁵

To powerful Democrat diplomats, like Bowles, Galbraith and Harriman, United States policy toward South Vietnam stood 'four square' in the way of what they perceived was the better route to go. Similarly, Ngo Dinh Diem's defiant stance against a paper-neutrality for Laos incurred their wrath. Anyone who agreed with Diem, such as Nolting, Colby and Paul Harkins (of MAAG) were, by association, cast in an unfavourable light by the Harriman group, which did have direct access to the President's ear. The British experience in Malaya, which was aptly

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⁴⁵ Bowles, Promises to Keep, pp. 407, 408 & 409.

described in the phrase “it’s hard to talk about draining the swamp when you’re up to your neck in alligators,” seemed to have made no impact at all amongst these senior American diplomats. To the contrary, and to press the point of the alligators and swamp even harder, the like of Bowles and Galbraith, evidently, believed that all you had to do to solve the problem was to declare the “swamp” neutral and give the “alligators” the vote. Even the hard-bitten old soldiers within the American Armed Services community, such as Lionel McGarr, realised that what Sir Robert Thompson had been advocating (even if they disagreed with his preference for policemen over soldiers) was better grounded in reality than the Harriman faction’s call to chase the “rainbows” of neutrality. Nevertheless, the power of Galbraith, and those of the neutrality camp, was substantial and it did have a direct impact on President Kennedy and his decision making process, as Nolting later indicated. Specifically, Nolting became deeply concerned that President Kennedy was relying on news stories and reports from his friends and cronies, like Galbraith, rather than on the official cables and reports sent to Washington from the American Embassy in Saigon. ⁴⁶

Footnotes

⁴⁶ “An interesting sidelight on how the Kennedy administration functioned was revealed during this period. As a regular member of the Foreign Service, I was not well known to most new members of the Kennedy administration nor was I particularly partisan in the political sense. I was not among the “in” crowd at the White House.

Kenneth Galbraith, a close friend and confidant of the President, arrived unexpectedly in Saigon while I was in the midst of the negotiations with the Diem government described above. Ambassador Galbraith was on his way from Washington to his post in New Delhi and had come via Saigon at the President’s request, apparently to check up on how we were doing. He stayed at our home and was a stimulating houseguest, sending us afterward a number of books, including many of his own.

The negotiations we were carrying on with President Diem and Minister Thuan were extremely time-consuming, as were most things in Vietnam. They involved delving into sensitive areas - the use of and accountability for American counterpart funds, the broadening of Diem’s government, the role of the National Assembly, the concentration of power in the hands of the President, the actual role of his brothers in the power structure.... To fulfil our instructions (and my own imperatives), it was necessary to reach clarifications and understandings on these matters before agreeing specifically on the use of American aid.

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President Kennedy's Policy Declaration on Laos: "We'll go along with the Governor" -

Certainly, even Roger Hilsman supports Nolting's view that Kennedy tended to be swayed by his cronies when it came to decision-making: "Suspicious about the Communists' intentions [with regard to Laos] were voiced in the NSC meeting, but there was no serious opposition to the basic policy. "Well," said the President, swinging his chair around toward Harriman with a relaxed grin, "we'll go along with the Governor."⁴⁷

During the pivotal year of 1962, Ambassador Nolting had to deal with much more than Galbraith's attempts to persuade President Kennedy away from supporting Diem as this was the year that the Laos Accords were, in fact, signed.⁴⁸ Averell Harriman had been tireless in his

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At the same time, we had to do this discreetly and privately, not as representatives of a powerful nation laying down the law to its ally.

Galbraith was sent, no doubt, by President Kennedy to see whether I was firm and persistent enough in these negotiations, but the slow tempo soon got him down, and he departed for New Delhi while the talks were still in progress. Some time later, John Richardson, who replaced Bill Colby as CIA Station Chief in April 1962, told me of a surprising message he received from New Delhi. Galbraith had asked his CIA man to get a private report from Richardson on the conduct and outcome of the negotiations. "What did you tell him, John?" I asked. "Highly satisfactory," he replied, "in outcome and in touch, although the press doesn't know it." Richardson knew that if the press had known about and publicised these tough negotiations, our influence with Diem would have been severely prejudiced, and the Viet Cong would have had a propaganda bonanza.

From this small incident, I began to suspect that President Kennedy relied more on news stories and reports from his cronies than he did on our cables, which were normally sent through the Department of State." Nolting, From Trust To Tragedy, pp. 42 - 43.

⁴⁷ Roger Hilsman, To Move A Nation: The Politics of Foreign Policy in the Administration of John F. Kennedy, (Garden City, [New York]: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1967), p. 153.

⁴⁸ "Laos presented its declaration of neutrality to the conference on July 6 [1962]. After three days of negotiations over wording, it was formally incorporated into the final conference document. On July 23 [1962] the foreign ministers of the fourteen nations at Geneva signed the "Declaration on the Neutrality of Laos," thus ending the conference..." Charles A. Stevenson, The End of Nowhere: American Policy Toward Laos Since 1945, (Boston, [Ma.]: Beacon Press, 1972), p. 178.

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efforts to ratify the substance of the accords, which had been discussed and debated for over a year with the Russians, the Laotians and the North Vietnamese.⁴⁹ Consequently, the former Governor of New York was in no mood to have his plans upset by a petulant President of South Vietnam.

He [Harriman] was hardly more patient with Washington's ally in Saigon than he had been with the minister from Hanoi...he found President Diem rigidly opposed to Souvanna Phouma and to the Kennedy administration's support for a neutral Laos. Diem not only backed General Phoumi, he wanted the United States and its allies in the Southeast Asia Treaty Organisation to occupy Vientiane and towns along the Mekong River in southern Laos to stop infiltration from the north. This was not an unreasonable position considering Diem's situation, but the South Vietnamese leader was personally vexing... Diem had lost public confidence, Harriman wrote Galbraith when he got back to Geneva. The United States was in the same boat it had been in when the Eisenhower administration had supported Phoumi in Laos - hardly on the side of democracy. It was time, he said, "to get away from Dulles's policy of backing 'strong men' regardless.... Our present stable of strong men are not winners for the long pull, at least in Southeast Asia."⁵⁰

In fairness to the so-called American "strong-men" in Southeast Asia, there were also many Americans who disagreed with the Laotian neutrality deal and stated as much at the time; one of these individuals was Richard Nixon. Now Nixon would have certainly had 'political-axes-to-grind' with regard to Kennedy and his administration, nevertheless, and with due caution given to the likelihood of such a bias existing, Richard Nixon's testimony is worth considering

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⁴⁹ Harriman was not alone in this effort as he was well supported by Roger Hilsman who, whether he intended or not, revealed that Harriman was determined to have an agreement on Laos to his credit, regardless of the consequences. "At one point, for example, Harriman was asked whether he was optimistic or pessimistic about the Geneva agreements on Laos. "Neither," he snapped. "I'm determined." For making successful agreements with the Communists - or, perhaps, anyone else - this is the correct attitude." Hilsman, *To Move A Nation*, p. 155. One would hasten to add, as the Americans found out to their loss, that Harriman and Hilsman had forgotten, in their haste to make a deal, a particularly salient piece of folk-wisdom which dictates that: "He who supps with Devil must have a very long spoon."

⁵⁰ Abramson, *Spanning The Century*, pp. 606 - 607.

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because the man possessed formidable intelligence and foresight in the arena of foreign policy. Thus, he explained his position when he stated in his memoirs: "During his first weeks in office he [Kennedy] was confronted with a crisis involving Communist aggression in Laos. After an initial show of strength in one of his first press conferences, he pulled back and ended up accepting a supposedly neutral government that everyone knew would be heavily influenced by the Communists."⁵¹ Unfortunately for Diem, influential individuals, such as Chester Bowles, not only supported the Harriman initiative for Laotian neutrality but also wanted to see it expanded to include all of Southeast Asia.⁵² Because the Vietnamese President objected to neutrality with the Communists, and thus obstructed Bowles' plans for "A Peace Charter For Southeast Asia,"⁵³

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⁵¹ Richard Nixon, The Memoirs of Richard Nixon, (New York, [NY]: Grosset & Dunlap, 1978), p. 232.

⁵² For a glimpse at this incredible notion one should read Bowles "Principles For a Presidential 'Peace Charter For Southeast Asia," on pp. 412 -413 of Bowles memoirs entitled Promises to Keep.

⁵³ The "Draft Principles For A Proposed Southeast Asian Charter," in all their unrealistic glory can be read as an attachment to a memorandum Bowles sent to Dean Rusk in July of 1962. Chester Bowles, 241. "Memorandum From the Ambassador at Large (Bowles) to the Secretary of State," Washington, July 12, 1962, [Kennedy Library, President's Office Files, Special Correspondence, Bowles. Confidential.] in FRUS: Vietnam, 1962, Vol. II, pp. 516 - 519.

Averell Harriman may have been many things but he was not stupid nor was he unfamiliar with what constituted reality in the world of power politics. Thus, he wrote a memorandum to Rusk which cautioned against the Bowles initiative for Southeast Asia: "Since our talk this morning on the objectives of Mr. Bowles' proposed trip, I have been over his memorandum again and find it even more impractical than I mentioned this morning. His whole thesis is based on the assumption that a Laos-type of international agreement is possible and enforceable for the whole of Southeast Asia. The proposed presidential statement, "Peace Charter for Southeast Asia," could only be implemented by an international agreement similar to the one reached in Laos. This would require us to take commitments without any assurance of the other side doing the same, with no enforcement procedures that would be workable. To negotiate such an agreement would require us to take commitments without any assurance of the other side doing the same, with no enforcement procedures that would be workable. To negotiate such an agreement would require another Geneva meeting, which I understood everyone was opposed to because of its effect on the situation in South Vietnam. Most of the suggested economic objectives can be achieved only after there is peace, and do not give a sufficient basis for immediate heads of government discussions.

I will be glad to go over the memorandum in detail with you (which shouldn't take long), and Ed Rice and I believe you will come to the same conclusions we have." Averell Harriman, 253.

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Bowles wrote emergency memos to President Kennedy urging him to reconsider his support for Diem.⁵⁴

While Bowles and Galbraith pressured Kennedy to replace Diem, Harriman, for his part, took the direct approach, visited South Vietnam in 1962, and duly threatened Diem with the promise to cut off all American aid if he didn't sign the Laotian Neutrality Accords.⁵⁵ Harriman had been out earlier, in September of 1961, to try and convince Diem that he should sign the accord and, as Nolting recalled the meeting had not gone well at all. The meeting was held in a small room that was hot and lacking in oxygen. Diem, nevertheless, went to great lengths to explain to Harriman why he was so unwilling to trust the Communists and their ability to live up to a treaty they had signed. Using an interpreter, Diem explained the dreary reality and depressing, lengthy list of agreements broken by the Communists in Southeast Asia. The South Vietnamese President even explained personally painful experiences from his own past dealings with the Communists, such as when they had brutally murdered his older brother and then attempted to win Diem over through threats of more violence and, conversely, promises of power. According to Nolting, who was at the meeting, Diem gave Harriman a long and historically accurate litany of deceptive actions taken by the Communists. There was no doubt left that past dealings with Communists spelled out an ill omen for any deal over Laos where

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"Memorandum From the Assistant Secretary of State For Far Eastern Affairs (Harriman) to the Secretary of State," Washington, July 30, 1962 [Columbia University, Harriman Papers, Bowles, Chester. Confidential; Personal - No Distribution.] in FRUS: Vietnam, 1962, Vol. II, pp. 565 - 566.

⁵⁴ Bowles, Promises to Keep, pp. 416 - 417.

⁵⁵ Frederick E. Nolting, "Kennedy, NATO, and Southeast Asia," in Kenneth W. Thompson's (ed.) Diplomacy, Administration, and Policy: The Ideas and Careers of Frederick E. Nolting, Jr., Frederick C. Mosher, and Paul T. David, (New York, [NY]: University Press of America - The Miller Center, University of Virginia, 1995), pp. 24 - 25.

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safeguards were not in place.⁵⁶ This accurate, careful and lengthy illumination of Communist deceits, given by Diem to Harriman, only served to annoy and bore the latter, as Nolting recalled:

But Harriman had turned off his hearing aid and closed his eyes. He appeared to be asleep. Diem noticed this with some annoyance but continued his monologue. Sitting next to Harriman on the sofa, realising that he had had a long and tiring flight, I tried to nudge him into attention. Finally Harriman snapped, "I have a fingertips feeling, Mr. President, that the Russians will police this agreement and make the others live up to it. We cannot give you any guarantees, but one thing is clear: if you do not sign this treaty, you will lose American support. You have to choose." With that the meeting - a tough encounter - broke up.⁵⁷

In very short order Diem's suspicions about the Communists' intentions in Laos were proved right and Harriman's 'finger-tip' feelings proved wrong. It is ironic that it was The New York Times that carried story after story concerned with Communist violations and attacks in post-Geneva Accords Laos while, at the same time, running story after story based upon anti-Diem bias.⁵⁸ In all of these reports it was made painfully clear that there was no peace in Laos and that the Accords, in fact, had given birth to a political and military disaster.

Footnotes

⁵⁶ "On September 20, 1961, in a small, steamy-hot room in the President's "Palace," Diem explained to Harriman at great length why he was unwilling to trust the Communist signatories to live up to their treaty obligations. Speaking through an interpreter, he went back to the early 1930s, tracing in some detail the history of Communist penetration into Southeast Asia, of agreements broken and bad faith displayed. He mentioned his personal experiences with Ho Chi Minh and the treachery of the Vietminh toward his older brother, whom they murdered. The historical record was impressively long and accurate. Its relevance to the question of signing the treaty on Laos without safeguards was clear." Nolting, From Trust To Tragedy, p. 83.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ A small sampling of these New York Times articles would include the following: "Rightists in Laos Repel Red Drive," in The New York Times, (Friday June 14, 1963), p. 1.

"Vientiane, Laos, June 15 (UPI) - Neutralists and right-wing troops were reported battling Pathet Lao forces at two towns in southern Laos." "South Laos Fighting at 2 Towns Noted," in The New York Times, (Sunday June 16, 1963), pp. 18.

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Nevertheless, acceptance of Laotian Neutrality had become the hinge upon which the Kennedy Administration's policy toward Southeast Asia swung. Nolting had not missed that a malevolent turn had been taken in American policy toward Diem's government and he ascribed its source to be Harriman's hatred of Diem:

*"His hatred of the Diem regime became greater and greater. It originated with President Diem's reluctance to sign the Laotian agreement that Harriman had negotiated. There was a personal friction between them on that. I had the job of persuading Diem to sign because there was very little else he could do. Harriman was out there in 1962 and threatened to cut off all American aid if he didn't. This involved not only Vietnamese objections to the treaty, which had no safeguards, but the Thais objected to it just as strongly as the Vietnamese did. But this started a personal distrust that certainly made it much more difficult to get any reasonable exchange of views in the National Security Council meetings that followed in the fall of 1963. It was very, very difficult."*⁵⁹

As Nolting stated, he was not only under pressure from Harriman to get Diem on side with the Laos Accords but, also, to encourage Diem to reach out to the opposition.⁶⁰ As even Harriman's biographer noted, Harriman's pressure on Nolting was in clear opposition to the Ambassador's instructions from Kennedy and Rusk: "Nolting was in a clear contradiction between his instructions from Rusk to do everything he could to help the Saigon government and Harriman's

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"Laotian Reds Pound 'Rightists' Garrison," in The New York Times, (Friday June 21, 1963), p. 15.

"Britain Assails Soviet Account of How Laos Peace Broke Down," in The New York Times, (Saturday June 22, 1963), p. 6.

Hedrick Smith, "U.S. Says Hanoi Renews Laos Aid," in The New York Times, (Wednesday October 30, 1963), p. 1.

⁵⁹ Frederick E. Nolting, "Kennedy, NATO, and Southeast Asia," in Kenneth W. Thompson (ed.) Diplomacy, Administration, and Policy, pp. 24 - 25.

⁶⁰ Abramson, Spanning The Century, p. 609.

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determination to bring about reform. He could not reconcile the objectives of inspiring confidence in the government while supporting the opposition.”⁶¹

For their parts, Diem and Nhu would have none of Harriman’s “fingertips” feeling on the Communists complying with and respecting the Laotian Neutrality Accords. Consequently, they threatened to cut off diplomatic relations with Laos so that they would not be bound legally from, amongst other things, hot-pursuits of Communist insurgents as they fled Vietnam for refuge in Laos. Ambassador Nolting tried his best, in form and substance, to use cordial diplomacy to persuade Diem to sign the agreements made in Geneva, as can be readily discerned upon perusing the following excerpt from a letter he sent to Nhu on October 13, 1962:

*Dear Mr. Counsellor: I have already taken much time of your Government's officials, including the President, on the subject of relations with the Laotian Government, and I hope you will pardon my sending this note on the subject to express once again my Government's strong hope that the Government of Viet-Nam will find a way to continue diplomatic relations with the Laotian Government.... President Kennedy feels that the United States has the right to ask for the continued co-operation of the Government of Viet-Nam in this matter. He also recognises and appreciates the fact that your Government has gone along thus far even despite grave misgivings. He feels that it would be a great mistake to break diplomatic relations at this point, regardless of what the Laotian Government may do in recognising the Hanoi regime.*⁶²

Harriman continued to increase his pressure on Nolting to “get tough” with Diem and Nhu over their threat to sever diplomatic relations with Laos. In a telegram, dated: Washington, October 18, 1962 - 8:24 p.m., Harriman started to show the “crocodile’s” teeth: “I must tell you frankly that it will be diplomatic defeat if Diem severs relations with Laos. Diem cannot expect

Footnotes

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Frederick Nolting, 301. “Letter From the Ambassador in Vietnam (Nolting) to the Vietnamese President’s Political Counsellor (Nhu),” Saigon, October 13, 1962, [Washington National Records Center, RG 84, Saigon Embassy Files: FRC 67 A 677,301 Laos-GVN. Confidential. Drafted by Nolting.] in FRUS: Vietnam, 1962, Vol. II, pp. 696 -697.

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us to accept his refusal, in affronting disregard of request from the President, to stay in the fight to preserve Laos, Laos being on his own doorstep.”⁶³

At about this time, October 21, 1962, to be exact, a meeting was held at Gia Long Palace in Saigon. In attendance were Mr. Ngo Dinh Nhu (Political Advisor to the President), Frederick Nolting, Admiral Harry D. Felt, Commander in Chief, Pacific, and Edward J. Martin, CINCPAC Polad [Political Advisor], and the purpose of this meeting was to discuss South Vietnam’s position on Laotian neutrality. This was a seminal meeting as Nhu was able to illustrate, very clearly, how Southeast Asians viewed the problem and, particularly, how the South Vietnamese and the GVN were concerned about it. Nhu pointed out many complexities about Laos that seemed to have eluded Harriman and his powerful supporters. For example, he had been in the process of negotiating the defection of two entire North Vietnamese regiments, which had been stationed in Laos and did not want to return to Hanoi as stipulated under the Laotian neutrality agreements.⁶⁴ Nhu claimed that Laotian neutrality was working against his whole program for securing substantial defections from the Viet Cong sequestered away in Laos.⁶⁵ Other unforeseen ramifications and questions left in the wake of Harriman’s neutrality accord, which Nhu pointed out, were based upon the very real sense of doubt caused amongst potential defectors as to what the Americans were about: would their policy change again? Would they

Footnotes

⁶³ Averell Harriman, 304. “Telegram From the Department of State to the Embassy in Vietnam,” Washington, October 18, 1962 - 8:24 p.m., [Department of State, Central Files, 651j.51k/10-1862. Secret; Priority; Limit Distribution. Drafted by Rice, cleared with S/S, and initialled by Harriman] in FRUS: Vietnam, 1962, Vol. II, p. 707.

⁶⁴ Source text indicates that it was prepared from the interpreter’s notes, John P. Glennon, editor in chief, 305. “Memorandum For The Record,” Saigon, October 21, 1962, [Washington National Records Center, RG 84, Saigon Embassy Files: FRC 68 A 5159. Top Secret] in FRUS: Vietnam, 1962, Vol. II, pp. 708 - 709.

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 709.

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abandon those who came over to the South's side as they were abandoning tribesmen (such as the Hmong) in other parts of Laos to the Pathet Lao and the North Vietnamese?⁶⁶ Nhu brought up other South Vietnamese fears such as the perception that, far from fearing the Americans staying too long in Vietnam, there was the worry that Laotian neutrality had opened a door through which the Americans could, similarly, leave Vietnam.⁶⁷

*Admiral Felt said that he had never heard the faintest whisper of such an idea. Mr. Nhu then said that he, personally, was convinced the United States had no idea of abandoning Vietnam, but that others could not understand the reason for what had taken place in Laos. Those who had the desire to confront the Communists thought that Laos offered the perfect terrain for their struggle.*⁶⁸

What is particularly important for the reader to note, and readily discernible within Nhu's expressed concerns, is that deep fears and suspicions had been aroused within the Vietnamese. These were fears that were based on the historical precedents of how the Americans had let down allies in Eastern Europe at the end of the Second World War and had let them fall within the grasp of the Soviets. During this meeting, in fact, Nhu had made this the centre-piece of his argument and it struck home with particular relevance because it had been Averell Harriman who had presided over what the Vietnamese believed were failed agreements:

He [Nhu] then referred to Mr. Harriman's written account of the Yalta Agreements pointing out that these agreements rested on the signature and the word of Stalin. He quoted Harriman's question in which he asked Stalin why he had not lived up to the agreements - and Stalin's answer that the conditions which had made the agreements necessary no longer prevailed. Mr. Nhu then said that the events in Laos were the direct consequence of the Vienna discussions between Khrushchev and Kennedy.... Mr. Nhu replied that the

Footnotes

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 711.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 714.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

actions of the countries of the Free World were such that the initiative was always left with the Communists. The "agreements" in Laos were entirely dependent upon the will of Khrushchev.⁶⁹

To sum up, there was no easy way out of the dilemma for the Americans. For Laos had resurrected the all-too-familiar spectre of American failure of will and this was, without a doubt, based upon their poor record of supporting former allies in Eastern Europe in the face of Soviet will (i.e., such as Poland). Laotian neutrality was causing far more problems in Southeast Asia than it was solving. After all, at the end of the day, the Americans could always go home but the non-communist Vietnamese could not as they were fighting for their very homes.⁷⁰

Regardless of all these concerns, Harriman was determined to bend the Vietnamese to his will in Geneva and if this meant removing opposition, such as Diem, then that would be done too. The following two cables best illustrate the problem that Harriman's determination was causing for Nolting in Vietnam:

443. To Harriman from Nolting, Deptel 459. It will be a diplomatic defeat if Diem severs relations with Laos. It will be something considerably worse if he breaks relations with Laos after approach in terms your telegram. I am convinced he will do so unless approach is coupled with threat of severe sanctions, and even then outcome would be doubtful. I do not believe that such sanctions are in interests of the United States and I gather this is also Washington's position.

The further approach prescribed - which advances no arguments not previously put to GVN and to Diem personally, but which directly engages President Kennedy's prestige - would in my judgement undermine our future influence here, and, with it, the carrying forward of our program. Whatever success we have to date rests in important sense on our ultimate respect for GVN

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⁶⁹ *ibid.*, pp. 711 - 712.

⁷⁰ This point was driven home to the Vietnamese later, when South Vietnam collapsed to the Communists' assault. For after the Communist victory in 1975, those who were not killed outright by the victors were subject to decades in concentration and re-education camps.

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sovereignty, including its right in final analysis to make decisions in field of foreign policy.

Within limits indicated above (respect for country's sovereign rights and no threats of withdrawal of US aid), we are doing everything we can on this issue. To take the position set out in your telegram would, in my judgement, defeat our purposes here - on an issue which in itself cannot compare in importance to the United States with that of maintaining an independent, non-communist Vietnam.

*Nolting*⁷¹

Harriman was incensed by Nolting's telegram, which defended South Vietnam's sovereign rights, and thus he shot the following brisk cable back at Nolting:

*466. For Ambassador Nolting from Harriman. Your 443 indicates that you and I are not on the same wavelength. The President's position is already doubly engaged, not only by his personal letter to Diem, but also by Laos settlement which must be made to achieve US objectives as far as possible. In making settlement we have made it plain to all concerned that we consider it not ending all conflict, but transferring conflict from military to political area. In this conflict we have a right to expect full support and assistance from GVN as ally as well as signatory. From your messages I gained the impression that you do not consider Diem's attitude towards Laos of prime importance...you are instructed to make another approach along lines of Deptel 459 or in whatever manner in your judgement you consider most appropriate. We have never suggested application sanctions, and you are not to give any implication that US has any idea of applying them. When you talk to Diem you should talk as an ally to another expecting support due us and may inform him you are speaking under instructions.*⁷²

Footnotes

⁷¹ Frederick Nolting, 306. "Telegram From The Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State," Saigon, October 20, 1962 - 10 a.m., [Department of State, Central Files, 651j.51k/10-2062. Secret. Priority.] in *FRUS: Vietnam, 1962*, Vol. II, pp. 716 - 717.

⁷² Averell Harriman, 307. "Telegram From the Department of State to the Embassy in Vietnam," Washington, October 22, 1962 - 4:06 p.m., [Department of State, Central Files, 751j.00/10-2262. Secret. Drafted and initialled by Harriman], *Ibid.*, pp. 717 - 718.

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It was not possible for Nolting to miss the very clear message that his original instructions of winning over Diem's trust and confidence were now considered obsolete to new directions emanating from Harriman's office. For whatever reasons, Harriman, and those who supported his position, including Hilsman (who as a proponent of counter-insurgency warfare should have known better), had come to believe that the way to get results was to pressure Diem and bend him to the will of Washington. What these men of power had failed to realise was that they were attempting, effectively, to make Diem a puppet, which, in turn, would undermine the most valuable commodity he had: political legitimacy. They were opening the floodgates for Communist propaganda against Diem, which never failed to drive home the point that he was "My-Diem" - America's Diem. In addition to this, they were paving the way for any dissident Vietnamese political group that could sway American opinion to its cause and thus pressure Diem. In short, Harriman's will, powerful as it was, had begun the process of thwarting Nolting's precise mission to South Vietnam and, concurrently, this was destroying Diem.

A century earlier Carl Von Clausewitz had stated that the purpose of war was to force the enemy to do one's will;⁷³ by this logic it is self-evident, that Harriman had effectively declared war on Ngo Dinh Diem. None of this had gone unnoticed by Frederick Nolting and he became deeply concerned about the future of American and South Vietnamese interests as a result of Harriman's deliberate change in United States Government policy toward Diem and his government.

Footnotes

⁷³ Carl Von Clausewitz, On War, Edited and Translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret, (Princeton, [New Jersey]: Princeton University Press, 1984), p. 75.

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"Nothing had happened to lessen Harriman's dislike of Diem - a dislike both personal and unforgiving - and he was soon well placed to translate this dislike into policy." He would lead the fight for a coup against Diem, said Robert Kennedy, the brother of the president. "It became an emotional matter...and in fact, his advice was wrong. In fact, he started us down a road which was quite dangerous."¹

The Harriman Faction:

The Harriman faction was the group primarily responsible for bringing about a one-hundred and eighty degree turn in US policy toward Diem. The group consisted, at one time or another, of Chester Bowles,² Michael Forrestal,³ John Kenneth Galbraith,⁴ Roger Hilsman,⁵

Footnotes

¹ Ellen Hammer is quoting from an interview with Robert F. Kennedy which was recorded by John Bartlow Martin, on April 30, 1964 for the John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Project, p. 393.

Hammer, A Death In November, pp. 31 - 33.

² "Chester Bowles, as Under Secretary, had the second place of responsibility in the State Department.... It was Bowles himself, with his sure instinct for appointments, who first proposed putting Harriman in charge of Far Eastern affairs.... Kennedy, who had sent Galbraith to New Delhi for a two-year tour (later somewhat extended), now asked Bowles to take his place." Schlesinger, A Thousand Days, pp. 437, 443, & 444.

³ Forrestal was a Harriman protégé who went to work for President Kennedy, transferring from DOS to the White House, as the National Security Council's specialist on Far Eastern Affairs. Abramson, Spanning The Century, pp. 571, 581, & 589.

⁴ According to Arthur Schlesinger's account of the powerful men who inhabited the State Department during the Kennedy years, Galbraith shared Harriman's dislike of Diem and supported the latter in his State Department battles to turn policy away from supporting Diem. Schlesinger, A Thousand Days, p. 547.

⁵ Roger Hilsman had been the State Department's Director of Intelligence and Research and then had become the Assistant Secretary For Far Eastern Affairs. Similar to all of the Harriman group, he held strong anti-Diemist sentiments. George W. Ball, The Past Has Another Pattern: Memoirs, (New York, [NY]: W.W. Norton & Company, 1982), pp. 288, 371, & 372.

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Paul Kattenburg,⁶ Vietnam-desk officer Joseph Mendenhall,⁷ William Sullivan,⁸ and Asia scholar James Thomson.⁹ The most salient ties that bound these men together were their loyalty to Averell Harriman, their relatively powerful positions within DOS and the Kennedy Administration (thanks to Harriman), and their dislike of Ngo Dinh Diem and Ngo Dinh Nhu. Politically, and with military considerations duly acknowledged, the Harriman group rendered their judgement that the insurgency in South Vietnam was a civil war caused, principally, by Ngo Dinh Diem's ineptness and machinations.¹⁰

Hilsman, who updated most of his substantial Second World War guerrilla experience with counter-insurgency ideas from Sir Robert Thompson, appears to have made leaps in logic, over this issue, that defy rational explanation. Thompson pointed out two very clear points, and these were that, indeed, this was a Communist inspired and led insurgency, which most definitely had its assigned place in the overall Cold War. Both Thompson and Douglas Pike concurred on this fundamental understanding by drawing attention to the fact that the Viet Cong were far too well organised to have just sprung up, spontaneously - over night, in rebellion against Diem. Both concurred that the Communist/insurrectionist organisation pre-dated Ngo

Footnotes

⁶ According to Ambassador Nolting, Kattenburg, who later became head of the Vietnam Task Force in DOS, held a very low opinion of Ngo Dinh Diem. Nolting, From Trust To Tragedy, p. 128.

⁷ Mendenhall had been the American Embassy's Counsellor for Political Affairs in Saigon; he had gone to Vietnam in August of 1959 and he was no friend of Ngo Dinh Diem. He told Ambassador Nolting, during the tenure of Nolting's mission to Saigon, that he intended to return to the United States and write his thesis on alternatives to President Diem. Ibid., pp. 24 - 25.

⁸ Sullivan was another Harriman protégé from within the lower-echelons of DOS who had assisted Harriman in the Laotian negotiations and who, with Averell's powerful help, became Ambassador to Laos. Charles A. Stevenson, The End of Nowhere: American Policy Toward Laos Since 1954, (Boston, [MA]: The Beacon Press, 1972), p. 157.

⁹ Abramson, Spanning The Century, p. 611.

¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 611 - 612.

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Dinh Diem's government. This understanding is made manifest and self-evident in the fact that there had to be the necessary guerrilla infrastructure in place, the way it clearly was, for any worthwhile assault to be launched against the South Vietnamese leader's government. Such an infrastructure would have required years of careful and expert planning. Quite obviously this masterful infrastructure was in place and the brilliance of its discipline and organisation betrayed the hidden hand of Ho Chi Minh. The detail of the Communist planning was a clearer sign to the counter-insurgency experts, such as Pike and Thompson, that Ho Chi Minh was involved than if he had left his own fingerprints.

Thompson had stated that regardless of who was President of South Vietnam, they would be faced with a burgeoning, well-planned Communist insurgency; he had also stated, in regard to this, that the Communists were masters at inventing a "just cause" to fight in order to suit their needs. Hilsman praised Thompson's work and ideas but,¹¹ then, promptly turned around and blamed Diem for what Thompson has declared was not Diem's doing. Perhaps, like so many of the Harriman group, it was Hilsman's self-assurance in his own abilities that led to the arrogance of the basic assumption, shared by the whole clique, that they knew what was better for the

Footnotes

¹¹ Consider, for example, Hilsman's praise for Thompson in the following excerpts from his memoirs: "The more I reflected on my own experience as a guerrilla in Burma and imagined what it would have been like if we had been facing strategic hamlets during World War II, the more I was persuaded.... It seemed more and more possible that an effective strategic concept could be developed by combining Thompson's strategic hamlet plan with the work in Washington and Fort Bragg on both the military tactics to be pursued and the measures to combat the strains of modernization with which Rostow was concerned.

What was clear above all else was that the single most important principle of all - as the British had discovered in Malaya - was that civic, police, social, and military measures had to be combined and carefully co-ordinated in an over-all counter-guerrilla program and that there had to be a unified civilian, police, and military system of command and control." Hilsman, To Move A Nation, pp. 434 - 435.

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Vietnamese than the Vietnamese did. Certainly, Hilsman had a pronounced track-record in assuming superiority, very much like Harriman did.¹²

There is little doubt that, over the issue of the United States continuing its policy of support to Ngo Dinh Diem, the State Department became a house divided by late 1962. Harriman and his group had drawn up the line against Diem that placed the Secretary of State on the other side along with Vice President Johnson and the Pentagon. Thus, Harriman's biographer noted: "Averell was the godfather of the anti-Diem band; Rusk was the faithful ally of the Pentagon school that spoke in the same breath of defeating the Communists and supporting the government in Saigon."¹³ The real problem here was that President Kennedy encouraged both sides "...accepting the McNamara-Pentagon advice to up the ante while encouraging Harriman and the Diem critics to keep up the pressure for reforms."¹⁴ This, in turn, sent mixed signals to both Nolting and Diem in Vietnam and coupled with the Laotian Neutrality agreement,¹⁵ this

Footnotes

¹² Harriman's biographer, Rudy Abramson, noted how Hilsman managed to make enemies with his arrogant manner: "That he was exceedingly bright no one denied, but his cocksure attitude and his conspicuous lack of awe for general officers infuriated people.

He was known to correct high-ranking military briefers in the presence of the President, the secretary of state, and the secretary of defense, using their maps and charts to launch soaring military and geopolitical expositions that left his superiors with jaws set and gripping the arms of their chairs. Once he stepped up and took the pointer from the hand of General Lyman Lemnitzer, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and more or less pre-empted his presentation. Taylor and McNamara stiffened at the mere mention of his name, and even the monumentally patient Dean Rusk could not conceal his dislike for the assistant secretary's impertinence. Lyndon Johnson, who usually said little in Vietnam meetings, took a simmering dislike to him because of the way he excoriated Diem and asserted himself in matters Johnson considered in the province of the military. One night, when Hilsman held forth on counter-insurgency after one of Harriman's dinners, which included the Vice President and General Lemnitzer, Johnson looked at him through narrowed eyelids and ordered, with barely controlled anger, "God-dammit, Captain Hilsman, shut up and let the general talk." Abramson, Spanning The Century, p. 612.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 614 - 615.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 615.

¹⁵ Nolting declared that the pressure on Diem to sign the accords on Laotian Neutrality had been a mistake which became obvious once the Americans were involved with their own troops: "Diem finally signed the Accords. That proved to be a costly mistake, and I came to regret having urged him to do. It

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created an ever-increasing doubt about the integrity of U.S. support, especially, in Diem's reasoning.

In fact, before and during the debate about Diem and the taking of sides on this critical issue, the State Department had been suffering as a venerable institution at odds with the directions being suggested by the New Frontiersmen.¹⁶ Moreover, a delicate balancing act of leadership existed at the Department's highest levels where Rusk, Ball and Harriman vied for the President's ear. President Kennedy had perceived that there were problems in the DOS but even after instituting its reorganisation he was still left perplexed.¹⁷ Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., has hinted in his written work that the real problem may have been Averell Harriman's unbridled pursuit of power.¹⁸

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soon became apparent that the Communist signatories, specifically North Vietnam, ignored the treaty's provisions from the beginning. Immediately after signing, the United States withdrew its assistance and advisors from the Laotian allies, the Meo tribesmen. The North Vietnamese, however, ignored the provision to remove their forces, as did the Communist elements within Laos, the Pathet Lao. Supplied with arms by the Soviet Union and China through North Vietnam, they never permitted Souvanna Phouma's government to send its officials into the Communist-controlled areas of eastern Laos. Harriman's "fingertips feeling" about Russian "policing" was not borne out by the facts. The Ho Chi Minh Trail, protected by the treaty from interdiction by our allies, was enlarged and developed by North Vietnam into a major route of infiltration into Laos, South Vietnam, Cambodia, and Thailand. Some called it the "Harriman Memorial Highway." Later, when the United States entered the war in force, our country became engaged in trying to knock out by bombing, at the sacrifice of many American lives, what was given away in negotiation." Nolting, From Trust To Tragedy, p. 84.

¹⁶ "The relations between the dynamic, pushing Kennedy staff and the Department became so trying that the young President made the unprecedented move of appearing before a meeting of the Foreign Service officers in an attempt to clarify his position. He reminded the officers that the Constitution conferred upon the President, not upon the State Department, the direction of the nation's foreign affairs and took pains to quote the original legislative enactment setting up the Department, thus adding Congressional and historical corroboration to his point." Smith Simpson, Anatomy of the State Department, (Boston, [MA]: Beacon Press, 1967), p. 141.

¹⁷ Author Smith Simpson in his book, Anatomy of the State Department, suggests that Kennedy's reorganisation caused considerable grief in the department and, owing to the president's interference, over two hundred experienced diplomats actually retired from the Foreign Service. Ibid., pp. 140 – 142.

¹⁸ The reader should note that Schlesinger's claims about Rusk's lack of direction in the Department, especially in the Far Eastern Bureau, coincide with what Nolting perceived and made mention of in his own memoirs [as duly noted in the body of this work]. This, of course, does not reflect poorly on

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Power continued to gravitate toward him [Harriman]. In 1963, when George McGhee went on to become ambassador to Bonn, Harriman took his place as Under Secretary for Political Affairs... To the end, the Department remained a puzzle to the President. No one ran it; Rusk, Ball and Harriman constituted a loose triumvirate on the seventh floor and, passing things back and forth among themselves, managed to keep a few steps ahead of crisis [my emphasis].¹⁹

According to Robert McNamara's recollections the Pentagon and DOD were quite happy about the progress being made in Vietnam and had no intentions of getting behind the anti-Diemist move. General Paul D. Harkins, who headed up the U.S. military mission in Vietnam, always maintained that Diem was on the 'right track' and that so was United States policy in supporting the Vietnamese leader and his government. Right up until the Buddhist Crisis broke, in the summer of 1963, Defense and the Pentagon continued to receive an optimistic picture of what was going on to defeat the Communist insurrection in South Vietnam.²⁰ As such, there was little support for the Harriman group over in the Defense Department.

Ambassador Nolting had to try and ameliorate the growing friction between Diem and the Kennedy Administration, which was brought about as a direct result of the Harriman group's increasingly successful attempts to sway US policy away from supporting the South Vietnamese President. However, there were others who did not have to consider the delicate politics of the State Department and, thus, could speak without constraints. Pre-eminent amongst these unfettered critics was Sir Robert Thompson, who later spelled out, in a very forthright manner, exactly what the Kennedy Administration was doing:

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Rusk as he was trying to contain the enormous power and prestige of Averell Harriman's, that, at times, had intimidated Kennedy as well.

¹⁹ Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days*, pp. 446 – 447.

²⁰ Robert S. McNamara (with Brian Van De Mark), *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam*, (New York [NY]: Times Books – Random House, 1995), pp. 46 – 49.

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To a certain extent President Kennedy understood the need to limit the aim when he used the words 'giving Diem what he needs to win his own war' and when he stated that the United States would 'sink or swim with Diem.' He then made a great error by informing the South Vietnamese Generals that, if they overthrew President Diem, they would continue to receive full American aid and support. It was one thing to threaten the withdrawal of aid from Diem but quite another to offer it instead to others. In any circumstances and by any standards it was monstrous interference in the internal political affairs of another state...By it the United States was committed to an open-ended assistance policy towards Diem's successors and assumed full responsibility for the outcome of the war. I said at the time that the United States had changed its policy from one of sinking or swimming with Diem to one of sinking without him [my emphasis].²¹

It will always remain to the credit of Frederick Nolting that he was able to perceive that '*sinking without Diem*' was precisely the course that Harriman was attempting to realign US policy to in South Vietnam;²² moreover, even in 1962, Nolting was attempting to stop this dangerous redirection in policy.

Footnotes

²¹ Thompson, No Exit From Vietnam, p. 120.

Thompson's memory was accurate on this account as a United States Government document shows, very clearly indeed, that Thompson warned President Kennedy that they ran the risk of losing the war within six months if they got rid of Diem. "The following are the principal points touched on between the President and Mr. R.G.K. Thompson:

1. *Diem*. Thompson emphasized that Diem had much support in the country where it counted and that he had written off the Saigon intelligentsia. In reply to a question from the President, he said that the quality of the political opposition was very poor. He said that if Diem disappeared there would be a risk of losing the war within six months since there was no other leader of his calibre available." Drafted by Chalmers B. Wood, 77. "Memorandum of a Conversation, White House," Washington, April 4, 1963, 10 a.m., [Source: Kennedy Library, National Security Files, Vietnam Country Series, 4/63-5/63. Secret.] in FRUS: Vietnam, January-August, 1963, Volume III, 1961 - 1963; John P. Glennon, editor in chief, (Washington, [DC]: United States Government Printing Office, 1991), p. 198.

²² General Harkins praised this insight of Nolting's in the immediate aftermath of the coup that removed Diem from power. In March of 1964, but four months past the murder of Diem and Nhu, General Harkins wrote a letter to Nolting. In this letter Harkins expressed his sorrow over Nolting's resignation from the State Department and that, without Nolting in Vietnam and without Diem, American policy was being undone at a phenomenal rate. The implications were clear enough: American policy was "*sinking without Diem*." This letter, from Harkins to Nolting, was dated March 27, 1964 and it is available for viewing as it is part of the Nolting Papers. Paul D. Harkins, General, United States Army, "Letter to Fritz

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What was most confounding to observers like Thompson and relatedly, frustrating, to Ambassador Nolting, was the fact that, by all measurable accounts, excluding the shrillness of the young US newsmen Halberstam and Sheehan, 1962 had been an extremely good year for countering the Communist insurgency in rural South Vietnam.²³ The proof of the substantial gains made by the GVN in 1962 was absolutely clear to the expert observers in the spring of 1963. At the time (Honolulu – May 6, 1963), Secretary of Defense, Robert McNamara, reported that the over-all situation in Vietnam was improving: “In the military sector of the counter-insurgency, we are winning.”²⁴ Even the most seasoned observer of insurgency warfare, Robert Thompson, was able to report at that time: “Now, in March 1963, I can say, and in this I am supported by all members of the mission, that the Government is beginning to win the shooting war against the Viet Cong.”²⁵ The manifest military victories that the GVN was attaining in early 1963 found their root in the counter-insurgency success of 1962.

William Colby, Robert Thompson and Frederick Nolting all pointed to the best indicator available: the effects of the counter-insurgent effort on the Viet Cong and what the Communists were saying about it.²⁶ According to Wilfred Burchett, an Australian Communist writer of ...*footnote continued from previous page:*

Nolting,”(March 27, 1964), “The Papers of Frederick (Fritz) Ernest Nolting, Jr.” rg-21/102.921, Box #: 12, Folder dates and heading: Selected Correspondence: Harkins, Paul D., (Charlottesville [Virginia]: Special Collections of the University of Virginia Library – The Alderman Library, 1993).

²³ Even Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., who was no friend of Diem or the GVN, was forced to acknowledge the success of 1962 in terms of defeating Communist insurgency and Diem’s reclamation of authority. Schlesinger, A Thousand Days, p. 982.

²⁴ Congress, House, Committee on Armed Services, “IV. B.5. Evolution of the War: The Overthrow of Ngo Dinh Diem, May – November, 1963: I Introduction, in United States – Vietnam Relations, 1945 – 1967: Book 3 of 12, p. 2.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ “Even Ho Chi Minh testified that 1962 was Diem’s year. He gave this to Wilfred Burchett, an Australian correspondent of Communist leanings, who spent most of his time in Hanoi or with the Communist Viet Cong in South Vietnam. His testimony, I thought, was significant. He said not only that 1962 was Diem’s year, but after the overthrow of Diem’s government in 1963, he quoted one of the

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considerable reputé, 1962 was a year of defeat and setbacks for the NLF (National Liberation Front) in South Vietnam.²⁷ Nolting used the very strong showing of US and Vietnamese Government efforts in that year to buttress his argument which was, and had consistently remained, that the strategic blunder that the Kennedy Administration made in redirecting policy was that it misunderstood the issues involved in Vietnam:²⁸

My thesis is that the great error of the Kennedy Administration was its misunderstanding of the issues involved in Vietnam in the 1960s and its reaction to those issues. More specifically, the error was in its refusal to understand that the elected constitutional government of Vietnam was the best available. If we were to help South Vietnam survive at all, the only available vehicle that could sustain and carry forward the country was the government that had been in power eight years (after two elections) and that had run into a great deal of Communist-inspired trouble.²⁹

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Communist leaders as saying they could not imagine that the United States would be so stupid as to preside over the overthrow of the only government that had any standing and status in South Vietnam [my emphasis].” Nolting, “Kennedy, Nato, and Southeast Asia,” in Diplomacy, Administration, and Policy, edited by Kenneth W. Thompson, p. 23.

²⁷ This writer is somewhat hesitant to use Burchett as a source as his work is so laced with outright lies and distortion, so as to facilitate the cause of Communist propaganda, that is difficult to know where the truth ends and the fiction begins. Nevertheless, and for whatever it may be worth, here is the Burchett acknowledgement of Diem’ and the American’s success in 1962: “1961 was a “Front year” [NLF] in terms of territory and population gained, 1962 however must be largely credited to Saigon. With U.S. aid in men and materials pouring in from the end of 1961, a major effort was made to destroy and isolate the Front’s armed forces, to push the Front influence back from the gates of Saigon and other provincial capitals and to re-install Diemist power in the countryside. The use of helicopters and amphibious tanks to increase rapidity of movement and to avoid the devastating ambushes that the Diemist troops invariably fell into when they moved by road or river, caught the guerrillas off balance at first. High mobility is something new in guerrilla warfare - America’s only “special warfare” tactical innovation. **The drive to set up “strategic hamlets” was also a problem for the NLF...[my emphasis]”** Wilfred G. Burchett, Vietnam: Inside Story of the Guerrilla War, (New York, [NY]: International Publishers, 1968), p. 189.

²⁸ Nolting, “Kennedy, Nato, and Southeast Asia,” in Diplomacy, Administration, and Policy, edited by Kenneth W. Thompson, p. 22.

²⁹ Ibid.

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The American Ambassador also noted that the change in policy came about suddenly and that it did not correspond to the substantial gains that were being made against the Vietnamese Communist insurgents.

In 1961 and 1962, our efforts to help South Vietnam through its duly elected government were for the most part successful. The testimony on that comes not only from Washington but other capitals, including especially France. This may surprise you, because France had a chip on its shoulder about Americans taking over its responsibilities in helping South Vietnam. But Couve de Murville, for example, told me on two occasions that the American effort in 1961 and 1962 in South Vietnam was succeeding from the point of view of the French interests still there, and they were considerable. The Michelin Rubber Company, the major banks, and the major shipping companies were all saying, "Keep it up; the country is beginning to get pacified; it is beginning to work."

When we first arrived with our families, we could hardly go out of Saigon without an escort, and then you took a chance on getting ambushed. By 1962 we could drive to many provinces without escort and without much danger....This was just one indication of the gradual pacification brought about by the Diem government with our help and advice.³⁰

The student of military history, and particularly counter-insurgency warfare, will recognise the fact that the indicators that Nolting was referring to, such as the reports from the French-owned Michelin Rubber Company etc., were the most crucial in analysing the success of countering guerrilla activity. This is so for a very obvious and yet often ignored reason: because essentially the insurgent activity is criminal in nature as it attacks the property and lives of civilians in order to demonstrate that the incumbent government cannot extend its authority and protect the civilian populace. In short, the insurgent's purpose is always a Mephistophelian attack on incumbent legitimacy, and this is accomplished via the ignoble/criminal means of attacking the innocent and defenceless. The Communists were particularly good at this kind of diabolical assault, as they acknowledged no moral restraint in the implementation of murder and

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³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 22 - 23.

terror to achieve their strategic goals. In the context of Vietnam during the year of 1962, and given the indicators that Nolting is referring to, the Viet Cong were being repelled. As such, to change American policy toward the GVN at this point would have been counterproductive and, yet, that is precisely what happened.

Historian George Herring noted that Ambassador Nolting did, indeed, have cause for optimism about the progress of the counter-insurgency program in South Vietnam and that there had been an impressive change in the political/military climate since 1961. Herring also noted, however, that the young news reporters of the American press corps in Saigon were determined to place an entirely different story before the American public. In their version, Ngo Dinh Diem was to become as Chiang Kai Shek had been to an earlier American news reporter, Theodore White. In this context, it is noteworthy that White later won a Pulitzer Prize by first establishing his reputation in his “exposé” of Chiang. This was the same prize that the American reporters needed to acquire in order to solidify their careers back in the United States. In fact, David Halberstam and Neil Sheehan argued, in direct refutation of Nolting’s reports to Washington, that the war was being lost owing to, amongst other things, the corruption of Ngo Dinh Diem’s government and, what they labelled, the “sham” of the strategic hamlets program.³¹ No one, at the time, seemed to question the “expertise” of these young critics especially on the issue of counter-insurgency. No one questioned the fact that the only real support that they had for their arguments seems to have come from John Paul Vann,³² a very capable American soldier/advisor

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³¹ Herring, *America’s Longest War*, pp. 91 - 92.

³² One can peruse Sheehan’s work on Vann and Ngo Dinh Diem at will and be immediately impressed with the fact that Sheehan had swallowed whole the Vann arguments against the GVN and their conduct of the war. Neil Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam*, (New York, [NY]: Vintage Books, Random House, Inc., 1988).

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who, nonetheless, was extremely impatient with the South Vietnamese way of doing things.³³ Yet, the fact remains that reporters like Halberstam and Sheehan - and what they wrote - did have an impact on the Kennedy Administration and on Ambassador Nolting's mission to South Vietnam. William Colby, who was an acknowledged expert in counter-insurgency warfare and special forces operations, however, bluntly and directly refuted the Halberstam/Sheehan line:

Sheehan's research is exhaustive, his writing brilliant, and his conclusions, in my view, wrong. His conclusions are essentially three: that the young reporters, such as Sheehan, who were in Vietnam during the early period of the war played such a role in attacking Diem were correct; that the Vietnamese generally (not just Diem) were hopeless; and that the Americans who were heavily engaged in the War were flawed.

My view of the Diem regime, fully stated previously - in sum not perfect, certainly, but better than what followed it - casts doubt on the wisdom, if not the specifics, of the reporters' themes, even though much of their criticism came from Vann himself.³⁴

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³³ In this writer's discussions with William Colby the issue of John Paul Vann's effect on the Kennedy Administration's view of Diem and his government came up. I argued to Colby that, from a detached Canadian perspective, it appeared, very much, that Vann had used the young reporters such as Sheehan and Halberstam in his efforts to "light a fire" under the Vietnamese counter-insurgent effort. After all, Sheehan and Halberstam were, by no stretch of anyone's imagination (other than their own) experts on this or any other kind of modern warfare. Colby agreed with my estimation but was loath to want to take Vann to task too heavily over this as he admired Vann's unimpeachable military prowess. This "gloves-on" treatment of Vann becomes discernible in Colby's official account of the Vietnam War: "Almost irrepressible even by the Army's discipline, Vann first came to public prominence after the January 1963 Battle of Ap Bac. The division he advised bottled up a Communist unit there but with a combination of laxity and disinclination to close had allowed the enemy to escape through a gap conveniently left in the lines around them. The Vietnamese force had lost eighty dead and over a hundred wounded and the Americans five helicopters, with three from their crews dead and eight wounded.

With his usual forcefulness, Vann had exploded to the press that highlighted the affair as a further indication that the Diem regime and its Army were unworthy of American support. Vann became so incensed at the official American reaction to the affair, in his mind condoning the ineffectiveness of the Vietnamese unit and its commander and trying to muzzle his protests, that he resigned from the Army." Colby, *Lost Victory*, p. 236.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 236 - 237.

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Colby's assessment was gracious, as a more uncharitable view of these news-reporters would draw attention to their ruthless zeal, which over-rode all other concerns. This was especially true when one considers that Nolting's Presidentially-assigned mission to regain Diem's trust was subjected to attacks by the reporters. They did this in order to place themselves in the Pulitzer Prize category with a made-to-order Chiang Kai Shek (in President Diem) and the obligatory "Dragon-lady" (in Madame Ngo Dinh Nhu).³⁵ This clever strategy was not missed by Clare Boothe Luce and she duly noted their assault when she wrote an article entitled "*The Seven Deadly Sins of Madame Nhu*": "Is the history of the Liberal Press in Chungking and Havana going to repeat itself? The evidence is that it is..."³⁶

Such intelligent and biting criticism of The New York Times' anti-Diem tack came too late in the day to stop the damage done. Serious and well-thought-through American policy, as being enacted by Ambassador Nolting, was viewed, ultimately, as only an impediment to the career aspirations of these reporters. That they were playing around with the lives of many Vietnamese and Americans did not seem to bother the consciences of these men one iota.

That the young reporters, representing The New York Times, the Washington Post or UPI, were making Nolting's assignment difficult was common-knowledge and the Ambassador, in his memoirs, addressed this directly. He noted that at the beginning of his mission in Saigon

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³⁵ As previously noted, there was an historic precedent for these newsmen if they were trying to emulate the career of Theodore White. The latter having built his reputation, writing articles for liberal American newspapers', on exposing the corruption of Chaing Kai Shek's nationalists in China. In the context of China's woes, both real and imagined, Theodore White & Annalee Jacoby penned the well-known Thunder Out of China, (New York, [NY]: William Sloane & Associates, 1946). In turn, and once his credentials were established amongst the liberal intellectuals of the Ivy League, he was able to secure a Pulitzer Prize for his book The Making of The President, 1960, (New York, [NY]: Atheneum Publishers, 1961).

³⁶ The National Review took out a full page add in The New York Times and posted one of their leading articles entitled "The Seven Deadly Sins of Madame Nhu." Clare Boothe Luce wrote the article and it went straight for the exposed jugular of The New York Times and David Halberstam. See The New York Times (Wednesday, October 30, 1963), p. 40.

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his relationship with the Press had been amicable.³⁷ Nolting admitted that he was at a loss as to what made the reporters hostile,³⁸ as he had had extremely good relations with the press when he had been assigned the task of doing so for the American delegation to NATO in Paris. Nolting did what he could in making himself available to the reporters and he maintained an open-door access to his office for them but he did not have time to socialise with them or give them “scoop” stories as his days were extremely busy.³⁹ He admitted, though, that he severely underestimated the antipathy of these men,⁴⁰ such as New York Times reporter Homer Bigart, toward Ngo Dinh Diem:

“I know that I underestimated the antipathy between Homer Bigart of The New York Times and the Diem Government. Bigart was a distinguished journalist who had won a Pulitzer Prize before his assignment to Saigon. His feelings about the Diem regime were established and well known long before I arrived in Vietnam. While in Paris, I had read the telegrams my predecessor,

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³⁷ Nolting, From Trust To Tragedy, p. 87.

³⁸ David Halberstam argued that, from the reporters’ perspective, Nolting’s notion of supporting Diem was flawed. “An unresponsive government which had been receiving considerable American aid and not listened to American advice, and which then is given even more aid because it has repeatedly failed in its mission, is not apt to be more amenable to suggestion later on.” Halberstam, The Making of a Quagmire, p. 68.

³⁹ Nolting, From Trust To Tragedy, p. 87.

⁴⁰ For example, when Nolting’s criticisms of Halberstam are compared with Halberstam’s criticisms of Nolting it becomes manifestly self-evident, and in rapid order, that Halberstam bore an attitude of malice toward the Ambassador. This was a malice that Nolting never responded in kind to. In this context, the reader should be able to discern the manifest malice of Halberstam in the following excerpt on Nolting. “Yet in following this policy Nolting came to remind me of some white community leaders I had known in Mississippi and Tennessee, men who – at a time when their communities were about to blow up in racial disorder – reassured me that all was well, that the Negroes were satisfied with the status quo, that the problem was entirely the work of outside agitators and that writing about it would only make the situation worse. These men had no contact with the Negro community except for what their maids or hired people told them, and they went on believing what they wanted to believe...” Halberstam, The Making of a Quagmire, pp. 73 – 74.

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Elbridge Durbrow, had sent describing his problems with Bigart. It was Bigart who coined the phrase "sink or swim with Diem" as a shorthand description of American policy in Vietnam. When I arrived, I found that Bigart's criticisms of the Diem government had deeply antagonised the regime. It was a serious situation, but I believed that if we got results, the facts would speak for themselves. Unfortunately, I was mistaken.

Bigart resented his 'backwater assignment,' as he termed Vietnam. I remember one occasion when he covered the opening of a vocational school in the provinces at which President Diem and I were present. After a brief ceremony, Diem, as was his custom, tramped around the countryside, looking at the rice paddies, the dikes, and the fish ponds, and talking with the people there. It was hot as hell, and the rest of the party was just slogging along behind him. I found myself walking beside Bigart, who was furious with the whole set-up. He did not like anything about it, and he made it clear that he most definitely did not want to be there.⁴¹

The proof that Nolting's efforts with Bigart were for naught came soon after this incident as the reporter's visa had expired and, owing to his constant assaults on Diem's government, the Vietnamese refused to renew it. Nolting went straightaway to President Diem, pre-empting instructions to do so from Washington, and argued to Diem that expelling a representative from one of America's leading newspapers could only do harm to their mutual efforts.⁴² It was at this time that Nolting was first made aware of the amount of serious damage that the newsmen, like Bigart, had managed to wreak on American - Vietnamese relations.⁴³ For Diem poured out his frustration about the constant demeaning and humiliating attacks that had been directed against him, personally, and his government.⁴⁴ Yet, in order to show good-faith to the American

Footnotes

⁴¹ Nolting, From Trust To Tragedy, pp. 87 - 88.

⁴² Ibid. p. 88.

⁴³ Even Halberstam recalled that there was a sigh of relief when Bigart finally left Vietnam. Halberstam, The Making of a Quagmire, p. 76.

⁴⁴ Halberstam accused Diem of being psychotic over the issue of American news reporters. "Nolting's job was difficult, but it was made even more difficult by the almost psychotic preoccupation of Diem and his family with the Western press- the one element operating in Vietnam, other than the Vietcong, which they could not control. ... Diem devoted time and energy to reading what the American

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Ambassador, even while he was venting his annoyance about The New York Times, Diem telephoned the Minister of the Interior and asked him to renew Bigart's visa.⁴⁵ The very next day Bigart called Nolting and accused him of ruining a news-worthy exit for him from his 'backwater' assignment to Vietnam:

I expected a word of appreciation, possibly even a change of attitude. Instead, he expressed considerable annoyance. He informed me that he had wanted to get away from his Vietnam assignment for some time and that this expulsion would have made his exit sensational. My intervention had only prolonged his stay and spoiled his story. I suggested that perhaps he, too, would have to "sink or swim with Diem" a while longer, but soon afterward he was replaced with David Halberstam.⁴⁶

Nolting's initial contact with David Halberstam was positive to the extent that he believed the young (twenty-seven years old) New York Times reporter was a considerable improvement over the unhappy Bigart. Within a few weeks, however, Halberstam was even more active in his criticism of Diem than his predecessor had been. Nolting began to suspect that there was a deliberate ideological line emanating from out of The New York Times chief editorial staff:

Halberstam quickly became the leader of the "get Diem" press group in Saigon. He did not use Bigart's phrase, but his articles implied that if we stuck with Diem, we would sink as if we were tied to a stone. Halberstam's considerable writing talent enhanced his influence. Beginning like drops of acid, his reports steadily conditioned the climate of American opinion. I suspect that Halberstam may have been catering to the Times' editorial line. He was, I think, influenced

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reporters were writing about him, far beyond what could be considered the understandable sensitivities of a leader whose country is engaged in a difficult war." Ibid., pp. 74 – 75.

⁴⁵ Nolting, From Trust To Tragedy, p. 88.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

*by his bosses and they by his reports, creating a crescendo of anti-Diem propaganda.*⁴⁷

Later on, in August of 1963, Nolting had his suspicions that Halberstam was catering to The New York Times editorial bias reinforced. He received reports from a trusted colleague that Halberstam had been at the Caravelle Bar (a popular place for American reporters to congregate) "...proudly displaying a telegram from his newspaper in New York, which said, in substance: "Good going. Keep it up. State Department is beginning to see it our way."⁴⁸ Clearly, Halberstam was biased and his petty and vicious attacks on Diem and his government made Nolting's mission, to ameliorate the differences between Washington and Saigon and to win back Diem's trust, almost, impossible.⁴⁹

Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., recalled the fact that a deep antagonism set in between the young American newsmen and the official US diplomatic and military missions in South Vietnam. Clearly, David Halberstam became the most outspoken leader of this antagonism as Schlesinger remembered:

Footnotes

⁴⁷ ibid.

⁴⁸ ibid.

⁴⁹ Senator Mansfield touched upon the subject of the American newsmen during his late 1962 (December 1962) visit to South Vietnam. In a meeting with Ngo Dinh Nhu, Mansfield noted that the relations between the American and Vietnamese governments were excellent but that the news-reports were causing problems. The concern, according to Mansfield, was that the difficulties that the South Vietnamese Government was having with Western reporters, particularly American reporters, was reflecting negatively on the Diem government. Ngo Dinh Nhu, in his reply to the Senator, fully acknowledged this problem and placed the blame four-square on the shoulders of the young American reporters. Nhu claimed that their youth, immaturity in outlook and emotion was what lay at the centre of the problem and stated that what Vietnam really needed was older more experienced reporters who could see the whole problem and the difficulties that the GVN was having in that light. John P. Glennon, editor in chief, "323. Memorandum of a Conversation, Gia Long Palace, Saigon, December 1, 1962, 11:30 a.m.," as part of "Senator Mansfield' Visit to Vietnam and Subsequent Report; Visits and Reports by Johnson and Heavner, December," [Department of State, Vietnam Working Group Files: Lot 66 D 193, 22.1, Mansfield Visit to Saigon. Confidential.] in FRUS: Vietnam 1962, Vol. II, pp. 752 - 753.

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"The U.S. Embassy," David Halberstam wrote in a characteristic outburst, "turned into the adjunct of a dictatorship. In trying to protect Diem from criticism, the Ambassador became Diem's agent. But we reporters didn't have to become the adjuncts of a tyranny. We are representatives of a free society and we weren't going to surrender our principles to the narrow notions of a closed society." ⁵⁰

It would be only fair and appropriate to add to Halberstam's arrogant outburst that if Nolting and his mission were adjuncts of a dictatorship then Halberstam, Sheehan and crew were either duped or wilful supporters of the all-out Communist attack on the strategic hamlets program. For it was the strategic hamlets program and commensurate counter-insurgency effort that these reporters attacked with the most vehemence at the time. Schlesinger, with some sympathy toward the reporters and their anti-Diemist position, noted: "They considered the strategic hamlet program a fake and a failure;"⁵¹

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⁵⁰ Schlesinger, A Thousand Days, p. 984.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 983.

The Hilsman/Forrestal Report:

In a hasty reaction to the attacks that Halberstam et al. were making in the press about over-optimistic American estimations of the struggle against the Communist insurgents in Vietnam, Kennedy dispatched Hilsman and Forrestal, in late 1962,⁵² to make a report on the situation.⁵³ While there was certainly Hilsman's critical attitude toward Ngo Dinh Diem ever present in this report, nevertheless, when he allowed the facts to speak for themselves, Hilsman had to acknowledge that the Communists had suffered serious set-backs in 1962. "The war in South Vietnam is clearly going better than it was a year ago.... The Viet Cong, in sum, are being hurt – they have somewhat less freedom than they had a year ago, they apparently suffer acutely from lack of medicines, and in some very isolated areas they seem to be having trouble getting food."⁵⁴ Hilsman was not content, however, to not criticise Diem or the GVN and thus the overall thesis of his report is best summed-up by the statement "things are going well but thanks to the GVN – not as well as we had hoped." Or, in his own words:

Our overall judgement, in sum, is that we are probably winning but certainly more slowly than we had hoped. At the rate it is now going the war will

Footnotes

⁵² Hilsman and Forrestal submitted their report in Washington on January 25, 1963. The reader can peruse it as Appendix F attached to this work.

⁵³ Kennedy had just received Senator Mansfield's report which was pessimistic and this came at the same time that he tried to have Halberstam recalled to the US by The New York Times: "Mounting criticism of American policy in Vietnam aroused grave concern in Washington. The administration had attempted to keep its involvement under wraps, but the rising toll of American deaths in combat and the critical newspaper reports raised troublesome questions. State and Defense Department officials spent hours investigating the journalists' reports and answering their allegations, and Kennedy himself attempted unsuccessfully to get the New York Times to recall Halberstam. Highly sensitive to criticism, the President was apparently enraged by Mansfield's report. But he could not ignore the warnings of an old and valued friend, and he immediately dispatched Hilsman and Michael Forrestal, a member of the White House staff, on a fact-finding mission to Vietnam." Herring, America's Longest War, pp. 92 -93.

⁵⁴ "19. Memorandum From the Director of the Bureau of Intelligence and Research (Hilsman) and Michael V. Forrestal of the National Security Council Staff to the President: A Report on South Vietnam." Please see pp. 559 & 560 of Appendix F.

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last longer than we would like, cost more in terms of both lives and money than we anticipated, and prolong the period in which a sudden and dramatic event would upset the gain already made.⁵⁵

The Hilsman/Forrestal Report to President Kennedy was also deemed necessary by the White House owing to the negative tone of the Senator Mansfield Report on Vietnam,⁵⁶ particularly as it related to the Strategic Hamlets Program, which reached Washington in late 1962.⁵⁷

Footnotes

⁵⁵ "19. Memorandum From the Director of the Bureau of Intelligence and Research (Hilsman) and Michael V. Forrestal of the National Security Council Staff to the President: A Report on South Vietnam." Please see p. 562 of Appendix F.

⁵⁶ Most of the Mansfield Report, and certainly all of the critical points in the report pertaining to American policy, Diem, and South Vietnam can be perused in Appendix G of this work.

⁵⁷ Senator Mansfield's final report on Southeast Asia - Vietnam was tabled in Washington on December 18, 1962. In this report Mansfield drew attention to expecting too much too soon from the Strategic Hamlets Program. "At this point, therefore, the optimistic predictions of success must be regarded as deriving primarily from the development of the theory of the strategic hamlets by Mr. Ngo Dinh Nhu and by the injection of new energy which has been provided by additional American aid and personnel. The real tests are yet to come.

Reservations are in order because in the first place, the rapid success of the concept of the strategic hamlet would seem to depend on the assumption that the Vietminh will remain wedded to their present tactics and will be unable to devise significant and effective revisions to meet the new concepts and the new highly mobile fire-power of the American-trained forces. That may be the case but it would be unwise to underestimate the resourcefulness of any group which has managed to survive years of the most rugged kind of warfare. In the second place, rapid success of the new concepts depends upon the assumption that the great bulk of the people in the countryside sustain the Vietminh merely out of fear or, at best, indifference. There is really no effective measure of the accuracy of this assumption. It may indeed contain a good deal of truth but the critical question is how much truth. The temptation to extrapolate our own reactions on to the Vietnamese peasant in this kind of a situation is as obvious as it is dangerous. Senator Mansfield, 330. "Report by the Senate Majority Leader (Mansfield) - Southeast Asia - Vietnam," Washington, December 18, 1962, [Senate Document 93-11. Printed in U.S. Senate 93d Congress, 1st session "Two Reports on Vietnam and Southeast Asia to the President of the United States by Senator Mike Mansfield (Washington, April 1973), pp. 7-14] in FRUS: Vietnam 1962, Vol. II, pp. 780 -781.

Of equal importance to Mansfield's caution over the optimism about the Strategic Hamlets program (an optimism, he noted, that was held by responsible US officials in Saigon [i.e., Nolting]) was his observation that, while Diem remained "...a dedicated, sincere, hardworking, incorruptible and patriotic leader," he was older and faced problems which were far more complex than those he faced in the mid-fifties and, as such, "The energizing role which he played in the past appears to be passing to other

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Senator Mike Mansfield:

Senator Mike Mansfield was a Democratic Party Senator from Montana who was the Senate Majority Leader and an influential member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.⁵⁸ He was also considered the Senate authority on Indochina/Vietnam.⁵⁹ Mansfield was well connected in the Democratic Party and in turn, was a dedicated Party man who enjoyed many years of friendship with Lyndon Baines Johnson.⁶⁰ Along with Francis Cardinal Spellman and, then United States Senator, John F. Kennedy, Mansfield had thrown his considerable political weight behind Diem in the mid-1950's.⁶¹ In this context it is worth noting that the all-pervasive irony of American involvement in Vietnam did not leave Senator Mansfield untouched. In late 1954 the Senator from Montana had gone on a fact finding mission to Saigon and, as a result, had issued a report upon his return to Washington that gave powerful support for an official American commitment to Ngo Dinh Diem. Bearing in mind the damage done by the 'Mansfield Report' submitted to President Kennedy, this first 'Mansfield Report', submitted to President Eisenhower, warrants some consideration:

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members of his family, particularly Ngo Dinh Nhu. The latter is a person of great energy and intellect who is fascinated by the operations of political power and has consummate eagerness and ability in organising and manipulating it. But it is Ngo Dinh Diem, not Ngo Dinh Nhu, who has such popular mandate to exercise power as there is in South Vietnam. In a situation of this kind there is a great danger of the corruption of unbridled power." *Ibid.*, pp. 781 -782.

⁵⁸ John P. Glennon, editor in chief, "List of Persons," in FRUS: Vietnam, January – August, 1963, Volume III, 1961 – 1963; (Washington, [DC]: United States Government Printing Office, 1991), p. XXIII.

⁵⁹ Hammer, A Death In November, p. 70.

⁶⁰ Bowman, general editor, The Vietnam War: An Almanac, p. 491.

⁶¹ Robert Scheer, "The Genesis of United States Support for Ngo Dinh Diem," in Vietnam: History, Documents and Opinions on a Major World Crisis, Marvin E. Gettleman, ed., (New York, [NY]: Fawcett Publications, Inc., 1965), pp. 251 – 252.

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He said the issue "is not Diem as an individual but rather the program for which he stands." That program "represents genuine nationalism...is prepared to deal effectively with corruption, and...demonstrates a concern in advancing the welfare of the Vietnamese people." The Senator felt it "improbable" that any other leadership "dedicated to these principles" could be found and recommended the Government "consider an immediate suspension of all aid to Vietnam and the French Union Forces there, except that of a humanitarian nature, preliminary to a complete reappraisal of our present policies in Free Vietnam" if Diem fell.⁶²

Shortly after the first 'Mansfield Report' had been given him, President Eisenhower had received negative reports on Diem from General Joseph Lawton Collins. Senator Mansfield had immediately come to Diem's defence arguing that General Collins was "playing with political dynamite."⁶³ Mansfield told Eisenhower, in defence of Diem, that "...the remarkable aspect of Diem was, unlike most of the Vietnamese, he really was honest, incorruptible and a devoutly dedicated nationalist as well."⁶⁴ To back up his firm stand in support of Diem, Mansfield asserted that he spoke for all the Democratic leaders and that their position was unequivocal: they would not agree to the support of any government in Vietnam other than Diem's.⁶⁵

Given Senator Mansfield's earlier absolute support for Diem, the contents of the December 1962 'Mansfield Report' stunned Diem supporters within the Kennedy Administration. President Kennedy, himself, was enraged by the Senator's report.⁶⁶ Nolting

Footnotes

⁶² Senator Gravel, ed. The Pentagon Papers, p. 222.

⁶³ John P. Glennon, editor in chief, Foreign Relations of the United States, 1952 – 1954: Indochina, Volume 13, PT.2., (Washington, [DC]: United States Government Printing Office, 1981), p. 2351.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ronald H. Spector, Advice and Support: The Early Years of the U.S. Army in Vietnam, 1941 – 1960, (Washington, [DC]: The Center of Military History, United States Army, 1983), p. 248.

⁶⁶ Herring, America's Longest War, p. 93.

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recalled that Diem was deeply wounded by the report and the ambassador went on to note in his memoirs that Mansfield's report was counter-productive, at best.⁶⁷

At this time, and in opposition to the negative news media reports, Dean Rusk (Secretary of State) argued that the information he had "...cited improvements in supply and intelligence operations and in the Vietnam command structure as evidence, in fact, the Vietnamese were winning the war."⁶⁸ Nevertheless, and regardless of Rusk's caution to the President about over-reacting to the newsmen, the Hilsman - Forrestal report went forward.

Ap Bac: The New York Times Escalates Its Assault on Ngo Dinh Diem -

What is important to note in the context of problems created by newsmen for Ambassador Nolting's mission is that at this time a sensational news story was created by the young, hostile, American reporters which was concerned with the bungling of the ARVN at Ap Bac. Because of the impatience of American advisors like John Paul Vann with the Vietnamese way of doing things, the floundering at Ap Bac provided them with the perfect set piece to illustrate their frustration:

(Summary telegram 677 from ARPAC to JCS, January 4; Kennedy Library, National Security Files, Vietnam Country Series, 1/63) Lieutenant Colonel John P. Vann, senior United States adviser to the Seventh Division of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam, filed an after-action report on the Ap Bac operation which concluded that the operation was a failure. Vann attributed the failure to the poor state of training of the South Vietnamese units, a system of command which never placed a Vietnamese officer above the rank of captain on the battlefield, a

Footnotes

⁶⁷ Nolting, From Trust To Tragedy, p. 98.

⁶⁸ Schoenbaum, Waging Peace & War, p. 395.

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*reluctance to incur casualties, an inability to take advantage of air superiority, and a lack of discipline.*⁶⁹

Newsmen, like Neil Sheehan and David Halberstam, were more than willing to comply with and endorse these criticisms in their reports.⁷⁰ Thus, they were able to create a full-blown political furore back home in the United States. Even in his critical analysis, Hilsman acknowledged that these American newsmen had gone too far in their vindictiveness and he made this plain in the Hilsman/Forrestal Report. "Although our report, for example, is not rosily optimistic, it certainly contains the factual basis for a much more hopeful view than the pessimistic (and factually inaccurate) picture conveyed in the press."⁷¹ Regardless of any factual basis, it was The New York Times reports that seemed to win the day in the United States:

The Battle of Ap Bac was reported in the press in the United States as "a major defeat" in which "communist guerrillas shot up a fleet of United States helicopters carrying Vietnamese troops into battle". (The Washington Post, January 3, 1963; The New York Times, January 4, 1963) On January 7, The Washington Post printed a front-page assessment of the battle by Neil Sheehan in which he wrote that "angry United States military advisers charged today that Vietnamese infantrymen refused direct orders to advance during Wednesday's battle at Ap Bac and that an American Army captain was killed while out front pleading with them to attack." An assessment done in the Department of State on January 15 of press reaction across the country to the battle of Ap Bac noted that "since Ap Bac the complaint has been increasingly heard that the American

Footnotes

⁶⁹ Editorial Note, "Vietnam: I. Reassessment, January 1 - March 14: Hilsman-Forrestal report, Wheeler Mission, Mansfield Report, Comprehensive Plan, Thompson Report, I. Editorial Note" in FRUS: Vietnam, January - August 1963, Vol. III, p. 1.

⁷⁰ Sheehan's most recent recounting of the Battle of Ap Bac can be perused in his book A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam. The bungling of the ARVN is certainly over-emphasised in Sheehan's account. General Paul Harkins is also made out to be a bungler in this retelling of the tale. Neil Sheehan, A Bright Shining Lie, pp. 203 - 265.

⁷¹ "19. Memorandum From the Director of the Bureau of Intelligence and Research (Hilsman) and Michael V. Forrestal of the National Security Council Staff to the President: A Report on South Vietnam." Please see p. 570 of Appendix F.

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public is not "getting the facts" on the situation in Viet-Nam, even at this time when American casualties are mounting."⁷²

In order that the reader might see for himself what Halberstam had written and what had appeared on the front page of The New York Times the following article should be perused:

"Vietcong Downs Five U.S. Copters, Hits Nine Others: Defeat Worst Since Build-up Began – Three Americans Are Killed In Vietnam.[my emphasis]" By David Halberstam.

Saigon, Vietnam, Jan. 2 [1963]

*Communist guerrillas armed with automatic weapons inflicted a major defeat today on United States helicopters carrying troops into an operation in the Mekong Delta.*⁷³

Fanning the flames of what was a minor engagement into a major battle, Halberstam wrote another article on Ap Bac, which appeared in The New York Times on January 4, 1963:

"Vietnamese Reds Win Major Clash: Inflict 100 Casualties in Fighting Larger Force, [my emphasis]" By David Halberstam.

Saigon, Vietnam, Jan. 3, [1963]

*Communist guerrillas, refusing to play by their own hide-and-seek rules in the face of Government troops, stood their ground and inflicted a major defeat on a larger force of Vietnamese regulars yesterday and today.*⁷⁴

Footnotes

⁷² John P. Glennon, editor-in-chief, "Vietnam: 1. Reassessment, January 1 - March 14: Hilsman-Forrestal report, Wheeler Mission, Mansfield Report, Comprehensive Plan, Thompson Report, 1. Editorial Note" ["Alert" on Viet-Nam: Current American Concern and Misunderstanding; National Archives and Records Administration, RG 59, Files of the Office of Public Opinion Studies, U.S. Policy on S. Vietnam, April-Dec. 1963]; in FRUS: Vietnam, January - August 1963, Vol. III, p. 2.

⁷³ David Halberstam, "Vietcong Downs Five U.S. Copters, Hits Nine Others: Defeat Worst Since Build-up Began – Three Americans Are Killed in Vietnam," in The New York Times, (Thursday, January 3, 1963), p. 1.

⁷⁴ David Halberstam, "Vietnamese Reds Win Major Clash: Inflict 100 Casualties in Fighting Larger Force," in The New York Times, (Friday, January 4, 1963), p. 2.

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Halberstam wasted no time in pinning the blame for Ap Bac on Diem's government and he used the whole story to give complaints, from people like John Paul Vann, a public forum in the United States:

"Vietnam Defeat Shocks U.S. Aide: Saigon's Rejection of Advice Blamed for Setback, [my emphasis]" By David Halberstam.

Saigon, Vietnam, Jan. 6, [1963]

The battle of Ap Bac in which attacking South Vietnamese troops were badly beaten by Communist guerrillas, has bewildered high United States officials in Saigon.

United States advisers in the field, however, have long felt that conditions here made a defeat like this virtually inevitable...American officers throughout the Mekong Delta feel that what happened at Ap Bac goes far deeper than one battle...⁷⁵

On January 10, 1963, Halberstam wrote another article on Ap Bac in which he tied the problem of Vietnamese troop commanders' reluctance to follow US advice directly to Diem:

The advisers feel that there is still too much political interference in the Vietnamese Army and that promotion too often depends on political loyalty rather than military ability.

These Americans recalled that in a recent shuffle of the high command two officers widely respected by the Americans were removed from field commands and that officers promoted and given field commands were men who had shown loyalty to President Ngo Dinh Diem at moments when his regime was threatened with internal revolt.

Some Fear Casualties

These sources also feel that one of the basic problems now hindering military improvement is a fear among many Vietnamese commanders of

Footnotes

⁷⁵ David Halberstam, "Vietnam Defeat Shocks U.S. Aide: Saigon's Rejection of Advice Blamed for Setback," in The New York Times, (Monday, January 7, 1963), p. 2.

incurring casualties. Some commanders are said to feel that they will not be promoted and may lose command if they suffer too many casualties.

Americans who deal with President Diem, however, say that he knows there will be casualties and is willing to allow for this. If this is true, the field commanders say, the word has not reached the Vietnamese in the field.⁷⁶

In an editorial piece entitled, “**What’s Wrong in Vietnam?** [my emphasis],” which appeared in The New York Times on January 15, 1963, the editors plainly targeted Diem and his government as being the root and the cause of the Ap Bac defeat.

It is worthwhile being reminded that losses in one battle, or even a dozen battles, do not portend loss of the war in South Vietnam. The fact remains, however, that serious defects of political policy and leadership in South Vietnam do seriously hamper the spirit and effectiveness of the South Vietnamese military forces. A defensive reaction to adverse reports about last week’s battle should not obscure a deficiency that is well-documented and is often cited by Americans on the spot in Vietnam.

Plainly, the South Vietnamese armed forces are not so good and spirited as they might be because a suspicious, dictatorial government in Saigon must preoccupy itself with preserving itself in power, not just from Communists but from many patriotic Vietnamese who oppose the Communists. Loyalty to President Diem is the criterion for preferment among Vietnamese officers, rather than ability.⁷⁷

The White House and the Department of State expressed concern over the newspaper reports and editorials on Ap Bac. The JCS countered swiftly to the assault the Washington Post and The New York Times had taken with a direct report to the President that the press was misleading in its account. “It appears that the initial press reports have distorted both the importance of the action and the damage suffered by the US/GVN forces. Although

Footnotes

⁷⁶ David Halberstam, “Harkins Praises Troops: Defends Soldier’s Courage Against U.S. Criticism,” in The New York Times, (Friday, January 11, 1963), p. 3.

⁷⁷ The Editors, “What’s Wrong in Vietnam?” in The New York Times, (Tuesday, January 15, 1963), p. 6.

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unexpectedly stiff resistance was apparently encountered contact has been maintained and the operation is being continued.”⁷⁸ While the press (Halberstam and Sheehan) would condemn General Paul Harkins and Ambassador Nolting for being over-optimistic about the entire Ap Bac affair, the outside observer and student of military history would find it a lot more difficult to do so. The record shows that Harkins and Nolting seemed to be more interested in maintaining a balanced perspective. Harkins, for example, tried to bring the necessary sang-froid to his analysis that avoided placing too much blame on the relatively “green” ARVN:

*A copy of a report on the battle prepared on January 4 by General Paul Harkins, Commander of the U.S. Military Assistance Command in Vietnam, was forwarded to President Kennedy on January 7 in response to his concern. (Attached *Ibid.*) General Harkins noted that the South Vietnamese forces at Ap Bac had made a number of errors, but he characterised them largely as errors of courage rather than cowardice. “It took a lot of guts”, he wrote, “on the part of those pilots and crews to go back into the area to try to rescue their pals.” “Like any engagements in war”, Harkins concluded, “there are days - and there are days. This day they got a bear by the tail and they didn’t let go of it.”⁷⁹*

Harkins was an experienced soldier of impeccable martial standing within the United States Government’s armed services community.⁸⁰ Every U.S. Army Commander and officer would have been aware of the historical precedent of how “green” U.S. troops had behaved when they first met and fled, pell-mell, from Rommel’s defeated Afrika Korps at the Battle of the Kasserine Pass (North Africa, 1943).⁸¹ Harkins would have been aware of this too and he would

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⁷⁸ John P. Glennon, editor-in-chief, “Vietnam: I. Reassessment, January 1 - March 14: Hilsman-Forrestal report, Wheeler Mission, Mansfield Report, Comprehensive Plan, Thompson Report, 1. Editorial Note” [Telegram 662 to Saigon, January 7; Department of State, Central Files, 951K.6211/1-763 & Kennedy Library, National Security Files, Vietnam Country Series, 1/63] in FRUS: Vietnam, January - August 1963, Vol. III, p. 2.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.* pp. 2-3.

⁸⁰ McNamara, In Retrospect, p. 47.

⁸¹ By all accounts in military history the U.S. Army in North Africa, including the vaunted “Big Red One”, had dropped their weapons and fled in panic when Rommel launched his successful panzer

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have been professionally reticent, as any experienced and thinking U.S. commander would have been, to criticise the ARVN for displaying a few “green” jitters.⁸² In fact, without tactical failures like Ap Bac, it is difficult for new approaches and ideas to be truly taken to heart by the commanders of fledgling armies - as the ARVN most assuredly was.

For his part, Ambassador Nolting was very blunt about what Vann and the press had managed to accomplish with what he believed was an out-right distortion:

Afterwards, Colonel John Paul Vann, and American military advisor, told the press that despite all the Americans had done to train and supply them, the members of the South Vietnamese Army were basically cowards who could not win. Allegations also arose that President Diem had ordered the Army to avoid casualties and that because of these orders ARVN commanders were not taking the initiative in combat.

General Harkins and I agreed that the South Vietnamese forces mishandled Ap Bac. They did not move in when they should have. We did not think, however, that the entire South Vietnamese Army deserved to be indicted for cowardice. Colonel Vann, who later gave his life in Vietnam, caused great damage by his press interview. His outburst stemmed, no doubt, from genuine frustration, but it was unfair to the South Vietnamese Army and government and did great harm in terms of American public opinion.⁸³

Nolting went on to counter the charges that Diem had been telling his army to avoid casualties and to state, in his usual gentlemanly style, that the news reporters from The New

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assault through the Kasserine Pass. Charles Whiting, in his book, First Blood: The Battle of the Kasserine Pass 1943, gave one of the many accounts of this plain and manifest disgrace to the U.S. Army. In comparison, the ARVN at Ap Bac, while clearly showing signs of apprehension, fought a relatively coherent battle - unsatisfactory as it was. Sir Robert Thompson, years later, would claim that the ARVN from Ap Bac on had learnt so many lessons and had been tried by fire so many times that it was more reliable than the U.S. Army in Vietnam.

⁸² Any thinking U.S. serviceman would have allowed the ARVN this grace period. Because they would have been aware of other contacts between seasoned German units in the Second World War (i.e., Anzio, the Ardennes Offensive - Battle of the Bulge, etc.) and “green” Americans, for example, that were even more laden with hesitancy under fire than anything the ARVN had displayed at Ap Bac.

⁸³ Nolting, From Trust To Tragedy, p. 96.

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York Times and Washington Post had been fabricating rumours to suit their purposes. It was on this issue, as well, that the Harriman faction was able to find grist for their mill against Diem as they, too, emphasised Diem's alleged "go-slow" policy in Washington.⁸⁴ Accordingly, Hilsman put forward the mutual support between the reporters' assessment and the Harriman faction's (to which he subscribed and belonged):

No one knows what Diem's reasons for this action were. It could be argued that he sensed that defeating the guerrillas would be a long, slow process and that it would be better to husband the strength of the government forces rather than dissipate it in too much American "gung ho" offensive-mindedness. The basic idea of the strategic hamlet program was consistent with a slow approach in its stress on the "oil blot" principle. But he never raised this question with either General Harkins or Ambassador Nolting, who did not learn of Diem's "go slow" instructions until much, much later. And this gives credibility to the rival explanation, which a few of the military advisers in the field adopted as well as most of the American press, particularly David Halberstam of the New York Times and Neil Sheehan of the United Press International.⁸⁵

Hilsman, when he wrote his memoirs, was either unaware of Nolting's keen interest in the veracity of the "go slow" allegations at that time or later, or he was, once again, practising extreme economy with the truth. Certainly, the Hilsman' memoirs seem to be inconsistent with what he had written in the Hilsman/Forrestal Report of January 1963. Indeed, as Nolting's testimony makes plain, there is little to no credibility to what Halberstam and the Harriman group were attempting to claim on this key issue which so affected Saigon - Washington relations:

No one, not President Diem, not Paul Harkins after his many talks with Diem, not Nguyen Dinh Thuan, the effective Defence Minister, ever said or intimated to me that the South Vietnamese government was ordering the Army to hold its punches. I never saw or heard of any orders to avoid combat. I do recall

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⁸⁴ Hilsman, To Move A Nation, p. 446.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

many discussions with Diem and other officials who thought the fewer the casualties among the Army, the villagers, the fence sitters, and even the Viet Cong, the sooner pacification of the countryside could take place. Both the Vietnamese armed units and their American advisors were instructed to be careful about whom they attacked, since we wanted to bring dissenters over to our side, not kill them. There were mistakes in tactics and judgement, of course, but they were the exception rather than the rule.

The press accusations that many operations were launched to avoid, rather than engage, the enemy were to my knowledge false. To be sure, President Diem, his cabinet, and MACV were strongly opposed to killing innocent people while trying to root out terrorists. In some cases Diem reprimanded his generals for attacking villages whose allegiance was in doubt. In addition to humanitarian considerations, neither the Vietnamese government nor the American mission wanted to put the fence sitters on the Viet Cong side, by killing innocent civilians.⁸⁶

Returning to the related issue of Ap Bac, Ambassador Nolting found it very revealing, as did Admiral Harry D. Felt, Commander in Chief, Pacific (CINCPAC),⁸⁷ that the news reporters chose to focus on one minor battle that went poorly for the ARVN whilst ignoring their many successes. In fact, the ARVN's successes were not reported at all by these biased newsmen.⁸⁸

Around the time of Ap Bac and the U.S. newspaper assault on Diem and his government, Roger Hilsman (Director of the Bureau of Intelligence and Research) began to criticise

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⁸⁶ Nolting, From Trust To Tragedy, pp. 96 - 97.

⁸⁷ John P. Glennon, editor-in-chief, "Vietnam: 1. Reassessment, January 1 - March 14: Hilsman-Forrestal report, Wheeler Mission, Mansfield Report, Comprehensive Plan, Thompson Report, 1. Editorial Note" in FRUS: Vietnam, January - August 1963, Vol. III, p. 3.

⁸⁸ "Ap Bac was, in my view, a relatively small battle which the American press blew out of proportion, partly because of Colonel Vann's statements. It stimulated the media's rhetorical chant, 'Why aren't our Vietnamese as good as their Vietnamese?' I think that, overall, they were as good. There were far more successful military actions than there were debacles like Ap Bac. These successful battles did not make dramatic headlines because we expected our side to win. Americans in the early 1960s did not envision military setbacks, even on the part of our allies at a time when we were not engaged as combatants. The media tended to feature the setbacks, creating a false impression of the ARVN's capabilities and of American training and advice." Nolting, From Trust To Tragedy, p. 97.

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Ambassador Nolting. In a series of memoranda for the record, he questioned Nolting's optimism about the progress being made in South Vietnam against the Communist insurgents, especially, as this optimism pertained to the new strategic hamlets.⁸⁹ Hilsman, with many caveats, accepted much of what Nolting had to tell him; but he clearly balked at Nolting's defence of Diem's leadership:

I raised the question of Diem's inability to delegate and asked whether this was leading to frustration on the part of technical and professional and bureaucratic elites. The Ambassador said that he thought that there was considerably less frustration both at the provincial and national levels for three reasons. First, because of our aid and the momentum that has been generated these officials now have more to do than they ever did before. The second, they have a plan which they understand and are following and third, the mere fact of momentum lifts morale and dissipates doubts. I suggested that this morale might be short-lived and due mainly to our aid and participation only to emerge [submerge/] again if Diem's habits about failing to delegate continued.

There was some discussion of this in which the Country Team generally sided with Diem and said that usually when he interfered he was right and the other people were wrong. My net reaction was that the case was not entirely persuasive.⁹⁰

Hilsman, who has much to answer for owing to his direct involvement in the orchestrating of the coup that overthrew Diem and Nhu and which resulted in their murders, had a very capable mind when it came to the workings of counter-insurgency warfare.⁹¹

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⁸⁹ Roger Hilsman, 3. "Memorandum for the Record by the Director of the Bureau of Intelligence and Research (Hilsman)," Saigon, January 1963, [Kennedy Library, Hilsman Papers, Country Series - Vietnam. Confidential.], in FRUS: Vietnam, January - August 1963, Vol. III, pp. 5 - 11.

⁹⁰ Roger Hilsman, 5. "Memorandum for the Record by the Director of the Bureau of Intelligence and Research (Hilsman)," Subject: Country Team Meeting on Wednesday, January 2, 1963, Saigon, January 2, 1963, [Kennedy Library, Hilsman Papers, Country Series - Vietnam. Confidential.], in FRUS: Vietnam, January - August 1963, Vol. III, pp. 12 - 13.

⁹¹ Following Sir Robert Thompson's principles for defeating Communist insurgency Hilsman viewed the U.S. Mission's interdepartmental approach as flawed as it lacked unified direction: "1. Is there a plan? The answer is no. There are five or six plans many of which are competing. There is, consequently, great confusion. 2. How about implementation? Are the military and political action co-ordinated? The

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Begrudgingly, he admitted that Diem's understanding of what was going on throughout South Vietnam was staggering in its scope and detail. Yet, at the same time, he was unable to grasp the reality of the situation: that Ngo Dinh Diem was the very best man available - the others, who aspired to take his place, simply paled in comparison as post-coup Vietnam proved. What Nolting had been telling him, and anyone else who would listen in Washington, was the simple truth: U.S. and Vietnamese interests were both served by staying the course with Ngo Dinh Diem.

Nolting summed-up the Hilsman - Forrestal visit as follows:

Hilsman seemed quite optimistic during this visit, Forrestal less so. I was never quite sure where Mike Forrestal stood. He came out to Vietnam occasionally, did not say much, did not appear to do much, then returned to Washington. He reported to the President through the NSC rather than through the State Department, so I did not see his reports, but during our discussions we sometimes disagreed on priorities. Forrestal, echoing Harriman, urged more democratic institutions and methods, pressing Diem to broaden the base of his government and become more "popular." I perceived such comments to be unrealistic and impossible to accomplish in a short time under existing conditions. I am sure Washington found me stubborn when I reported in this vein.

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answer - imperfectly at best. There are huge gaps in what people are doing. For example, the police program has not even begun to get off the ground, and this raises the possibility that the strategic villages will be built around Communists and will rot from within which could bring the whole thing down in shambles. 3. Is the U.S. effort co-ordinated? Is it guided by a clear conception which permits effective meshing of our various efforts? Answer - Individual agencies are doing a superb job (e.g., Rufus Phillips, Richardson of CIA and the Special Forces). But it cannot really be said that there is wide understanding of [or/] a clear conception though some individuals do have a clear conception." Roger Hilsman, 3. "Memorandum for the Record by the Director of the Bureau of Intelligence and Research (Hilsman)," Saigon, January 1963, [Kennedy Library, Hilsman Papers, Country Series - Vietnam. Confidential.], in FRUS: Vietnam, January - August 1963, Vol. III, p. 16.

Hilsman had applied Thompson's precepts to the Vietnamese situation and, manifestly, found the American effort lacking in direction. This was owing to many things, such as the contest between the departments of State and Defense over who had ultimate authority and control in Vietnam with regard to American aid and projects. Nolting had tried to get Harriman to define this problem clearly with DOS and DOD and determine a resolution, yet, owing to the power of the Pentagon and the JCS, this never came about as even the Secretary of Defense, Robert McNamara, seemed unable to impose the authority of his office over this quarrel.

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Forrestal spent a lot of time with American press representatives during this trip, gathering, I suppose, what he thought was "inside information," untainted by the Embassy. In the end, however, neither he nor Hilsman suggested anything substantial in terms of changing our policies or programs. Their final report, which I did not see until it was published in the Pentagon Papers in 1965 [this date is either an error on the part of Nolting's or a reference to top-secret reports, which became the Pentagon Papers], was generally positive, saying that there was more to be done and that it could be done at a faster pace, but that, overall, things seemed to be going well.⁹²

Ap Bac, the Hilsman - Forrestal visit, the continuing harangues from Halberstam, Karnow and Sheehan had failed to seriously dislodge the direction of U.S. policy toward Diem's government, at least, overnight.⁹³ Nevertheless, and regardless of the facts, these anti-Diemists

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⁹² Nolting, From Trust To Tragedy, p. 96.

⁹³ Stanley Karnow was also assigned as a journalist to South Vietnam in 1959 and he made pronouncements and criticisms about the Strategic Hamlets, for example, that betrayed a bias against Diem and Nhu that was as virulent as that of Halberstam's and Sheehan's. In many ways, Karnow's compilations of alleged "evidence" against Diem and his supporters was subtler, more indirect and, thus, inherently more vicious than the other reporters' efforts to jaundice American opinion. For example, one has but to examine Karnow's assessment of the strategic hamlets and compare it to what the real experts, such as Colby, Thompson, and even Hilsman, were saying: "The plan was to corral peasants into armed stockades, thereby depriving the Vietcong of their support, which would not survive without the population just as fish die outside water, as Mao Zedong's image put it. The agrovillage scheme, a similar effort three years earlier, had been a botch, yet Diem and his brother Nhu clung to their brainchild, and they were encouraged by Robert Thompson, a British counter-insurgency specialist who had successfully promoted a similar program in the fight against Communist guerrillas in Malaya. But the Malayan experience did not quite fit Vietnam.... Diem and Nhu saw the strategic hamlet program as essentially a means to spread their influence rather than a device to infuse peasants with the will to resist the Vietcong. Nhu, personally taking charge, was obsessed by numbers. He tried to build stockades as fast as possible, and Thompson himself would after disavow them..." Karnow, Vietnam: A History, pp. 255 - 256.

As the reader can judge from comparing Karnow's discourse with the consistent testimony of Colby on this subject, Nhu did, in fact, see strategic hamlets as not only a device to infuse the peasants with the will to resist the Communists but also as the foundation for democracy in South Vietnam. No where, except in the mind of Stanley Karnow, is there a record left by Nhu or those associated with the strategic hamlets program that would suggest that the program was put into place to crudely coerce the peasants - as Karnow's effort subtly suggests. Similarly, Robert Thompson did criticise the rapidity with which some hamlets were rushed into existence by Nhu but never did he disavow the program as he remained its most ardent supporter right up until it was destroyed along with many of Diem's programs after the coup. As was made clear by the Communist adversaries in the North - the strategic hamlets program caused real fear and consternation and, thus, it was targeted as a priority for destruction. Ironically, Karnow nearly defeats himself in recognition of the fact that it was targeted for undermining by Colonel Pham Ngoc Thao - Nhu's chief lieutenant in carrying out the program. Colonel Pham Ngoc Thao also happened to be a top-level

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were building up a momentum in Washington that could not be stopped by the like of Nolting or even Dean Rusk. For example, Stanley Karnow, the American journalist who became well known for his book, Vietnam: A History,⁹⁴ alleged that Robert Thompson, himself, had disavowed Ngo Dinh Nhu's rapid expansion of the Strategic Hamlet Program as a serious mistake. Of course, what he failed to mention, or perhaps he did not have access to the correct information at the time, was the fact that Thompson disavowed his 'disavowal' of Nhu's energetic direction of the program.

One of the reasons for their optimism is apparently the vigor with which the South Vietnamese government and especially Brother Nhu have pushed the strategic hamlet program. (R.G.K. Thompson also mentioned that without Nhu's enthusiastic and vigorous backing, the strategic hamlet program would probably not have gotten off the ground. He went on to say, in fact, that he is wrong in his worry earlier this year that the Vietnamese would endanger the program by doing too much of it in too many places. He now feels that Nhu was not wrong in doing this because it attracted a great deal of attention to the program all over Vietnam and hence got an essential momentum.)⁹⁵

Nevertheless, the negativity of the 'Mansfield Report', the ambiguity of the Hilsman/Forrestal Report, the damage caused by the journalists, such as Karnow or Halberstam, seemed to gel together with a weight of their own. Together, they provided the foundation upon which Harriman was able to build and marshal his forces for that which he and Galbraith had become convinced was necessary, the removal of Ngo Dinh Diem.

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Communist agent who was ordered, or so the Communists claimed, to deliberately speed-up the program to the point that it would unravel. Now, as any soldier with any wit knows, if your enemy is embarked on a strategy that will lead to his ruin - you do not interfere with it - in fact, you do nothing at all. Yet, clearly - and as evidenced by their own testimony, the Communists were so alarmed at the potential of the program that they felt compelled to interfere at the highest level. Ibid., p. 257.

⁹⁴ Karnow, Vietnam: A History, The First Complete Account of Vietnam at War, (New York, [NY]: Penguin Books, 1986).

⁹⁵ Roger Hilsman, 3. "Memorandum for the Record by the Director of the Bureau of Intelligence and Research (Hilsman)," (Saigon, January 1963), [Source: Kennedy Library, Hilsman Papers, Country Series - Vietnam. Confidential] in FRUS: Vietnam, January - August 1963, Vol. III, p. 5.

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Ambassador Nolting had claimed that the policy shift did come on suddenly. Yet, judging by developments in South Vietnam in late 1962 and early 1963, something else was needed to cause a full, about-face in U.S. policy to the point where the abandonment of Diem would appear to be the route of least resistance. According to the evidence, readily discernible in the documents, Ambassador Frederick Nolting felt compelled to fight against the policy shift. It was this very policy reorientation that the Harriman group, aided and abetted by the young American newspaper journalists, were trying to ram through the back-door (i.e., via the means of the United States Embassy in Saigon).

In 1963, Nolting's last year in South Vietnam, the American ambassador's stubborn rear-guard action of 1962 would become an all-out fight to defend the honour of the American people. For it was Nolting's understanding that they had given their word, through their duly elected President John F. Kennedy, that there would be no interference with the internal politics and government of South Vietnam. Nolting argued right up to and after the murders of Diem and Nhu that it would be better for the United States to walk away from Vietnam than to breach its promise made to an ally, Diem's government, in a time of war.

His co-worker and friend, William Colby, made the most fitting testimony to the honour and stubborn courage of Nolting's increasingly lonely fight:

As the drama unfolded, Nolting maintained a clear and persistent view that the United States should support the constituted authority in Vietnam which Diem represented and that it should persevere in the strategy of helping the Diem government to win its own struggle against the Viet Cong, through such programs as the strategic hamlets. He fought for his policies from Saigon to Washington and against some of the towering figures of the Kennedy administration. In the end he lost the battle...in retrospect it is clear that the policies he fought against proved to be massively mistaken and engulfed America in a war which shook it internally and which it lost.⁹⁶

Footnotes

⁹⁶ William E. Colby, "Foreword," in Frederick Nolting's, From Trust To Tragedy, p. xii.

What really needs to be underscored about the history of this period is that Ambassador Nolting's fight against a policy about-face was supported by the facts on the ground. From William Colby through to Robert S. McNamara, President Kennedy's Secretary of Defense, there was a documented recognition of the solid success achieved in 1962 and early 1963. In support of this, the reader needs only to peruse McNamara's most recent account of those years wherein he admits to many mistakes but concurs with the experts that the Communist insurgent infrastructure in South Vietnam had taken a severe pounding - to the point of immanent collapse:

Thinking ahead, I asked General Harkins in Honolulu on July 23, 1962, how long he thought it would take to eliminate the military potential of the Vietcong. His estimate was something like this: one year after the South Vietnamese military and civil guard forces become fully operational and begin pressing the Vietcong in all areas.... The following spring, on March 29, 1963, I asked Sir Robert Thompson whether he thought it advisable to reduce the number of advisers. He replied that if progress continued and the Vietcong could be cleared from a particular area of South Vietnam during the summer, it might be possible to reduce our strength by 1,000 men.

At my next meeting with General Harkins, in Honolulu on May 6, 1963, he told me we were continuing to make progress in the war.⁹⁷

As was noted earlier, even the Communists admitted that 1962 and early 1963 represented a time of success for American policy in South Vietnam and for Ngo Dinh Diem's government. That substantial friction between Washington and Saigon had been ameliorated by Ambassador Nolting's effort is plain and it is equally clear that Nolting's rear-guard action against the policy re-direction being forced by Harriman and the newspaper men played a substantial role in the success against the Communist insurgents in 1962. This was so simply because Ngo Dinh Diem was still in authority and his political legitimacy, supported by the Nolting mission, had expanded at the expense of the Communists' during this time. This was

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⁹⁷ McNamara, *in Retrospect*, pp. 48 - 49.

what the fight was all about and somehow the saliency of political legitimacy, not just democracy, never seemed to make much of an impact upon the minds of the powerful Americans within the Harriman group - who had lost patience with Diem.

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William Colby recalled the pressures that were building in Saigon and the general split that developed within Kennedy's Administration over the issue of how to support South Vietnam and, while he first noted this split as manifest in 1962, it became even more obvious in 1963.

In Vietnam, the impinging of past and present, the contrasting cultures, the clashes of pride, timing, and technique, the divisions of both societies, the differences over the "how" among the leadership of both countries, the increasingly evident preoccupation of prominent Americans, the turning of World attention to the struggle in Indochina, and the growth of American military involvement (including the first helicopters in 1962) all combined ...to raise the level of tension in Saigon in conjunction with the rise of the Communist danger in the countryside. Vietnam began to fill headlines in the United States. The growth in general attention heightened the pressures among the various factions and forces involved in the situation. On the American side, the differences grew between those who saw the problem as chiefly one requiring a strong effort in the countryside, military and paramilitary, and those who believed the effort was doomed unless Diem changed his authoritarian regime to attract popular support and include oppositionists in a national effort [my emphasis].¹

From a variety of historical perspectives 1963 was the year of decision with regard to the future of American - Vietnamese relations. The documented record concerning American conduct in its relations with the Government of South Vietnam in 1963 manifestly places the responsibility for the fate of America's involvement in South Vietnam upon the shoulders of specific individuals.² This understanding, of course, is contrary to those who would absolve

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¹ Colby, Lost Victory, p. 114.

² This position, of course, is commensurate with the understanding of Frederick Nolting's - as related to Vietnam: "one point I keep coming back to in my mind is that the general interpretation of America's getting a thumb in the wringer in Vietnam, then our hand, then our arm, is not true. I don't think it was true under Eisenhower and I don't think it was true under Kennedy up until his last tragic months. I think that the U.S. support of the coup was a political decision of crucial importance. It was opposed by the CIA. Nolting, "Kennedy, NATO, and Southeast Asia," in Diplomacy, Administration, and Policy, Editor - Kenneth W. Thompson, p. 31.

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man's moral responsibility in the wake of decisions made and their subsequent actions in time and space, by wrapping themselves in the mantle of supposed inexorable, inevitable movements in history. Decisions were made by powerful men within the Kennedy Administration which directly and intentionally resulted in the abrogation of America's pledges to Diem's government. Subsequently, this abrogation of America's pledges to the GVN resulted in the destruction of the same and forced into being the moral impetus for the United States to then fill the very political vacuum produced by such decisions with military might. As the senior State Department man on the ground in South Vietnam at that time, Ambassador Nolting stood alone against these decisions and, as such, he was overwhelmed, defeated and replaced as Ambassador during the summer of the Kennedy Administration's discontent, in 1963. Michael Forrestal of the National Security Council had advised as much to President Kennedy - that Nolting's tour was up in April of that year and that they needed a replacement Ambassador who would proceed with "More vigour in getting Diem to do what we want."³

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³ In a relatively unveiled piece of advice to President Kennedy, Michael V. Forrestal (National Security Council Staff to the President) had stated: " 1. Start looking for a successor to Fritz Nolting, whose tour comes to an end in April unless he is re-appointed. More vigor is needed in getting Diem to do what we want." Michael V. Forrestal, 21. "Memorandum From Michael V. Forrestal of the National Security Council Staff to the President [re]: South Vietnam," Washington, January 28, 1963, [Kennedy Library, National Security Files, Vietnam Country Series. Secret.] In FRUS: Vietnam January - August 1963, Vol. III, pp. 63 - 64.

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The CIA Report of January, 1963 -

The beginning of 1963 seemed to be the harbinger for the same kind of success that 1962 had proved to be in the American - Vietnamese fight against the Viet Cong. This success was made manifest in a document prepared by the CIA entitled "Current Intelligence Memorandum Prepared in the Office of Current Intelligence, Central Intelligence Agency."⁴ Much of this document has been "sanitised" and, thus, the full extent of the memorandum remains unknown. Nevertheless, on the key issues of what was being accomplished by the Diem government and what Nolting and Harkins had been arguing against, with regard to the nay-saying of the American reporters, this document supports the official United States mission to Saigon position.⁵ Worthy of particular attention, with regard to the actual progress of the counter-insurgency campaign, were the points made which indicated a favourable seizure ratio of Communist weaponry and,⁶ relatedly, the effect of the Strategic Hamlets.⁷

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⁴ There were questions asked in this document which, certainly, did not support the ultimate optimism that the counter-insurgency campaign would be an over-night success. Indeed, much of the tone of the document seems to be quite sober, nevertheless, and in no way, did this document support the disaster predictions of the young American journalists. Overall, the CIA analysis lends objectivity to the whole process of counter-insurgency that had been lacking on the American part.

⁵ William Colby noted that this time in U.S. - GVN relations was fruitful because of "The solid atmosphere of progress accompanying all this activity..." Colby, Lost Victory, p. 117.

⁶ "4. The ratio of weapons captured to weapons lost has recently turned in favour of the government..." John P. Glennon, editor in chief, 11. "Current Intelligence Memorandum Prepared in the Office of Current Intelligence, Central Intelligence Agency," [document number not declassified] Washington, January 11, 1963. [Source: Kennedy Library, National Security Files, Vietnam Country Series, 1/63. The source text is labelled "Sanitized Copy," and the original classification has been obliterated. Ellipses throughout the document are in the source text.], FRUS: Vietnam January - August 1963, Vol. III, pp. 19 -21.

⁷ "8. In the political sphere, various counter-insurgency projects - of which the strategic hamlet program is the most important - have improved the local security situation in some areas and made some progress toward persuading the rural population to identify its fortunes with those of Saigon." Ibid.

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Specifically, the CIA report noted that the GVN was probably holding its own against the Communist insurrectionists and even reducing the threat of the guerrillas in some areas. Cautiously, the CIA analysts explained that it was too early to declare that the back of the Communist organisation had been broken.⁸ However, they did report that the South Vietnamese were attaining success in curbing the insurgency through extensive US assistance with political and military measures. In addition to this success the report also noted that US tactical advice had resulted in the ARVN being more efficient, mobile and aggressive in hunting down and destroying the Communist insurgents.⁹

Essentially, the CIA reported that the Diem government was gaining ground against the Communists and, while victory could not be predicted, the disasters, which the like of Halberstam and Sheehan had been intimating,¹⁰ were extremely unlikely. The US was not sinking with Diem; it was, at least, treading water and the Communists were doing no better and in some ways, thanks to the strategic hamlets, a good deal worse.¹¹

Footnotes

⁸ "SUBJECT:

Current Status of the War in South Vietnam,

Though the South Vietnamese government probably is holding its own against the Viet Cong and may be reducing the menace in some areas, the tide has not yet turned...." *Ibid.*

⁹ "7. The South Vietnamese, with extensive US assistance, have instituted military and political measures which have had some success in curbing the insurgency menace. Training has been intensified, counter-guerrilla tactics have been improved, and force levels augmented. These, in conjunction with new US-provided or operated equipment and US tactical advice, have all resulted in a measure of increased effectiveness, mobility and aggressiveness on the part of government forces...." *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Certainly, Sheehan intimated that disaster was obviously in store for the GVN and the ARVN based upon their poor performance at Ap Bac and their subsequent attempts to cover it up. Of course, he was recalling this disaster many years after the fact so it was rather easy to suggest his own prescience at the time. Neil Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam*, (New York, [NY]: Vintage Books – Random House, Inc., 1988), pp. 271 – 278.

¹¹ Glennon, editor in chief, "11. Current Intelligence Memorandum Prepared in the Office of Current Intelligence, Central Intelligence Agency," [document number not declassified] Washington, January 11, 1963. [Source: Kennedy Library, National Security Files, Vietnam Country Series, 1/63. The

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The General Wheeler Report of January, 1963 –

The CIA report was by no means the only official investigative report done on the situation in South Vietnam in early 1963 as the Joint Chiefs Of Staff submitted a very lengthy and rigorous report based on General Earle G. Wheeler's observations in South Vietnam. In General Wheeler's and his team's assessment, Ambassador Nolting was doing an impressive job that was making the US effort work in Vietnam.¹² Wheeler and his team, similarly, noted that General Paul Harkins had managed to establish cordial, direct and trustworthy relations with Diem's government,¹³ and they also praised the substantial value of the strategic hamlets to the counter-insurgency effort against the Communists.

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source text is labelled "Sanitized Copy," and the original classification has been obliterated. Ellipses throughout the document are in the source text.] In FRUS: Vietnam January - August 1963, Vol. III, p. 22.

¹² "Political Factors. (1) The team was impressed with the United States Country Team in South Vietnam. Under the leadership of Ambassador Nolting, the work of the member agencies of the country team has been carefully integrated to optimize the United States effort." General Earle G. Wheeler, 26. "Report by an Investigative Team Headed by the Chief of Staff, United States Army (Wheeler), to the Joint Chiefs of Staff," Washington, January 1963, [National Defense University, Taylor Papers, T-181-69. Top Secret.] In FRUS: Vietnam January - August 1963, Vol. III, p. 81.

¹³ "a. An important and interesting aspect of relationships between the American military and the leadership of the Vietnamese Government became apparent in the course of calls made by General Wheeler. Accompanied by General Harkins, he called on Minister of Defense Thuan and President Diem. The attitude of Minister Thuan toward General Harkins is completely open, frank and friendly. The two confer on matters of organisation, operations and assignment of personnel in the most free and easy fashion. General Harkins has no hesitancy in pointing out mistakes in military operations to Minister Thuan, and he in turn receives these comments with equanimity and assurances that he will look into, and correct, mistakes. General Harkins told General Wheeler privately that Minister Thuan had proved that he keeps his promises. General Harkins has a great influence upon the assignments of senior Vietnamese officers. While this influence is not advertised (and General Harkins would prefer that it not be known), nevertheless, it is known, and adds to the prestige and influence of American officers in their advisory role.

b. The conference with President Diem made it apparent that he, also, likes and trusts General Harkins. Moreover, General Harkins, as with Minister Thuan, has no hesitancy in pressing the president to carry out programs which he considers to be important to the military effort. All-in-all, this attitude at the very top of the government represents a vast change from the aloofness and suspicion with which American advisors were received by senior Vietnam officials a year ago." Ibid. p. 87.

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In specific terms, the Wheeler Report team identified the fact that the military measures that were being taken in South Vietnam were vital, as they would pave the way for the security and stability without which political and economic growth could not occur.¹⁴ They noted that the real problem, which plagued rural South Vietnam, was the re-establishment of law and order so that the GVN's measures for political and economic growth could actually take hold. Attached to this fundamental problem was the historical reality, which dictated that the central government in Vietnam had never reached down into the very lives of the peasants before. Nor had the peasants ever truly identified themselves, their activities or their futures with the central government and, as such, had no comprehension of national political issues. The Wheeler Report team did note, however, that there was the slow dawning of change discernible in the evidence that the GVN was beginning to reach the people and, in response, the people were attempting to reach for their government.¹⁵

In the analysis of the Wheeler Report team, the strategic hamlet program was clearly identified as the greatest single political/military instrument that was making this historically unprecedented (in terms of the social/political history of Vietnam) corresponding 'reaching-out' between the GVN and the rural peasants possible. The reasons for this success were self-evident in as much as the defence that the strategic hamlets provided the people with also allowed the GVN the time and crucial relative peace to inaugurate political, economic and social reforms

Footnotes

¹⁴ "The JCS team believes that the military measures being taken in South Vietnam must continue to be considered as necessary, principally to establish conditions favorable for political and economic growth." *Ibid.* p. 81.

¹⁵ "The basic problem now is to restore law and order, particularly in the rural areas, so that measures for the development of political and economic strength can take hold. Historically, the central government in Vietnam has not reached down and made itself felt to the peasant. Likewise, the peasant has not truly identified himself, his activities, or his future with his government, nor has he thought in terms of national political issues, as we know them. The team found that this situation is slowly beginning to change. Now the government is beginning to reach the people, and the people are beginning to reach for the government." *Ibid.* pp. 81 & 82.

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right at the hamlet level.¹⁶ Further proof of this political success, in the estimation of the Wheeler Report team, was the fact that elections had been held in over one thousand of the hamlets. The American team noted that these elections were held in a democratic manner. In turn, this was allowing the newly elected councils and hamlet chiefs to truly represent the people as they decided on which projects to carry forward in their attempts to defend and improve the lives of the voting peasants. The Wheeler Report team members identified this rudimentary democratic action as a “rice roots” program and that it was, indeed, permitting a true democratic political process to develop in South Vietnam. While noting that the process was slow, the team recognised that democracy could not be forced on the people from legislative action and that the strategic hamlet elections would allow the political development of South Vietnam to advance at a pace determined by the peasants themselves.¹⁷

In their attempt to come to grips with the nature of the relationship between the American officials in Vietnam and the GVN, the Wheeler Report team noted that the Americans were not in a position to command, control, or direct the GVN. Instead, the desired approach, advocated by the team, was precisely what Nolting and Harkins had been directing and urging in all aspects of the American mission in South Vietnam: i.e., influence the GVN through good relations and friendly advice. In the estimation of the Wheeler Report team, the relationship

Footnotes

¹⁶ “(2) The strategic hamlet program is perhaps the greatest single case for this encouraging development. It is a program aimed directly at the people that not only provides them with an elementary system of defense against, and isolation from, the Viet Cong, but also is the vehicle by which the Government of Vietnam can carry forward a political, economic, and social revolution....” *Ibid.* p. 82.

¹⁷ “(3) To date, elections have been held in more than a thousand hamlets. While the government attempts to insure that candidates for office are not Viet Cong members or sympathisers, the elections appear to be conducted in a democratic manner. Following the election of a hamlet chief and a hamlet council, the new officials, themselves, decide on projects for the improvement of the well being and living conditions of the people. It is through this “rice roots” program that the framework for a democratic political process is being developed.... Although this is a slow process, the team believes that democracy cannot be legislated in South Vietnam, and that the current political development program will move forward....” *Ibid.*

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between the United States Government and the GVN would only continue to strengthen if the excellent relations, put into place by Nolting and Harkins, were continued in the same vein. ¹⁸

The picture being painted by the press, back in the United States, continued to focus on and amplify the negative which, in turn, was causing serious problems for Dean Rusk and his attempts to officially “stay the course” with a continuity of policy toward South Vietnam.¹⁹ Accordingly, Rusk sent a brief telegram to Nolting requesting his evaluation of what the U.S. newsmen were doing and what he thought could be done:

Request your frank, general, and confidential evaluation overall job being done by U.S. newsmen in reporting war in Viet-Nam to U.S. public. Context our concerns as follows:

- 1. We are still getting adverse play in daily press; somewhat better coverage in weekly publications (e.g. Newsweek Jan 28, Life Jan 25). In general war in Viet-Nam going better than being reported to U.S. public.*
- 2. Poor relations between U.S. press reps and GVN not likely be significantly improved.*
- 3. Realize wire service correspondents have difficulty in leaving Saigon, where they in contact with home office, to go into country.*

Footnotes

¹⁸ “3. Nature of the Relationship between United States and Government of Vietnam Authorities

c. United States officials, military, and civilian, are not in a position to command, control or direct Government of Vietnam military, economic or political activities, nor do they desire such added responsibilities. They must, therefore, be in a strong position to influence Government of Vietnam activity along the desired lines and thus achieve the desired objectives. Fortunately, excellent relations exist between United States and Government of Vietnam authorities in all major fields of joint endeavour and United States advice is generally, though not always, accepted. The team feels these relationships will continue to strengthen and United States advice will be increasingly followed as Government of Vietnam confidence in themselves and their advisors continues to grow.” *Ibid.* p. 87.

¹⁹ “Rusk also firmly denied reports that surfaced from interviews with returning American advisers and correspondents in Vietnam that the war was going badly. He cited improvements in supply and intelligence operations and in the Vietnam command structure as evidence that, in fact, the Vietnamese were winning the war.” Schoenbaum, Waging Peace & War: Dean Rusk in the Truman, Kennedy & Johnson Years, p. 395.

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4. If correspondent has time, how difficult is it for him to get transportation a) to cover military operations, b) to go into countryside to cover strategic hamlets and other rural activities?

In general is it TF view that, given local obstacles and problems, U.S. correspondents are doing adequate or inadequate job of covering war?

Would appreciate your carefully weighed overall view this long vexed question and would welcome any suggestions as to how we may assist or encourage them to do better job either here or in Saigon.

Rusk²⁰

General Wheeler's investigative team, like Dean Rusk, was concerned over the press and the problems they were creating with Diem's family, the GVN and with the military effort being made by the United States and South Vietnam. The American press, according to this report, was directly and adversely affecting American relations with the GVN and was creating serious doubts within Congressional opinion in Washington as to just what was going on with the Ngo Dinh and the ARVN in South Vietnam. For their part, the Ngo Dinh perceived, accurately enough, that the American press disliked them intensely and was, indeed, biased in their reports. In short, the American press was causing serious problems well beyond any use it might be fulfilling as the American public was receiving a distorted and inaccurate assessment through their newspapers. The maturity and balance required simply could not be found in the stories being filed by the American press in South Vietnam. ²¹

Footnotes

²⁰ Dean Rusk, 17. "Telegram From the Department of State to the Embassy in Vietnam," Washington, January 24, 1963 - 1:31 p.m., [Department of State, Central Files, 951K.6211/1-2463. Confidential.] In FRUS: Vietnam, January - August 1963, Vol. III, pp. 34 - 35.

²¹ In the conclusions of the Wheeler Team's report to the JCS, the following was noted: "d. The schism between the United States press and the Government of Vietnam is more than a simple lack of communications. To span the gap requires great effort and, on our side, much patience. An objective, on-the-spot appraisal of the war by mature, responsible newsmen is gravely needed as a counter to the sometimes frustrated reporting of the resident correspondents." General Earle G. Wheeler, 26. "Report by an Investigative Team Headed by the Chief of Staff, United States Army (Wheeler), to the Joint Chiefs of

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Specifically, the Wheeler Report team drew attention to the fact that the press representatives from the United States, in their obvious dislike of the Diem government, had created a serious public relations predicament. In fact, this problem was so substantial that it was having a direct impact on the war effort in Vietnam and the support thereof back in the United States.²² According to Wheeler's team, the GVN had come to regard the foreign press as completely untrustworthy as they had a predilection for publishing secret and false information derived from private, unreliable and biased sources. The thrust of all the stories was to portray the GVN and its undertakings in the worst possible light by constantly focussing on mistakes and failures while never writing about what was actually being done properly and succeeding.²³ In this context, the Wheeler Report Team drew the JCS' attention to the major public relations scandal to which the American Press had managed to elevate the minor Battle of Ap Bac. Wheeler's team pointed out that, contrary to the facts, the press forged ahead by using incomplete reports and details and thus claimed the battle was a major defeat. In turn, this irresponsibility had created cries of doom back in the newsrooms of the United States. In short,

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Staff," Washington, January 1963, [National Defense University, Taylor Papers, T-181-69. Top Secret.] In FRUS: Vietnam, January - August 1963, Vol. III, p. 93.

22 "7. Press Relations

The mutual distrust and dislike between the Diem government and the foreign press, particularly United States press representatives, has created serious public relations problems which impact directly on the war effort both in the United States and in Vietnam...." Ibid. p. 89.

23 "b. The Government of Vietnam regards the foreign press as untrustworthy, prone to publish secret and false information derived from private sources and biased to the extent that the press writes up only the bad and not the good aspects of events in South Vietnam. A revealing nuance of the Government of Vietnam press feud was communicated to General Wheeler by a first-hand source. Madame Nhu, wife of the brother and principal advisor to President Diem, and an important figure in her own right, deeply resents the press stories of the bombing of the President's palace during which she and her children were in grave danger of death. She states that the stories revealed an "ill-concealed regret" that the bombing failed in its objective." Ibid.

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the whole Ap Bac news bonanza was a distortion in the professional estimation of the Wheeler Report team.²⁴

Wheeler's team summed up the effect of the American newsmen's distorted reports and of their clear animosity toward Diem by stating that great harm had been done to the combined U.S. government and GVN effort. The team noted that there was no gainsaying the fact that both public and Congressional opinion had been influenced by the newsmen toward the position that the war effort in South Vietnam was badly 'off-the-rails.' The South Vietnamese Army and the GVN were seen as co-conspirators in a military undertaking lacking in drive, determination, courage, training and dedication. The newsmen had also created the false impression that American counsel was being widely ignored or flouted by the ARVN and GVN.²⁵

Wheeler's team also noted that there was a serious backlash to the American newsmen's reports in South Vietnam. It was quite apparent to the team that the Vietnamese bitterly resented the derogatory portrayal, in the American Press, of their personal characteristics and military habits. In the estimation of Wheeler's team, the noticeably strained relationship between US

Footnotes

²⁴ "c. While the truth of these countercharges probably lies, as usual, somewhere between the extremes of the allegations of the two parties, the fact remains that the situation is serious, because the continuing bad press has coloured public attitudes both in the United States and Vietnam. The unfortunate aftermath of the fight at Ap Bac on 2 January 1963 is a prime instance of harm being done to the war effort. Press members admit that they were appalled at the flood of editorial punditry and cries of doom elicited by the first incomplete accounts of the clash. They insist defensively, and contrary to the facts, that the battle was a defeat and that the stories were derived from United States sources. The latter is true, but only to the extent that the stories were based on ill-considered statements made at a time of high excitement and frustration by a few American officers." *Ibid.*

²⁵ "d. Nevertheless, great harm has been done. Public and Congressional opinion in the United States has been influenced toward thinking that the war effort in Vietnam is misguided, lacking in drive, and flouts the counsel of United States advisors. Doubts have been raised as to the courage, the training, the determination and dedication of the Vietnamese armed forces." *Ibid.*

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diplomatic and military representatives in South Vietnam and the American Press was a significant repercussion of the distortions about Ap Bac.²⁶

Clearly, the U.S. press corps, in the aftermath of Ap Bac, had become a problem and was having an effect on the American public which, in turn, could only lead to problems with maintaining a steady course in policy. Even Harriman, who certainly wanted a change in policy, was worried about the extent of the influence of the U.S. newsmen on policy made in Washington and he noted as much in a cable sent to Nolting at the end of January, 1963. Harriman liked to control events and what went on in the Department of State and, as evidenced by his telegram to Nolting, the press was starting to take control.²⁷ Harriman conceded that

Footnotes

²⁶ "In Vietnam the backlash of these reports, both in governmental and military circles, is apparent. The Vietnamese resent statements in the American press of such a derogatory nature to their personal characteristics and military habits and objectives. Moreover, relations between the United States diplomatic and military representatives, on the one hand, and the press representatives on the other, is somewhat strained." *Ibid.* pp. 89 & 90.

²⁷ "Dear Fritz: I can imagine that the flood of unfavorable news stories about the helicopter operation of January 2 - 3 has given you as much pain as me, particularly those stories alleging that American military spokesmen made such statements as, "It was a miserable damn performance." I know that press relations is one of your biggest headaches.

The purpose of this letter is to explore with you what further steps can be taken in Saigon & Washington to improve the situation. I realize that a great deal has been done by you and your able PAO, John Mecklin, but more objective reporting in the U.S. press is of great importance. I know I don't have to emphasize to you the need for support and understanding at home for the expensive, continuing and sometimes dangerous programs which we are carrying out in Viet-Nam.... I think the most damaging aspect of our press problem is alleged quotes of American military advisers criticizing their Vietnamese comrades in arms. Nothing could be more destructive of the co-operation we must have with the Vietnamese or more helpful to the Communist propagandists.... Also, I would like to know what is done to explain to U.S. personnel the importance of not insulting the Vietnamese publicly. We are guests in their house and we have come to help them.... The success stories of Vietnamese operations have little U.S. news value, whereas the setbacks involving planes shot down with U.S. casualties, are headline material. Attempts will be made here to encourage experienced reporters to go to Viet-Nam and write stories about their overall observations. Through these feature articles, perhaps a better and more accurate understanding of the war can be obtained.

We have a mutual problem and I ask for your views and suggestions. We want to try to do all we can to help you from this end." W. Averell Harriman, 24. "Letter From the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs (Harriman) to the Ambassador in Vietnam (Nolting)," Washington, January 30, 1963,

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“they” (i.e., the State Department and the Embassy in Saigon) had a mutual problem with the substantially less than objective news reporting and that it was, in fact, causing real damage. He even agreed with President Diem’s observation that more experienced newsmen be sent from the United States to report on the war in a more all-encompassing and objective manner, and he told Nolting that they were going to try to make that a reality from their end.²⁸ In other words, Harriman’s sense of professional responsibility to the State Department over-rode his own desire to see his policy direction enacted as rapidly as possible (i.e., the removal of Diem from power).

Yet again, the enigmatic irony that surrounded nearly every aspect of the American involvement in Vietnam was making its presence felt in the fact that Harriman was actually concurring with the Diem supporters, such as Nolting. For he too had become aware that the young inexperienced newsmen, who were writing for the large daily U.S. newspapers, had run amuck and were in the process of directly interfering with United States Government’ policy toward South Vietnam. Ambassador Nolting, for his part, responded immediately to the Harriman concern about the out-of-control U.S. press. In a letter to Harriman (February 4, 1963) he suggested that he be recalled to Washington for several weeks of consultations whereupon he could devote much of the time to public relations work concerned with U.S. policy toward the Government of South Vietnam.²⁹

On February 5, 1963, Nolting sent a lengthy cable to the State Department that acknowledged the U.S. press problem with the Diem government. He put a very objective cover

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[Department of State, Vietnam Working Group Files: Lot 67 D 54, PR-11 Press Relations. Secret. Drafted by Wood and Harriman.], in FRUS: Vietnam, January - August 1963, Volume III, pp. 67 - 69.

²⁸ Ibid. pp. 68 - 69.

²⁹ This Nolting letter was made mention of in a footnote to Harriman’s earlier letter to Nolting. [Department of State, Vietnam Working Group Files: Lot 67 D 54, PR-11 Press Relations]. FRUS: Vietnam, January - August 1963, Volume III, 1961 - 1963; John P. Glennon, editor in chief, (Washington, [DC]: United States Government Printing Office, 1991), p. 69.

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on the Ap Bac story, allowing that "There was no malice..." in the reporting of this incident owing to the sources that the newsmen used.³⁰ Nevertheless, in a couple of paragraphs of this same document, Nolting reveals a depth of understanding and maturity about the American mission in South Vietnam which, quite obviously, completely escaped the wisdom of the young would-be Pulitzer Prize winners from the Associated Press, The New York Times and Washington Post:

This is not unparalleled in other new countries. Older, more experienced correspondents who come here usually accept harassments with all other characteristics of this war and are able to take the larger view of what's at stake here and logic of US policy under circumstances. Younger men, experiencing situation like this for first time - and often finding news sources among equally young American advisors - tend to be shocked, angry, indignant because they think US is being "suckered", though most of them accept basic US policy intellectually when considered in calmer moments.

Such young reporters, and young advisors, have yet to learn that the mark of a great nation is tolerance and understanding of such tortured people as Vietnamese and their petty, often rather pathetic, manoeuvres to save face. And they forget that the face of the government has vital bearing on support of its people in conduct of war [my emphasis].

This is further complicated by reality that these particular American newsmen and this particular regime dislike each other to degree that verges on neurotic. Besides their public dispatches, newsmen have reported at length by mail and private cable to editors back home on indignities of working Vietnam. Chances are when Ap Bac story broke, GVN had hardly friend in any editorial room in United States [my emphasis]. What happened looks from here like savagely emotional delayed reaction to ousters of Sully and Robinson, Mme. Nhu's charge that whole American press is "communist" and every other harassment over past six months. Ap Bac was reported as major GVN failure at cost of American lives, and it appears from here that American editorial writers,

Footnotes

³⁰ Frederick E. Nolting, 30. "Telegram From the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State," Saigon, February 5, 1963 - 1 p.m. [Department of State, Central Files, PPV 7 S VIET-US. Confidential] in FRUS: Vietnam, January - August 1963, Volume III, pp. 98 -99.

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*commentators, columnists licked chops with delight and reached for simplest adjectives they could muster.*³¹

William Colby left a written record that displays a similar, over-arching strategic view of events that occurred in South Vietnam. Colby, like Nolting, intimates that it was the American press' failure to move beyond a short-term tactical view of events that caused so much grief. Similar to Nolting's understanding, he was loath to accuse the American press of conspiracy. Accordingly, Colby recalled that when things were quieter in Vietnam, between the years 1956 to 1960, the American press generally ignored Diem's programs and his attempts to modernise South Vietnam socially and economically. When the Communists began the insurgency against Diem in earnest then the regional reporters from Tokyo and Hong Kong began to make more visits to South Vietnam and the resident press corps began to expand.³²

Once in South Vietnam, the reporters, like many of the American civilian officials, naturally gravitated toward contacts with Saigon officials and members of the quarrelsome political elite who were fluent in French or English. The reporters, according to Colby, made their rounds in Saigon where intrigue was constant and fascinating and they only occasionally varied their 'gossip-column' course with trips to the countryside. These trips, however, were often problematic, as their interviews were not only hampered by laborious and time-consuming translated question and answer sessions but also by an immense cultural gap.³³ Thus, with

Footnotes

³¹ *Ibid.* p. 100.

³² "During the quieter days in Vietnam from 1956 to 1960, the American press gave little attention to Diem's programs of economic and social modernization (except for one enterprising reporter [Shaplen?], whose name I have long since forgotten, who visited in 1959 and produced a criticism of the American aid program and the comfortable lives of the American officials). But as the war began heating up in the rural areas and tension rose in political circles in Saigon, visits by regional reporters from Tokyo or Hong Kong became more frequent and the resident press corps grew." Colby, *Lost Victory*, pp. 112 - 114.

³³ "As with the American civilian officials, the reporters' natural contacts were with Saigon officials and members of the intellectual and political elite fluent in French or English. Their rounds in

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deadlines for filing stories ever present it was understandable that the reporters would choose the expedient of the convenient Saigon 'gossip' circle interview over the far-flung, difficult and often dangerous interview with a peasant in a remote hamlet.

The American reporters were professionally trained to seek out the flaws in the banal statements made by any government or official, and in this context the GVN and the American official missions in Saigon were treated no differently. Because it was impossible to interview the Communists, as their clandestine nature made such attempts futile, the reporters could only focus on the GVN and the American support structure. As such, their combined failures made for first-rate copy in accordance with the best American journalistic tradition.³⁴

Colby summed-up his analysis on this issue by acknowledging the fact that the Saigon assignment had been seen as a secondary story base for years before the Communist insurrection. The professional opportunities for a reporter were few and were hardly compensated for by the physical inconvenience. Thus, Saigon attracted young and inexperienced reporters hopeful of launching their careers with a sensational story that could make the front page, the evening news or both. In this, Colby saw no American Press conspiracy but that distortions about Vietnam would occur, especially when American understandings of the Vietnamese and their cultural were so rudimentary, he took for certainty.³⁵

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Saigon were only occasionally varied by trips to the countryside or laboriously translated question-and-answer sessions with rural or working class Vietnamese with whom the cultural gap was even greater than the linguistic." Ibid.

³⁴ "Professionally, they sought out the flaws in the Government's or the American Embassy's bland over-statements of "progress," tranquillity, and public satisfaction. With the Communists inaccessible in their clandestinity, the focus was on the Government and its American support structure. Theirs failures made excellent copy in the best American journalistic tradition." Ibid.

³⁵ "For some years the Saigon assignment was a relatively secondary story base, professional opportunities hardly compensating for physical inconvenience. Since most of the correspondents who showed up in Vietnam were young and hopeful of launching their careers, there was a consequent tendency to come up with the story or the picture which could make the front page or the evening news.... Certainly there was no conspiracy by the press to present a false picture of Vietnam to the American people. But

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The aftermath of Ap Bac, without a doubt, had an ugly influence on American - Vietnamese relations. The American press was poised to seize on any issue of substance that could be held as demonstrative proof of failed American policy and Diem's corruptness, so as to be vindicated in the logic that they were committed to. This writer gives full-credit to both Colby and Nolting for their loyalty to their country, as they did not wish to argue that there was an extremely serious flaw in the American system as revealed in how U.S. reporters (and their editors) ultimately affected U.S. Government policy. Nevertheless, the student of history is forced to consider this dilemma with the backdrop of the *USS Maine* incident held firmly in mind. At another time and place the American press, regardless of the facts, had served to so inflame domestic public opinion as to make war between Spain and the United States almost impossible to avoid.³⁶ With the spectre of this precedent looming in the background, the historian must consider possible parallels enmeshed in the dynamics of an irresponsible press' influence upon American diplomacy and foreign policy. For it would appear that not much had changed in sixty-five years, notwithstanding that the time, place, and players for America involved in Vietnam in 1963 had.

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there is an inherent problem of accurate perceptions of faraway and exotic situations and cultures." Colby went on to elaborate on this critical issue: "Readers understand a story in an American community that "man bites dog" as recounting an exceptional event, and they understand as well that there is no news value in a report that a dog bit a man. But reports of events in a distant country reach a reader who has no basis for judging whether the event is exceptional, or typical; indeed, the report of an exceptional event may well carry with it an inference that it describes one of the normal aspects of life in a very different culture. The cumulative effect of such impressions can be significant: it is the American readers and their elected representatives who in the end accept or reject our Government's policies toward that country.... The problem must be understood, however, and met with more extensive efforts to present the full picture by responsible officials, the governments concerned, and serious journalists. In Vietnam that process took many years, and misperceptions played major roles in American attitudes, policies, and actions throughout the war years." *Ibid.*

³⁶ Ferrell, *American Diplomacy: A History*, Third Edition, pp. 354 - 357.

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There is a final note drawn from Colby's recollection from this particular time of flux in the American approach to Diem's Vietnam and it is worth noting. Essentially, this concluding point of Colby's was concerned with General Paul D. Harkins' view on Ap Bac. The four-star American general officer who commanded the entire U.S. military aid mission to South Vietnam "...had little sympathy for the American civilians who agonized over Diem's failings, and in fact had great sympathy for the Vietnamese leader."³⁷ Harkins, it should be noted, never wavered from this position - before or after Ap Bac. At the time of the Wheeler Report to the JCS, the Wheeler Report team praised Harkins. The Pentagon specialists recognised Harkins as having been a bulwark against assaults on American policy in Vietnam and, amongst other things, he had been praised for the excellent relations he had nurtured and maintained between the leadership of America's military representatives and the Diem government.³⁸

Ambassador Nolting was left cleaning up the "mess" from Ap Bac well into February of 1963. He even reported, by cable to the State Department, that Ngo Dinh Nhu had assured the American Embassy that the GVN was truly going to "pull all of its punches" in any future dealings with the young reporters from the United States. This was Nhu's way of suggesting that the GVN might even attempt to effect some sort of rapprochement with the editors back in New

Footnotes

³⁷ Colby, Lost Victory, p. 115.

The reason why William Colby proves to be such an immensely valuable source is straightforward enough: he was CIA Station Chief at this time, he had access to all of the secret and back-channel information related to this period, and he has since maintained a keen but unemotional, thorough and consistent record and testimony about American dealings with Diem's Vietnam through his many interviews, articles and memoirs. In short, William Colby is a first-rate witness and disseminator of what went on in Vietnam during this time.

³⁸ General Earle G. Wheeler, 26. "Report by an Investigative Team Headed by the Chief of Staff, United States Army (Wheeler), to the Joint Chiefs of Staff," Washington, January 1963, [National Defense University, Taylor Papers, T-181-69. Top Secret.] In FRUS: Vietnam, January - August 1963, Vol. III, p. 87.

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York and Washington.³⁹ Yet, and regardless of Nolting's diligent "clean-up", another agenda within the State Department was moving ahead with an inexorable consistency that betrayed the will of Averell Harriman. In a classified memo sent to Harriman from Michael V. Forrestal of the National Security Council Staff, the underpinnings of this logic are illuminated. Forrestal even admits, in this memorandum, that at some point Diem is going to become aware of the shift in policy:

In our report Roger (Hilsman) and I did suggest that consideration be given to expanding the contacts between U.S. personnel in Saigon and non-communist elements of the Vietnamese opposition.

There are, I think, two major reasons for doing this. First, it would be part of a carefully designed program to establish a somewhat more independent U.S. position in SVN. Second, it should eventually increase our alternatives in the event of an accident which results in a shift in the government.

I agree with Fritz Nolting that there are dangers in raising old suspicions in the mind of President Diem and his family about U.S. intentions. But I think that the risks in remaining too closely tied to Diem's government will increase rather than decrease as time goes along.

If the field agrees with the suggestion, I should imagine they would want to move with great caution, and I would agree. If I were Fritz, I would simply encourage our people in Saigon to be available to non-governmental personalities and to listen to their problems. I would avoid at the outset any involvement in officially disapproved activities, but I would not discourage reporting. (1 sentence [11/2 lines] not declassified)... At some point, of course, Diem will become aware of shift in our present policy of total public and private support of his person and family.⁴⁰

Footnotes

³⁹ Frederick E. Nolting, 30. "Telegram From the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State," Saigon, February 5, 1963 - 1 p.m. [Department of State, Central Files, PPV 7 S VIET-US. Confidential] in FRUS: Vietnam, January - August 1963, Vol. III, p. 101.

⁴⁰ Michael V. Forrestal, 33. "Memorandum From Michael V. Forrestal of the National Security Council Staff to the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs (Harriman)," Washington, February 8, 1963 [Kennedy Library, Schlesinger Papers, South Vietnam. Secret.] In FRUS: Vietnam, January - August 1963, Vol. III, pp. 105 -106.

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One of the truly outstanding features of Frederick Nolting's point of view, i.e., that of defending the legitimate civilian Government of South Vietnam under Diem's leadership, was the remarkable consistency of his testimony down through the years. As any competent investigator knows, the mark of those whose argument is not commensurate with the truth, is, initially, salted with subtle inconsistencies which become more glaring and obvious over time followed, perhaps, by an outright recantation of the original position - depending on how the final position suits the individual. Everyone, including Averell Harriman, who had anything to do with the overthrow and murder of Ngo Dinh Diem and his brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu, has admitted the grievous error of this course and direction for America and Vietnam - this is common knowledge. Not surprisingly, Ambassador Nolting's consistent position has been reinforced with time and new documentary revelations, such as in the following rebuttal of his with regard to the previous Forrestal memo to Harriman and Harriman's response to Nolting. For the Ambassador pointed out, with unmistakable clarity, the danger to United States' effort in South Vietnam if a coup was touched-off by American encouragement and that, related to this, such an effort would be an about-face in U.S. policy and one that he could not be part of. William Colby, Colby's successor, Richardson, and Sir Robert Thompson all agreed with Nolting's estimation: that the civilian opposition in Saigon was not up to the task of leading the country and were only good for encouraging acrimonious dissent. These men understood that the real political threat to Diem lay within the army. The doctors, lawyers and professors of Saigon were self-serving in the extreme and did not have any support from rural/peasant Vietnam which, conversely, held Diem in great and traditional esteem.⁴¹ In effect, in this cable to Harriman,

Footnotes

⁴¹ Ellen Hammer, the only American-born scholar of Vietnamese history who was acknowledged by the French and Vietnamese, alike, as having any real insight into the problems which beset Vietnam, gave a very realistic appraisal of the "intellectual" oppositionists in Saigon: "In April 1960, at a meeting in the Hotel Caravelle, then the newest and most luxurious hotel in Saigon, eighteen Vietnamese had issued a

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Nolting draws the line over which the Kennedy Administration can cross only at its grave peril and, of course, without him or his support.

I am sorry that Mike didn't voice these thoughts while he was here. We could then have filled him in on what is done in this regard on a regular basis and with the knowledge of the GVN. In fact, I should have been glad to introduce him to dozens of non-commie members of the Vietnamese opposition at our home. These might have included a wide assortment of Vietnamese friends - bankers, businessmen, labor leaders, landowners, lawyers, doctors, university professors - who would doubtless have had a field day criticizing the government in varying degrees and from various angles. But what good this would have done - outside of demonstrating a point and possibly stimulating a coup - I don't know! I must confess to being somewhat astonished by the implication that we are living in cocoons here, dealing only with GVN officials and deliberately cutting ourselves off from other Vietnamese elements. This has never been the case since I have been here. One of the first things I did upon arrival was to tell President Diem personally that I intended to see and talk with members of the opposition; that I wanted him to know this and trusted that he would not consider it as plotting or as throwing doubt on US support of South Viet-Nam through its duly elected government. He accepted this in good spirit and we have been doing it ever since. All members of my staff know that they are free to do the same. I have heard some false reports to the contrary. These I attribute to the proclivity of certain oppositionists (and to certain former members of our Mission) to charge a freeze-out when, after hours of conversation, they fail to change one's position. ... There is, of course, a great difference between being accessible to oppositionists and giving them encouragement. Many of them tend towards radical solutions and we give them no encouragement. If we are not crystal clear on this, we would stimulate revolution. We have, however, frequently passed on to members of the government what seemed to be reasonable suggestions from oppositionists, and some of these have resulted in government actions.... In brief, I think we have been doing all along what Mike suggests, if I interpret the suggestion correctly. If, however, the idea is to try to build up an alternative to the present government, I believe you already know that I am opposed, for reasons: (1) that I see no viable or better alternative; (2) that any such attempt would ruin the carefully-built base of our advisory and supporting role here, which must rest on persuasion and on confidence in our integrity. ... I should add that, after the unequivocal public pronouncements of Vice

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declaration accusing the government of arbitrary arrests and dictatorial methods; of using the official political parties to control the population and divide the army. They had called for liberty and democracy, for reforms in the army and the administration and in economic and social policy...but the Ngos were unimpressed. They might have found the Caravellistes more convincing if most of the eighteen had not been out-of-office politicians who during their government service had shown little understanding of the difficulties besetting the South and no disposition to deal with them.... [Diem noted the following about the Saigon intellectuals to a Western ambassador]...'They are just spoiled middle class, always complaining, not worth anything.' Hammer, A Death In November, pp. 76 -77.

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*President Johnson two years ago, and more recently the Attorney General and other high US officials, which I myself thought right and proper, I would not find it possible to be the agent in a change of US policy away from forthright support of the legitimate government, which happens also, in my opinion, to be the best available at the present time.*⁴²

Once again, it is worthwhile underscoring the fact that Nolting repeated the same argument to Mr. O'Brien of the JFK Library many years later. For this corroborating evidence supports the veracity, credibility and continuity of what Frederick Nolting has declared all along. Accordingly, it is important for the reader to note exactly what he told Mr. O'Brien in the Spring of 1970 and compare it with what he wrote to Harriman back in early 1963:

...I asked Mr. Harriman whether he had read the original instructions under which we were supposed to be operating. And his reply, as I recall, was roughly that no, he hadn't, but he knew what he was doing.

But it seemed to me, at any rate, from out there, that there was never a formal review given to changing any instructions. It just happened, little by little, with people with a new slant coming in, sending me a telegram to do something which was quite contrary to what the original basic instructions had been, including, for example, instructions to cultivate the opposition to Diem, to get closer to the opposition.

*Well, I went back rather strongly on that one, saying that I knew members of the opposition. I'd seen them; I knew them personally. I'd talked to them. But if you meant by cultivating them, to give any outward sign that we were supposed to be supporting, that this had enormous consequences internally in Vietnam, that it was interfering in the internal politics of Vietnam which President Kennedy had promised not to do, and through me had made it very clear that we were not going to use our leverage of increased aid to interfere in the internal politics of South Vietnam - - meaning who was going to rule the place. This was a very serious change of instructions, and I questioned it very strongly.*⁴³

Footnotes

⁴² Frederick Nolting, 45. "Letter From the Ambassador in Vietnam (Nolting) to the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs (Harriman)," Saigon, February 27, 1963, [Kennedy Library, National Security Files, Vietnam Country Series, 2/63-3/63. Secret; Official-Informal.] In FRUS: Vietnam, January - August 1963, Vol. III, pp. 126 - 128.

⁴³ Frederick Nolting, "Third Oral History Interview With Frederick Nolting." Recorded interview by Dennis O'Brien, May 7, 1970 (Washington, [DC]). John F. Kennedy Library, Oral History Program; pp. 93 -94.

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The Culminating Impact of the 'Mansfield Report' –

Ambassador Nolting, like William Colby, with good evidence had come to believe that 1963 was going to witness even more progress in the fight against the insurgents and he held to the view that U. S. policy was on the “right track” up until March of that year.⁴⁴ By his own admission, Nolting was unaware that a policy change was in the making until he witnessed the “fall-out” from the Senator Mansfield Report which was made public in March of 1963.⁴⁵ As indicated in the last chapter Mansfield’ Report stunned Diem and many Americans. Mansfield, as previously noted, was a powerful Democratic Party member and an extremely powerful United States Senator and, thus, his special report to President Kennedy had substantial weight. Nolting was astounded at the contents of the report and the prescriptions it offered. The negativity of the report hurt Diem deeply as he had always considered Mike Mansfield a personal friend.⁴⁶ The report also served warning to Nolting’s mission in Saigon that Washington, while still claiming to follow the same policy, was considering embarking on

Footnotes

⁴⁴ In his memoirs Nolting made specific mention of how positive things had seemed: “Thus 1963 began positively, continuing the previous year’s progress. The Hilsman/Forrestal and Krulak/Wheeler visits reinforced our feelings that we were on the right track. Early in the year we completed a draft of the comprehensive plan for gradual American withdrawal from Vietnam and forwarded it to Washington. The pacified area in the country continued to expand, government services to the people continued to increase and improve, and the Strategic Hamlets program appeared to be consolidating these gains. The infiltration rate from North Vietnam was estimated at less than 500 a month.” Nolting, From Trust To Tragedy, pp. 97 - 98.

⁴⁵ Again the writer would like to draw the reader’s attention to the fact that the contents of the Mansfield Report can be perused in Appendix G.

⁴⁶ “Mansfield’s report wounded President Diem deeply. He asked me to come to his office, where he told me that he was not going to let it end his friendship with Mansfield, but that he thought the report was unfair...he was concerned about the report’s impact on President Kennedy.” Nolting, From Trust To Tragedy, p. 98.

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another course.⁴⁷ At a personal level, it was also the watershed mark for the Nolting influence as, clearly, the Ambassador's admonishments to stay the course with Diem were being pushed aside.

Nolting recalled the fact that he was personally struck with the very negative tone of the Mansfield Report when it was released in March of 1963. In Nolting's estimation the allegations of the report, which suggested that Diem had secluded himself from the people and was absolutely dependent on the advice of his family could only be damaging to U.S. – GVN relations. The shrill cry for immediate democratic reforms and the broadening of the government could only add to this damage.⁴⁸ Nolting perceived that the Mansfield Report would have the exact opposite effect in South Vietnam than what it was supposed to create. By encouraging the non-communist dissidents against the GVN, Nolting understood that Diem's reaction would be to come down even harder on threats to his government, thereby narrowing its base as opposed to broadening it.⁴⁹ Of equal disastrous proportions, according to Nolting's understanding, was the fact that the Viet Cong could only view the Mansfield Report as a political bonanza as it gave them a certain sense that support for Diem was weakening in the United States.⁵⁰ "In retrospect,

Footnotes

⁴⁷ "The Mansfield report was the first real indication we had in Saigon of negative thoughts in Washington about our policy in Vietnam." *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ "Then, in March 1963, the Senate Foreign Relation's Committee released the report Senators Mansfield, Pell, and Smith had made on their trip to Vietnam. It was very negative, alleging that President Diem had closeted himself away from the people, was looking progressively inward, and had become increasingly dependent on his family. It called on Diem to broaden his government and to introduce democratic reforms without delay." *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ "I personally thought Mansfield's report did a great disservice to the government and our cause in South Vietnam. It encouraged the non-communist dissidents against the regime, thereby diminishing, rather than increasing, the chances of broadening the government." *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ "It gave the Viet Cong a bonanza; they could see support for Diem and his government weakening in the United States." *Ibid.*

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I consider the Mansfield report the first nail in Diem's coffin. Diem was right to fear its effect on President Kennedy and other policymakers in Washington."⁵¹

The Mansfield Report stood in opposition to what Nolting had been telling Washington. This report of Senators Mansfield, Pell, and Smith had been countered by the very detailed Wheeler Report to the Joint Chiefs which declared in its conclusions that the counter-insurgency campaign was slowly being won by the non-communist forces (one might add - in direct opposition to Senator Mansfield's report). Ominously, though, the Wheeler Report to the JCS warned that too much interfering with the Vietnamese, which would include the introduction of large US forces and the subsequent US demand to assume control of the war, held impracticable dangers:

a. The situation in South Vietnam has been reoriented, in the space of a year and a half, from a circumstance of near desperation to a condition where victory is now a hopeful prospect [my emphasis]. There are numerous options of support and involvement available to the United States. They range from complete disengagement to overt commitment of United States forces with a concomitant demand on our part for full command authority over the Vietnamese. The first extreme is unacceptable. It sacrifices all that has been gained, and is tantamount to relinquishment of our position in Asia. The second is impracticable in terms of what the Vietnamese would accept, and it is undesirable from our viewpoint in that it would tend to make us responsible for every misadventure in the conflict.... This leads to the conclusion that the current support program in Vietnam is adequate, and should be retained with only minor alterations as may be recommended by the Advisory Command. This view derives from the conviction that we are winning slowly in the present thrust, and that there is no compelling reason to change.⁵²

Thus, the battle-lines for what would eventually become a deadly serious fight over the direction of US policy in South Vietnam were being drawn up in this interim period between Ap

Footnotes

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² General Earle G. Wheeler, 26. "Report by an Investigative Team Headed by the Chief of Staff, United States Army (Wheeler), to the Joint Chiefs of Staff," Washington, January 1963, [National Defense University, Taylor Papers, T-181-69. Top Secret.] in FRUS: Vietnam, January - August 1963, Vol. III, p. 91.

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Bac and the Buddhist Crisis. On the one side could be found the leadership of the American diplomatic and military missions in South Vietnam, along with the JCS in Washington and over at State, the Secretary and his supporters. This side believed that the right course for American policy was to maintain the direction it had set out on with Ngo Dinh Diem.⁵³ On the other side, Averell Harriman and his group had powerful allies in the young American news-reporters who wanted Diem removed from power. While it is a matter of record that the pro-Diemist group had the unqualified support of the Vice-President (LBJ), Nolting's fears that the President could be swayed by his cronies and friends, such as Harriman and Galbraith, seems to have been well founded.

Nolting continued to write to Harriman and remind him of the pledge that Kennedy had made, on behalf of the American people, to Ngo Dinh Diem and, in particular, he emphasised to Harriman what his original mission instructions had been. With the destructive influence of Ap Bac and the Mansfield Report fresh in his mind, Nolting informed Harriman that the publication of a GAO Report on South Vietnam (from 1958 to mid-1962), which he had read in draft form and which was severely critical of the GVN, would be the same as giving aid and succour to the Viet Cong.

820. For Harriman. Deptel 871. ... For many months this Mission has been reporting steady and encouraging progress in the slow and difficult counter-insurgency and pacification effort here. At the same time, we have pointed out that the general situation, though improving, is still fragile and subject to dangerous deterioration, physical and psychological. We are not out of the woods yet; the favorable trend is not irreversible. Any sign of weakening could well result in another attempt to overthrow the government. The predictable result of such an attempt - whether successful or not - would be, in my judgement, a bonanza for Hanoi. As it now stands, continued foreign press criticism of the GVN and US policy here, followed by Mansfield report and signs of reluctance and disillusionment on part of certain segments of US opinion, have without doubt encouraged coup plotting, have made the govt here tighten up rather than liberalise,

Footnotes

⁵³ Author Thomas J. Schoenbaum acknowledges this split within the State Department in his book, Waging Peace & War: Dean Rusk in the Truman, Kennedy & Johnson Years, p. 392.

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and have encouraged the enemy. I do not think in these circumstances we can afford a public chastisement of the GVN (and/or our own policy) by a US agency [my emphasis]. This is not said in an attempt to stifle criticism. It would, however, be totally incredible to the Vietnamese people (government and non-government, friendly and hostile) that the US could sustain a position with one hand and publicly slap it down with the other. They would certainly interpret this as foreshadowing change in US Govt policy here [my emphasis]. In this connection, it seems to me pertinent to recall the first commandment of our task force instructions issued two years ago: To build confidence in US intentions to support this country through its duly-elected government, and to use that confidence to improve and underpin the entire situation. These basic instructions have not changed to my knowledge [my emphasis]. We have made, and continue to make, measurable progress under them. I have a strong feeling that publication of the GAO report as summarized and as suggested in refstel would gravely undermine this progress [my emphasis]. I do not believe that its publication in any form would provide us leverage in negotiations with GVN. It is therefore my strong recommendation that US Government consult with Congressional leaders with view to deferring publication of GAO report indefinitely... Nolting⁵⁴

On March 28, 1963, Ambassador Nolting informed the State Department about an intense meeting that he had with Defense Minister Thuan about the GVN's reluctance to closely collaborate with Washington on putting into place a counter-insurgency fund with U.S. aid dollars. Nolting told Washington that he had run into serious trouble on this issue. Apparently, Thuan claimed Ngo Dinh Nhu had backed away from the previous agreement in principle. Nhu's 'backing away' was facilitated by the "...doubts and misgivings engendered by the Mansfield report, by editorial and press pressures against the GVN in America, by what appeared to Nhu to be indications of US uncertainty in continued support of GVN."⁵⁵ Plainly, the South Vietnamese

Footnotes

⁵⁴ Frederick Nolting, 62. "Telegram From the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State," Saigon, March 18, 1963 - 7 p.m., [Department of State, Central Files, AID (US) S VIET. Confidential.] In FRUS: Vietnam, January - August 1963, Vol. III, pp. 161 - 162.

⁵⁵ Thuan went on to summarise Nhu's position and Nolting relayed this summary to the State Department. "In short, he said that Nhu particularly was disturbed about entering into a commitment of this sort (both procedural and financial) at a time when he thought he saw signs of a possible shift in U.S. policy." Frederick Nolting, 68. "Telegram From the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State,"

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were scared that their government was as disposable as the Laotian non-communists had been owing to shifts in Washington's policies.

Ambassador Nolting did his best to overcome the South Vietnamese fears of American duplicity - as expressed by Minister Thuan, and he emphasised that the joint agreement on funding for counter-insurgency was a critical area where confidence could be re-established between the two governments. Thuan left his meeting with Nolting with his promise to try and overcome the GVN's objections. As such, Nolting ended his despatch to the State Department by warning Dean Rusk that these reactions of the South Vietnamese had been brewing for some time and that something had to be done to re-assure Diem and Nhu. He also stressed that publishing the GAO report, in the wake of the destruction wrought by the Mansfield report, would be tantamount to destroying good working relations with the GVN.⁵⁶

Dean Rusk replied immediately to Nolting's warning and emphasised to the Ambassador that he was to assure Diem and Nhu of America's continuing support. Clearly, Rusk and other decision-makers in Washington had been impressed with the gains made in countering the Communist insurgents and did not want to see the program fail owing to heavy-handed American criticism and Vietnamese truculence:

We most concerned by report GVN apparently drawing back from commitment to continue successful rural CI social economic programs which we view as heart of effort to win support of VN people and isolate VC. If our figures correct, funds remaining for these programs will be exhausted in about one month. Firm GVN commitment therefore appears most urgent matter. In negotiating with Nhu and Diem you therefore authorised at your discretion stress great importance we attach to these programs and state Washington also views their continuation as test of mutual confidence. If GVN unwilling trust us to extent of continuing successful and vital CI programs under proven machinery, difficulties of working together for common goals will be greatly increased.

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Saigon, March 28, 1963 - 8 p.m., [Department of State, Central Files, AID (US) S VIET; Limit Distribution.] in FRUS: Vietnam, January - August 1963, Vol. III, pp. 183 - 184.

⁵⁶ Ibid. p. 184.

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You are also authorized tell Nhu and Diem that you instructed assure them US policy remains full support of Diem's government in its efforts defend VN against VC attack and bring better life to VN people. Mansfield report does not mean change in US policy of support for GVN against Communist threat [my emphasis]. This connection you may wish quote President Kennedy's March 6 press conference remarks on Mansfield report.⁵⁷

With regard Warren Unna visit you may wish tell Nhu that Thompson had long talk with Unna last night and Unna appeared impressed by Thompson's positive views VN situation.

Rusk⁵⁸

The next day after receiving Rusk's telegram, Nolting cabled back to the Secretary and expressed his appreciation for the authority to officially reassure Diem and Nhu about the direction of US policy toward the GVN.⁵⁹ Yet, regardless of Rusk's assurances a policy shift was quietly being put into place in Washington because the question of the validity and viability of

Footnotes

⁵⁷ Drafted by Theodore JC Heavner for Rusk, 69. "Telegram From the Department of State to the Embassy in Vietnam," (Washington, March 29, 1963 – 1:04 p.m.), [Source: Department of State, Central Files, AID (US) S VIET. Secret; Limit Distribution; Operational Immediate.] In FRUS: Vietnam, January - August 1963, Vol. III, p. 185.

John P. Glennon made the following note on Kennedy's reaction to the Mansfield report: During his press conference on March 6, (1963) President Kennedy was asked to comment on the recommendations by the Mansfield committee for a 'thorough security reassessment in the Far East and a clamp down, if not a reduction in our aid to that part of the world.' Kennedy replied: 'I don't see how we are going to be able, unless we are going to pull out of Southeast Asia and turn it over to the Communists, how we are going to be able to reduce very much our economic programs and military programs in South Viet-Nam in Cambodia, in Thailand.

'I think that unless you want to withdraw from the field and decide that it is in the national interest to permit that area to collapse, I would think that it would be impossible to substantially change it particularly, as we are in a very intensive struggle in those areas.' (Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: John F. Kennedy, 1963, pp. 243-244) in FRUS: Vietnam, January - August 1963, Vol. III, Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Frederick Nolting, 70. "Telegram From The Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State," Saigon, March 30, 1963 - noon, [Department of State, Central Files, AID (US) S VIET. Secret.] In FRUS: Vietnam, January - August 1963, Vol. III, p. 186.

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current US policy kept re-surfacing at this critical juncture in US - Vietnam relations. For example, in April of 1963 Roger Hilsman, recently appointed as the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs, wrote an official memorandum of considerable length to Dean Rusk. Hilsman informed the Secretary that US policy, with respect to Counter-Insurgency, was basically sound, regardless of his expressed wishes that the Americans could operate with the same efficiency as the British had in Malaya under Sir Gerald Templar.⁶⁰ Hilsman, like many others in Washington, was reviewing policy because critical questions kept recurring.

Sir Robert Thompson Defends the GVN and the CIP in Washington --

On April 1, 1963, in the early afternoon at the State Department, a peculiar conversation took place between Governor Harriman and Robert Thompson - the Head of the British Advisory Mission to Viet-Nam. Two other supporters of Harriman's were also in attendance for this meeting and conversation about South Vietnam and they were: Mr. Michael V. Forrestal, NSC Member, and Mr. William H. Sullivan, Assistant to Under-secretary for Political Affairs. These gentlemen were also accompanied by Mr. Chalmers B. Wood, Director, Working Group/Viet-Nam who dutifully reported the direction and details of these meetings back to Frederick Nolting in Saigon.⁶¹ What was peculiar and, thus, noteworthy about this meeting was that, for the most

Footnotes

⁶⁰ Roger Hilsman, 72. "Memorandum From the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs (Hilsman) to the Secretary of State," Washington, April 1963. [Kennedy Library, Hilsman Papers, Vietnam Country Series, Hilsman Trip 12/62 - 1/63, Related Documents. Secret. Also sent to McNamara, McCone, Harriman, McGeorge Bundy, William Bundy, and Forrestal.] In FRUS: Vietnam, January - August 1963, Vol. III, pp. 189 - 192.

⁶¹ For the details on Chalmers B. Wood one can peruse his report to Nolting Chalmers B. Wood. 79. "Letter From The Director of the Vietnam Working Group (Wood) to the Ambassador in Vietnam (Nolting)," Washington, April 4, 1963, [Department of State, Vietnam Working Group Files: Lot 67 D 54, ORG-1 Gen Pol (Off & Inf Lets). Secret.] In FRUS: Vietnam, January - August 1963, Vol. III, pp. 203 - 206.

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part, Thompson illustrated a favourable but not perfect picture in South Vietnam while Harriman consistently brought up questions or points of scepticism and quandary. These dynamics were subtle yet unmistakable and betray the gathering storm of doubt that the Governor was unleashing, in Washington, against the Diem government. In turn, this process, put into action by Harriman, would assist in bringing about a change in policy - the very thing that Rusk had just told Nolting he could assure the Ngo Dinh brothers was not going to happen.

Confidence. Thompson emphasized the necessity of building confidence on the part of the GVN and in Washington. ...The Governor asked whether it was possible to build Vietnamese confidence in Diem. Thompson replied that where you needed confidence most was in the villages and that it was increasing there. An index of this confidence was the fact that so much rice was getting through from the villages to Saigon. The GVN might be able to export 300,000 tons during 1963. The Mansfield Report had a depressing effect, particularly because it complimented Sihanouk. The Governor wondered whether Mansfield knew this. 2. Press Relations. The Governor felt that the chief responsibility for improving press relations rests with the GVN President Diem and that everything possible had been done in Washington... 4. Population Control. Thompson believed this program should have priority in order to regain control of the hamlets. Many villagers were pleased that the Government cared enough to give them I.D. cards. The program so far has been a thorough and useful census. The Governor felt that the name was unfortunate and should be changed. 5. Surrender Program. Thompson emphasized that the top level of the GVN now understood that persons who surrender must be well treated. Nhu attached great importance to this. 6. Strategic Hamlets. In general it is no longer possible for the Viet Cong to run in and out of these hamlets at will. Before the U.S. took a decisive hand the hamlet program had been shallow and inadequate. Since September, 1962, it has been much better. 7. Size of the Viet Cong Forces. The Governor noted that the numbers of Viet Cong continued to increase. Thompson said that this was done mainly by recruitment, pointing out that the Viet Cong control large enough areas to recruit the numbers they need.... 10. GVN Foreign Relations. The Governor felt that Diem could obtain better control of his frontiers by changing his attitude toward Sihanouk. Thompson was dubious. 11. Authority of Local

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*Officials. The Governor felt that the GVN should give more authority to its local officials and pick better people for these jobs. Thompson emphasized the greatly improved caliber of the province chiefs.*⁶²

What was particularly odd about the whole engagement of Robert Thompson in Washington was that he was defending the core and continuity of American policy toward South Vietnam when it appeared that many Americans had lost faith in such a direction. Nevertheless, Thompson was a singularly powerful proponent of the Counter-Insurgency program, Strategic Hamlets and the Government of Vietnam because he had a justly deserved reputation for successfully defeating Communist insurgency in Malaya. Accordingly, his visit to Washington in April of 1963 included meetings and conversations at the highest level. In a meeting with President Kennedy, which was also attended by the British Ambassador to Washington, the Honourable David Ormsby Gore, and State Department representative, Mr. Chalmers B. Wood, Thompson spent much of his time emphasising that Diem did, indeed, have a lot of support in rural Vietnam. The British counter-insurgency expert also emphasised his belief that if Diem were removed from power, the repercussions would be devastating:

The following are the principal points touched on between the President and Mr. R.G.K. Thompson:

*1. Diem. Thompson emphasized that Diem had much support in the country where it counted and that he had written off the Saigon intelligentsia. In reply to a question from the President, he said the quality of the political opposition was poor. He said that if Diem disappeared there would be a risk of losing the war within six months since there was no other leader of his calibre available.*⁶³

Footnotes

⁶² Chalmers B. Wood, 73. "Memorandum of a Conversation, Department of State, Washington, April 1, 1963, Noon," [Department of State, Central Files, POL S VIET. Secret.] In FRUS: Vietnam, January - August 1963, Vol. III, pp. 193-194.

⁶³ Chalmers B. Wood, 77. "Memorandum of a Conversation, White House, Washington, April 4, 1963, 10 a.m.," [Kennedy Library, National Security Files, Vietnam Country Series, 4/63-5/63. Secret. Drafted by Wood on April 5] in FRUS: Vietnam, January - August 1963, Vol. III, p. 198.

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Of equal importance to Thompson's defence of Diem was his echoing of exactly what Ambassador Nolting, and also Colby and Harkins, had been telling Washington with regard to the success of the over-all Counter-Insurgency effort against the Viet Cong. Thompson also stressed that the special attention given Ap Bac was without credibility in the proper criticism of this kind of warfare and that, indeed, the American had to get used to occasional battlefield reverses.⁶⁴ All of Thompson's points, in fact, were made from the position of an expert Counter-Insurgency warrior and they were points of common-sense, they were also points which showed that patience and time were key elements to the successful conclusion of the Counter-Insurgency campaign. These were details that seemed to vanish in the Washington furore over how to get the best and most immediate results from the South Vietnamese in their struggle against Communism. Yet, what Thompson was telling Kennedy's Administration was that they were winning and that there was tangible evidence of such success.⁶⁵ He was also telling Kennedy that they must 'stay the course' with Diem and, essentially, that they should play down or ignore the heavy criticism of Diem and American policy in the press.

Footnotes

⁶⁴ "2. How the War is going. Thompson said that on the military side statistics showed that things were moving in our favor. He cited particularly the increased number of defectors (from an average of 15-20 a week in early 1962 to 148 for the week ending March 25, 1963). He cautioned that the pattern of the war would not change much, that there would be no major victories on our side, and that we had to expect as a part of the fortunes of war occasional reverses, such as Ap Bac." *Ibid.* p. 199.

⁶⁵ "6. Favorable contrast between the Government of Viet-Nam and Viet Cong controlled territories. Thompson said that things had now progressed to a point where an observer in a plane could distinguish, on the one hand, GVN-controlled territories where roads and bridges were repaired and strategic hamlets built, and, on the other hand, VC territory where the bridges were generally down and the roads cut.... 14. U.S. Presence. If the GVN continued to progress at the present rate, if it were possible to declare one or two provinces white areas by summer 1963 (no announcement about white areas should be made unless it were certain that the areas were indeed freed of the Viet Cong), and finally, if confidence of success continued to grow until the end of the year, an announcement out of the blue by the United States that it was reducing the American military in Viet-Nam by say 1,000 men would have three good effects: a) It would show that we were winning; b) It would take the steam out of the Communists' best propaganda line, i.e., that this was an American war and the Vietnamese were our satellite; and c) It would reaffirm the honesty of American intentions." *Ibid.* pp. 199 & 200.

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Kennedy, for his part, was cautious and sceptical and he placed this caution in the form of an historical query to Thompson as he asked the latter why it was that the Viet Minh had been able to defeat the French. Thompson's reply was immediate and straightforward as he told the President that the French never had a hope of getting the Vietnamese on their side and he stressed the fact that the strategic hamlet program was what was making the difference currently in Vietnam. The strategic hamlets were affording the GVN and its people a degree of security that the French had never been able to achieve.⁶⁶

Thompson then made a specific point of praising the quality of the American military and their behaviour in the provinces and in Saigon.⁶⁷ In this context, the British advisor also noted that the morale of the Vietnamese civilian and military authorities had improved.⁶⁸ Thompson was then able to inform the President that the related problem of Communist terrorism was on the decline but that it would increase again when it became obvious to the Viet Cong that their position was desperate.⁶⁹ In other words, the smoother counter-insurgency

Footnotes

⁶⁶ "4. The President asked why the Viet Minh were able to defeat the French. Thompson replied the French never had any hope of getting the people on their side and that the strategic hamlet program, which had gone much better than anyone had expected, provided a degree of security in the countryside which the French had never been able to achieve." *Ibid.* p. 199.

⁶⁷ "5. American Military Personnel. Thompson said that the American military personnel that he had observed, particularly the MAAG Advisers in the provinces, were very good. He was impressed by the good behaviour of the American military in Saigon." *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ "8. Vietnamese Morale. Thompson said that the morale not only of the top leaders but also of most Vietnamese civilian and military authorities, particularly province chiefs, was up." *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ "10. Terrorism. Terrorism is not bad at present but as it becomes clear that the Viet Cong are losing, an increase in terrorism, particularly hand grenades in Saigon, should be expected. Such terrorism would be an admission of defeat. It would require steady nerves to endure it, particularly given the unfavorable publicity which would probably be generated in the foreign press.

The Viet Cong were not using much terrorism against officials. They did not kill popular officials but sought to make them unpopular before bumping them off." *Ibid.* p. 200.

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operations resulting from better American – Vietnamese relations, and the corresponding improvement in morale, were causing a decline in the effectiveness of Communist terror tactics. Thompson went on to warn the American President that, while helicopters were a useful instrument for surprising the insurgents and for preventing them from concentrating, they were not capable of winning large-scale victories. He stressed the fact that victory in counter-guerrilla warfare was only attained by using ones "...brains and feet."⁷⁰ Similarly, he warned Kennedy that even though tactical air strikes were a key factor in preventing the Communist forces from concentrating they were, also, absolutely counter-productive if deployed in a role where they strafed and bombed villages. The legacy of bitterness resulting from indiscriminate death from the air would only drive more villagers into the arms of the Viet Cong.⁷¹

In one of his final points on counter-insurgency tactics and programs, Thompson told Kennedy that the surrender policy that Ngo Dinh Nhu had put into place was a good one. He told the President that the U.S. should give it public support when it was announced.⁷²

The concluding point that Thompson made to the American President, in fact, was a repetition of one of President Diem's deepest desires. For it was concerned with the problem of Diem's political legitimacy in that U.S. involvement had to be curtailed as soon as possible as it undermined his credentials as a legitimate Vietnamese nationalist and provided the Communists with no end of propaganda material.⁷³

Later in the afternoon of the same day, April 4, 1963, Thompson met with the Special Group for Counter-insurgency which included Governor Harriman, The Attorney General -

Footnotes

⁷⁰ *Ibid.* p. 199.

⁷¹ *Ibid.* p. 200.

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ *Ibid.*

Robert Kennedy, Mr. Gilpatric, CIA Director - Mr. McCone, Mr. Forrestal, Mr. Coffin, Mr. Bell, Mr. Wilson, Mr. Murrow, General Johnson, and General Taylor. In this meeting Thompson repeated much of what he had told President Kennedy. Once again, he stressed the importance of patience to the Americans, the simple fact that their news media were out of control and that the reporting in American papers concerned with the overall effort in Vietnam could be improved.⁷⁴ Thompson was clearly handing Harriman a rebuttal, in the presence of Counter-Insurgency warfare experts, which was concerned with the fact that Harriman had placed the onus for good press relations on Diem.

The most important point raised by Thompson, in this meeting with the American Counter-Insurgency Special Group, was the issue that was concerned with what would happen if Diem were removed from office. Thompson, as usual, was very blunt with the Americans as he told them that the entire government would collapse without Diem and that the counter-insurgency effort would be left in serious disarray.⁷⁵

Nolting was not left out of touch with Thompson's efforts in Washington as Chalmers B. Wood sent him a detailed letter, right after (on the same day) the Thompson meetings with President Kennedy and Governor Harriman, which was very precise in spelling-out exactly what had taken place in these discussions.⁷⁶ Worthy of particular note in the Wood report to Nolting was the emphasis of America losing the counter-insurgency fight if they lost Diem, that

Footnotes

⁷⁴ James W. Dingeman (Executive Secretary), 78. "Minutes of a Meeting of the Special Group for Counter-insurgency, Washington, April 4, 1963, 2 p.m.," [Department of State, Special Group Counter-insurgency Files: Lot 68 D 451, Special Group (CI). Secret.] In FRUS: Vietnam, January - August 1963, Vol. III, pp. 201 - 203.

⁷⁵ ibid. p. 202.

⁷⁶ Chalmers B. Wood, 79. "Letter From The Director of the Vietnam Working Group (Wood) to the Ambassador in Vietnam (Nolting)," Washington, April 4, 1963, [Department of State, Vietnam Working Group Files: Lot 67 D 54, ORG-1 Gen Pol (Off & Inf Lets). Secret.] In FRUS: Vietnam, January - August 1963, Vol. III, pp. 203 - 206.

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inflammatory press reporting should not cause Washington to panic, and that Governor Harriman actually paid attention to what Thompson was saying:

The most helpful development has been Bob Thompson's visit, just completed.... He saw the President this morning and when queried about Diem, he said the question was not whether we could win with Diem but that without Diem we would very probably lose within six months.... Throughout, he made it clear that we are winning, that we are on the right track and that we should not be drawn off or man the panic station if there are further incidents like Ap Bac or if press reports continue to be unsavoury.... I might comment that his meeting with the Governor was extremely cordial, lasting an hour and 15 minutes - during which time the Governor kept his hearing aid in with the volume up [my emphasis]. This is, I believe, a record for undivided gubernatorial attention. To the Governor, Thompson stressed the need for patience and confidence.⁷⁷

Wood informed Nolting that Thompson had met with Secretary McNamara, Roger Hilsman and Warren Unna of the Washington Post and that these meetings had gone well. Wood also let Nolting know that Thompson had repeatedly raised the question about just what the US press was trying to accomplish in South Vietnam.⁷⁸ The direction that the press was driving domestic public opinion in America, of course, continued to be a major concern for Ambassador Nolting - as he related this problem to Mr. O'Brien of the JFK Library many years later:

They [Homer Bigart, Malcolm Browne and David Halberstam] didn't cause me so much irritation as they caused me great alarm and pain. I rather liked them personally in many ways. But they were undermining the thing all the time...finding things to criticize about the Diem government and very seldom, if ever, mentioning the good things they were doing.... I thought they did too much of it [their research] at the Caravelle Bar by sort of consulting with each other as to what the latest Saigon rumor about the malfeasance of the government might be and how to dress that up into a story. Now this would make them just as mad as hops because they did go out into the country quite a bit. But there again, I thought they failed to see the woods for the trees. They would come back with an emotional story of somebody who had been, we'll say, maltreated or allegedly maltreated by a district chief of the government, and they would talk about that rather than what the district chief was doing to defend his district against the Viet Cong and what he was doing for the people. My own feeling was that they were quite unjust,

Footnotes

⁷⁷ *ibid.* pp. 204 -205.

⁷⁸ *ibid.* p. 205.

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*quite unjust, in the overall picture they gave of what the Vietnamese government was trying to do and what it was, in fact, doing for the benefit of its own people.*⁷⁹

Frederick Nolting also related to Mr. O'Brien that one of the great distortions that began to seize hold of American opinion in Washington, during this interim period, was that of Diem and his government being increasingly isolated from the people and what was going on. Thus, he addressed this issue directly:

*This was one of the favorite themes of the press, and Mike Mansfield's report to the President of 1962, which really drove the first nail in Diem's coffin in my opinion, said this. He had gotten most of his information, I think, on this point from the American press corps in Saigon. And I think it was a mistake. I think it was an injustice. And I don't think that Diem or his government were any more isolated. In fact, I think they were less isolated.*⁸⁰

Ambassador Nolting Successfully Negotiates the Joint American-Vietnamese Counter-Insurgency Fund –

Ambassador Nolting had to deal with at least one more serious problem before the Buddhist Crisis broke late in May of 1963 and this issue was concerned with gaining Diem's compliance over a jointly acknowledged American-Vietnamese Counter-Insurgency fund. Nolting's earlier talks with Thuan had failed to render the necessary agreement that Washington was looking for and, thus, Nolting sought a meeting with Diem in order to convince the Vietnamese president of the necessity of coming to terms on this key issue. During the course of this meeting, Nolting had to tell Diem that his protracted reluctance to ratify the Counter-Insurgency fund agreement could only result in a deterioration of US - GVN relations and a

Footnotes

⁷⁹ Frederick Nolting, "Second Oral History Interview with Frederick Nolting." Recorded interview by Dennis O'Brien, May 6, 1970. John F. Kennedy Library, Oral History Program; pp. 70 - 71.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.* p. 77.

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change in US policy. Diem continued to express his concerns that if he gave this kind of control to the American he would be surrendering his legitimacy in the eyes of his people. Nolting was, in his own words, disturbed by Diem's stubbornness on this issue as so much depended on the GVN's help in this area.⁸¹

One other key factor that had caused Diem to stand so firmly on this issue was the fact that lower-level American officials were interfering with the direction that the GVN wished to go in and were reporting, negatively, back to Washington.⁸² In the previous discussion with Diem, Nolting denied this at the time but admitted, many years later, that he had found out that Diem had been correct in this allegation. This admission, on Nolting's part, was given to Mr. O'Brien of the JFK Library, in an interview.⁸³

In his next telegram to Washington (April 7, 1963), Nolting informed the State Department that he had consulted with General Harkins and Joseph L. Brent (Director, Operations Mission in Vietnam). According to Nolting, they had agreed that before the U.S. took any actions, to show Diem that they were serious about reducing aid if he did not comply with the joint Counter-Insurgency fund program, they would want him to give them a written

Footnotes

⁸¹ For a more complete rendering of this telegram the reader should peruse Appendix H. Frederick Nolting, 81. "Telegram From The Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State," Saigon, April 5, 1963 - 7 p.m., [Department of State, Central Files, POL 26-1 S VIET. Secret; Priority;] in FRUS: Vietnam, January - August 1963, Vol. III, pp. 208, 212 & 213.

⁸² Ibid. p. 209.

⁸³ Nolting described the impact of these negative reports in the following excerpt from his interview with Mr. O'Brien: "I didn't realize at the time how much of this there was, and I still don't know how much there was. But I did discover later on that a lot of Washington thinking had been changed by this type of sort of informal and unofficial communication." Frederick Nolting, "Second Oral History Interview with Frederick Nolting." Recorded interview by Dennis O'Brien, May 6, 1970, p. 97, John F. Kennedy Library, Oral History Program.

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rejection or acceptance of the proposal.⁸⁴ Their concern was that forcing Diem's hand ran serious risks:

If this is correct evaluation of significance of Diem's position, we see no viable alternative to taking action (or possibly series of actions) designed to convince Diem that we mean business - notwithstanding grave risk that such action (a) will not move Diem but on contrary lead to retaliatory action and descending spiral our relations and (b) might light coup fuse. (We continue have no grounds to believe that coup would bring to power government more likely to win the war than Diem. On contrary, we think a coup, either accomplished or abortive, would weaken chances of preserving independence of SVN.)⁸⁵

By April 17, 1963, Nolting was able to report back to Washington that Diem had softened his stance considerably on the Counter-Insurgency fund proposal and that the way was open for an agreement.⁸⁶ Nolting also mentioned in this report that he had spoken to Diem about Madame Nhu's penchant for making inflammatory remarks to the US press and that this undermined their joint position. Diem defended Madame Nhu but also admitted that she tended to overstate her points of argument.⁸⁷

Footnotes

⁸⁴ Frederick Nolting, 82. "Telegram From The Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State," Saigon, April 7, 1963 - 1 a.m., [Department of State, Central Files, POL 26-1 S VIET. Secret; Priority;] in FRUS: Vietnam, January - August 1963, Vol. III, p. 214.

⁸⁵ ibid.

⁸⁶ Frederick Nolting, 91. "Telegram From the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State," Saigon, April 17, 1963 - 3 p.m., [Department of State, Central Files, AID (US) S VIET. Secret; Priority;] in FRUS: Vietnam, January - August 1963, Vol. III, p. 227.

⁸⁷ ibid. p. 228.

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Between Ap Bac & The Buddhist Crisis –

During this period, between Ap Bac and the Buddhist Crisis, Ambassador Nolting had fought hard to preserve a steady course in US policy toward South Vietnam. He had stated his case very firmly to those powers in Washington who wanted a change and who wanted an opposition to Diem encouraged. He had also made it equally plain to Diem that he had to meet the Americans at least half way on such salient issues as the Counter-Insurgency Fund proposal.

In his efforts to preserve continuity in direction for the US Mission in South Vietnam, Nolting had been given powerful support from Sir Robert Thompson who, indeed, argued the Nolting position very effectively in Washington. Yet, despite all of this good effort and expert testimony, the evidence seems to indicate that the covert and overt powers of Harriman, and those who agreed with him, had already subtly and effectively undermined the old policy of support for Diem. The Mansfield Report, according to Frederick Nolting, acted in Washington, as legitimating support for the direction that Harriman wanted with regard to discontinuing US support for President Diem. Nolting was correct in calling it the first nail in Diem's coffin, as the actions of Harriman et al. would subsequently prove. Another equally important point that the student has to consider, with regard to the impact of the Mansfield Report, was the effect that it had in Saigon. The report caused no end of trouble in American - Vietnamese relations as it had deeply hurt Diem and it fuelled the fire of Ngo Din Nhu's suspicions that the Americans were as untrustworthy toward the South Vietnamese as they had been toward the Laotians. Ambassador Nolting ran head-long into the distrust that the Mansfield Report had engendered in his initial attempts to seek GVN compliance with the United States government over a joint counter-insurgency fund. It was this joint program, which had initially been proposed by Washington, which was being held up as a test for Diem's good intentions by the Kennedy Administration.

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Mansfield's report had been countered by the JCS report; yet, the Pentagon account seemed to have no impact whereas the prestige of Senator Mansfield carried forward his negative summary.

Quite apart from their suggestions to distance the US from Diem and, by implication, have him removed from power, there is no documentary evidence which illustrates that anyone amongst the Harriman group had a viable alternative to the Vietnamese President. Like the US newsmen, they knew what they did not like and what they did not want (i.e., Diem as President of South Vietnam) but they had produced no evidence of any leader in South Vietnam who had the same prestige amongst ordinary Vietnamese as Diem had. South Vietnam's intellectual and professional community was divided and self-serving while the military officers seemed capable only of coup-plotting. In short, there was no political legitimacy outside of the Diem administration and this is precisely what Colby, Nolting and Thompson had told Washington. Yes, Diem was near problematic in his inabilities but he had the rarest quality of all in South Vietnam at that time - he was a genuine, traditional Vietnamese leader - he had political legitimacy.

The overwhelming impression that the study of this period of Nolting's mission to South Vietnam leaves is that the Ambassador was fighting a losing battle. The American newspapermen and the Harriman group had really had the effect they wanted in Washington. Even President Kennedy was asking questions, as indicated in his meeting with Robert Thompson, which were concerned with Diem's continuing role as leader of South Vietnam. This had become fact, there was nothing Nolting could do to stop scepticism about Diem at the highest levels within the Kennedy Administration.

Thus, this interim period was a period of decision with regard to the future of United States policy toward South Vietnam. It was not marked by any great media events such as the Battle of Ap Bac nor had any Buddhists burned themselves to death at this time; yet, the foundations for the effective redirection of the US policy of support away from Ngo Dinh Diem

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had been put in place. There is little doubt, as a result of this fundamental shift in policy direction emanating from Washington, that Nolting's influence had declined by the end of this period (May 1963).

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One Buddhist monk, fingering his brown beads, said firmly, "No true Buddhist would commit suicide. It is written in the verses of Buddha that suicide is wrong. Buddha says that a man's responsibility is to mend his own life, not to meddle in politics. So those men who are, according to your newspaper article, marching in the streets [of Hué and Saigon] are not Buddhists. They betray Buddhism." ¹

Frederick Nolting had had ample opportunity to observe the subject of the focus of his mission, Ngo Dinh Diem, in his relations with the South Vietnamese people.² It was no secret to the American Ambassador, then, that Diem preferred the company of the rural peasants and dealing with their problems on an individual basis to that of the urban elite in Saigon who

Footnotes

¹ Marguerite Higgins was impressed by the conviction of this Buddhist so she pressed the point: "But," I interjected, "these people are believed by the Americans to represent Buddhism." - "White men," said the Buddhist monk sadly, "have brought many things to Vietnam. But white men have not brought much understanding to Vietnam." Marguerite Higgins, Our Vietnam Nightmare, (New York, [NY]: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1966), p. 41.

² In a letter to a friend Ambassador Nolting noted the following about Diem: "Diem was an indefatigable traveller. He was out of Saigon in the provinces two - three days out of every week. He ran us ragged trying to keep up with him. In addition to Army headquarters and outposts, he visited the remotest villages and districts, Camau, Montagnard villages and training camps, off-shore islands, 17th parallel, etc. As you know, Diem had been a Province Chief under the French (a darned good one) and he was intensely interested in local rural problems - health conditions, schools, water supply, roads, canals, seeds, fertilizer, crop diversification, land ownership, land rents, housing, etc. He was especially interested in, and proud of, the agricultural improvement stations which his government had established, teaching many things, from fruit and nut-tree raising to fish-ponds, manioc-grinding, and even mushroom-raising in rice-straw stacks.

I accompanied Diem on many, many trips (and took many others to try to get reactions of my own). I am sure that he was genuinely and sincerely seeking out the truth about rural conditions and rural government, inviting the airing of problems and complaints and settling many matters on the spot. He was not a good orator before big crowds, but extremely effective with groups of peasants and villagers, informal, inquiring, genuinely interested and sympathetic, and usually coming up with practical remedies. He was anything but aloof as depicted. He frequently complained about the ceremonies laid on for him by provincial officials, preferring to talk to the people in small groups, to eat simply with a few of the village elders, to discuss real problems. The fact that he didn't shake hands and slap backs, but bowed instead, was of course the result of his country's customs, not a reflection of an aloof or disinterested attitude (as some members of the press professed to think!)." Frederick Nolting, 'Letter to Miss Marguerite Higgins - July 2, 1965,' p.1 in - RG-21/102.921 - Box #: 12 - Selected Correspondence - Higgins, Marguerite, The Nolting Papers.

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clamoured for abstract ideals and more power. Diem summed up his impatience with the complaints of the nouveau riche in Saigon as: "They are just spoiled middle class, always complaining, not worth anything."³ According to both Colby and Nolting this was an accurate assessment of the civilian critics of Diem's government who were best known for their manifesto of complaint which had emanated from a meeting they had had at the Caravelle Hotel in Saigon in 1960.⁴ They held no real representative legitimacy as, indeed, they represented little more than their own career aspirations and thus they had a limited usefulness to the true enemies of both Diem and Nolting's mission: the Communists.⁵

Footnotes

³ Hammer, A Death In November, p. 77.

⁴ Ellen Hammer summed-up the reality of these urban would-be political reformers in the context of South Vietnam's political travail: "In April 1960, at a meeting in the Hotel Caravelle, then the newest and most luxurious hotel in Saigon, eighteen Vietnamese had issued a declaration accusing the government of arbitrary arrests and dictatorial methods; of using the official parties to control the population and divide the army. They had called for liberty and democracy, for reforms in the army and the administration and in economic and social policy.... The manifesto was a sweeping indictment of the regime, but the Ngo's were unimpressed. They might have found the Caravellistes more convincing if most of the eighteen had not been out-of-office politicians who during their government service had shown little understanding of the difficulties besetting the South and no disposition to deal with them. Diem and Nhu, in any case, had come to believe that the real problems of the country were in the rural areas where these urban middle-class politicians had no roots, whereas the battle had to be fought against the Communist-led insurgents and against underdevelopment.... Only after the murder of Diem and Nhu were the opposition politicians able to play an active part in Saigon political life. Most would reveal themselves then as weaklings without political following or national purpose. They would justify the low opinion in which they had been held by Nhu and Diem -..." Ibid. pp. 76 - 77.

⁵ It cannot be overlooked, however, that the Caravellistes and their associates did serve a peripheral propaganda purpose for the Communists, albeit unwittingly. Their litany of constant complaint found ready reception in ears of the young American news-reporters who frequented the Caravelle and who, subsequently, based their stories, which would appear in the major American daily newspapers, on Vietnamese discontent with Diem upon this source and, often, no other.

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The Communists Target Diem's American Support –

Because the core of the struggle in South Vietnam was concerned with political legitimacy the Communists needed a group of representatives who, through protest and subversion, could at least cause some doubt in the minds of ordinary Vietnamese about the political legitimacy of Ngo Dinh Diem. Of equal or, perhaps, even greater importance to the Communists in this struggle was the need to divorce American support from Diem in order to undo his very effective counter-insurgency campaign.⁶ Diem's record as a legitimate nationalist, who was truly concerned for the welfare of the average peasant in South Vietnam, was near unassailable. Yet, the Communists had astutely surmised that the Vietnamese President's weakest salient-point was the Americans and their will to continue supporting him if the cost of supporting him began to have a negative effect back in the United States. Thus, in May of 1963 the Communists had found the necessary tool to pry US support away from Diem, or so it could be argued, and this device was none other than the politically militant and radical Xa Loi Pagoda Buddhists.⁷ What unfolded in the spring and summer of 1963 was no spontaneous uprising of

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⁶ Mieczyslaw Maneli, the Polish and East-Bloc representative to the Geneva Accords' International Commission for Supervision and Control in Vietnam, was in constant contact with Hanoi during his tenure in Vietnam. He admitted that in the spring and summer of 1963 the North was willing to go along with any plan that would divorce the Americans from Diem. Mieczyslaw Maneli, War of the Vanquished, translated from the Polish by Maria de Görgey, (New York, [NY]: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1971), pp. 134 - 135.

⁷ Stephen C.Y. Pan (Ph. D.), was a published scholar of the East Asian Research Institute in New York City who had extensive experience with Southeast Asian history and, personally, had met and interviewed men like Ho Chi Minh and Ngo Dinh Diem. Mr. Pan was well aware of the intricacies and intrigues of Vietnamese politics and, with the aid of over thirty five years experience in his area of study, discerned that the Buddhist Crisis was a Communist front. "The Communists knew how to cope with Diem's appeals. Highly skilled at spreading false propaganda, they created incidents, and launched demonstrations. Masters of cold war strategy, they decided that the Achilles heel in Vietnam was the Buddhist associations. They realised the acute sensitivity of Americans, in particular, to the charge of religious persecution." Stephen Pan & Daniel Lyons, Vietnam Crisis, (New York, [NY]: East Asian Research Institute, 1966), pp. 110 - 111.

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persecuted Buddhists who could no longer stand the 'burden of oppression'.⁸ Instead, a masterful act of political manipulation uncoiled in a deadly strike which betrayed, at least to the objective observer, a brilliant insurgent plan, executed with a reptilian ruthlessness on par with the very best deviousness ever displayed by leaders like Lenin, Stalin and, more appropriately, Ho Chi Minh. The American Government and American public opinion were the intended targets for this carefully crafted political weapon which, the record has clearly shown, struck home with a vengeance that destroyed American policy in South Vietnam.

Certainly, it is an established fact that even the Communists had conceded that 1962 was Diem's year and, therefore, it can be reasonably argued that they were loathe to let 1963 follow suit in the fight for political legitimacy.⁹ But their task was not easy, as Diem had indeed

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⁸ "Among the other freedoms granted by the Diem regime there was that of religion, of non-political assembly, freedom to demonstrate, a certain freedom of the press and finally the open admission into the country of many foreign journalists of every political stripe who were able to report abroad the opinions of the opponents of the regime, and the regime's mistakes. We must honestly recognize that President Diem, if he was especially supported by the Catholics, strongly resisted any untoward attempt at the 'clericalization' of the regime....Just as he always resisted the untoward interference of America, he did not allow his regime to become defined as 'Catholic.'...On the religious plane, we see the aid given to the Buddhists and the other Vietnamese religions, as well as the Catholic Church, for the rebuilding of churches and religious works destroyed by the war; his presence at Catholic and non-Catholic ceremonies on the occasion of great festivities; his not wanting the name of God in the 1956 Constitution, as the Catholics requested, but only the name 'Most High,' as the representatives of Buddhism and the Buddhist sects asked.... Diem was discriminating with the Vietnamese and entrusted the most important positions only to the most trusted persons, but this was not on the basis of the individuals' religious persuasion but on the basis of their anti-Communism. The Diem regime could in no way be called 'Catholic,'... The essential data indicating the Buddhist renaissance under the Ngo Dinh Diem regime are taken from an authoritative publication of the president of the Society of Buddhist Studies at Saigon. Under the direction of the General Association of Buddhists of Vietnam, three communities were organized, including 3,000 bonzes and 300 nuns, and another three communities of lay followers, even in the most deserted villages; these three communities grouped together about one million Buddhist laymen, to whom were joined the non-affiliated laymen... For the 'propagation of the faith' and the spiritual formation of the Buddhists, weekly conferences at Saigon are mentioned, periodical preaching in the provinces, with motor cars furnished with loudspeakers and movie projectors, and the wide sale of magazines and pamphlets (about 30,000 copies were published monthly by the General Association of Buddhists alone). Then there were specialized lectures organized, 'for those who desire to deepen their knowledge of doctrine,' and numerous libraries were set up." Fr. Gheddo, *The Cross and the Bo-Tree*, pp. 133, 143, 176 & 177.

⁹ Indeed, all the indicators concerned with the prosecution of the counter-insurgency campaign were positive as both Robert McNamara and Robert Thompson told Washington officials at the Honolulu

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established himself as a leader in the best and oldest Vietnamese understanding of that term.¹⁰ Thus, the potential for damage to the President's office, which could be caused by a religious uprising, for example, was too big to ignore. The question of whether or not the Buddhists were, in fact, doing the Communists bidding consciously cannot be proven entirely with the current documentary evidence available.¹¹ That the Communists were the major benefactors of the results of the Buddhist Crisis of 1963, however, is self-evident and easily demonstrated.¹²

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Conference of May 6, 1963. McNamara stated: "The over-all situation in Vietnam is improving. In the military sector of the counter-insurgency, we are winning. Evidences of improvement are clearly visible, as the combined impact of the programs which involve a long lead time begin to have effect on the Viet Cong." Congress, House, Committee on Armed Services, "Evolution of the War: The Overthrow of Ngo Dinh Diem May - November, 1963." in United States - Vietnam Relations, 1945-1967, IV.B.5., Book 3 of 12, p. 2.

The Pentagon Paper's analyst went on to state that: "Even as seasoned an observer of insurgency as Sir Robert Thompson, Chief of the British Advisory Mission, was able to report that, 'Now, in March 1963, I can say, and in this I am supported by all members of the mission, that the Government is beginning to win the shooting war against the Viet Cong.'" Ibid.

¹⁰ Even a Buddhist bonze, Nhat Hanh, felt compelled to note the achievements of Ngo Din Diem: "Under the Diem government there came to light an awareness of a distinction existing between the Communists and the national resistance, and this was Diem's most valid contribution to the country." Fr. Gheddo, The Cross and the Bo-Tree, p. 109.

¹¹ Professor Douglas Pike, the acknowledged leading expert on the NLF/Viet Cong, found it odd that the NLF did not take advantage of the Buddhist campaign and noted their lack of mention of it in all of their propaganda material at that time. "Attacks on Americans mounted in intensity and hysteria. Radio Liberation acted as though the Buddhists did not exist. Nor, as had been anticipated, did the NLF agit-prop teams flood the countryside with anti-Diem leaflets in the name of Buddhism. The leadership appeared unwilling or unable to capitalize on the most significant struggle movement in Vietnamese history.... Had the NLF leadership wished to do so, it could have used its impressive struggle machine to launch in the name of Buddha a nation-wide struggle movement that conceivably could have ended with its long-pursued General Uprising. The NLF's reluctance to involve itself deeply in the Buddhist struggle was somewhat puzzling." Pike, Viet Cong: The Organization and Techniques of the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam, p. 353.

Pike could have added that their lack of public identification with the Buddhist uprising was not just "puzzling" but, instead, outright suspicious. For, the thin argument that the Communists wanted nothing to do with organisations that they could not control 'fly's-in-the-face' of their past-proven ability to 'hi-jack' other peoples revolts. Indeed, in the Vietnamese context, one could argue that the subversion and commandeering of nationalist protest was what the NLF excelled at. As such, an educated guess would suggest that the Buddhist crisis was carried out with the full-knowledge and approval of the North Vietnamese Communists and the NLF leadership in the South was told to maintain a position of 'hands-off' - for very obvious reasons. This kind of political sophistication was well within the capabilities of Ho Chi Minh's genius. Moreover, this appears to be particularly the case when one considers the dividends

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Harriman Rejects Nolting's Request for Replacement in the Spring of 1963 -

Frederick Nolting wrote in his memoirs that he had again requested that Secretary Rusk consider his successor for the Saigon mission during the time of euphoria in Washington over the South Vietnamese success against the Communists in early 1963.¹³ Reports from the Department of State and the CIA verify that this was a time, specifically April of 1963, when the joint American - Vietnamese counter-insurgency effort was meeting with considerable success.¹⁴ Harriman replied to Nolting that, owing to the progress that was being made in South Vietnam...

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that the Buddhist crisis brought for the North: - it produced a public rift between Saigon and Washington, it propelled forward negotiations between Diem and the North; and, in the immediate, it turned GVN focus away from the strategic hamlet program which was devastating the Communist effort in rural South Vietnam.

¹² Professor Pike assessed this period (i.e., that time which led up to and included the Buddhist Crisis) from how the Communists wrote about it. "The NLF leadership apparently believed that the shaky Diem government could be brought down through the deliberate creation of anarchy.... Diem was proving more durable than expected.... For the NLF it was a period that began with high hopes and ended with disillusionment. Most significantly, for rural Vietnamese it was a time of disenchantment in the NLF, its cause, and its increasing use of repression and terror.... the NLF sought to destroy the viability of the GVN administrative structure in the rural areas....the NLF's perception of events was equally grim. Internal reports of the period stressed over and over the assessment that the Revolution was not moving with the necessary speed, that it had encountered far more resistance and hostility than anticipated, that the Diem government's counter-insurgency efforts, even if unpopular, might fatally injure the Revolution.... they feared that the GVN might with short-run measures destroy the NLF structure and crush the insurgency. This attitude became strongest in April 1963, which conversely was the high-water mark of the Diem government." Pike, Viet Cong: The Organization and Techniques of the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam, pp. 157 - 158.

In other words, the Buddhist Crisis could not have happened at a better time for the NLF - it was, undeniably, a Godsend for their near-defeated cause.

¹³ Nolting, From Trust To Tragedy, p. 95.

¹⁴ The details of these reports and their estimations can be found in 94. "National Intelligence Estimate - NIE 53-63, Prospects in South Vietnam," Washington, April 17, 1963, [Department of State, INR-NIE Files. Secret; Compiled by the CIA and the Intelligence organizations of the Departments of State, Defense, the Army, the Navy, the Air Force, and NSA.] In FRUS: Vietnam, January-August, 1963, Vol. III, pp. 232 - 235.

In addition to these positive reports Rufus Phillips of the CIA, in his capacity as Assistant Director for Rural Affairs, gave a solid report about the Strategic Hamlets program which, while criticising how the program was executed, nevertheless, was favourable overall: "...the strategic hamlet program has so well proven itself in those areas where it has been well executed that there is every reason for optimism and

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Vietnam, he should remain indefinitely according to the discretion of the State Department. In addition to this, Harriman advised Nolting to plan for a vacation some time in the spring or summer. As such, there is no record within the State Department or Nolting's own memoirs which indicates that the Buddhists were about to explode upon the political stage of South Vietnam with the devastating force that they did. Everything seemed to be moving along quite satisfactorily, albeit, according to Hilsman and Forrestal, a bit slower than Washington would have it.¹⁵

The Buddhists Organising, Politically, Before the Crisis Broke -

Ellen Hammer was in Hué just before the breaking of the Buddhist Crisis in the spring of 1963 and her attention was drawn to the fact that Buddhists were organising politically.¹⁶ If the upsurge in Buddhist activity struck keen outside observers as a source for political discourse it can be reasonably assumed that such political potential had not escaped the very adroit planners of the Communist insurgency in South Vietnam. However, there was one group of observers who harboured an agenda that failed to realise what was developing, as Hammer noted: "What the upsurge in Buddhism might portend did not interest American reporters that spring. They were in ... footnote continued from previous page:

confidence." Rufus Phillips, 102. "Memorandum From the Assistant Director for Rural Affairs, United States Operations Mission in Vietnam (Phillips), to the Director of the Mission (Brent)," Saigon, May 1, 1963, Subject: An Evaluation of Progress in the Strategic Hamlet-Provincial Rehabilitation Program, [Hoover Institution Archives, Lansdale Papers, Chron File C. Secret.] In FRUS: Vietnam, January-August, 1963, Vol. III, p. 258.

¹⁵ Nolting, From Trust To Tragedy, p. 95.

¹⁶ Here is Hammer's recollection of how she was made aware of the Buddhists political awakening: "When this writer visited Hue in April and asked a local doctor for the latest news, he did not speak of war but of peace. "Something important," he said. "The Buddhist Youth are organising."

In Ceylon, the international journal World Buddhism had reported from Vietnam "a great deal of Buddhist activity and signs of a revival of Buddhism."

The movement to restore the old religion from the decadence into which it had fallen had begun in the 1920s but had taken on new life when the country became independent. In the South, young people, deprived of political freedom, turned in increasing numbers to Buddhism. And a new generation of Buddhist monks was in touch with the world Buddhist movement." Hammer, A Death In November, p. 83.

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Vietnam to cover a war, and their articles reported complaints of American officers that the Vietnamese did not want to fight or fought badly..."¹⁷

The Buddhist Assault on the GVN Begins –

The 'upsurge' in Buddhism reached a critical mass in the first week of May, 1963, when a demonstration was organised by Buddhist agitators in Hué to protest against President Diem's law which decreed that the Vietnamese flag had to be given precedence over religious ones, Buddhist or Catholic. Violent explosions killed some of the people attending the Buddhist-organised rally and protest when rioting broke out at the scene of the Hué Radio Station. Ambassador Nolting recalled this incident as it occurred just before he was to go on holidays with his family to Europe:

Then came the beginning of a major crisis. On May 6, 1963, soon after I returned to Saigon from meetings in Honolulu, President Diem directed that the Vietnamese flag be given precedence over religious banners flown in public displays. He issued the order in response to the prominence given the Vatican flag at a recent Catholic celebration in Hué. Two days later, a large crowd assembled in Hue to celebrate the birth of Gautama Buddha. Buddhist flags were displayed ahead of the national flag. As the crowd attempted to take possession of the radio station, Vietnamese troops were called in by the province chief to enforce the recent decree and to protect the radio station. The demonstration became violent. Several shots (or explosions) occurred. Eight people died.¹⁸

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¹⁷ *Ibid.* p. 84.

Ellen Hammer went on to quote David Halberstam about just what interested US reporters in Vietnam at that time: "For David Halberstam it was 'great and unreal fun.' On his birthday in April, he was up in a helicopter with picked troops chasing the Viet Cong in the Ca Mau Peninsula: 'a particularly successful day and we had made several strikes, capturing about 15 Viet Cong and killing about 10 others... in those days a reporter's Vietnam was a marvellous and rare combination of constant excitement, some danger, the exhilaration that comes from being around brave men, beautiful countryside, good food and lovely women...and recurrent fights with American officialdom...." *Ibid.* pp. 84 - 85.

¹⁸ Nolting, *From Trust To Tragedy*, p. 106.

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While the political impact upon US Government relations with the GVN had to be Nolting's primary concern with regard to the incident in Hué, there was a lot more to this demonstration and its subsequent violent conclusion than has generally been admitted in most American written accounts. The first official telegram sent by John J. Helble, the American Consul in Hué, to the State Department about this issue was not as informative as it should have been - given the circumstances.¹⁹ This was because it did not give any sort of useful context or thorough background to the incident and it was non-committal as to what exactly had killed the demonstrators.²⁰ For there was a manifest discrepancy in reports as some indicated that GVN police gunfire had been responsible for the carnage while others claimed that grenades or even

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¹⁹ Here is the first despatch sent to the State Department by the Consulate at Hue: " 4. Buddha Birthday Celebration May 8 erupted into large-scale demonstration at Hue Radio Station between 2000 hours local and 2330 hours. At 2245 hours estimated 3,000 crowd assembled and guarded by 8 armoured cars, one Company CG, one Company minus ARVN, police armoured cars and some carbines fired into air to disperse mob which apparently not unruly but perhaps deemed menacing by authorities. Grenade explosion on radio station porch killed four children, one woman. Other incidents, possibly some resulting from panic, claimed two more children plus one person age unknown killed. Total casualties for evening 8 killed, 4 wounded." John J. Helble - American Consul in Hue, 112. "Telegram From The Consulate at Hue to the Department of State," Hue, May 9, 1963 - 3 p.m., [Department of State, Central Files, POL 25 S VIET. Secret.] in FRUS: Vietnam, January-August, 1963, Vol. III, p. 277.

²⁰ The Helble background to the incident read as follows: "Background this incident started May 7 when police attempted enforce law that no flags other than Viet-Nameese to be flown. Police apparently encountered popular resistance to enforcement of law as thousands Buddhist flags publicly displayed. At police request evening May 7 Province Chief Dang reportedly rescinded order. Morning May 8 demonstration at large Tu Dam Pagoda resulted in speech by Chief Bonze in presence Buddhist Dang criticising GVN suppression freedom religion, favoritism of Catholics. Parade banners during day anti-GVN orientated. Translations of same will be forwarded when available.

Evening May 8 crowd gathered at radio station where Head Bonze scheduled broadcast speech. Permission refused at last minute by GVN. Bonzes on scene urged people remain peaceful. GVN fire hoses and exhortations of Province Chief unsuccessful in dispersing crowd. Troops arrived and ordered dispersal.

Bonzes said stand still, do not fight, GVN claims some threw rocks at radio station, although indications are this not true. Firing then broke out.

1100 hours May 9, Province Chief addressed estimated 800 youth demonstrators, explained crowd actions spurred by oppositionist agitators had necessitated troop action to maintain order. Head Bonze requested crowd disperse peacefully and turn in flags. Some of crowd heard chanting "down with Catholicism."... Ibid. p. 278.

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bombs had been thrown or planted. Helble's initial report seemed to indicate gunfire had been the cause of the fatalities but the American Embassy in Saigon added to this the possibility that explosions had killed the demonstrators:

At 7 p.m. the Embassy in Saigon sent a second report of the incident to Washington listing seven dead and seven injured. The Embassy noted that Vietnamese Government troops may have fired into the crowd, but most of the casualties resulted, the Embassy reported, from a bomb, a concussion grenade, or "from general melee". The Embassy observed that although there had been no indication of Viet Cong activity in connection with the incident, the Viet Cong could be expected to exploit future demonstrations.²¹

The details of how the casualties occurred during the incident in Hué are crucial to ascertain in any attempt to cast even a modicum of objective historical analysis on this issue, because all objectivity was swept aside in the news media reports which ensued as a result of the violence. In fact, and as the American writer Marguerite Higgins noted,²² it was the inaccuracy of reports which appeared in The New York Times which set off the Buddhist Crisis in the United States and this, in turn, impinged directly upon US Government policy toward the GVN.²³ William Colby, who was back in the United States at the time, recalled the initial impact

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²¹ Telegram 1005 from Saigon, May 9, [Department of State, Central Files, SOC 14-1 S VIET] - Text included in footnote #2 of 112. "Telegram From The Consulate at Hue to the Department of State," Hue, May 9, 1963 - 3 p.m., [Department of State, Central Files, POL 25 S VIET. Secret.] In FRUS: Vietnam, January-August, 1963, Vol. III, p. 277.

²² Marguerite Higgins, was born in the Far East - Hong Kong to be precise; she later graduated from the University of California and Columbia School of Journalism. She began her career of reporting for the Herald Tribune in 1942 and actually became a war correspondent for that same paper in 1944. She moved on to become Chief of the Berlin Bureau for her paper in 1947 and Tokyo Bureau Chief in 1950. Higgins won a Pulitzer Prize for International Reporting in 1951 as a result of her coverage of the Korean War. Higgins has authored several books concerned with journalism and wars in Southeast Asia; owing to her steady, no-nonsense approach to journalism she became much trusted by Ambassador Nolting. She was highly respected by Southeast Asian scholars and her work was utilised by scholar Ellen Hammer. In interviews with this writer, Mrs. Nolting emphasised the integrity of Higgins during a time when most journalists in South Vietnam had abandoned objectivity for the sake of sensationalist stories.

²³ Here is Higgins' account from her own investigation which led her to Hue and through many sources, including the United Nations Report on Religious Discrimination in South Vietnam: "The

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of the US news-reports on the Huế incident in Washington. Colby's analysis paid special attention to the astonishing political adroitness of the radical Xa Loi Pagoda Buddhists, and the eventual severe moral and political blunder made by the Kennedy Administration as a result of the Buddhist Crisis:

The date was May 8, 1963, and the news reports that came in over the ticker at Langley were disturbing and were not made any better by the CIA and embassy cables that fleshed them out.... I was familiar with the Buddhist movement in Vietnam and knew that until then it had never played an important political role, as for example had the Catholic Church and the Hoa Hao and Cao Dai sects in the country's turbulent history. So, as I read the reports I judged that the incident, while certain to fuel the debate then going on in Washington over the Diem regime, would have very little significance in Vietnam itself. I was totally wrong in my assessment of its effect in Vietnam, for the Buddhists proved able to use the incident as the spring-board for a nation-wide political campaign. But I was right about its impact in Washington. For the Huế riot led to what I still consider the worst mistake of the Vietnam War: the American-sponsored overthrow of Diem.²⁴

Ellen Hammer and Marguerite Higgins,²⁵ through their own investigations, which took place in Vietnam at the time of the Buddhist Crisis, have illuminated a very complex political -

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investigation was undertaken because I quickly learned in the summer of 1963 that there was wide disagreement about what had happened.

For example, on June 30, 1963, a dispatch from Saigon to The New York Times said, 'The Buddhists said that they would not join a commission to investigate the alleged Buddhist grievances unless the government accepted responsibility for the incident on May 8, 1963, that set off the crisis. *Troops fired then on Buddhists demonstrating against a ban on displaying their religious flag. Nine Buddhists were killed* [italics mine].'

But these three sentences do not reflect the true situation. And yet the account given in The New York Times' news dispatch represents what many Americans, even some in official positions, still believe to be the truth about Hue. I find this appalling, because crucial national policy was, it now appears, based on 'facts' of highly doubtful authenticity." Higgins, Our Vietnam Nightmare, pp. 89 - 90.

²⁴ Colby, Honorable Men: My Life In The CIA, p. 203.

²⁵ The respect that Ellen Hammer held amongst the Vietnamese and the French, alike, was substantial and remarkable. She was perceived by the natives of the region to be one of the very few American scholars who actually had an understanding of what was going on in Vietnam. Marguerite Higgins noted that Ngo Dinh Diem too appreciated Hammer: "One communication was a mimeographed excerpt from an article by Ellen Hammer, author of The Struggle for Indo China, with a hand-written notation (in French) in pencil from Diem saying: "Miss Hammer at least tries to understand what we are

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religious development.²⁶ First of all, leading up to the Buddhist Crisis, there is no concrete evidence, or evidence of substance whatsoever, that Diem was practising or endorsing, in any

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doing. She takes account of the Oriental context in which we must operate." Higgins, Our Vietnam Nightmare, p. 176.

²⁶ Ellen Hammer placed Buddhism in its proper Vietnamese context, something any American journalist or State Department official could have done had they the will or inclination to research Vietnamese history. As such, Dr. Hammer wrote: "Vietnam has little in common with Western society, so the language of Western politics cannot be transposed to Vietnamese life without the greatest caution, and then only at the risk of confusion and misunderstanding.

Vietnamese society was characterized by both a highly developed autocracy and a remarkable degree of democracy. Although all power reposed in the Emperor, every aspect of his life, as with the least of his subjects was regulated by the moral precepts of Confucius. The Confucianist teaching which was grounded solidly on humanism and characterized by moderation, minutely regulated the behaviour of the individual; it provided that the role of the citizen in government was only one facet of a carefully organized network of social relations and obligations. Even during the period of French rule, Vietnamese society remained surprisingly unaltered. Although the displacement of political power to French hands inevitably disrupted certain aspects of Vietnamese life. The social traditions of Vietnam managed to survive through the family which became the guardian of national traditions.

Confucianism was a way of life which impregnated the entire culture of Vietnam. It left an indelible imprint upon the Vietnamese, regardless of their religion, upon Catholics and Buddhists, as well as animists; and in its emphasis on the responsibilities of an individual to society (as in the Nhan Vi doctrine) it acted as a valuable counterpoise to Buddhism which was essentially other-worldly and indifferent to social or political relations.

In this Confucianist world, political behaviour was logically deduced from a set of ethical equations which any servant of the state had to assimilate before he could qualify for office. There was thus no place for the concept of the right of the minority to become the majority which is at the root of Western political democracy, nor of majority rule. There was no hereditary aristocracy to stand between the emperor and the people. With the Vietnamese state recruiting its governing elite, or mandarins, entirely through educational channels by a system of triennial examinations open to the entire population, its officials were selected to a striking extent on ability. This intricate society was permeated by a profound sense of popular sovereignty for all that it was expressed in ways unknown to the West. It affected even the emperor who governed according to a so-called 'mandate of heaven....' Omnipresent rules of Confucianist doctrine imposed both a practical and theoretical check on the abuse of power...the Confucianist system took for granted a society in which each individual knew his place and duties.... Whatever rights an individual might have were derived largely from his functions and from the role he was called to play in the social system.... In 1954 when Diem returned to power the duty of obedience to established authority had been undermined (in the cities). But since that time Diem has set about building a regime, step by step, on foundations that go deep in what in the past was legitimate and decent for an Asian country, namely Confucianist ethics. In the present Vietnamese state.... recourse to the basic Confucianist equations has been accomplished by special emphasis on the rights of the individual....In this development of a political credo which draws its deepest roots from the traditions of which Asia can so legitimately be proud, the service rendered by Diem to free Asia may well extend beyond the frontiers of his Republic of Vietnam." Ellen Hammer as quoted by Marguerite Higgins. Ibid. pp. 177 – 178.

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way, manner or form, the persecution of Buddhists in Vietnam. Indeed, General Nguyen Khanh, in a lengthy interview with this writer, scoffed at the idea of persecution or even discrimination against Buddhists - claiming that over half of Diem's cabinet were Buddhist and that he (Khanh) was also a Buddhist who enjoyed the President's trust and friendship.²⁷ Further to this, even a cursory overview of the religious affiliations of the 113 elected members of South Vietnam's National Assembly would objectively demonstrate that the majority were Buddhists (i.e., 75 members were Buddhists).²⁸

Irony, which has always been replete in Vietnam, was unmistakable in Diem's decree about displaying the Vietnamese flag before any other, including religious banners, as it was actually aimed at his own brother, Archbishop Ngo Dinh Thuc. For Thuc had permitted Roman Catholic ceremonies in Da Nang, celebrating his Silver Anniversary as an ordained priest, to go

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If Ellen Hammer's research is accurate then, quite clearly, the Buddhist agitators of 1963 were operating beyond the purview of both traditional Buddhism and Vietnamese society. Had there been the requisite Southeast Asian expertise in the State Department it would seem more likely that there would have been a lot more concern about who was directing this unprecedented explosion of politically active Buddhism.

²⁷ Mr. Geoffrey DT Shaw in Conversation With General Nguyen Khanh, Recorded on June 16, 1994 at the USAF Special Operations School - Hurlburt Field, Florida - Transcript page #: 61. This transcript is available through the Vietnam Centre at Texas Tech University.

General Khanh expanded on Diem's treatment of Buddhists in an informal interview at Texas Tech in April of 1996.

In support of Khanh's testimony about Diem's more than fair treatment of Buddhists, Dr. Pan gives the precise figures for Diem's cabinet and government with regard to religious affiliation: "Diem chose a Buddhist to be his Vice-President during his two terms in office. In his cabinet during the last year of his administration, the Vice-President, Nguyen Ngoc Tho, was a devoted Buddhist. His Foreign Minister, Vu Van Mau, was another outstanding Buddhist. Among the 18 members of Diem's cabinet in 1963, five were Catholics, eight were Buddhists, and five were Confucians. The military governor of Saigon-Cholon, General Ton That Dinh, and the Commander-in-Chief, General Le Van Ty, were also Buddhists. Among the top 19 generals, there were only three Catholics. The others were Buddhists, Confucians, and Taoists. Although many of the best schools were Catholic, there were only 12 Catholics among the 38 provincial governors. The rest were Buddhists, Confucians, and Taoists." Stephen Pan & Daniel Lyons, *Vietnam Crisis*, (New York, [NY]: The East Asian Research Institute, 1966), p. 115.

²⁸ Pan & Lyons, *Vietnam Crisis*, p. 115.

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to too lavish an extent. According to both Hammer and Higgins, Thuc's extravagance was perceived by both Diem and his brother, Ngo Dinh Can, as extremely insensitive and provocative to the Buddhists and, thus, it angered Diem enough that he believed a law was necessary to prevent any future re-occurrences. Here is how Higgins described the events leading up to the incident in Hué:

As to the Times [New York] dispatch's assertion that there was a ban on Buddhist flags, no such thing existed. This dispatch implied also that there was some ruling applying solely to Buddhists. Again, this is not true. There was a Vietnamese government regulation against giving any religious flag - either the Buddhist or Catholic - precedence over the national flag in public places or in public view. Inside pagodas and inside churches, flags could be flown at will. The regulation applied to all religions.

There is no doubt, however, that the Vietnamese government's decision to revive these flag regulations on May 6, 1963, made possible the Hue tragedy.

Ironically, Diem's May 6 circular was provoked a few days earlier in Danang by excessive use by Catholics of Vatican flags, which were flown in profusion, whereas the national Vietnamese flags on view were few in number and sometimes tattered and torn.²⁹

Ellen Hammer's research into this question shows that Ngo Dinh Thuc was upset by the prominence of Buddhist flags, being displayed for the celebration of the 2,507th anniversary of Buddha's death,³⁰ which he personally observed as he drove through Hué on May 7, 1963.³¹ Thuc ordered Ho Dac Khuong, the man who represented the Saigon government in Hué, to have the flags removed; Khuong immediately protested, arguing that it was too late and that such a move would deeply offend the Buddhist community.³² Khuong even appealed to Saigon but to no avail. The minister of the interior - Bui Van Luong, was in Hué at the time and he had

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²⁹ Higgins, Our Vietnam Nightmare, p. 91.

³⁰ Fr. Gheddo, The Cross and the Bo-Tree, p. 179.

³¹ Hammer, A Death In November, p. 110.

³² Ibid.

actually visited the pagodas in order to reassure the bonzes that their flags could be flown and that the order to have them taken down had been rescinded. He later told the UN mission about his efforts to reassure the Buddhists when the UN team arrived to investigate the charge of religious persecution in South Vietnam. Unfortunately, these GVN efforts were too late as the police had already taken down some flags. This gave the radical and, most likely, Communist bonze, Thich Tri Quang,³³ all the excuse he needed to begin a campaign which would bring down Diem and his government, simultaneously, leaving American policy in complete disarray.

Footnotes

³³ *Ibid.* pp. 110, 112 & 113.

This writer has talked with Ambassador William Colby, Mrs. Nolting and General Nguyen Khanh about the enigmatic and mysterious Thich Tri Quang's politics and background. While no one has yet produced his Communist Party Card all concur that the evidence points to the likelihood that he was, indeed, a Communist agent; certainly, his ends were the equivalent to a political 'El Dorado' for the North and the Viet Cong. In this context, Marguerite Higgins uncovered some very unpalatable truths for those Americans, particularly the newsmen, who attached so much righteous indignation to the 'persecuted' leader of the radical bonzes, Thich Tri Quang: "If I had known more about Thich Tri Quang, I might have been less taken aback by his massive indifference to the fight against the Communists.

Even today Thich Tri Quang's past remains very much a mystery.

When did he emerge as the dominant monk at the Tu Dam Pagoda at Hue? Nobody knows for sure - or will say.

The famous Tu Dam Pagoda remains Thich Tri Quang's headquarters in Central Vietnam and is the political command post from which he launched his anti-Diem drive.

According to records of the French Colonial office, Thich Tri Quang was twice arrested for his dealings with Ho Chi Minh. By his own admission he served after 1945 with Communist front groups working with Ho's Viet Minh army.

In a recent report sent to Washington based on conversations with Thich Tri Quang, our embassy in Saigon noted: 'Tri Quang himself has said that he acceded to Viet Minh 'invitations' to collaborate with them in the 1940's and that in response to their demands he served 'passively' as chairman of the United Vietnamese Association, which was controlled by the Viet Minh and was located near his home village in Quang Binh province.' The US Embassy further noted that Thich Tri Quang claimed he was able to leave the Viet Minh-controlled province 'by a ruse.' Thich Tri Quang also for a time led a Communist-front Buddhist organization collaborating with Ho Chi Minh.... Again, according to the French, who still have representatives at Hanoi, Thich Tri Quang's brother is currently working for Ho Chi Minh in the Communist Vietnam's Ministry of the Interior. The duties of Thich Tri Quang's brother include the direction of subversion in South Vietnam.

Thich Tri Quang is a disciple of Thich Tri Do, who is now in Hanoi as a leader of the Buddhist organization there. Buddhism in North Vietnam operates of course by favor of and for the purposes of the Communist regime.

Footnote continued on next page: ...

The Minister of the Interior, in a private meeting had told Thich Tri Quang that the Buddhist flags did not have to come down. Tri Quang assented to this understanding, and then turned around and quietly ordered his monks to go and haul down the flags - as if to provoke a confrontation. Indeed, Quang had also ordered his monks to inform the citizens of Hué that the flags were coming down because of Diem's order to "ban the Buddhist flag."³⁴ Obviously, Thich Tri Quang was attempting to inflate the whole flag incident and had infused this inflammatory process with an outright lie, as Diem had never issued any decree, at any time, that banned the Buddhist flag. Evidently, there was no stopping this politically motivated bonze as the organisation he had waiting in the background to protest against the Diem government was thorough-going and highly competent in the execution of such a complex plan.³⁵ In other words, Quang's "protest" was no spur of the moment out-pouring of Buddhist outrage but, instead, a coldly-calculated political campaign on par with the political capabilities of Ho Chi Minh and his

... footnote continued from previous page:

Also, Thich Tri Quang has made some rather remarkable public statements concerning Communism, having asserted on one occasion that it was in his opinion entirely compatible with Buddhism." Higgins, Our Vietnam Nightmare, pp. 28 - 29.

³⁴ Ibid. p. 92.

³⁵ "...it was clear that Thich Tri Quang has learned a lot from the Communists about organization and propaganda. He ran his emergency headquarters at the Xa Loi Pagoda like a company command post. Orders were barked out directing a demonstration here, a protest meeting there. Messengers scurried in and out carrying banners with their newly painted slogans that were remarkably similar to slogans used by the Communists.

There was something very Machiavellian about this monk - a kind of Machiavelli with incense. And I am by no means the only person to have registered this impression.

Denis Warner, writing in *Reporter* magazine, describes this scene that took place...in the Xa Loi Pagoda: 'I have rarely met a man so sure of himself. In his drab grey robes, he dominated the strange scene.... Thich Tri Quang did not pretend that the Buddhist religious campaign was without political motivations. His plan, it appeared, was to continue forcing the government into rash acts against the Buddhists....When I told him that the Special Forces of the army had been alerted to attack the pagoda, he smiled and answered: '*Don't you think it will help our cause if some of us are killed* [italics mine]?'" Ibid. p. 30.

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Party.³⁶ In this context the historian needs to consider, for example, the fact that when the GVN Provincial officials and Hué City officials turned up at the Tu Dam Pagoda to take part in the anniversary celebrations, they were confronted with large banners inscribed with radical anti-government slogans.³⁷ Thich Tri Quang, along with some of his assisting monks, began haranguing the crowds at the pagoda to “Go to the radio station - something very interesting will happen there.”³⁸ It is a matter of historical record that “something interesting” did, indeed, happen at the radio station for this is where several Vietnamese met their deaths that day; deaths, that were immediately blamed on Ngo Dinh Diem’s government by Thich Tri Quang.

Footnotes

³⁶ This was what Ambassador Nolting had come to understand and he maintained this position steadfastly down through the years; moreover, he came to believe that the American press and the Kennedy Administration had been duped by the General Association of Vietnamese Buddhists [an organisation unknown to the rural Buddhist pagodas not caught up in the politics of Hue]: “Then there was an incident in Hue involving a number of deaths and arising out of a Buddhist demonstration. There were various causes for this. Who was culpable in those deaths has never been, to my mind, proven. Certainly the government mishandled the thing, I think, both in terms of public relations externally and in terms of Vietnamese public opinion. But at the same time the charge that this was a spontaneous uprising of Buddhists because of religious persecution was, in my opinion, false.

On the subject of persecution I said publicly then, at the height of the Buddhist crisis, and I still think, that there was no religious persecution. I travelled to pretty near all the provinces of Vietnam, some of them on many occasions, and I never saw one instance of religious persecution, nor did I have the feeling that there was religious discrimination.... I felt then and I still feel that one of the few things that didn’t plague this unfortunate country was religious discrimination. Diem, who himself was a devout Catholic, did things in an even-handed way to promote Buddhism, to put scarce government funds into pagodas, and so forth. - I might also say in this connection that I received many letters from Buddhist bonzes in the provinces during the Buddhist crisis saying that they had nothing to do with the propaganda being put out by the General Association of Vietnamese Buddhists, which was the central organization of the agitators. They said they never heard of the organization; they weren’t members of it; and they were running their pagoda in the village as always, as an independent entity. And this was the general set-up in Vietnam; there wasn’t any established hierarchical Buddhist organization. Nevertheless, this whole thing was interpreted by the press as a genuine revolt against religious persecution, which in my opinion was a false interpretation. And this did have an effect on the US government -- a disastrous effect, in my opinion.” Frederick Nolting, “First Oral History Interview with Frederick E. Nolting.” Recorded interview by Joseph E. O’Connor, May 14, 1966 (Paris, France), p. 19, John F. Kennedy Library, Oral History Program.

³⁷ Higgins, *Our Vietnam Nightmare*, pp. 92-93.

³⁸ *Ibid.* p. 93.

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When Tri Quang and his followers reached the radio station the Buddhist leader insisted to the station director that he broadcast a speech calling for Diem's overthrow as opposed to the government-approved taped message commemorating Buddha's death [birthday].³⁹ Tri Quang and his crowd grew impatient and raucous when the radio station director stated that he could not broadcast such a political speech; fearing that a riot would break out the director telephoned the deputy province chief who was in charge of public security, Major Dang Sy.⁴⁰ The following depiction, given best by Ellen Hammer, also concurs with what Marguerite Higgins was able to uncover and with what Mrs. Nolting told this writer:

Major Dang Sy arrived at the radio station two hours after the first report of the riot reached his headquarters. He had a company of men with him in rubber-tired armoured cars. Because they had no tear gas at hand they were equipped with MK III grenades. They were still in their cars about fifty meters from the building when the night was ripped by two explosions. In the darkness, with the crowd shocked and scattering, Dang Sy feared the explosions meant a Viet Cong attack like the recent one on a police station. This was the signal for his men to use their grenades. At least fifteen were thrown. The crowd fled, leaving seven dead and one child dying. The victims were mutilated, some decapitated. There were mangled shreds of flesh and bone and torn bodies with no trace of any lethal projectile.... None of the Vietnamese present had ever witnessed explosions of such exceptional force. They corresponded to nothing in the arsenal at the disposal of Dang Sy's men... the Buddhist doctor who examined the bodies said he had never seen such injuries and did not believe they could have been caused either by plastic or by grenades...the American concussion grenades they had used were described in the United States Department of the Army Field Manual on "grenades and Pyrotechnics" and could never have been lethal because "the maximum capabilities of the MK III grenades are concussion, burst eardrums and shock."⁴¹

Footnotes

³⁹ Hammer, *A Death In November*, p. 113.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.* pp. 114-115.

What is important to note in the above excerpt from Hammer's research, as it concurs precisely with what Higgin's uncovered,⁴² is that it was virtually impossible for Diem's troops, under the supervision of Dang Sy, to have slaughtered the civilian protesters in the manner recorded.⁴³ Marguerite Higgins, recognising the importance of the vast discrepancy between what the American public was being told about the deaths in Hué, and what actually happened, strove to uncover the most precise and, sadly, gruesome details available. These details, as already suggested earlier in this chapter, are crucial because of the popularly-held defamatory allegation that Diem's troops gunned down protesting civilians and Buddhist Bonzes. The deaths of these people becomes far more worrisome to those interested in uncovering the truth about this time in Vietnamese - American relations. This is because the circumstantial and the forensic evidence suggests that the crowd of protesters were cold-bloodedly herded to their deaths by a Bonze who knew about pre-planted plastic bombs or other explosive devices at the radio station.⁴⁴ Here, then, are the facts as unearthed by Higgins during the course of her interviews with the senior GVN official on the spot, Interior Minister Bui Van Luong:

I went to see the bodies of the dead. I found most of them had the top of their heads blown off, but there were no wounds below the chest. There were no metal splinters in the bodies, but only holes. No metal was found on the concrete veranda. All the bodies were found on the veranda, none of them in the courtyard. I asked the legal doctor to make a post-mortem and send me the results. He made a very careful examination and took out the organs for examination and sent his findings to me in Saigon.

Footnotes

⁴² Higgins, Our Vietnam Nightmare, pp. 94 -95.

⁴³ Hammer, A Death In November, p. 114.

⁴⁴ Owing, in no small part, to the bias of American reporting the true facts and the very real mystery surrounding the deaths in Hue were never uncovered. Later, a year after Diem's murder - when Nguyen Khanh was premier of South Vietnam, Dang Sy was tried for alleged crimes against Buddhist protesters at Hue. Here is what the objective reporting of the London based Economist newsmagazine found: "outrage...at a cynically rigged trial. He [Dang Sy] took his orders from the proper authorities and carefully used percussion grenades only on the fringes of the mob that had been whipped up by Tri Quang. He was then accused of responsibility for the still unexplained deaths of eight demonstrators in plastic bomb explosions." The Economist, London, 1966.

Afterward there were rumours that tanks had driven into the crowd and crushed the people. But the fact is that tanks were not used. Only lightly armoured cars. The dead had not been crushed but had had their heads blown off and had been wounded only from the chest up.

I have now in hand the findings of the legal doctor, who says they were killed by an explosion and a violent blast.

When I came back from Hue to Saigon, I attended a meeting between Buddhist leaders and the President. Among the Buddhists was Dr. Mai Tho Truyen (head of the Saigon Buddhist Association). Dr. Truyen asked me the reason for the explosion and deaths. I told him that the experts in weaponry whom we had consulted in both Hue and Saigon were of the opinion that it was probably bombs made of plastic [explaining why no metal splinters were found]. I also told Dr. Truyen that we had many bullets because the United States had given us many bullets free. But we had no plastic. Plastic is the arm of the Viet Cong guerrilla.⁴⁵

The standard American account of the incident in Hue,⁴⁶ which in one of its various formats, can be read in Stanley Karnow's Vietnam: A History,⁴⁷ ignores any in-depth analysis of the incident and tends to support the American Consul's early, hasty and very inaccurate report.⁴⁸ Reporters such as Halberstam,⁴⁹ Karnow and Sheehan,⁵⁰ quite apart from distorting

Footnotes

⁴⁵ Higgins, Our Vietnam Nightmare, pp. 95 - 96.

⁴⁶ Nolting's own account differs markedly from this standard American recital of events as it is based upon more evidence than available to both the American Consul in Hue, John J. Helble, and the American reporters. As far as who actually did what to whom at Hue, Nolting recorded in his memoirs that in all the evidence he had seen the indications were that agitators in the crowd had thrown bombs and that the Army had fired weapons. Nolting, From Trust To Tragedy, p. 106.

⁴⁷ Karnow, Vietnam: A History, p. 279.

⁴⁸ Here is the salient excerpt from Karnow about the incident in Hue which, it should be underscored, leaves no doubt as to its anti-Diem bias: "On May 8, 1963, as Buddhists assembled in Hue to celebrate the 2527th birthday of Buddha, the deputy province chief, a Catholic by the name of Major Dang Xi, enforced an old decree prohibiting them from flying their multicolored flag. A week earlier, however, he had encouraged Catholics there to display blue and white papal banners to commemorate the 25th anniversary of Thuc's ordination. The discrimination dismayed the Buddhists. Several thousand gathered peacefully in front of the city's radio station to listen to loudspeakers broadcast a speech by Tri Quang, a Buddhist leader. The station director cancelled the address, claiming that it had not been censored. He also telephoned Major Xi, who dispatched five armoured cars to the scene. The commander ordered the crowd to disperse, then told his men to fire. The people stampeded. A woman and eight children died, either shot or trampled in the melee." ibid. p. 279.

the reality of how the victims at the incident had died, inflated the total casualties upward - claiming that nine people had died and that these were all children except for one woman.⁵¹ Their claims were, as demonstrated, not accurate and could easily be interpreted as being aimed at delivering maximum damage to US Government relations with Diem's GVN. The irony here being that they were unwittingly doing the Communists' bidding as that is precisely what the leaders of the insurrection wanted - i.e., a divorce between Diem and the Americans and, thus, the collapse of Diem and his government.⁵² Ambassador Nolting elaborated on the recognition of who benefited, directly, from the Buddhist Crisis:

I think the Buddhist crisis was basically a very clever political ploy, using a religious mask and making use of a great many naive people [i.e., young, US news-reporters]. It was basically a political ploy aimed at over-throwing the Diem government. It was also aimed through publicity at the United States, which was supporting the constitutional government. And it came out exactly as the Buddhist agitators intended. This outcome exactly paralleled the number one

... footnote continued from previous page:

⁴⁹ David Halberstam was still maintaining, in June of 1963, the allegations that the GVN was responsible "...for the deaths of nine Buddhists in Hué on May 8. Troops at that time fired into a Buddhist throng staging a forbidden demonstration." David Halberstam, "Saigon Buddhists Fight The Police," in The New York Times, (Sunday, June 16, 1963), p. 18.

⁵⁰ Sheehan, A Bright and Shining Lie, p. 334.

⁵¹ Karnow, Vietnam, p. 279.

⁵² John Mecklin, who was by no means antagonistic toward the American reporters in South Vietnam, acknowledged that the professional ethics of the newsmen were being called into question by other, well-established reporters: "In a scathing article (September 20, 1963) that led to the protest resignation of Charles Mohr, its chief correspondent for Southeast Asia, Time asserted: 'The press corps on the scene is helping to compound the very confusion that it should be untangling for its readers at home....They pool their convictions, information, misinformation and grievances....They have covered a complex situation from only one angle, as if their own conclusions offered all the necessary illumination.'

Columnist Joseph Alsop (September 23, 1963) accused the Saigon newsmen of 'carrying on another of these egregious crusades' comparable with the campaign against Chiang Kai-Shek by some of the correspondents in China in 1944. 'It is easy enough to paint a dark, indignant picture, without departing from the fact,' Alsop wrote, 'if you ignore the majority of Americans who admire the Vietnamese as fighters and seek out the one US officer in ten who inevitably thinks all foreigners fight badly.... The reportorial crusade against the government has also helped mightily to transform Diem from a courageous, quite viable national leader, into a man afflicted with a galloping persecution mania, seeing plots around every corner, and therefore misjudging everything.'" John Mecklin, Mission In Torment: An Intimate Account of the U.S. Role in Vietnam, (Garden City, [NY]: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1965), p. 120.

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*tactical objective of the Viet Cong, which was to overthrow the Diem government and thereby bring about political chaos in South Vietnam.*⁵³

Diem seemed to intuit, right from the onset of the incident in Hué, that disaster lay in a Buddhist revolt, especially since it held the threat of undoing all that he had already accomplished to bridge suspicions between Buddhists and Catholics. Hammer's study and Higgin's investigations support the objective scholarship of Piero Gheddo's claim that Diem had gone to great lengths to accommodate the Buddhists - long before there had ever been a political-Buddhist crisis. In fact, as the figures of the Society of Buddhist Studies in Saigon make manifest, Diem's use of government funds to rebuild Buddhist infrastructure throughout all of South Vietnam, including pagodas and Buddhist schools, played a substantial role in the revival of Buddhism.⁵⁴

Under Diem there is no doubt that Buddhism enjoyed the fullest religious freedom. This is so true that never in its long history had it recorded such a grandiose rebirth in so short a time...we must say that from 1954 to 1963 [the Diem years], Buddhism amply developed in South Vietnam and became clearly aware not only of its religious identity but also of its political strength...In the period of 1956-1962, the upper schools for bonzes in South Vietnam increased from 4 to 10; of the 4,766 pagodas in the country, 1,275 were built after 1954 and 1,295 were renovated or rebuilt after that year. The Diem government at the same time gave nine million piastres for the building of Buddhist pagodas (about \$1,600,000), and President Diem himself gave a major contribution for the reconstruction of the famous Xa Loi pagoda...⁵⁵

Ambassador Nolting had many conversations with Diem about the coexistence of Buddhism with Roman Catholicism in South Vietnam and never had cause to doubt Diem's sincere goodwill toward the Buddhists. Furthermore, even in the wake of the Buddhist crisis, Nolting

Footnotes

⁵³ Frederick Nolting, "First Oral History Interview with Frederick E. Nolting." Recorded interview by Joseph E. O'Connor, May 14, 1966 (Paris, France), pp. 19 - 20. John F. Kennedy Library, Oral History Program, Boston, Ma.

⁵⁴ Mai Tho Truyen, Le Bouddhisme au Vietnam, (Saigon: Xa Loi Pagoda, 1962).

⁵⁵ Fr. Gheddo, The Cross and the Bo-Tree, p. 176.

maintained Diem's benevolence toward the Buddhists was genuine - as can readily be discerned in the following letter that he wrote to Marguerite Higgins in 1965:

You ask my views about the characterisation of Diem as a "narrow-minded, fanatical Catholic like the medieval inquisitors." Such a description is totally false, I think - a figment of prejudice and ignorance of the man. I knew him well and I think of him, not as a Roman Catholic, but rather as a person of strong Christian ethics, including moral conviction, compassion, and understanding of the beliefs of others. He was a man of tolerance, so far as religion is concerned. His theology was not dogmatic. I discussed philosophy and theology with him often. (I happen to be interested in both and have a doctor's degree in philosophy). He had firm beliefs and the courage of his convictions, but he did not try to impose those beliefs and convictions on others. He had high regard for good Buddhists, good Confucians, good ancestor-worshippers (defining good in terms of honesty, compassion, and active practice of such virtues). His privately-voiced criticism of the Buddhist philosophy in general went to its passiveness. He saw Communism as a moral evil, and was convinced that one had a duty actively to oppose it, not simply sit and wait for it to go away.⁵⁶

Diem knew that the educated elite in the major urban centres of South Vietnam, such as the Caravellistes, had managed to engineer a rapprochement with the Buddhists and that this posed a significant political challenge. Essentially, these anti-Diem elite formed an underground political opposition within the urban pagodas and Buddhism gave them an air of legitimacy that they had lacked on their own.⁵⁷ As such, Diem responded by meeting with the Buddhist leaders who were protesting against the outrage in Hué and he ordered, instantly, generous indemnification for the families who had suffered losses in the incident.⁵⁸ In addition to this, the South Vietnamese president formed-up a special commission, which was directed by a Buddhist - Vice-President Nguyen Ngoc Tho - with the mandate to negotiate and reach amicable

Footnotes

⁵⁶ Frederick Nolting, 'Letter to Miss Marguerite Higgins - July 7, 1965,' p.1, in - RG-21/102.921 - Box #: 12 - Selected Correspondence - Higgins, Marguerite, The Nolting Papers.

⁵⁷ Fr. Gheddo, The Cross and the Bo-Tree, pp. 178 -179.

⁵⁸ Higgins, Our Vietnam Nightmare, p. 101.

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agreements with the Buddhist leaders.⁵⁹ Diem, confident that government forces had nothing to do with deaths in Hué, openly refused to accept the guilt for the killings prior to the joint and internationally supervised investigation - which Thich Tri Quang had demanded. A critical fact here, that should have drawn more attention to the Thich Tri Quang's motives, was, simply, that once Diem had agreed to an international investigation, Tri Quang then rejected the offer.⁶⁰

During the course of the first meeting with the Buddhist leaders Diem explained to them that there had been errors made by GVN officials pertaining to the whole flag issue. He reminded them that they were guaranteed freedom of worship under the constitution of the Republic of South Vietnam and he also reminded them that there were troublemakers at the Hué radio station who had nothing to do with Buddhism and that, indeed, Catholics were amongst the injured there.⁶¹ Diem, in fact, went to great lengths to assuage Buddhist fears and to meet their demands. Accordingly, he issued a joint communiqué with the Venerable Thich Tinh Kiet, head of the Vietnam Buddhist Association, which addressed all of the Buddhist demands - except for the one promulgated by Thich Tri Quang wherein he was to admit guilt, before any inquiry,⁶² vis-à-vis the killings in the Hué incident. In light of the fact that, almost to a man, the American journalists ignored Diem's substantial efforts, as witnessed in their histories of this period, it is illuminating and useful for the student to peruse the following document:

"The points of this joint communiqué were approved by me [President Diem] in principle from the very beginning" (i.e., of the talks). The points of the agreement eliminated any discussion and further dissent in the religious field.

Footnotes

⁵⁹ Pan & Lyons, Vietnam Crisis, pp. 112 -113.

⁶⁰ Higgins, Our Vietnam Nightmare, p. 101.

⁶¹ Hammer, A Death In November, p. 117.

⁶² The Manifesto of the Buddhist's demands was reprinted in FRUS and the contents of the Buddhist manifesto and demands closely matches all the points that President Diem addressed. 118. "Manifesto of Vietnamese Buddhist Clergy and Faithful," Hue, May 10, 1963. [Department of State, Central Files, POL 13-6 S VIET. Unclassified; Translation.] In FRUS: Vietnam, January-August, 1963, Vol. III, pp. 287 - 288.

There was a new and carefully worked out regulation on the public display of religious banners (art.1); the government's promise to pass at the beginning of 1964 a new law on religious assemblies and associations (art.2); the setting up of an enquiry commission on the injustices denounced by the Buddhists and the act of presidential clemency for all who in the Buddhist demonstrations had broken the law (art.3); the renewal of the guarantees for more ample religious freedom in all its aspects (art.4) and, finally, the punishment of the members of the police who were proven guilty in the clash with Buddhists and the agreement to give aid to the families of the victims (art.5).⁶³

American journalists, though, were not alone in blaming the GVN for the Hué killings before all the facts were in. For it can be readily discerned from the tone of Consul Helble's telegrams, sent directly to the State Department in Washington, that he held an early and ill-founded presumption that, indeed, Diem's forces were responsible owing, amongst other things, to years of alleged repression of the Buddhists.⁶⁴ John Helble, whatever his sympathies may have been, was meticulous in his telegrams in pointing out that Thich Tri Quang was propelling the Buddhist Crisis forward by trying to organise a massive funeral rally for the victims of the Hué incident to be attended by international Buddhist leaders.⁶⁵ Helble also noted in his telegrams that Tri Quang was trying to incite a nation-wide Gandhi-styled protest against the GVN. Furthermore, he noted that another prominent Buddhist leader (name not declassified yet)

Footnotes

⁶³ Ngo Dinh Diem quoted in Fr. Gheddo, The Cross and the Bo-Tree, p. 181.

⁶⁴ Here is an excerpt from one of the Consul's telegrams to Washington that indicates that Heble was swallowing whole the "popular" line about GVN repression of the Buddhists: "Population must be judged as tense. Duration and intensity of crisis unusual in view generally passive nature Vietnamese in terms public demonstrations. People seem to have taken seriously Bonze speech morning 8th "now is time to fight." While word fight perhaps overemphatic, desire of people seems to be to have some sort of showdown following years of frustration for Buddhists. Student banner morning 9th "please kill us". Man on street expressing great desire for world to know of killings on 8th. While GVN line is VC responsible, no credibility this among population." John J. Helble - American Consul in Hue, 116. "Telegram From the Consulate in Hue to the Department of State," Hue, May 10, 1963 - 2 a.m. [Department of State, Central Files, SOC 14-1 S VIET. Secret; Operational Immediate. Also sent to Saigon.] In FRUS: Vietnam, January-August, 1963, Vol. III, p. 285.

⁶⁵ Ibid. pp. 284 - 285.

tried to prevent further violence as he told the 'Quang incited crowds' that, in fact, Diem's government was a good one.⁶⁶

Of course, the whole incident had bothered Ambassador Nolting as much as it had Diem. But he had no reason to believe, at that time, that the entire affair would not be dealt with properly by all parties involved and, as such, he continued to make preparations to go vacation in the early summer of 1963:

Although I believed that there was no religious persecution in South Vietnam, I had no doubts about the seriousness of the May 8 incident in Hue. My family and I were scheduled to leave Saigon on May 9 for a vacation on a sailboat in the Aegean... I postponed our departure in case the situation deteriorated. We stayed in Saigon for two relatively calm weeks. The government's report on the incident was issued during this period. While the report failed to establish culpability for the eight deaths, it seemed objective, accurate, and fair. Finally, I decided that the immediate crisis had passed and that we could leave for our vacation with a clear conscience.

My wife was uncomfortable with the decision. Too many persistent questions from Vietnamese friends about exactly when we were leaving had made her uneasy, and she suggested that we not go at all. But the plans were made, our daughters were waiting for us, and the State Department had issued our travel orders, so I convinced her that it was safe to go. Both my deputy at the mission, Bill Trueheart, and the State Department in Washington had our daily schedule. It was understood that Trueheart would contact me in an emergency through the US Embassy in Athens, or elsewhere en route. The atmosphere appeared calm in both Saigon and the Provinces, and we left Saigon on May 23, 1963, to join our daughters in Greece.

I could not have made a worse mistake. I left my post on the eve of the storm - a storm that eventually destroyed nine years of constructive American help and support for South Vietnam's independence.⁶⁷

Footnotes

⁶⁶ Here is one of the relevant excerpts from Helble's cable to Washington: "Ex-chief Bonze Tri Quang urged all be peaceful. Carry no weapons, be prepared die. Be alert to VC efforts agitate people, follow Gandhi policies. Quang asked people agree to follow him and crowd roared assent.

Buddhist leader [less than 1 line not declassified] told crowd this regime is good govt." John J. Helble - American Consulate in Hue, 117. "Telegram From the Consulate in Hue to Department of State," Hue, May 10, 1963 - 3 p.m. [Department of State, Central Files, SOC 14-1 S VIET. Secret; Operational Immediate. Also sent to Saigon.] In FRUS: Vietnam, January-August, 1963, Vol. III, p. 285.

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At the time of the Buddhist Crisis, Ambassador Nolting had other concerns with regard to joint GVN and American efforts in keeping the counter-insurgency activities properly funded and directed. Evidently, Nolting's concerns had made an impact with Diem and the Secretary of State, Thuan, as correspondence from Nolting shows that problems were being overcome and that, in fact, the whole COIN effort was resting on a much healthier foundation than before.⁶⁸ In his memoirs Nolting stated that the resolution to the COIN funding problem, which was officially acknowledged in a joint communiqué issued by the US Embassy and the Diem government on May 17, 1963, seemed routine enough.⁶⁹ Yet, information that came his way subsequent to this time revealed that Washington had taken the whole issue very seriously and actually had it slated to go before the National Security Council as Kennedy and his advisors were wondering about continuing support for Diem. Nolting recalled this noteworthy turn in his political memoirs:

I have since learned, however, that it had tremendous impact in Washington, to the point that the National Security Council was scheduled to discuss it. The discussion never took place, apparently deferred for more pressing issues, but this was the first time in 1963 that Vietnam appeared on the NSC agenda. President Kennedy and his advisors were to examine - I learned later - whether the United States could continue active support of the Diem government and the counter-insurgency effort in Vietnam if we did not get joint control of this fund. This dispute deepened Washington's perception that Diem was a difficult person to deal with and enhanced its impression that Nhu was even more stubborn than his brother....Even though Diem eventually signed the agreement, the argument

... footnote continued from previous page:

⁶⁷ Nolting, From Trust To Tragedy, pp. 108 - 109.

⁶⁸ Frederick Nolting, 119. "Letter From the Ambassador in Vietnam (Nolting) to Secretary of State at the Presidency and the Assistant Secretary of State For National Defense Thuan," Saigon, May 10, 1963, [Department of State, Central Files, POL 26-1 S VIET. Confidential.] In FRUS: Vietnam, January-August, 1963, Vol. III, pp. 289 - 290.

In addition to Nolting's correspondence with Thuan, on May 17, 1963, President Diem and Nolting issued a joint communiqué, which announced the fact that, the US and South Vietnamese governments had reached an agreement on counter-insurgency funding. Editorial Note in FRUS: Vietnam, January-August, 1963, Vol. III, pp. 307 - 309.

⁶⁹ Nolting, From Trust To Tragedy, p. 103.

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left a bad taste in officialdom's mouth. These events and feelings may have factored into a reevaluation of Vietnam policy, and into Washington's opinion of how the mission - I in particular - handled Diem.⁷⁰

Clearly, Nolting's later concerns over Washington's reaction to the whole COIN issue were warranted as, evidently, Kennedy Administration motivation for removing Diem was being forged regardless of the positive diplomatic results Nolting had achieved with Diem in Vietnam. Certainly, it can be argued, credibly, that those in Washington who wanted Diem out of the way found exactly what they were looking for in the Buddhist Crisis.

David Halberstam & The New York Times : Pouring Gasoline on the Buddhist Fire –

Building steadily toward a crescendo of criticism of the Diem government, Halberstam, in a front page article of The New York Times (June 10, 1963), noted that '**Americans [were] Vexed By Inability to Act in Vietnam Dispute** [my emphasis].' David Halberstam, who was a very clever writer, carefully sets up the American public in this article to expect, amongst other things, a "far reaching policy statement" with regard to Diem's GVN:

The conflict between the South Vietnamese Government and Buddhist Priests is sorely troubling American officials here...For a variety of reasons Americans wish to dissociate themselves from the Saigon Government's role in the religious crisis. Any public disavowal, however, would contrast so sharply with the previous American policy of all-out support that it would be interpreted as heralding a change in the United States' attitude toward the Government of President Ngo Dinh Diem. Thus any expression would be a far-reaching policy statement.

It is reported that Washington has already told its officials here to express extreme concern over the developments and the Government's handling of them, and to press for a solution to the religious strife.

Americans are deeply embarrassed by the events, and frustrated in the face of persistent questioning by individual Vietnamese, who ask: "Why does

Footnotes

⁷⁰ Ibid. pp. 103 - 104.

your Government allow this to go on? Why don't you Americans say or do something?"⁷¹

In the same article Halberstam carried on a specific theme that became the hall-mark of The New York Times' assault on Diem and the GVN's legitimacy. The theme was that between 70 to 80 per cent of the population of South Vietnam considered itself Buddhist and that Diem and his GVN represented only a small minority and undemocratic ruling elite. This thesis, in various subtle and not so subtle forms, appeared in nearly every article published by the paper that was concerned with the Buddhist Crisis:

American political officials here are worried about the effect of the crisis on the war effort in a country where an estimated 70 per cent of the population considers itself Buddhist. Since President Diem and most of his close associates are Roman Catholic, it is almost impossible to maintain the Government's stand that it is only interested in keeping order, and that the struggle has no religious overtones...the picture of the Government, even among its most recent supporters here, is one of a regime aloof and inflexible.⁷²

The distortion that 70 per cent of the population considered itself Buddhist should prompt the reader to carefully consider what the depth of Buddhism was in the country and whether or not the Hué and Xa Loi pagodists had the authority to speak for all Buddhists. In this consideration, the reader should remember that most of the rural Buddhist monks had never heard of the radicals' organisation, which the revolutionary 'monks' called the "General Association of Buddhists". The outright false claim that most of Diem's close associates were Roman Catholic, when they were in fact Buddhist, warrants serious consideration of just what Halberstam and his paper were about. Evidently, Halberstam and his New York Times editors were attempting to 'play up' the angle of religious favouritism and persecution. This would also be underscored by the fact that they tried to keep the story on the front page of The New York

Footnotes

⁷¹ David Halberstam, "Americans Vexed By Inability to Act In Vietnam Dispute," in The New York Times, (Monday, June 10, 1963), pp. 1 & 6.

⁷² Ibid. p. 6.

Times, effectively, up until the coup on November 1, 1963. Given these serious considerations, the evidence mounts steadily to suggest that Halberstam and The New York Times were, indeed, creating the image of a religious bigot and persecutor in the public persona of Diem. On June 11, 1963, in an article entitled **“U.S. Avoids Part in Saigon Dispute: Tells its Troops Not to Help Stop Buddhist Protests [my emphasis],”** Halberstam, again, drives home the distortion: “About 70 per cent of the country considers itself Buddhist... President Ngo Dinh Diem and his family are Catholics.”⁷³ This point was emphasised again on June 14 (1963),⁷⁴ and then on June 18 (1963) the figure of 70 per cent of all Vietnamese being Buddhist was escalated to 80 per cent.⁷⁵ Halberstam followed the same procedure in an article published in The New York Times on June 22, 1963,⁷⁶ and maintained this point up until Diem was murdered in November of 1963.

In concise terms, it is important for the scholar, interested in this era in American - GVN relations, to understand that the Buddhist Crisis occurred at a time of real progress being made in the countryside.⁷⁷ The people and the GVN, at the expense of the Viet Cong, were gaining this

Footnotes

⁷³ David Halberstam, “U.S. Avoids Part in Dispute: Tells Its Troops Not to Help Stop Buddhist Protests,” in The New York Times, (Tuesday, June 11, 1963), p. 6.

⁷⁴ Max Frankel, “U.S. Warns South Vietnam on Demands of Buddhists: Diem Is Told He Faces Censure if He Fails to Satisfy Religious Grievances, Many of Which Are Called Just,” in The New York Times, (Friday, June 14, 1963), pp. 1 & 10.

⁷⁵ David Halberstam, “Buddhists in Saigon Clash With Police,” in The New York Times, (Sunday, June 16, 1963), pp. 1 & 18.

⁷⁶ David Halberstam, “Discontent Rises In Vietnam Crisis: Regime Losing Ground Over Treatment of Buddhists,” in The New York Times, (Saturday, June 22, 1963), p. 6.

⁷⁷ Later, in 1966, after Nolting had retired from the State Department in protest over Diem’s murder, he expanded on this positive information, which the Kennedy Administration had been made fully aware of back in Washington, “...first of all, the first three or four months of ‘63 went along well. The pacified areas continued to expand, government services to the people increased and improved, the Strategic Hamlet program (of which Ngo Dinh Nhu was the father) seemed to be consolidating these gains, infiltrations were down, VC surrenders under the ‘Open Arms,’ program were up, the economy and communications were much better.” Frederick Nolting, “First Oral History Interview with Frederick E. Nolting.” Recorded interview by Joseph E. O’Connor, May 14, 1966 (Paris, France), p. 18. John F. Kennedy Library, Oral History Program, Boston, Ma.

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rural progress. For American - GVN conflicts over funding of Strategic Hamlets and other counter-insurgency efforts were resolved positively.⁷⁸ To date, there are no documents confirming that the timing of the Buddhist Crisis was planned to derail the progress the GVN was making and the Vietnamese have not been forthcoming about this issue. Nevertheless, it would be naive for any scholar to overlook the timing of these momentous events as, manifestly, the Communists benefited by the Buddhist Crisis which did, in fact, bring the successful Strategic Hamlets program to a halt.

Another event which was taking shape within the Kennedy Administration at the time of the beginning of the Buddhist Crisis, and one that would have a devastating effect on American policy in South Vietnam, was planning and discussion to replace Nolting - immediately. One particular memorandum, sent from Michael V. Forrestal of the National Security Council Staff to President Kennedy made it very clear that Nolting had to be replaced because, in his own words: "What we need is fresh leadership in the field".⁷⁹

Footnotes

⁷⁸ In a lengthy letter to President Diem, General Paul Harkins (Commander, Military Assistance Command, Vietnam) indicated that the campaign against the Viet Cong was producing such dividends that the time was fast-approaching for an all-out offensive to be launched against the VC. Harkins, quite accurately, told Diem that 1962 had been the year wherein a very solid base had been built, via the means of Strategic Hamlets and other COIN efforts, which would permit a thorough offensive to be launched against the Communists. General Paul Harkins, 123. "Letter From the Commander, Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (Harkins) to President Diem," Saigon, May 15, 1963, [Washington National Records Center, RG 334, MAC/V Files: FRC 69 a 702, 204-58 Command Reporting (1963). Secret.] In FRUS: Vietnam, January-August, 1963, Vol. III, pp. 296 - 300.

⁷⁹ The following memorandum of Forrestal's indicates that Nolting's leadership in Vietnam was being questioned: "Roger Hilsman asked me to show you the attached memorandum from him to me. I also attach an airgram from Fritz Nolting also on the subject of interdiction of air strikes against the Viet Cong. The issue resolves to whether or not the United States and Vietnamese military are effectively carrying out our policy of treating the war in South Vietnam as essentially a political battle.

I don't believe that the problem raised by Roger's memorandum can be effectively handled from Washington. What we need is fresh leadership in the field. In this connection, State has still not come up with a replacement for Fritz Nolting who is returning on home leave late this month, although several candidates have been suggested." Michael V. Forrestal, 120. "Memorandum From Michael V. Forrestal of the National Security Council Staff to the President," Washington, May 10, 1963 [Kennedy Library,

Footnote continued on next page: ...

Ngo Dinh Nhu and The American Press –

Simultaneous to the Buddhist Crisis and the move to have Nolting replaced was Dean Rusk's concerns over public opinion in the United States with regard to the unsavoury image the press had managed to create of Ngo Dinh Nhu. Similarly, Rusk or Hilsman, who cleared drafted outgoing telegrams, which used Rusk's name, from the State Department to the US Embassy in Saigon, had taken umbrage at an interview Nhu had given to Warren Unna. In this interview the Counsellor had brought up pointed questions about the American military presence in South Vietnam and the need for a reduction in US armed forces. Specifically, Ngo Dinh Nhu pointed out that their high profile was playing right into the hands of the Communists' propaganda.⁸⁰ Regardless of the potential problems that lay within the Buddhist Crisis, which could not have been entirely foreseen in May of 1963, a very real rift was being opened up between the Kennedy Administration and the Diem government with Ngo Dinh Nhu at the centre of the controversy. On May 17, 1963, Hilsman sent a brisk telegram to Nolting in which he claimed that Nhu was making support for the GVN very difficult in Washington as he had made a public rejoinder about the Warren Unna interview in which he argued that Unna had badly misquoted him. Essentially, Hilsman wanted Nolting to get Diem to "lay-down-the-law" with Nhu:

I hope you able to find additional opportunities continue impress on Diem and Nhu fact that we having rough going defending our Viet-Nam program at best and this incident likely leave lasting bad impression in spite of communiqué. You may say we hope future statements will be more helpful to joint effort defeat VC.

... footnote continued from previous page:

National Security Files, Vietnam Country Series, 4/63-5/63. Secret.] In FRUS: Vietnam, January-August, 1963, Vol. III, p. 291.

⁸⁰ Dean Rusk, 122. "Telegram From the Department of State to the Embassy in Vietnam," Washington, May 13, 1963 - 6:36 p.m., [Department of State, Central Files, DEF 6 US. Secret; Priority. Drafted by Heavner and cleared by Hilsman.] In FRUS: Vietnam, January-August, 1963, Vol. III, pp. 294 - 296.

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Nhu rejoinder to Unna, which we have not yet seen, also may create further difficulties. Unna has reputation on Hill and elsewhere in government as accurate reporter no matter what his policy view. An insulting accusation against him could provoke even stronger resentments...my own fear that Nhu likely to repeat performance if not brought up sharply and above hope that you able find opportunity continue to impress consequences on both Diem and Nhu.⁸¹

Nolting had already warned Hilsman that Diem had gone as far as he could go with regard to a public repudiation of his brother. In addition to this, Nolting "...concluded that much of the unfortunate impact of the incident was due to The Washington Post's handling of the interview.⁸²

Ambassador Nolting sent a lengthy telegram to the State Department on May 18, 1963, wherein he addressed the problems surrounding the Buddhist problem and what the GVN had done to date. Diem, according to Nolting's report, was equally frustrated with Catholics and Buddhists alike in what he termed their "disorderly use" of religious flags. The American Ambassador had noted that Diem was reluctant to cave-in to all Buddhist demands, especially those concerned with blaming GVN forces for the killings in Hue, as the Vietnamese President did not want to give legitimacy to claims about his government that were false. Diem had proof that the killings were not done by his troops and, given these established facts, he was loathe to

Footnotes

⁸¹ Roger Hilsman, 128. "Telegram From the Department of State to the Embassy in Vietnam," Washington, May 17, 1963 [Department of State, Central Files, DEF 6 US. Secret.] In FRUS: Vietnam, January-August, 1963, Vol. III, pp. 308 - 309.

⁸² Frederick Nolting, "Telegram # 1043 to the Department of State," Saigon, May 20, 1963 [Department of State, Central Files, PPV 7 S VIET-US], editorial note attached to Roger Hilsman's telegram to Nolting, 128. "1104. Telegram From the Department of State to the Embassy in Vietnam," Washington, May 17, 1963 - 8:51 p.m., [Department of State, Central Files, DEF 6 US. Secret; Operational Immediate; Limit Distribution.], in FRUS: Vietnam, January-August, 1963, Vol. III, pp. 308 - 309.

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accept that Thich Tri Quang had any other motive than political agitation.⁸³ The essentials of Diem's position were relayed to Washington in a telegram that Nolting sent on May 22 of 1963:

*From Diem's extensive remarks to me, it was quite clear that he is convinced that (a) Hue incident was provoked by Buddhist leaders, (b) deaths were caused by grenade or grenades thrown by VC or other dissidents and not by GVN, and (c) certain Buddhist leaders are seeking to use Hue affair as means of enhancing their own positions within Buddhist movement.*⁸⁴

Because of Nolting's influence with Diem at this time, South Vietnamese Ambassador Buu Hoi had expressed to the State Department, during his visit to Washington, that Ambassador Nolting suggest to Diem the idea that he appoint a cabinet level official responsible for religious affairs. This, it was hoped, would provide an established avenue of appeal that would deal with complaints and problems and, thus, defuse future incidents before they blew-up like the Hue incident.⁸⁵

Footnotes

⁸³ Frederick Nolting, 129. "Telegram From the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State," Saigon, May 18, 1963 - 4 p.m. [Department of State, Central Files, SOC 14-1 S VIET. Confidential:] in FRUS: Vietnam, January-August, 1963, Vol. III, pp. 309 - 312.

⁸⁴ Frederick Nolting, 131. "Telegram From the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State," Saigon, May 22, 1963 - 2 p.m. [Department of State, Central Files, SOC 14-1 S VIET. Secret; Priority] in FRUS: Vietnam, January-August, 1963, Vol. III, p. 314.

⁸⁵ "Telegram 1117 - Department of State to the Embassy in Saigon," as noted in footnote #4 attached to Frederick Nolting's telegram to the State Department as 131. "1050. Telegram From the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State," Saigon, May 22, 1963 - 2 p.m., [Department of State, Central Files, SOC 14-1 S VIET. Secret; Priority. Repeated to CINCPAC] in FRUS: Vietnam, January-August, 1963, Vol. III, p. 314.

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The Australian Experts on Counter-Insurgency Praise & Support the GVN's CIP –

While those in Washington who would replace Diem grew restless with the potential and possibilities of the Buddhist problem in South Vietnam, other extremely positive reports about the COIN effort continued to be brought to light in the American Capitol. One report, in particular, carried enormous weight and prestige as it was given by Colonel Serong, Head of the Australian Training Mission to South Vietnam; for it was generally acknowledged that, when it came to jungle-warfare in Southeast Asia, the Australians knew their business extremely well indeed. A high-level meeting of the Special Group for Counter-insurgency was held on May 23, 1963, and it was attended by Averell Harriman, Robert Kennedy, the Attorney General, Mr. McCone, Director of the CIA, a number of Presidential aides and advisors, and Generals Krulak and Taylor. During the course of this meeting Colonel Serong stated that all the indicators showed that the war against the Communist insurrectionists was being won.⁸⁶ Serong used several current statistical indicators that displayed the favourable trends in countering the Viet Cong; not least of importance amongst these indicators was the substantial increase in the volume of spontaneous intelligence given by the people to the GVN. Colonel Serong attributed this marked increase in valuable intelligence as resulting directly from the Strategic Hamlets as these afforded the people greater security from the threats of the Communists.⁸⁷ Serong put the success within the context of frustration which was being leaked from American advisors to the

Footnotes

⁸⁶ James W. Dingeman - Executive Secretary, 132. "Minutes of a Meeting of the Special Group for Counter-insurgency, Washington, May 23, 1963, 2 p.m.: 3. Discussion with Colonel Serong on the Situation in Viet-Nam," [Department of State, Special Group Counter-insurgency Files: Lot 68 D 451. Secret. Drafted by Dingeman who is not listed among the participants.] In FRUS: Vietnam, January-August, 1963, Vol. III, pp. 315 - 316.

⁸⁷ Ibid. p. 315.

press and, while acknowledging that things in South Vietnam were far from perfect, he stated that he believed the real success story, i.e., that of the strategic hamlets, was being overlooked:

He pointed out that there are problems with the press in Viet-Nam, but they are reporting what they see or are being told. He believes this situation can be improved by working more closely with them in the field. Our US military advisors are reflecting in their comments to the press their frustrations to get the Vietnamese to accept their advice. The big success story in Viet-Nam is the strategic hamlet program and this story has not yet been fully told. He stated that out of a total population of about 16 million some 8 million have been moved into the strategic hamlets, resulting in one of the biggest population moves in history.⁸⁸

Serong also informed the Washington meeting about some of the problems that could be expected from the strategic hamlets program owing to the rapidity with which it had been implemented. The Australian Colonel was particularly worried about gaps left, in what he termed the lateral development of strategic hamlets,⁸⁹ where the Communists could infiltrate and wreak havoc in areas, theoretically, already cleared.⁹⁰

The significant point that should be noted, with regard to Colonel Serong's report, is that Ambassador Nolting had effectively and positively influenced relations between Washington and Saigon in such a manner as to allow the counter-insurgency program to reach a strong position where even foreign experts were acknowledging its success. This recognition, however, poses at

Footnotes

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ "Colonel Serong presented an oral and graphic description of the concept of the strategic hamlet program and in the southern portion of Viet-Nam, stating that its objective is to establish strategic hamlets on a radial basis along communications routes with subsequent development of hamlets laterally to fill the gaps. The purpose is to separate the people from the insurgents.

The radial development of the hamlets is progressing well but the lateral program is falling behind. He observed that we may be overextending ourselves in the strategic hamlet program leaving a number of Viet Cong behind enabling them to penetrate areas already cleared. The strength of the Vietnamese armed forces is being sapped to counter the threats of the Viet Cong in these pockets of resistance." *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ *Ibid.* pp. 315 - 316.

least two very difficult historical questions. The first question is, if Nolting had led the way to such a strong and effective strategy against the Communists why, then, did the powers within the State Department, particularly, choose to ignore this success? The second and related question would have to be why, indeed, did the powerful men in DOS turn about and attack the very foundation of the accomplishment - the GVN under the leadership of Ngo Dinh Diem? One thing is reasonably certain in attempting to come to grips with this question, as will be made manifest through the evidence garnered herein, the decision to get rid of Diem had already been made, as revealed in the assumptions of men like Averell Harriman.⁹¹ Thus, the Buddhist Crisis was allowed, perhaps encouraged, to assume ridiculous proportions in souring relations between Washington and Saigon. It stands to reason, then, that Nolting was an impediment to this plan and that he had to be replaced by an ambassador who would draw up the battle lines between Diem and his enemies in Washington.

An important consideration, which needs to be reiterated, and which should be factored into the historian's analysis of this period, was the fact that the Strategic Hamlets were reaping dividends in the war against the Communist insurgents and that this effective work was undone as a result of the Buddhist Crisis. William Colby's testimony makes this point precisely and it

Footnotes

⁹¹ One of the best documents supporting the argument that Harriman was already looking for another, more compliant leader for South Vietnam exists in the Nolting Collection of private and personal papers at the University of Virginia. The document, which is a Harriman telegram to Nolting, dated February 18, 1963 - i.e., before the Buddhist Crisis - encourages Nolting to look for alternative leaders and to lend support to Diem's opponents. The following excerpt gives credence to the argument that Harriman was 'fishing' for alternatives to Diem even before the Buddhist Crisis: "However you, and your very competent Labor Attaché, might wish to consider using CIA to supply some discreet support to Mr. Buu's labor union in order to counteract repressive measures taken against it by GVN." W. Averell Harriman, Official -Informal Secret Letter to Frederick E. Nolting, p.1 in RG-21/102.921; Box Number: 12; Folder Dates & Heading: Selected Correspondence, Harriman W. Averell, The Nolting Papers.

It should also be noted that the State Department claims that they could not find this document as mentioned by Nolting in his return telegram to Harriman - see footnote #2 in FRUS: Vietnam, January-August, 1963, Vol. III, p. 126.

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supports what the Australian and British counter-insurgency experts had been telling Washington:

But, while the Communists had not yet begun to lose the war and were still in fact building their forces through local recruitment and infiltration of men and supplies from North Vietnam, they no longer seemed to be winning the race into the vacuum in the countryside. Set against the time frame of several years, which were recognised in the comparable conflict in Malaya, a start had clearly been made in the right direction in Vietnam, and in my view success seemed possible if the strategy were pursued with forceful leadership, hard work and American support. But all this began to disappear as a result of the May 8 Buddhist riot and deaths.... a fatal confrontation between the Diem government and the Buddhists had begun. And whether the Buddhists represented most Vietnamese or stood for only a small portion of the population did not matter either, because the vigour of their political assault on the Saigon regime electrified America and intensified the debate there over the pros and cons of the Diem government.⁹²

While Nolting was reporting to Washington about the substantial gains made in countering the Viet Cong and, at the same time, soothing their anger over the Warren Unna - Ngo Dinh Nhu explosion,⁹³ Thich Tri Quang's plans to topple Diem and the GVN continued to

Footnotes

⁹² Colby, *Honorable Men*, p. 204.

⁹³ See Nolting's cable to the State Department wherein Nhu's position is explained as not anti-American or inconsistent with US views and objectives but, instead, as a nationalist's view which would like to see the Vietnamese army and provincial administrators less dependent on constant American assistance.¹³⁴ "Telegram From the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State," May 23, 1963 [Department of State, Central Files, POL 15-S VIET. Secret;] in *FRUS: Vietnam, January-August, 1963*, Vol. III, pp. 324 - 327.

As Ellen Hammer has pointed out in her studies, there was far more than just American sentiment at work, with regard to the Unna - Nhu controversy as, indeed, the Vietnamese had genuine nationalist concerns over what the Americans were doing in Vietnam and what would happen to Vietnamese sovereignty if American armed forces started to deploy in increasing quantities in South Vietnam. Diem was concerned more about American intentions at the beginning of the Buddhist Crisis than he was about the Buddhists creating too much turmoil. This problem went back to the whole counter-insurgency funding problem that Diem had had with the Americans; as Hammer explains: "The real problem troubling the Vietnamese President was not money but men - the American advisers who seemed to be everywhere, too numerous, too deeply involved in Vietnamese affairs. And now the Americans wanted still more influence for their officers serving with Vietnamese fighting units and intended to bring in many more military advisers. worst of all, they insisted on bypassing the central government to deliver supplies directly to the provincial authorities, allowing the American advisers on duty in the provinces to control the distribution of aid to the hamlets. The Americans would run the new rural economic development plan...For Diem, this amounted to direct administration by foreigners, a new colonialism that he could not tolerate...The fact that

Footnote continued on next page: ...

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come into being. Indeed, his plans were spawned with a ferocity equalled only by the Communist insurgents themselves. In fact, only two days after the original incident in Hué Tri Quang had boasted to an American official in that city that his campaign, which was anti-Diem, would not be stopped until the leadership of the GVN had been toppled.⁹⁴ The pressure being applied by the Americans on Diem to bend to the will of the Buddhists had paid dividends in that the only concession that Diem refused to make was to acknowledge that his troops had caused the deaths in Hué as, indeed, all the forensic evidence pointed elsewhere.⁹⁵ The American inability to deal unemotionally and calmly with the Buddhist problem, especially as witnessed from the reactions in Washington, played right into the hands of Diem's enemies - who could not have asked for their long-term plans to develop any better than they did. An acerbic assessment given to this whole issue came from a Vietnamese professor who achieved some prominence in Saigon's political affairs in the year after Diem's death.⁹⁶ In an interview with Marguerite Higgins's, that was given in 1964, the professor stated the following:

President Diem's greatest mistake during the spring and summer of 1963 was to listen to the Americans. Washington forced Diem to dig his own political grave when it urged him in the summer of 1963 to be conciliatory and allow the extremist wing of Buddhists and students to create turmoil in the streets, and so to parade their false charges in the gullible American press and powerful television media. During this period of "conciliation" the Buddhists cleverly used to the maximum the time of supposed negotiation with the government as a cover to slander it and weaken it. Pretty soon the whole world began to believe the accusations against Diem. The Americans were tying Diem's hands behind his back and telling the manipulators of the mob, "Hit him again." Thich Tri

... footnote continued from previous page:

Diem and Nhu wanted the provincial advisers removed had set off warning bells in the offices of Washington policymakers." Hammer, A Death In November, pp. 120 -121.

⁹⁴ Higgins, Our Vietnam Nightmare, p. 101.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ For reasons not yet explained in the historiography of this period, other than the professor's prominence in Vietnamese politics at the time that she wrote her book, Our Vietnam Nightmare, Marguerite Higgins did not divulge the name of this bitter Vietnamese critic.

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Quang can hardly be blamed for being smart enough to aim his blows for the moment when CBS News and the New York Times were ready.

Diem knew that Tri Quang was using the Xa Loi Pagoda as a propaganda and subversion command post to topple his regime. Diem knew that Thich Tri Quang had served with the Communists and that the tumult was serving Communist ends. He knew all about those horrible Buddhist suicide squads in which monks brainwashed likely recruits and furnished them with gasoline and anti-pain pills. Diem had every sound reason to end the mobocracy, arrest its leaders, disband its suicide squads, and get on with the war. Instead, to please the Americans, Diem allowed the turbulence to go on, in the name of conciliation, for three whole months, and in the process permitted the Buddhists to poison world opinion to the extent that Washington decided to get rid of him. It was a perfect vicious circle and served Diem right for ever having trusted the Americans in the first place.⁹⁷

This bitter Vietnamese estimation was, unfortunately, not too far wrong as the foundation of “trusting the Americans” had, indeed, been established thanks largely to the genuine good-will and good efforts of Ambassador Nolting. Furthermore, and as the events of the summer of 1963 subsequently proved, the Nolting mission was not a permanent part of American policy, a policy that, became as destructive toward political stability in South Vietnam upon Nolting’s recall to the United States as it had been constructive under his tenure. Indeed, Nolting had cautioned his own countrymen that their hubris and zeal would undo the patient work accomplished to date; he had strongly hinted at this when he had told Robert McNamara “...that it was difficult, if not impossible, to put a Ford engine into a Vietnamese ox-cart.”⁹⁸ According to Nolting, McNamara agreed with his analogy but claimed that the US had the know-how and capability to do just that and make it work in short order.⁹⁹ To carry Nolting’s analogy

Footnotes

⁹⁷ *ibid.* pp. 102 - 103.

⁹⁸ Michael Charlton, Many Reasons Why: The American Involvement in Vietnam, program 4 in a series of 11 programs, Part II, The New Frontiersmen Hold The Line, British Broadcasting Corporation, Radio 3, Talks and Documentaries Department; Recorded Thursday 23rd June 1977; Transmission Tuesday 11th October 1977, 2130-2215; Manuscript copy, p.4 in RG-21/102.921; Box Number: 13; Folder Dates & Heading: Professional Papers, The Nolting Papers.

⁹⁹ *ibid.*

a step further, during his absence in the summer of 1963, the Harriman group used the pretext of the Buddhist crisis to finally do what they had wanted all along: to set in motion the means to change the ox-cart driver, i.e., Ngo Dinh Diem, and replace him with someone more compliant to their will.

As May of 1963 came to a close Ambassador Nolting made his preparations to go on leave.¹⁰⁰ Accordingly, the US Ambassador made his final pre-leave report to Washington which is noteworthy as he made little mention of the Buddhist Crisis, other than noting Vice President Tho's concern that the Buddhist situation could be handled more adroitly.¹⁰¹ Instead, Nolting, quite rightly, gave Washington an overall report on the region of Southeast Asia with regard to South Vietnam's current status therein. This overall report included nothing that was alarmist but did note that, while relations were improving with Laos, Cambodia continued to be seen as a problem by the Vietnamese as Sihanouk maintained an anti-Diem policy.¹⁰² The trouble with Nolting's report, professional and accurate as it was, was that it did not carry the same weight in Washington as the emotional and inaccurate reporting coming from the US newspaper reporters did. In fact Nolting, along with Paul Harkins and CIA Station Chief John Richardson, was losing credibility within the Kennedy Administration for not "getting-on-board" with the popular anti-

Footnotes

¹⁰⁰ Nolting left Vietnam on May 24th, 1963; he would return on July 11, after his holiday in the Aegean and after consultations in Washington. Editor's footnote # 2 in 134. "Telegram From the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State," May 23, 1963 [Department of State, Central Files, POL 15-S VIET. Secret;] in FRUS: Vietnam, January-August, 1963, Vol. III, p. 324.

¹⁰¹ Ambassador Nolting, 134. "Telegram From the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State," May 23, 1963 [Department of State, Central Files, POL 15-S VIET. Secret;] in FRUS: Vietnam, January-August, 1963, Vol. III, p. 325.

¹⁰² Ibid., p. 326.

It is worth noting that Prince Sihanouk was one of the major instigators in rallying world public-opinion against Diem during the Buddhist Crisis as he wrote letters to many leaders of state, including John F. Kennedy, wherein he implored them to do something about the persecution of the Buddhists by the Catholic regime of Ngo Dinh Diem's. Footnote #1 attached to Norodom Sihanouk, 173. "Telegram From Prince Sihanouk to President Kennedy," Phnom Penh, June 14, 1963, [Department of State, Central Files, SOC 14-1 S VIET], in FRUS: Vietnam, January-August, 1963, Vol. III, p. 392.

Diemist sentiment which, of course, would have been the path of least resistance; as Dr. Pan explains:

In spite of the fact that there was no evidence of prejudice against the Buddhists...the propaganda against him [Diem] was intensified [my emphasis]. The anti-Diem elements, together with the efforts of world Communists and their followers, made an impact that was felt all over the world. In Washington, the Kennedy Administration decided, with the insistence of a few "Oriental experts," that Diem must be ousted...General Paul D. Harkins, of the US Military Assistance Command in Vietnam (USMACV), Frederick E. Nolting, Jr., US Ambassador in Saigon, and John Richardson, CIA Chief in Saigon, lost most of their influence in Washington because they were allegedly "pro-Diem." Ambassador Nolting's report on South Viet Nam at this time carried less weight than the reports of a young and inexperienced New York Times correspondent named David Halberstam. Halberstam and other US reporters influenced the Administration unduly, and prejudiced it against Diem [my emphasis].¹⁰³

Footnotes

¹⁰³ Pan & Lyons, Vietnam Crisis, p. 115.

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There was a personal drama behind the scenes of the American reaction to the Buddhist upheaval. It arose out of the coincidence that Ambassador Nolting had left Saigon on a well-earned home leave with his family just before the crisis developed.... It was a last-straw touch to Nolting's anguished tour of duty that in his absence the US switched back to a "tough" policy with Diem and it failed miserably. It will remain one of the unanswerable "ifs" of history that Nolting's low-key way, at the moment of ultimate challenge, might have been more effective.¹

Nolting went on holidays with his family and left his deputy, William Trueheart, in charge of the Embassy in his absence with the strict instructions that he was to be contacted immediately if any sort of crisis or serious problem developed.² Unfortunately for all concerned, the Buddhist Crisis erupted in earnest while Nolting was out of the country and Trueheart failed to honour his pledge to contact the Ambassador. This was a serious breach of trust and it had long-term ramifications for US policy. Later, in August of 1963, when Nolting was back at the State Department in Washington he filed a report on Trueheart to the Personnel Division that spelled out, in unequivocal terms, the nature of Trueheart's failure:

This is a final report which I am required to make at the end of my tour of duty as Ambassador to South Viet-Nam. I have previously given Mr. Trueheart the highest efficiency ratings that I have ever given. He deserved them on the basis of his performance as Deputy Chief of Mission. I must, however, record the following reservation, based on events which occurred since my previous reports.

On May 23, 1963, my family and I left Saigon on home leave, taking approximately a month's vacation en route to New York and Washington. Our schedule was known in detail to Mr. Trueheart, who was Charge during my absence. I had specifically asked Mr. Trueheart to advise me, en route, of any changes in the situation in Viet-Nam, in order that I might be up-to-date upon my

Footnotes

¹Mecklin, Mission in Torment, p. 168.

² Nolting, From Trust to Tragedy, p. 108.

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arrival in the United States. Neither of us anticipated any major changes in the situation.

Mr. Trueheart as Charge, through no fault of his own, was faced by a dangerously developing crisis shortly after my departure. It was of such magnitude as to threaten to destroy the base on which United States policy in Viet-Nam was founded and to cause great changes in the relationships between the United States Mission and the Vietnamese Government.

Mr. Trueheart failed to let me know of these developments. This was contrary to our understanding and, in my view, not in keeping with the responsibilities and loyalties of a Deputy Chief of Mission to a Chief of Mission, irrespective of previous understandings.³

In June of 1966, Nolting told Mr. Joseph O'Connor, in an interview the latter was conducting for the John F. Kennedy Library, that Trueheart had been won over to the Harriman-Hilsman group and had adjusted his views accordingly.⁴ As such, when Nolting later attempted to check in on developments, while on vacation in the Aegean, the Embassy in Athens had nothing to report from Saigon as, indeed, Trueheart had failed to comply with his boss' instructions and had withheld urgent Buddhist crisis developments.⁵

The historical question, which is pertinent to Ambassador Nolting's mission and his concern over Trueheart's failure, becomes what happened in Nolting's absence that so devastated all his efforts at building a constructive and mutually respectful relationship between the American and Vietnamese governments? Clearly, the answer to this question in its simplest form is the Buddhist crisis. This simplest answer, though, reflects only the surface of the problem as

Footnotes

³ Frederick E. Nolting, "Limited Official Use: William C. Trueheart, Deputy Chief of Mission," Letter date: August 17, 1963, pp. 1 - 2 in RG-21/102.921; Box Number: 13; Folder Dates & Heading: Selected Correspondence: Trueheart, William, The Nolting Papers.

⁴ Frederick Nolting, "First Oral History Interview with Frederick E. Nolting." Recorded interview by Joseph E. O'Connor, May 14, 1966 (Paris, France) p.21, John F. Kennedy Library, Oral History Program.

⁵ *Ibid.*

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the real destruction of relations, which subsequently imperilled American policy in the region, occurred as a result of how Trueheart treated Ngo Dinh Diem. Averell Harriman and Roger Hilsman prescribed this treatment.

Nolting summarised, in his memoirs, what essentially went on in Vietnam during his leave. He noted that the Buddhists escalated their agitation regardless of Diem's attempts to placate them;⁶ and an elderly, respected Buddhist monk, Thich Quang Duc, ceremoniously burned himself to death on June 11, 1963.⁷ Of course, The New York Times did not fail to pick up on this part of the Buddhist story and its potential for bringing pressure to bear on Diem's GVN.⁸ Notably, the leaders of the radical Xa Loi and Tu Dam pagodas had arranged this suicide

Footnotes

⁶ These attempts of Diem's, to placate the Bonzes, were duly noted in the cable traffic between the Embassy in Saigon and the State Department in Washington. Indeed, in telegram # 1189 Trueheart explained that the South Vietnamese government was having difficulty in keeping the bonzes at the negotiating table as the latter were coming up with all manner of excuse for not negotiating. Furthermore, the biased coverage in The New York Times was making the official Vietnamese position very difficult in negotiations as the Buddhists would merely claim that they would go to the public. Here is how Trueheart reported these developments: "Saw Thuan 1230. He was deeply distressed and angry at NYT story. Said at first it would 'ruin' negotiations.

Thuan reported talks with Buddhists this morning had made little progress. Buddhists had in fact asked unaccountably that meetings be adjourned until Monday, but under GVN prodding finally showed up hour late. Thuan now thought they had gotten word of NYT story (this entirely possible as US press fully aware from their headquarters." William Trueheart, 176. "Telegram [# 1189] From The Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State," Saigon, June 15, 1963 - 2 p.m., [Department of State, Central Files, SOC 14-1 S VIET. Secret; Emergency... a note on another copy of this telegram indicates that the President read it.] in FRUS: Vietnam, January-August, 1963, Vol. III, p. 395.

In addition to these negotiations, which the Buddhist leaders seemed less interested in than the GVN, Diem signed a communiqué on June 1, 1963, which noted "...the debates held between the Interministerial Committee and the General Association of Buddhists in Vietnam June 14 - 16 'to seek a satisfactory resolution for the five demands' presented by the Buddhists." This communiqué was acknowledged by the State Department, as a copy was sent to the State Department in telegram # 1194 from Saigon on June 16, 1963, and appears in the Central Files, SOC 14-1 S VIET.

⁷ Nolting, From Trust to Tragedy, p. 112.

⁸ Associated Press, "Monk Suicide by Fire In Anti-Diem Protest," in The New York Times, (Tuesday, June 11, 1963), p. 4.

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by fire and it had taken place outside the Cambodian Embassy. Thus, it was, amongst other things, a clear political appeal to the Cambodians whose leader, Prince Sihanouk, was well known to be no friend of Ngo Dinh Diem's.⁹

It was no secret that Buddhists had already found encouragement and support in Cambodia and Ceylon, two countries whose leaders were not admired in Saigon government circles. Adherents of the Hinayana form of Buddhism that prevailed across the border in Cambodia were also found in the Vietnamese Buddhist movement in the South. Their presence raised the spectre for the Ngos that Norodom Sihanouk might encourage Vietnamese Buddhist activists to try to impose on Vietnam the neutral stance he held in his own country, where he steered a middle course between the Communists and the West. Diem's policy of courting the Third World was a strategy for diplomacy in areas safely removed from the borders of Vietnam. Closer to home, the Ngos remained firmly anti-Communist. They had sponsored plots against Sihanouk in the past, with the Americans and on their own, and they did not trust him now.¹⁰

Prince Sihanouk, for his part, had made public statements against the Ngos - asserting, amongst other things, that Hanoi was bound to be victorious over them. At the Seventh World Buddhist Congress, held in Phnom Penh back in November of 1961, the Buddhist delegation from South Vietnam had been introduced to delegations from North Vietnam and Communist China. It is worth noting that both of these delegations from the Communist countries were firmly under Communist Party control.¹¹ While it cannot be proved to any degree of absolute definition, the connections facilitated by the Cambodians between Communists and the Buddhist radicals and their revolt in South Vietnam appears to have some substance in reality. This becomes particularly obvious when one considers Professor Pike's research on this subject. He illuminated the fact that Thich Thom Me The Nhem, "...an ethnic Cambodian and a Buddhist monk, acted as

Footnotes

⁹ Higgins, Our Vietnam Nightmare, p. 18.

¹⁰ Hammer, A Death In November, pp. 140 - 141.

¹¹ Ibid. p. 141.

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leader of the Cambodian minority in Vietnam as well as the chief NLF [Viet Cong] liaison figure with the Vietnamese Buddhist organisations.”¹²

That there existed an ideological ‘common-ground’ between Communism and certain radical aspects of Buddhism was a fact established in the research of Father Piero Gheddo of the Pontifical Institute for Foreign Missions of Milan. His thorough investigations uncovered an article significantly entitled “World Coexistence of Buddhism and Communism” in a radical Japanese Buddhist publication, Young East, No. 56, Tokyo, 1965, pp. 18 – 24. This illuminating article made plain the fact that there was “...a desire to show that the oppression in Asia comes from Christianity and white people, while salvation comes from Buddhism united with Communism since both complement one another and have the same aspirations and the same goals.”¹³ Father Gheddo went on to uncover this article’s main argument that “Between Buddhism and Communism there is more that unites than divides.”¹⁴

At this juncture, it is important for the reader to consider the fact that behind the public image of the Buddhist monk in flames there had been much intrigue and manipulation which made this political spectacle possible. This is an important consideration because of the devastating impact this image had on the GVN’s ability to appear legitimate in the eyes of the American people. Accordingly, Ambassador Nolting recalled in his memoirs how a Vietnamese acquaintance related the background of the whole event to him. Diem’s own personal physician who also happened to treat Quang Duc on a regular basis at the Xa Loi Pagoda had told Diem of

Footnotes

¹² Pike, Viet Cong: The Organization and Techniques of the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam, p. 431.

¹³ Fr. Gheddo, The Cross and the Bo-Tree, p. 206.

¹⁴ Ibid.

the possibility that Thich Quang Duc would burn himself to death before the fact.¹⁵ This doctor, whose name Nolting would not divulge for security reasons, had been reporting to the Vietnamese president about the political machinations in progress over at the Xa Loi and that several 'new' monks were trying to convince the Venerable Quang Duc to kill himself. Quang Duc was targeted for this persuasion because, several years earlier, he had made a suicide pact with a fellow Buddhist monk in Hanoi who had indeed carried out his part of the bargain and burned himself to death in Hanoi. (The noteworthy point here being that no-one, including David Halberstam or the General Association of Buddhists in Vietnam, was concerned at all by the outright persecution of Buddhists conducted by the Communist Party in North Vietnam).¹⁶ Consequently, it became known by the leaders of the Buddhist uprising that Quang Duc wanted to redeem his pledge which, in itself, had nothing to do with politics or protest against Diem's government until they made it so.¹⁷

Footnotes

¹⁵ Nolting, From Trust to Tragedy, p. 115.

¹⁶ "That there were discriminations in favor of the Catholics (not qua Catholics but as certain foes of Communism) is undeniable, but that Diem 'declared a religious war against four-fifths of the population, who were Buddhists' passed for the truth only with a certain kind of Western press which never raised the least protest about the absolute authentic persecutions suffered by Buddhism in North Vietnam.... It is enough to say that the two largest Buddhist organizations of North Vietnam (North Vietnam Buddhist Association and the North Vietnam Sangha) have, and had even in Diem's time, settled in Saigon, after having fled from the North (World Buddhism, January, 1963, p. 20)." Fr. Gheddo, The Cross and the Bo-Tree, pp. 184 & 204.

According to Fr. Pierro Gheddo, the Buddhists of North Vietnam were, effectively, eliminated as a practising or functioning organised religion. They were completely incapable of resisting the Communist onslaught and seemed to lack any sort of organised or prepared protest to the Communists and, thus, acquiesced without a whimper. Ibid. p. 206.

¹⁷ Nolting, From Trust to Tragedy, pp. 115 - 116.

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American reporters had been tipped-off by the radical Xa Loi pagodists that an “important” event was going to take place.¹⁸ They were told where to go and, sure enough, Malcom Browne was able to photograph the ‘Buddha in the Fire’ making his supposed protest against Diem’s persecution sealed in flame.¹⁹ This fiery image linked to alleged persecution, Nolting contends, is what turned American public opinion away from President Diem.²⁰ Leading front page articles in The New York Times, such as **“U.S. Warns South Vietnam On Demands of Buddhists: Diem is Told He Faces Censure if He Fails to Satisfy Religious Grievances, Many of Which are Called Just [my emphasis],”** blazed out against Diem and shocked the American public.²¹ David Halberstam could not resist running a story concerned with “Buddhist Women” protesting in support of the monk “...who burned himself to death to protest against restrictions on religious practice.”²² What the American public did not know and, remarkably, what the young investigative reporters failed to tell them, was the historical fact that Buddhist monks had burned themselves to death before Diem had ever held public office and well-before America’s news-media inspired concern over religious persecution in Southeast Asia.²³ It must

Footnotes

¹⁸ The wording used by the radical Buddhists, “...an important event was going to take place...”, was eerily reminiscent of the same exact phrase that they issued about the riot and death in Hué which had precipitated the entire crisis.

¹⁹ Nolting, From Trust to Tragedy, p. 112.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Max Frankel, “U.S. Warns South Vietnam On Demands of Buddhists: Diem is Told He Faces Censure if He Fails to Satisfy Religious Grievances, Many of Which Are Called Just,” in The New York Times, (Friday, June 14, 1963), p. 1.

²² David Halberstam, “Buddhist Women Protest,” in The New York Times, (Friday, June 14, 1963), p. 10.

²³ Ellen Hammer’s research is extremely thorough on this point and owing to her acknowledged authority on Vietnamese culture and politics her work is well worth considering: “The activist bonzes found they had a weapon of choice that had captured the horrified imagination of people in many places throughout the world. They would use that weapon time and again in their struggle with the Diem

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be underscored, at this point, that such 'burnings' had no acceptable place in orthodox Buddhist teaching.²⁴ In other words, 'burning Buddhas' only had shock value in the Western world and this was who, particularly so in the case of the United States, the politically motivated Buddhist

... footnote continued from previous page:

government. In Washington, no less a personage than Senator Frank Church, a member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, would say in September, 'Such grisly scenes have not been witnessed since the Christian martyrs marched hand in hand into the Roman arenas.'

Senator Church was wrong, for Vietnam alone had seen many self-immolations over the years - although, to do the senator justice, no one could have gleaned that information from the American press. Throughout the summer of 1963 reporters would turn out reams of copy about the Buddhists and their trial of strength with the Diem regime. The American public had the right to know, as they liked to say. But never in all that time did these reporters who were so dedicated to the truth stop to inquire whether such deaths by fire had ever before occurred in Vietnam. Yet there was no secret about it: they had only to talk with knowledgeable people, Vietnamese and others, and consult old books and newspapers.

The practice of Vietnamese bonzes' [sic] burning themselves to death to honour Buddha could be traced back for centuries. As late as 1950 such a case had occurred in North Vietnam. The French authorities had tried to stamp out the practice in colonial days but were not always successful. They did keep one monk who was intent on suicide away from the flames in Hue, but he finally succeeded in starving himself to death. During the 1920s and 1930s, Saigon newspapers from time to time matter-of-factly recorded the death of a bonze who had burned himself alive.... But no such details about the practice of these and other forms of suicide in Vietnam and China appeared in the American press. The self-immolation the Buddhist activists had organised in Saigon on June 11 was new and alien to Western experience and generated shock waves that were all they could have wished, demonstrating that they had planned well and judged their audience accurately. Hammer, A Death In November, pp. 145 - 146.

²⁴ Father Piero Gheddo's scholarly research and examination of this precise subject supports what Marguerite Higgins had uncovered in her interviews with Buddhist monks. "The scholar, M. Percheron, author of valuable books on Asian religions, wrote in La Croix, June 14, 1963: 'Buddhism is an attitude of wisdom which has at its base respect for the life and the opinions of others.... Non-violence and the refusal to attempt the life of another are the cornerstone of the Buddhist spirit.... It is totally alien to Buddhism to have a public and spectacular suicide with self-immolation in flames of a protesting bonze, since the respect for life extends to one's own.' We cannot disagree with this judgement when we think that with Buddhism the absolute respect for life is even stricter than that of the Christians (the Buddhists are vegetarians and, according to the rules, the bonzes drink only filtered river water in order not to swallow involuntarily midges or other living beings.) How this total respect for every form of life can be morally in accord with the suicide of bonzes is hard to explain. Some see in it an indication of the presence of Communists among the Vietnamese Buddhists, i.e., that their revolt against Diem was instigated and led by alien elements and not by Buddhists who were fighting for religious freedom. It is certain that in no other country of the Orient where the Buddhists had severe conflicts with the local government (e.g., Burma and Ceylon), was a similar method of pressure like the bonzes' suicide ever used." Fr. Gheddo, The Cross and the Bo-Tree, p. 205.

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bonzes had targeted precisely.²⁵ In support of Nolting's analysis concerned with the impact of the burning bonze,²⁶ William Colby made the following astute observation in his customary steady logic and manner during an interview with Mr. Ted Gittinger of the LBJ Library:

What he [Diem] couldn't control later were two things: one, the forerunner of the Ayatollah Khomeini, the Buddhist bonzes that burned themselves. Because I think that's an exact forerunner, total rejection of the changes going on, modernisation, an idealistic return to some religious base which, if you ever talk to any of these people you really see that it's all words and no content. I mean, very, very strange. Then the effect, however, of the Buddhist thing -- again, I'm a little contentious about this because I believe that the Buddhist revolt, which blew up in June of 1963, had its major impact not in Vietnam but in the United States. When the picture of the burning bonze appeared in Life magazine, the party was almost over in terms of the imagery that was affecting the American opinion. That put enormous pressure on

Footnotes

²⁵ "There are more than 20,000 official suicides in the United States each year. One can hardly conclude that they prove anything, except that the victim is often mentally unbalanced. But the world press made the suicides in Saigon sensational. The world, and particularly the United States, was filled with shock and horror...the suicides in South Vietnam were undoubtedly inspired by politically-minded Buddhist leaders, dedicated to the overthrow of the anti-Communist government in Saigon." Pan & Lyons, Vietnam Crisis, pp. 113 - 114.

²⁶ Having reviewed much of the literature concerned with the Buddhist crisis and, specifically, material which concerns itself with the purpose of the burning bonzes, this writer has yet to come across in the same in-depth and bluntly candid interviews that Marguerite Higgins was able to conduct with Thich Tri Quang, the leader of the Buddhist insurrection. Thich Tri Quang, during the course of the Higgins' interviews, revealed that his insurrection had nothing really to do with 'Buddhist persecution' per se and everything to do with a political power-grab. "As I emerged from the Xa Loi Pagoda, it was clear to me that Thich Tri Quang was hungry for power, exhilarated by the world's attention, and supremely confident of getting his way. - I remember at one point saying, 'But if I repeat some of these things you are telling me, it could hurt you.' 'That is not possible,' said Thich Tri Quang, 'because nobody will believe you.'...Thich Tri Quang was perfectly candid about what he was doing. When I asked him about the ethics of sending people off to fiery deaths for political purposes he merely shrugged his shoulders and said that 'in a revolution many things must be done.'...And what was to be made of his icily cool manner as he talked of 'ten, forty, fifty' horrifying suicides?... the truth is that I, like many Americans, greatly underestimated Thich Tri Quang for a long, long time. - In any case, by September the message I finally conveyed to President Kennedy about Thich Tri Quang was far different from what the monk intended. Instead of passing on his piece of blackmail concerning self-immolations and the Kennedy image, I tried at the White House to convey some of my own foreboding about these extremist Buddhists that had crystallized, finally, during my fact-finding tour of Vietnam....It is clear that Thich Tri Quang understood the forces at play in the world of that time far better than I did. For even when I left Vietnam that summer I did not share Thich Tri Quang's conviction that the United States would take his side in the battle against Diem. - But I was wrong." Higgins, Our Vietnam Nightmare, pp. 33 - 35.

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President Kennedy. *“How can you possibly support a government that has people doing this against it [my emphasis]?” [It] led to his vacillation, which is what I have to say it was in terms of what we should do about this problem, and then led to Diem’s forceful suppression of the Buddhist revolt in the August raids. Frankly, I think he suppressed them in the same way that he suppressed the sects in 1955.*

Now, the problem he couldn’t control was the United States reaction. But the Buddhists were not a factor in September and October. The factor was the difference between the Americans and the government. It wasn’t a matter of the Buddhists being a major problem in the countryside. They were not a major problem, and he had not lost the authority of his state [my emphasis]. Sure, there were unhappy people, but he hadn’t lost authority and he had been through tough challenges like that before.²⁷

Having removed the emotion of the American newsmen and the American public from his analysis, Colby was able to discern and illustrate the difference between the impact of the burning bonzes on the public and, subsequently, President Kennedy’s policy, and the actual political legitimacy Diem still enjoyed in Vietnam. Thus, the emotion of the Buddhist crisis subverted American focus away from their real strategic assets and goal in South Vietnam. Nolting, for his part, discerned this subversion of strategic focus through Trueheart’s actions in his absence. He noted that “the whole machinery of co-operation between the American mission and the South Vietnamese government nearly collapsed.”²⁸ Nolting could see, upon reading the cable traffic between Washington and Saigon, that Trueheart had carried out the Harriman group’s instructions to get tough with Diem “...with a vengeance.”²⁹ Yet, in the final analysis, Nolting found Trueheart’s betrayal beyond comprehension:

Footnotes

²⁷ William Colby, “William Colby on Vietnam, Interview I.” Recorded interview by Ted Gittinger, June 2, 1981 (at Mr. Colby’s office in Washington, DC) p. 20, Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, Oral History Program.

²⁸ Nolting, *From Trust to Tragedy*, p. 112.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

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It is still incomprehensible to me that my deputy in Saigon and my colleagues in the State Department allowed this crisis in US-GVN relations to develop without letting me know what was happening. They had our daily schedule. I had their assurances. Upon timely notification, I could have returned within twenty-four hours, and I believe that I could have helped to prevent the tragedies that followed.³⁰

Judging from Harriman's negative reaction to Nolting's request to get back to South Vietnam in rapid order,³¹ and judging by the vindictive remarks made by Roger Hilsman about Nolting's bias in favour of Diem, which he called 'Localitis',³² it would appear to be highly probable that the Harriman faction did not want Nolting in Vietnam. This was because he could have ameliorated the differences between Washington and Diem and, thus, they wanted Diem out without Nolting's interference. Certainly, this is what Nolting suspected and made mention of in his memoirs.³³ Both John Mecklin and Marguerite Higgins support Nolting's claim that Trueheart had followed orders from the Harriman group that, subsequently, reduced the level of sophistication of American diplomacy in South Vietnam to crude table hammering and

Footnotes

³⁰ *Ibid.* p. 113.

³¹ "In Washington I met with Hilsman and Harriman and once with President Kennedy. I believe Secretary Rusk was away. In any case, I do not recall having a talk with him then. Harriman was testy and uncommunicative. He appeared not to want me to return to Saigon. I suspect that I had not been notified during my vacation because the anti-Diem forces in Washington had not wanted me to return to Vietnam. Seeing in this crisis a chance for a fresh start, they may have wanted it to come to a head, to make a change in government in Saigon inevitable." *Ibid.*

³² Hilsman, perhaps unwittingly, admitted that the power clique in Washington was at odds with Nolting's perspective when he accused Nolting of 'Localitis': "Kennedy would send people out there, you know, like myself or Mike Forrestal and others, and they would come back and say Nolting has become wedded to Diem. Localitis, we used to call it, you know...Then you see Nolting goes on leave and Bill Trueheart his deputy, his protégé, after a month of Nolting's leave, begins to be anti-Diem. So it is almost unanimous." Michael Charlton, Many Reasons Why: The American Involvement in Vietnam, program 4 in a series of 11 programs, Part II, The New Frontiersmen Hold The Line, British Broadcasting Corporation, Radio 3, Talks and Documentaries Department; Recorded Thursday 23rd June 1977; Transmission Tuesday 11th October 1977, 2130-2215; Manuscript copy, pp. 11 – 12 in RG-21/102.921; Box Number: 13; Folder Dates & Heading: Professional Papers, The Nolting Papers.

³³ Nolting, From Trust to Tragedy, p. 113.

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threatening. All of which had the combined effect of driving a wedge between Washington and Saigon.³⁴

John Mecklin's Perspective on the Buddhist Crisis -

Another perspective on the Buddhist crisis by an eye-witness to the event, and how it affected American policy and US - Vietnam relations, is useful at this point in order to lend credence to the cold logic of Colby and Nolting. John Mecklin, a US Information Agency officer attached to Ambassador Nolting's Mission in Saigon, explained how the Buddhist Crisis expanded, exponentially, just after Nolting had gone on leave and was out of the country.³⁵ On

Footnotes

³⁴ "According to Mecklin, William Trueheart, the chargé d'affaires, applied, on orders from Washington," enormous pressure on Diem which was quite out of keeping with the diplomatic civility one government extended to another, especially, if they were allies. But Trueheart went further "...in June [he] resorted to a formal warning to Diem that if he continued repressive measures [police effort to prevent and disburse *illegal* demonstrations] the United States would be forced to disassociate itself publicly from such actions, as indeed we did two months later. The warning was a momentous step. It amounted to a direct official command from the United States. Public disassociation could have disastrous results, encouraging the Buddhists, heartening the Viet Cong, strengthening the regime's foreign critics, *perhaps even stimulating the Vietnamese army to try another coup* [italics mine]." Higgins, Our Vietnam Nightmare, p. 100.

³⁵ Frederick Nolting liked and admired John Mecklin but he also came to believe that Mecklin, owing to his journalist 'roots' and allegiances fell under the sway of David Halberstam et al. Nolting recalled these details and impressions to Dennis O'Brien of the John F. Kennedy Library, seven years after the summer of 1963: "John Mecklin was an old press man himself, as you know. He was a friend of mine. I knew him well. I think in the final analysis -- and I hope I'm not doing him an injustice in this, but when I read his book, I got the same impression -- that in the final analysis, he tended to agree more with his friends in the press than he did with official policy that he was supposed to be helping to promote. I think he was divided and torn on this subject.

I think he tried to promote the official policy, but I think he was terribly influenced, strongly influenced, by Neil Sheehan, David Halberstam, and other members of the press. And those two, I believe, lived in his house for quite a while after his wife left. And John found it very difficult to either bring them around or, in fact, not to sort of agree with them.... I also felt that John in his book did not do full credit to the good things that had been accomplished under the Diem government and with the help of the US mission and other foreign missions, including the British mission under Bob Thompson and others. In other words,...-- and it surprised me because I didn't know John felt this way-- a defeatism [was reflected] from the time, or soon after, he got out there, as if the object was to agree at any cost with the local American journalists -- that it was better to have government policy supported by the journalists than to have government policy to be right." Frederick Nolting, "The Third Oral History Interview with Frederick

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June 1, 1963, the day after Diem had met with Buddhist leaders and promised to consider their demands, some four thousand Buddhists started a public demonstration and protest in Hue.³⁶ William Trueheart reported this protest to Washington and, for the first time, it started to occur to observers like Trueheart that there was more to the Buddhist campaign than mere protest against alleged religious persecution. For Trueheart informed Washington, in telegram 1085, that the chief bonze leading the protest, Thich Tri Quang, was telling Buddhist followers "...that situation in his view beyond compromise and, in direct confrontation with GVN, Buddhists should seek help from any source, including VC [i.e., the Communists]."³⁷ Manifestly, the radical Buddhist leaders were carrying out a political program with a political agenda: the overthrow of the Diem government. The State Department recognised this Buddhist political agenda and mentioned the same in the next telegram sent out to the Embassy in Saigon [telegram #: 1085].³⁸ Nevertheless, the anti-Diem element within the State Department, which included the ever-present Hilsman who approved this telegram, seemed more concerned about world public opinion than with the political reality evolving in South Vietnam and, as such, Trueheart was advised to try and get the GVN to ignore the Communist connection:

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Nolting." Recorded interview by Dennis O'Brien, May 7, 1970 (Washington, [DC]), pp. 104 – 106, John F. Kennedy Library, Oral History Program.

Mecklin confirmed the fact that Halberstam and Sheehan came to live at his house in Saigon; Mecklin, Mission in Torment, pp. 184 - 185.

³⁶ ibid. p. 155.

³⁷ William Trueheart, 142. "Telegram [#1085] From The Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State," Saigon, June 1, 1963 - 1 p.m. [Department of State, Central Files, SOC 14-1 S VIET. Confidential; Priority] in FRUS: Vietnam, January-August, 1963, Vol. III, p. 341.

³⁸ Telegram drafted by Wood and cleared by Rice and Hilsman and then signed by Dean Rusk, 143. "[Embtel 1085] Telegram From the Department of State to the Embassy in Vietnam," Washington, June 1, 1963 - 1:59 p.m., [Department of State, Central Files, SOC 14-1 S VIET. Confidential; Priority.] In FRUS: Vietnam, January-August, 1963, Vol. III, p. 342.

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Agree that unrest has political as well as religious motivation, but believe it would be unwise for GVN to make any further moves to place blame on Communists. Naming them would make them as officially recognised party to the dispute and downgrade genuine grievances Buddhists themselves have. Would seem best ignore Communists and deal as reasonably as possible with Buddhists.³⁹

In Nolting's professional estimation Trueheart, in complying with the aforementioned advice, had completely missed the point that foreign service officers were duty-bound to observe and that was the pursuit and support of sound policy regardless of how the press reacted: "...to get the journalists on our side. Well, in my opinion that was exactly wrong. I'd rather have a good policy, with the journalists against it, than a bad policy with the journalists in favour of it."⁴⁰

Mecklin claimed that on June 2, 1963, there was violent rioting in Hué which the government's troops tried to suppress with tear gas grenades which, owing to their age, managed to burn about sixty people.⁴¹ The American Consul in Hué,⁴² reported to the American Embassy

Footnotes

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Frederick Nolting, "The Third Oral History Interview with Frederick Nolting." Recorded interview by Dennis O'Brien, May 7, 1970 (Washington, [DC]), p. 106, John F. Kennedy Library, Oral History Program.

⁴¹ Mecklin, *Mission in Torment*, p. 155.

⁴² Helble, the American Consul in Hue, was certainly amongst those State Department officers who would have been considered anti-Diem and, as such, in his first report filed about this latest riot he attempted to put the worst-case scenario before his bosses in Saigon and Washington. Accordingly, it was noted [Footnote #3 attached to Document # 146] that: "Helble's first report to the Department of State on the use of gas to disperse Buddhist demonstrators...noted that 67 youths had been hospitalized as a result of the use of tear gas, and that possibly 1 to 3 deaths had occurred as a result of the gas." William Trueheart, 146. "Telegram From the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State," Saigon, June 4, 1963 - 4 p.m., [Department of State, Central Files, SOC 14-1 S VIET. Secret; Operational Immediate.] In FRUS: Vietnam, January-August, 1963, Vol. III, p. 346.

In addition to the previous note an FSR footnote explained Helble's reports further: "The Embassy noted that Consul Heble had reported that South Vietnamese troops had used tear gas and 'possibly another type of gas which caused skin blisters' to disperse Buddhist demonstrators." Footnote # 2 attached to Document # 147. "Telegram From the Department of State to the Embassy in Vietnam," Washington, June 3, 1963 - 5:30 p.m., [Department of State, Central Files, SOC 14-12 S VIET. Secret; Operational

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in Saigon that the soldiers must have used blister gas against the demonstrators who had defied the Government order against public demonstrations at that time.⁴³ William Trueheart, acting as chargé in Nolting's absence, immediately stormed Secretary Thuan's office threatening the GVN with public condemnation in Washington. Patiently, Thuan allowed Trueheart to rant and then forcefully explained to him that the Vietnamese forces did not possess blister gas. However, they did have some very old tear-gas grenades which dated back to the French colonial times and that when these were used the acid, which activates the smoke, had broken through and burned the protesters. The damage was already done, however, as American reporters spread the story that the suppression of the peaceful bonzes in Hue had been accomplished, brutally, via the means of blister gas.⁴⁴ Further to this, even John Mecklin, a former war-correspondent himself, began to seriously question the professional ethics of the American newsmen stationed in Saigon as they ran with the story about blister-gas before it was confirmed one way or the other:

The professional ethics of the Saigon newsmen occasionally were at least debatable... On one occasion we had received a preliminary report indicating that Vietnamese police had used some kind of "blister gas" against a Buddhist demonstration in Hue. Since this could provoke serious repercussions, I persuaded the chargé d'affaires, William Trueheart, to call in the newsmen, tell them all we knew, and then appeal for omission of references to "blister gas" until the report could be investigated. The newsmen agreed, but one of them immediately filed a dispatch that was widely published in the US accusing the government of using "blister gas." As we had hoped, investigation revealed that the burns had been caused by deteriorated tear gas grenades, but by then the damage had been done.⁴⁵

... footnote continued from previous page:

Immediate. Drafted by Heavner and cleared by Wood and Hilsman.] In FRUS: Vietnam, January-August, 1963, Vol. III, p. 348.

⁴³ Hammer, A Death In November, p. 136.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Mecklin, Mission in Torment, p. 127.

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Regardless of the Americans' delicate sensibilities, the GVN remained adamant about the Communist-connection in the Buddhist unrest: "The Chief of Police for Central Vietnam told an American observer that the three leading bonzes in Hué were Viet Cong 'without doubt.'"⁴⁶ Mecklin, though highly critical of Diem and his government, also noted that the organised campaign of the radical Buddhists against Diem was "...executed with such sophisticated skill as to suggest that they had been trained on Madison Avenue."⁴⁷ In fact, while maintaining a critical eye on the Diem regime,⁴⁸ Mecklin illustrated the foundation of the Diem government's concern, and his own, vis-à-vis the vulnerability of the Vietnamese Buddhist organisations to Communist infiltration, radical Buddhist's political professionalism and Communist links, and the utter nonsense about Diem persecuting Buddhists:

"...but the experts [on Buddhism] were no less surprised than the rest of us when the Buddhists went into politics so spectacularly....If Ho Chi Minh had planned the upheaval himself, it could hardly have been more helpful to his interests. - For years it had been a standard Communist technique throughout the world secretly to infiltrate legitimate organisations, like American labor unions, to work into key positions of leadership, and to push openly for Communist objectives only when conditions offered the maximum chance of success. The Buddhist rebellion exactly fitted this pattern, and the Buddhists in Vietnam had long been vulnerable to exactly this kind of penetration. - Their leadership was fragmented among a half dozen major organisations, plus innumerable local splinter groups. Half the Vietnamese people were already under total Communist control in the North, and another two or three million were under varying degrees of clandestine Viet Cong control in the South, providing an ideal base for the placing of agents in any organisation. Unlike other faiths, moreover, there was no distinct Buddhist hierarchy, or anything resembling the discipline of

Footnotes

⁴⁶ Footnote #2 attached to William Trueheart, 146. "Telegram From the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State," Saigon, June 4, 1963 - 4 p.m., [Department of State, Central Files, SOC 14-1 S VIET. Secret; Operational Immediate.] In FRUS: Vietnam, January-August, 1963, Vol. III, p. 346.

⁴⁷ Mecklin, Mission in Torment, p. 157.

⁴⁸ He did maintain that, while Diem never persecuted the Buddhists, some discrimination did take place in his opinion. "Mostly the discrimination was unthinking and arrogant rather than malicious, like the flag ruling at Hue, but it was real enough to be exploited." Ibid. p. 159.

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the clergy in most Christian denominations. It was relatively easy to pass as a Buddhist monk, requiring little more than a shaved head, a robe and an attitude of humility. - The Buddhists were also vulnerable to Communist exploitation because of their legitimate grievances against the Diem regime. There was a violent controversy about this during the 1963 crisis, stimulated by extravagant Buddhist charges of "persecution." This was absurd. Better than two thirds of the generals in Diem's armed forces, and of the ministers in his cabinet, were Buddhists. For years Diem's innumerable enemies had dredged up every possible charge against him, but it was only after the May 8 incident at Hue that they discovered that he was also guilty of oppressing the Buddhists.⁴⁹

Mecklin maintained that it was never proved that the Communists planned the Buddhist crisis. He did note, however, that the most unlikely aspect to emerge out of the entire affair, quite apart from the unorganised and undisciplined Buddhists displaying masterful political acumen and a security discipline unparalleled by any other group, was the fact that the Buddhists could not have succeeded in attaining their political goals "...without the help of the American press and radio/TV."⁵⁰ He did note that there were individual newsmen in-country and editors back in the US "...who hated Diem and enjoyed writing about his difficulties."⁵¹ In fact, Mecklin put the American news media's contribution to the whole destructive process in the most-straightforward terms that anyone has to date:

Expressed more bluntly, American news coverage of the upheaval contributed directly to the destruction of a national US policy of direct importance to the security of the United States, in an area where we had deployed nearly twenty thousand Americans, where we were spending some \$500 million a year, at the only point in the world where we engaged in support of a shooting war against a Communist enemy [my emphasis].⁵²

Footnotes

⁴⁹ *ibid.* pp. 158 - 159.

⁵⁰ *ibid.* p. 162.

⁵¹ *ibid.*

⁵² *ibid.*

Marguerite Higgins' Perception of the Buddhist Crisis -

Marguerite Higgins, a Pulitzer Prize winning war-correspondent who had covered the Korean War alongside Pulitzer Prize winner, Keyes Beech,⁵³ was no stranger to Southeast Asia and, particularly, South Vietnam. During her extensive travels around the country, during the summer of 1963, she became impressed with the power of the news media, as she had never been before. Particularly, Higgins had noted the bias, which favoured reporting on the latest intrigue, attached to the Buddhist crisis in Saigon, which Keyes Beech had compared, with some precision, to a "...sophisticated snake pit of intrigue and rumour..."⁵⁴ She had also noted that the conspiracy and conniving therein had no tangible effects on or linkage to the real world outside.⁵⁵ Indeed,

Footnotes

⁵³ She had covered many of the same battles in Korea with Keyes Beech, the Pulitzer Prize-winning correspondent of the Chicago Daily News. Beech, like Higgins, had come to develop a healthy respect for the emerging soldierly qualities of the men and officers in the ARVN. Higgins, *Our Vietnam Nightmare*, p. 121.

⁵⁴ *ibid.* p. 120.

⁵⁵ Higgins put the contrast between what was happening out in the countryside with the Buddhist crisis in Saigon effectively in the following excerpt: "Most informed witnesses, including the Vietnamese, admitted that things in the delta were going much less satisfactorily than in the North. But despite the frustrations and the griping, the phrase that I heard the most often from the American advisers was that 'we are inching ahead.'

Therefore, I was amazed upon returning to Saigon to find the town buzzing with news of recent newspaper dispatches proclaiming that the Buddhist crisis was 'spreading to the countryside,' that it was 'deep and smouldering' in the army, that the war in the delta had 'deteriorated,' and that the situation was 'ominous.'

One dispatch reported that Buddhist and Catholic officers had suddenly begun to eat at separate tables in Vietnamese army messes.

This was in direct contradiction to everything I had observed and had been told by the military advisers, aid officials, and Vietnamese officers and enlisted men out in the boondocks, where the war was being fought. I was puzzled and angry.

I went to the American embassy and demanded to know from a senior official if there was a conspiracy to befog with lies what I had seen and heard.

Said the official: 'How can the reporters document this so-called deterioration? None of the resident press corps have been out of Saigon - except for a couple of day-long helicopter trips - since June [when the first Buddhist suicide took place]. Men like Major Kelly [of Quang Ngai] are busting to have reporters come up and see what they are doing. But the press isn't interested. And if we try to get them interested, they would say that we are stage-managing things.'...So while the resident correspondents

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she was stunned by the power of the press to focus on the negative and ignore real advances made in the fight against the Communist insurgents during this critical period. Thus, she contrasted and compared the debacle of Ap Bac with the far greater victory scored by the South Vietnamese in Quang Ngai against the North Vietnamese:

In January, 1963, the most publicized military setback for our side occurred - the humiliation of the Vietnamese armed forces at Ap Bac...Sixty Vietnamese and three American lives were lost...These losses were small by the standards of 1965, but some of the Vietnamese officers in the Ap Bac battle exhibited incredibly bad leadership, prompting Lieutenant Colonel John Vann, the brilliant and idealistic US adviser at the time, to complain bitterly... In the framework of the times, the splashy headlines with their inevitable oversimplification were more or less justified in calling this a "defeat." - And yet in the North four months later, the Twenty-fifth Vietnamese Division at Quang Ngai not only stood its ground but also fought four days and nights running. When the battle was over two hundred and twenty-six Viet Cong dead were picked off the field with their weapons (including Chinese and Czech machine guns), and another idealistic and brilliant adviser, Major John Kelly, was full of praise for the Vietnamese division's performance. If Ap Bac was a "defeat," Quang Ngai was surely a "victory." But Quang Ngai got no headlines at all. - This accent on the negative was a recurring phenomenon, and it embittered the United States mission...⁵⁶

As Marguerite Higgins discovered, what got headlines, instead, were articles such as Halberstam's "**Buddhists in Saigon Clash With Police** [my emphasis]."⁵⁷ The Ap Bac coverage in The New York Times had carefully prepared the ground to 'make' the American public aware that 'something was wrong' with the government of South Vietnam and, now, the Buddhist Crisis was very handily assisting the NYT in its terminal campaign against Diem. Indeed, the

... footnote continued from previous page:

covered the war bravely (and won plaudits and Pulitzers) before and after the Buddhist crisis, they were seldom, judging by their datelines, at the scenes of battle in the period when stories appeared linking the Buddhist crisis to the war effort." *Ibid.* pp. 122 - 123.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.* pp. 127 - 128.

⁵⁷ David Halberstam, "**Buddhists in Saigon Clash With Police**," in The New York Times, (Sunday, June 16, 1963), p. 1.

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implications were made clear: that the ARVN was only good for 'beating up' on harmless Buddhist protesters as opposed to dealing effectively with the Communists. Any historian who peruses the stories printed on the front page of the NYT (with accompanying dramatic photographs), such as "**Troops and Tanks Quell Buddhist Riots in Saigon** [my emphasis]" cannot miss this sort of blatant presentation bias.⁵⁸

The New York Times Uses the Buddhist Crisis To Question Diem's Authority To Rule South Vietnam –

David Halberstam effectively introduced the notion that the Diem government was staggering, and most likely entering a terminal phase, in an article he wrote for The New York Times in late June, 1963. The article, entitled "**Discontent Rises In Vietnam Crises: Regime Losing Ground over Treatment of Buddhists** [my emphasis]," put forward a number of key allegations and rumours as if they were fact. For example, he led the article off with the suggestion that Diem's government was "...engaged in an all-out struggle for political survival."⁵⁹ Of course, as William Colby had pointed out, this claim simply was not true until the American Press made it 'true' in the perceptions of the American public and, consequently, in the perceptions of the politicians in Washington. Halberstam went on to suggest that the unrest in Saigon represented all of South Vietnam and that the regime now had to worry about a coup because their mishandling of the Buddhist Crisis had irreparably damaged the war effort.

Footnotes

⁵⁸ Associated Press, "Troops and Tanks Quell Buddhist Riots in Saigon," in The New York Times, (Monday, June 17, 1963), p. 1.

⁵⁹ David Halberstam, "Discontent Rises in Vietnam Crises: Regime Losing Ground Over Treatment of Buddhists," in The New York Times, (Saturday, June 22, 1963), p. 6.

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But it is the young officers that the regime knows it must worry about. Security precautions within the army are at a maximum.

Some well-informed observers believe there will be an attempt to oust the Government.⁶⁰ The question appears to be when?

It is significant that this has become the key question in the country, and not whether South Vietnam is winning or losing the war against the Communist guerrillas, or whether it can win the population to an all-out effort in that war.

The general feeling is that the last six weeks have damaged the war effort irreparably. It is widely believed that military action against the Communists can be successful only in a favorable political climate...Hampering the Government is the fact that it enjoys little popular support. The last two weeks have been a stunning display of stubborn resentment on the part of vast sections of the people...Ambitious young anti-Communist officers now doubt the regime's ability to lead a successful war against the Communist Vietcong...The Government has also angered high American officials here who have worked hard in the last 18 months to implement United States policy in the face of considerable obstacles.

The United States officials feel strongly that they have been let down, and that American aid has been frittered away. Thus the picture is of a government in extreme difficulty and rapidly losing friends.⁶¹

In writing this article Halberstam clearly intended to sway American opinion away from Diem, regardless of such facts like Diem had never truly been popular in Saigon as his real support came from rural Vietnam. There had never been any love lost between the Saigon elites and Diem as they saw him as an austere Catholic/Confucian Mandarin from the North and, for his part, Diem viewed them as spoiled complainers. The implications and the power of Halberstam's

Footnotes

⁶⁰ The phrase "some well-informed observers" is classic Halberstam style as he uses it over and over again in nearly every single article he wrote. Yet, strangely enough, he never tells the reader who these 'expert' or 'well-informed' sources are. Ambassador Nolting came to the understanding that Halberstam's experts were nothing much more than the Saigon clique of gossips that plied their trade at the Caravelle Hotel.

⁶¹ David Halberstam, "Discontent Rises in Vietnam Crises: Regime Losing Ground Over Treatment of Buddhists," in The New York Times, (Saturday, June 22, 1963), p. 6.

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article are clear enough and warrant no further comment other than to remind the reader of the trouble such an article would have caused back in Washington.

Not wanting to let 'the ink dry' on his plans for the direction that he and his paper were attempting to steer American public opinion in, Halberstam wrote a follow-up article on July 2, 1963, which appeared on the front page of The New York Times on July 3 (1963). This article, entitled "**Some U.S. Officials In Saigon Dubious About Diem Regime** [my emphasis]," raises the issue of American officials wanting to see Diem's government replaced:

Some United States officials in South Vietnam who two months ago were praising President Ngo Dinh Diem have changed their minds about him and his chances of winning the war against the Communists. They would like to see a new government in Saigon [my emphasis].

*Young Vietnamese military officers, whom the Americans would like to be talking with today, seem suspicious of the United States Embassy because of its public commitment to President Ngo Dinh Diem. These officers are also reported to be unsure what position the United States would take if they tried to oust him... **The Americans would like to see a change in Government, but would like the change to be a natural one, born of real Vietnamese desires** [my emphasis].*

Some Vietnamese military officers are reported ready to act but they give the impression that they would like the Americans to make a public statement calling for a change.

It is widely believed here that any statement from Washington critical of Mr. Ngo Dinh Diem for his handling of the Buddhist Crisis would touch off an internal military strike at the Government...The unhappiness of the nation's Buddhists with the Government, which is predominantly Roman Catholic, became public when nine Buddhist demonstrators were killed by Government troops May 8 in Hue...One aspect of the changed situation here is that Americans, who previously were unwilling to use their intelligence agents freely for fear of angering the Government, are now openly sending these agents to

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*Buddhist pagodas and making daily contact with Buddhist priests and other participants in the present conflict.*⁶²

Of course, Halberstam's article included some severely distorted crucial facts such as his regurgitation of the Hue incident, falsely claiming that nine 'Buddhists' were killed by government troops firing at them. In fact, and as indicated in the previous chapter, eight people were killed in this incident, several of them were Catholic, and they were not shot by Government troop rifle-fire. The forensic evidence made manifest the fact that they were blown to pieces, quite literally, by an extremely powerful plastic explosive that the South Vietnamese simply did not possess in their inventory (no shrapnel or foreign objects were found in the massively disfigured bodies of the victims, thus, ruling out the possibility of the use of grenades or mortars). Yet, and as always, David Halberstam and the NYT editors did not concern themselves with the facts as, obviously, they had an agenda, and that was to assist in the removal of Diem from power.

There can be little doubt that The New York Times, through its coverage of the Buddhist crisis, was, indeed, beginning to cause real problems in Washington for United States officials as the paper was able to catch even the very circumspect Dean Rusk declaring the conflict in Vietnam a **"dirty, untidy, disagreeable" war** [my emphasis].⁶³ Another official in Washington blurted out in anger: **"What do you want us to do? We're in a box. We don't like that Government but it's the only one around. We can't fight a war and a revolution at the same time, so lay off** [my emphasis]."⁶⁴ But The New York Times, as witnessed in the articles of its correspondents and its editorials, had no intention of 'laying off' the pressure on Washington,

Footnotes

⁶² David Halberstam, "Some U.S. Officials In Saigon Dubious About Diem Regime," in The New York Times, (Wednesday, July 3, 1963), p. 1.

⁶³ Max Frankel, "Vietnam's 'Untidy' War: Washington is Unhappy With Saigon, But Thinks That Support Is Necessary," in The New York Times, (Wednesday, July 3, 1963), p. 8.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

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indeed, they built the very 'box' that the US Government official was complaining about being in. In this context, the reader may consider, again, Clare Boothe Luce's statement, **"Is the history of the Liberal press in Chunking and Havana going to repeat itself [in Vietnam]? The evidence is that it is... [my emphasis]."**⁶⁵

William Trueheart Works Under the Dictate of The Harriman Group While Nolting is on Holidays –

With The New York Times attacking Diem back in the United States, William Trueheart, at the behest of the Harriman group in Washington,⁶⁶ continued to 'bang-the-table' so rudely with the Diem government,⁶⁷ over the Buddhist Crisis in Vietnam. He was strident enough in these efforts as to cause irreparable damage to all the good work that Ambassador Nolting had accomplished, at Kennedy's request, with the Vietnamese President. Within a few weeks, during the summer of 1963, Trueheart destroyed the tentative yet very tangible trust that Nolting had built in partnership with Diem. Mrs. Nolting told this writer that it was her husband's belief that

Footnotes

⁶⁵ Clare Boothe Luce, "The Lady is For Burning: The Seven Deadly Sins of Madame Nhu," in a full page advertisement taken out by the National Review in The New York Times, (Wednesday, October 30, 1963), p. 40.

⁶⁶ The increasing strident tone of the telegrams sent from the State Department to Trueheart is self-evident when one examines Department telegrams: 1171 (drafted by Heavner and cleared by Wood and Hilsman in Washington on June 3, 1963 - 5:30 p.m.) p. 348. 1173 (drafted by Heavner and cleared by Wood and Hilsman in Washington, on June 3, 1963 - 6:46 p.m.) p. 349. 1194 (drafted by Wood and cleared by Hilsman in Washington on June 8, 1963 - 12:55 p.m.) pp. 363 – 364. 1196 (drafted by Heavner and Wood and cleared by Hilsman in Washington on June 8, 1963 - 5:37 p.m.) pp. 364 – 366. 1207 (drafted by Wood and Hilsman and cleared in draft by Harriman in Washington on June 11, 1963 - 11:03 p.m.) pp. 381 – 383. Source for these telegrams emanating from the State Department: FRUS: Vietnam, January-August, 1963, Vol. III.

⁶⁷ Quoting from John Mecklin, Marguerite Higgins noted the departure that Trueheart took from Nolting's instructions: "...direct, relentless, table-hammering pressure on Diem such as the United States had seldom before attempted with a sovereign friendly government...." Higgins, Our Vietnam Nightmare, p. 100.

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Trueheart had 'jumped-ship' and joined what he thought was the 'winning-side' in the State Department's undeclared war on Ngo Dinh Diem. William Trueheart had been a close confidant, supporter and friend of the Noltings and therefore trusted by the Ngo Dinh brothers. Yet, almost to the minute that he took over as chargé at the American Embassy in Saigon, he utterly betrayed his boss and friend, and even the position he had previously held vis-à-vis Diem, in order to win favour with the Harriman prevailing wind.⁶⁸

The reality remained, however, that Nolting was on holidays and that the only high-level contact that President Diem had with Washington, William Trueheart, was not offering understanding or even normal diplomatic 'give-and-take' but, instead, threats.⁶⁹ The very un-diplomatic language used by Trueheart accomplished only two things: first of all, Diem's wariness and doubts about the American alliance were honed to a fine edge as was his realisation that he was, effectively, alone in this new assault on the political legitimacy of his government.

Footnotes

⁶⁸ There was no hiding the deep sense of betrayal that the Noltings felt over Trueheart's about-face - even many years later when these details were recounted to this writer in January of 1998. Interview with Mrs. Lindsay Nolting conducted by telephone on Thursday, January 29th., 1998 at 1:00 p.m. (Winnipeg time).

Frederick Nolting had told Mr. O'Connor of the JFK Library something very similar to what Mrs. Nolting had related to this writer. O'Connor: "Well, this may impinge on your personal conclusions, but it was reported in various places several times that Mr. [William Clyde] Trueheart, the chargé d' affaires, in your absence, had...Or at least you and he had not agreed on Vietnamese policy. I wondered if that was part of the conflict there. Was there a real conflict between the two of you?"

Nolting: "No, we had completely agreed on policy up until the time I left on home leave."

O'Connor: "You had never seen any evidence of disagreement on his part?"

Nolting: "Not until I got back to Saigon in July. Then I found that Trueheart had shifted with the winds blowing from Washington -- he had joined the [W. Averell] Harriman - [Roger] Hilsman group. He had adjusted his views." Frederick Nolting, "First Interview with Frederick Nolting." Recorded interview by Joseph O'Connor, May 14, 1966 (Paris, France) p. 21, John F. Kennedy Library, Oral History Program, Boston, Ma.

⁶⁹ The full extent of what Trueheart said to Diem, at least according to Trueheart's cabled report to Washington, can be perused by the reader in Appendix I.

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Secondly, Trueheart managed only to harden Diem's stance on the Buddhists.⁷⁰ This new approach, directed out of the State Department, was a colossal blunder, which had repercussions that even Nolting could never undo.

One of the best examples of Trueheart's threatening Diem and, conversely, an example of one of the worst ways to deal with a sovereign government, is illustrated in telegram # 1168 which Trueheart sent back to Hilsman and Harriman. In this telegram Trueheart boasts to the State Department about how he followed out their instructions and 'laid-down-the-law' with Diem.⁷¹ In particular, Trueheart threatened Diem with a formal disassociation from the United States Government, as per Harriman's approval, if he did not follow the State Department's instructions vis-à-vis placating the Buddhist bonzes. Here are the precise instructions that Harriman approved and which Trueheart communicated to Diem in a hostile manner:

Accordingly, you authorized to tell Diem that in the United States view it is essential for the GVN promptly to take dramatic action to regain confidence of Buddhists and that the GVN must fully and unequivocally meet Buddhist demands as set forth in Embtel 1038. Furthermore, we believe that meeting these demands must be done in public and dramatic fashion if confidence is to be restored.

You further authorised to tell Diem that unless GVN is willing to take effective action along the above lines within the next few days the US will find it necessary publicly to state that it cannot associate itself with the GVN's

Footnotes

⁷⁰ Hammer, *A Death In November*, p. 143.

⁷¹ Trueheart wrote: "Department's instructions could not have been more timely, coming just before negotiations begin. They are of course very strong medicine and will be very hard for Diem to take. ...I believe we can be satisfied that we have done everything reasonably possible to get President Diem to save himself.

It is obviously vital that there be no leaks about this latest move and I am taking strictest precautions at this end." William Trueheart, 169. "Telegram From the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State," #1168. Embtel 1207. Saigon, June 12, 1963 - 8 p.m., [Department of State, Central Files, SOC 14-1 S VIET. Secret; Operational Immediate; Limit Distribution.] In FRUS: Vietnam, January-August, 1963, Vol. III, pp. 386 - 387.

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*unwillingness to meet the reasonable demands of the Vietnamese Buddhist leaders.*⁷²

Evidence that the Kennedy Policy of Rapprochement with Diem was Over-turned by the Harriman Group:

Trueheart had assured the Harriman group that “confidentiality” had been maintained and unwanted eyes had not seen this vitally important document.⁷³ For a limited amount of time the chargé was correct as President Kennedy “...was unaware of the memorandum conveyed to Diem by Trueheart on June 12,”⁷⁴ up until June 14th of 1963. When Kennedy did find out about the threat to Diem he was furious, as it had been made without his approval and the threat had only come to light after the fact, when he went through his President’s Intelligence Checklist - summarised by the CIA. As noted in the President’s papers at the Kennedy Library: “The President noticed that Diem had been threatened with a formal statement of disassociation. He wants to be absolutely sure that no further threats are made and no formal statement is made without his personal approval.”⁷⁵ Ambassador Nolting’s widow, Mrs. Lindsay Nolting, conveyed

Footnotes

⁷² Drafted by Chalmers B. Wood and Hilsman and cleared in draft by Harriman, 167. “(1207) Telegram From the Department of State to the Embassy in Vietnam,” Washington, June 11, 1963 - 11:03 p.m., [Department of State, Central Files, SOC 14-1 S VIET. Secret; Operational Immediate; Limit Distribution.] In FRUS: Vietnam, January-August, 1963, Vol. III, p. 381.

⁷³ “It is obviously vital that there be no leaks about this latest move and I am taking strictest precautions at this end.” William Trueheart, 169. “Telegram From the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State,” #1168. Embtel 1207. Saigon, June 12, 1963 - 8 p.m., [Department of State, Central Files, SOC 14-1 S VIET. Secret; Operational Immediate; Limit Distribution.] In FRUS: Vietnam, January-August, 1963, Vol. III, p. 387.

⁷⁴ John P. Glennon, editor in chief, Kennedy Library, National Security Files, Chester V. Clifton Series, **President’s Intelligence Checklist; attached as footnote #5 to William Trueheart’s**, 169. “(#1168. Deptel 1207) Telegram From the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State,” Saigon, June 12, 1963 - 8 p.m., [Department of State, Central Files, SOC 14-1 S VIET. Secret; Operational Immediate; Limit Distribution.] In FRUS: Vietnam, January-August, 1963, Vol. III, p. 386.

⁷⁵ Kennedy Library, National Security Files, Chester V. Clifton Series, **President’s Intelligence Checklist; attached as footnote #5 to William Trueheart’s**, 169. “Telegram From the Embassy in
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Kennedy's unhappiness with how Diem was being treated by the State Department's Harriman group to this writer.⁷⁶ The reader needs to consider this point carefully because the implications are serious in that they illustrate the fact that the Kennedy had not abandoned his initial and formal policy of rapprochement with Diem. Instead, the powerful Harriman group forced through their own anti-Diemist policy heedless of the President's position.

Regardless of Kennedy's disapproval Averell Harriman and Roger Hilsman carried on with their new policy direction with a vengeance and, accordingly, instructed Trueheart, in a top-secret, eyes-only telegram to "...consider steps gradually increase covert and overt contacts with non-supporters of GVN. In present situation this should only be done if you feel our (overt or covert) contacts with those who might play major roles in event of coup are now inadequate."⁷⁷ Dutifully, Trueheart wrote back to Harriman and Hilsman, with reference to their top-secret telegram, and informed them that "...we have all the lines out that we know how to put out and have had for some days.... I am not discussing Deptel 1219 with anyone but Manfull."⁷⁸

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Vietnam to the Department of State," #1168. Deptel 1207. Saigon, June 12, 1963 - 8 p.m., [Department of State, Central Files, SOC 14-1 S VIET. Secret; Operational Immediate; Limit Distribution.] In FRUS: Vietnam, January-August, 1963, Vol. III, pp. 386 - 387.

⁷⁶ Interview with Mrs. Nolting was conducted, by telephone, on Friday, January 2nd., 1998, at 1:00 p.m. in the afternoon - [Winnipeg time].

⁷⁷ Drafted by Wood and cleared by Hilsman and Harriman, 175. "Telegram [Deptel # 1219] From the Department of State to the Embassy in Vietnam," Washington, June 14, 1963 - 11 p.m., [Washington National Records Center, RG 84, Saigon Embassy Files: FRC A 51 59, SGN(63) 19 GVN. Top Secret; Eyes only.] In FRUS: Vietnam, January-August, 1963, Vol. III, p. 394.

⁷⁸ William Trueheart, 179. "Telegram [Embtel # 1195] From the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State," Saigon, June 16, 1963 - 5 p.m. [Department of State Central Files, SOC 14-1 S VIET. Top Secret; Priority; Eyes Only.] In FRUS: Vietnam, January-August, 1963, Vol. III, pp. 398 - 399.

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John Mecklin noted the failure of this new policy direction which was embarked upon in Nolting's absence during the summer of 1963 and he also noted the 'coincidence' of the Buddhist crisis blossoming only once Nolting was out of the country.⁷⁹

Marguerite Higgins gives considerable credit to Mecklin for his attempts to accurately reflect what was going on in Saigon during Nolting's absence. Nevertheless, she also notes that Mecklin subscribed to the same understanding that nearly every American held at that time which was: "If Diem had immediately heeded American advice, he probably could have stopped the upheaval before it got started."⁸⁰ Yet, and as Higgins points out, Americans were not asking the right questions in their search for such immediate and simple answers. For example, how likely would it have been for Diem to humiliate himself before Thich Tri Quang in a public manner? Moreover, how likely was it that Thich Tri Quang would have accepted or, ultimately, have settled with merely a public debasement of Diem? Clearly, this Machiavellian monk had much grander designs and the humiliation of Diem was just one step along the way to the attainment of his ultimate goal: the removal of Ngo Dinh Diem from power.⁸¹

Footnotes

⁷⁹ See quotation from John Mecklin at the beginning of this chapter. Mecklin, Mission in Torment, p. 168.

⁸⁰ Higgins is paraphrasing a quotation from Mecklin at this point. Higgins, Our Vietnam Nightmare, p. 100.

⁸¹ The following excerpt from Higgins' memoirs indicate, quite clearly, that the Americans were not asking the right questions at all when it came to power-politics in South Vietnam: "How was this possible [i.e., Diem's heeding of American advice to beg forgiveness of Thich Tri Quang and the radical Buddhists] if, as the facts show, Thich Tri Quang deliberately provoked the crisis in order to promote disorder? It stands to reason that if Thich Tri Quang at Hué indulged in so much trouble and trickery to provoke upheaval, he had well-laid plans to turn it to his advantage. We know that by July Thich Tri Quang was openly talking of toppling Diem. And during the summer of 1963 Thich Tri Quang saw to it that no matter what concessions Diem made the crisis was kept at boiling point. It all showed careful, clever planning.

The Washington-generated pressure on Diem for conciliation was based on the assumption that Thich Tri Quang's grievances concerning flags and such were what motivated his Buddhist protest

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Nolting, himself, gave testimony about what he had come to understand had happened in his absence and even the futility of his efforts when he returned to Vietnam for four weeks in July of 1963:

All I can say is -- and this has some bearing, I think, on the historical record -- that during this time, beginning, say, in June of 1963 and carrying through until the overthrow of the Diem government on November 1, 1963, political forces were built up in Washington, all of which were in the direction of, 'We've had enough of this. We must somehow break out of the policy of supporting Vietnam through its elected government.' Certain people who had been of this opinion all along in Washington were given great encouragement in this line by the press and the prevailing public opinion. I think the White House got very sensitive to this. The Embassy in Saigon when I was away had broken the bridge of confidence by which we had worked with the Diem government. I tried to restore it during my remaining four weeks, after I got back to Saigon, but I was a "lame duck." I had more influence then with Diem than with Washington. This dangerous situation was exacerbated by the press and by the prevailing opinion that it was, in fact, caused by religious persecution. That was the basic error. Now you can see certain factors here which would have a bearing on the President's attitude.... All I know is, and I feel this very strongly, that our country made a great error in political policy in Vietnam in 1963. I think the struggle out there was being gradually won under a policy which was never overtly changed while I was there. My basic instructions never changed, but somehow the support for those instructions drained away in Washington. This was, I think, not only a

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movement. But it was evident that what Thich Tri Quang wanted was a pretext to seize on. His objective was not a solution, but no less than Diem's head.

Perhaps Diem might have had a better image in the United States if he had personally shown greater immediate public concern for the victims of the Hué tragedy. He did order generous indemnification of the families who suffered losses, but this was never publicized. Perhaps he was too prideful. So inwardly sure of his innocence was Diem that he did not deign to go to the trouble of proving it. He would certainly have pleased the Madison Avenue boys at the embassy by visiting a pagoda or two.

But such stratagems would scarcely have appeased Thich Tri Quang, whose target was not Diem's image but his jugular.

Indeed, two days after the Hué incident Thich Tri Quang confidently assured an American official in that city that his anti-Diem campaign would not be halted till the regime had been overthrown. Neither the embassy or Washington, it appears, took this threat at all seriously, and indeed one of Thich Tri Quang's great strengths was the degree to which the Americans underestimated his guile and his ability to manipulate public opinion." Higgins, Our Vietnam Nightmare, pp. 100 - 101.

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*fateful error of judgement -- it was also grossly unjust to a faithful ally, President Diem.*⁸²

Nolting described to Dennis O'Brien, of the Kennedy Library, what he had come to understand to be the three 'lynch-pins' of the destruction of wise US policy in South Vietnam during the summer of 1963. First of all, it was the Ambassador's perception that President Kennedy had become extremely sensitive to the claims in the American news media that he was supporting a Roman Catholic dictatorship,⁸³ and that this was a dictatorship permeated with nepotism.⁸⁴ The second 'lynch-pin' in the abandonment of Diem was the non-rational dislike of

Footnotes

⁸² Frederick Nolting, "First Interview with Frederick Nolting." Recorded interview by Joseph O'Connor, May 14, 1966 (Paris, France), pp. 22 – 23, John F. Kennedy Library, Oral History Program.

⁸³ Nolting was exactly right on this issue as inordinate international pressure was being brought to bear on President Kennedy over American support for the Diem government and this pressure was thanks, largely, to the orchestrations and pleadings of Prince Norodom Sihanouk of Cambodia. It was common-knowledge that Sihanouk had never been a friend or supporter of Ngo Dinh Diem and that he had ties to the Communists through his somewhat tainted 'neutralist' position. Thus, Sihanouk wrote a letter directly to President Kennedy on June 14, 1963 which asked the American president to stop Diem from persecuting the Buddhists: "Today, this persecution has overtaken the Vietnamese Buddhists themselves. Their non-violent protests and the heroic act of martyrdom of the venerable Thich Quang Duc have roused the conscience of the world. Through my voice, Cambodia, where Buddhism is a State religion, and the Cambodian people, deeply moved by the suffering of the Buddhists of South Viet-Nam, beg Your Excellency to intercede with the full force of your moral prestige and that of your country to the end that the Catholic South Vietnamese Government may accord Buddhists the right to practice freely their religion of peace and brotherhood.... it rests with the great powers to bring back to reason a government that has revived religious conflicts..." Norodom Sihanouk, 173 "Telegram From Prince Sihanouk to President Kennedy," Phnom Penh, June 14, 1963, [Department of State, Central Files, SOC 14-1 S VIET], in FRUS: Vietnam, January-August, 1963, Vol. III, p. 392.

In fact Sihanouk had gone to great lengths to cause trouble for his old enemy Diem over the Buddhist issue by contacting U.N. Secretary-General, U Thant, British Prime Minister Macmillan, French President De Gaulle, and Indian President Radhakrishnan and imploring them to speak out against the alleged persecution of Buddhists in Vietnam by a Catholic minority government. These facts were disclosed in **Footnote #1 attached to Norodom Sihanouk, 173 "Telegram From Prince Sihanouk to President Kennedy," Phnom Penh, June 14, 1963, [Department of State, Central Files, SOC 14-1 S VIET], in FRUS: Vietnam, January-August, 1963, Vol. III, p. 392.**

⁸⁴ Frederick Nolting, "The Third Oral History Interview with Frederick Nolting." Recorded interview by Dennis O'Brien, May 7, 1970 (Washington, [DC]), pp. 102 – 103, John F. Kennedy Library, Oral History Program.

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the Vietnamese President and his family, which existed in the State Department and was fed continuously by the news media. This bias existed at the highest level, particularly in the approach and attitudes of men like Averell Harriman and Roger Hilsman.⁸⁵ Finally, and perhaps the least important of the three “lynch-pins” of Nolting’s estimation, the Buddhist crisis became the catalyst which the anti-Diem group in the State Department seized upon as the excuse needed for getting rid of Diem in an expedient manner.⁸⁶

The Americans, the Buddhists, and the Communists Share the Same Goal: the Removal of Ngo Dinh Diem from Power –

The irony worthy of consideration in this context is that both the State Department’s Harriman faction and the Communists in South Vietnam recognised an opportunity in the Buddhist crisis to finally be rid of the bothersome Ngo Dinh brothers. This consideration, alone, should have given Harriman et al. pause to reflect upon the consequences of the actions they were pursuing and just who would benefit from Diem’s undoing. Disliking Diem was one thing but dismantling US policy in order to get rid of him, regardless of the cost, was another thing entirely. Ultimately, this purblind re-direction of policy caused Ambassador Nolting to resign from a very promising career in the State Department when, instead, the redirection of policy should have been stopped and reversed by Kennedy and Rusk with the just and subsequent firing of Harriman

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⁸⁵ “I think there had been people in the State Department all along who didn’t like President Diem and who abominated his sister-in-law and his brother. And I think this also was a factor. I think it was an unreasonable factor, but it was one. And those people came to the fore; namely, Averell Harriman and Roger Hilsman, particularly.” Frederick Nolting, “The Third Oral History Interview with Frederick Nolting.” Recorded interview by Dennis O’Brien, May 7, 1970 (Washington, [DC]), p. 103, John F. Kennedy Library, Oral History Program.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

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and Hilsman.⁸⁷ These two gentleman had gone beyond the pale of responsible conduct in their ardour and, as a result, had unwittingly aided and abetted the enemies of South Vietnam and the United States. Harriman, to his credit, admitted this great error later in his life before he died while Hilsman continues to rail against even the ghost of Ngo Dinh Diem.⁸⁸

At the time of the Buddhist crisis Hilsman, manifestly, believed that he no longer had to maintain 'confidentiality' with regard to his attitude toward Diem and, accordingly, his outlook was made plain in the telegrams he sent to Trueheart during Nolting's leave. As such, it is worthwhile to note that the direction and content of these telegrams to Trueheart differed greatly from how Hilsman broached the subject of Diem with Nolting. One of the most incredible

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⁸⁷ This writer is not alone in this perception that Harriman and Hilsman should have been fired by their bosses as the former president of the University of Dallas and later Republican Senator, Robert Morris, stated the same. **"The State Department over-ruled advice from the Central Intelligence Agency and Defense Department and provoked the overthrow of the pro-West Diem regime in South Viet Nam [my emphasis],... He (Morris) is seeking the post held by U.S. Senator Ralph Yarborough. He said Undersecretary of State Averell Harriman and Roger Hilsman, assistant secretary of state for Far Eastern Affairs, should be removed from office for their roles in the November 1 coup that ousted the Diem regime [my emphasis]."**

He said former Ambassador Frederick Nolting and John Richardson, former head of the CIA in South Viet Nam, should be returned to their posts." By Oscar Griffin, "State Department Provoked Diem Ouster, Robert Morris Charges," in Houston Chronicle, Wednesday, January 15, 1964, Page 2 of Section 1.

⁸⁸ Even at the time of Diem's murder, when Marguerite Higgins asked Hilsman how it felt to have blood on his hands the best he could reply was "oh, come on now, Maggie," said Roger. "Revolutions are rough. People get hurt." Higgins, Our Vietnam Nightmare, p. 225.

Nolting recalled, however, that at the time, when the bloodlust of the coup Generals was out of control, Hilsman telephoned him in a panic about what might be done to save Madame Nhu's children from being murdered. "I said, 'Roger, if you really mean it, I would do this. Call Paul Harkins – direct, not through the Embassy. Ask him to find the children. If he can, ask him to send a U.S. chopper to pick them up. Be sure to have a reliable Vietnamese or French-speaking person aboard. The children may not want to come. Explain to them that their mother needs them. Fly them out of the country without stopping in Saigon, if Paul can do it.' This was done, and the children were eventually reunited with their mother." Nolting, From Trust To Tragedy, p. 133.

Years later, when interviewed for the PBS series on Vietnam, Hilsman would accept no responsibility for his actions and continued to blame Diem for everything that happened in 1963.

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documents in this context is telegram # 1247 sent from Hilsman to Trueheart.⁸⁹ What makes this document an exposé of Hilsman and not of the reality in South Vietnam was the fact that Hilsman insisted, in the face of all the evidence, that the Buddhists were 'peaceful' with no links or control by the Communists and other opposition groups. More importantly, and this writer would argue that Hilsman knew that Diem could not abide with such instructions, Diem was being instructed to believe that the radical Buddhists were above suspicion.⁹⁰ Hilsman's instructions to Trueheart

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⁸⁹ This writer emphasises the fact that Hilsman's instructions to Trueheart were, indeed, incredible because his position about the Buddhists was not commensurate, and thus not credible (or believable), with the known facts available, through the intelligence information about the radical Xa Loi pagodists, at that time and after. For example, these Buddhist radicals did not represent the majority of Vietnamese or even Vietnamese Buddhists in any conceivable manner, and they remained, in fact, a radical minority. They were not peaceful and there definitely was a powerful linkage to Communist leaders in the North through no less a connection than Thich Tri Quang himself. The radical Buddhist leadership had been abundantly clear that they had definite political objectives which included, at all times, the removal of President Diem from power. Thus, Hilsman was knowingly instructing Diem to acquiesce to his own undoing at the hands of a radical minority. Furthermore, if he truly believed that the vast majority of Vietnamese were Buddhists of conviction then his ignorance was appalling; for even Vo Nguyen Giap, a history teacher, recognised that the shallowness of Buddhism's grasp in Vietnam was striking. Ellen Hammer quoted him directly from Dossier Sud Vietnamien 1945-1965: Études Vietnamiennes, No. 8, p. 17: "Buddhism, Giap noted, exercised an influence in Vietnam that was not particularly deep, even though it extended over a large number of people." Hammer, A Death In November, p. 139.

⁹⁰ Quite reasonably enough, Diem brought up this point with Marguerite Higgins when she interviewed him in the late summer of 1963. Diem, with his powerful knowledge of history, tried to place the whole Buddhist crisis in a context that would help Westerners understand just how ridiculous and crazy the Hilsman demands were: "The West has had its religious wars," Diem said. "But that has never been true of Vietnam. Vietnamese have never gone to war against each other for religious reasons. We are a very tolerant people. Look at our relations with China. WE fought and defeated the Chinese and finally repulsed their invasion. But even though we got rid of the invaders, we kept their religions (Confucianism and Mahayana Buddhism). Our Confucian Emperors fought the Catholics - not because of their religion but because they feared that Catholic priests were the claw of the crab of imperialism.... And although we got rid of the French, we kept Catholicism.

I don't understand the Americans...(they have)... has asked me to conciliate the Buddhists and not even speak out in defense against these absurd charges being made against me. I have kept my side of the bargain. But if I must keep silent, why don't the Americans tell the truth - that this so-called Buddhist affair has nothing to do with religion but is a fight to topple my government?

Or is it conceivable that Washington really thinks I have gone crazy? Certainly only a crazy man would at this late date and at this crucial point in the war suddenly start a fight with an important segment of the population. But I assure you, Miss Higgins, I am not crazy. I have done everything within my power

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illustrate, very clearly, a mind that was closed to any possibility other than that Diem and the GVN were at fault. Thus, his attitude was condescending, arrogant and absolutely destructive to any vestige of good relations that might be left between Washington and Saigon. Similarly, it would have been impossible for Hilsman to not know that his directives to Trueheart were undoing Nolting's specific mission instructions from President Kennedy and that he was changing the direction of United States policy in South Vietnam. Hilsman was remarkably silent about this aspect in his memoirs but his attitude was made plain in his telegrams at the time:

"There should be no separation between the Government and people of Viet-Nam the great majority of whom consider themselves to be Buddhists. The barricades in Saigon emphasize this serious separation and should be taken down. The highest leaders of the Government should meet Buddhist leaders regularly and treat them as respected equals.

The Government should consider other gestures of good faith which recognize that the Buddhists are sincere and that they are entitled to an honored place in the Vietnamese nation.

The joint communiqué of June 16 in which agreement was reached on the five demands should be scrupulously respected and promptly carried out so as to reduce the suspicions of the Buddhists who are watching the Government's actions closely. The Buddhist leaders are well organized and have not permitted the Communists or political opposition elements to take control.⁹¹ They are a disciplined and peaceful people who must be treated without suspicion.

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to placate these Buddhists. I have made an agreement with them concerning the flying of flags and property ownership. I have offered to have every single grievance investigated by an international commission, including the foreign press and the Buddhists themselves. Why won't they accept these offers? It is because they want, not a solution, but an excuse to continue agitation against this government. There are Communist Viet Cong in those pagodas, Miss Higgins, and we know it. You have attended some of those demonstrations. You have heard wildly subversive speeches that not even the United States government could tolerate, and certainly not in the middle of a war. And yet the United States says that the liberal thing for this regime is to sit silently and accept all this. But what happens if we sit silent and do nothing? There will be more suicides and more headlines around the world portraying me as some kind of devil. The more passive we are, the more the demonstrators will be emboldened. How can I, in the middle of a war, allow these disorders in the street to go on?" Higgins, Our Vietnam Nightmare, pp. 171 - 172.

⁹¹ Professor Douglas Pike's thorough-going research of the Viet Cong/NLF indicates that, while there was no evidence uncovered [at the date of his publication] which conclusively proved that the NLF had succeeded in penetrating the decision-making level in Hué and Saigon, the Communists had made advances in the Buddhist movement. Thus, Professor Pike noted: "The thematic appeal of the NLF to

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News of these events reaches Washington promptly and any evidence that elements within the GVN were seeking to hold back on the agreements or to criticize the Buddhists publicly or privately would have grave effects.... In general the GVN should seek to convince its citizens that it is a reasonable Government dedicated to assisting, not harassing them and to preserving law and order without employing means so strong or so irritating as to cause divisions and dissension.⁹²

The Buddhists in Rural South Vietnam Disagreed with the Direction taken by Buddhist Agitators in Saigon and Hué –

It is worth noting that Vietnamese Buddhists, who lived in rural Vietnam, directly refuted Hilsman's assertions about Buddhist persecution and refusal to be in the employ of the Communists when they were interviewed. Indeed, these rural bonzes could not believe that the Tu Dam and Xa Loi Pagodists were real Buddhists at all.⁹³ Professor Douglas Pike's exhaustive studies certainly indicate that there were several prominent bonzes with connections to the Viet Cong.⁹⁴ Even Wilfred Burchett, the Australian writer who supported the Communist cause,

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religious believers was religious freedom, a freedom at no time in serious jeopardy in South Vietnam. Even the Diem-Buddhist struggle, as Buddhist leaders acknowledged, was essentially a political struggle. The NLF in the summer of 1963 attempted to turn the Buddhist movement to its own purposes. It did succeed in increasing its influence among Buddhist laymen....The Buddhist hierarchy in Saigon, known collectively as the Vien Hoa Dao, was split between moderates led by Thich Tam Chau and the left wing led by Thich Tri Quang. The NLF mass media directed scalding verbal attacks against Tam Chau but only infrequently attacked Tri Quang." Douglas Pike, Viet Cong: The Organization and Techniques of the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam, pp. 203 - 204.

⁹² Roger Hilsman, 181. "(1247) Telegram From the Department of State to the Embassy in Vietnam," Washington, June 19, 1963 - 8:28 p.m. [Department of State, Central Files, AID (US) S VIET. Secret;] in FRUS: Vietnam, January-August, 1963, Vol. III, pp. 402 - 403.

⁹³ "Turning to me, the Cao Dai priest asked: 'Aren't these demonstrations against the law?' 'Yes,' I answered, 'They are illegal.' 'Disrespect for authority is bad,' he said, 'especially in time of war. The Viet Cong are very clever. They could get into a mob and make trouble. We would not permit this kind of thing in our village.'" Higgins, Our Vietnam Nightmare, p. 42.

⁹⁴ For example, Pike's research illustrates the fact that Thich Thien Hao was a member of the NLF Central Committee and Thich Thom Me The Nhem was actually vice-chairman of the NLF Central Committee. Obviously, before or after the fact of the Buddhist crisis of the summer of 1963, there were well-placed bonzes who assisted the NLF and, thus, Hilsman was decidedly wrong in his assertion that

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would take exception to the Hilsman argument that the Viet Cong had no linkage to the radical Buddhist bonzes.⁹⁵ Marguerite Higgins conducted a rigorous study of exactly how the suicides and Buddhist crisis were viewed in the small rural pagodas and she uncovered a profound disagreement with the political direction that the Tu Dam and Xa Loi Pagodas, in Hué and Saigon respectively, were taking.

Standing outside his small pagoda at the side of a charming water-lily-gorged stream, the Buddhist monk said, "I do not understand it at all. I would not kill a fly myself. Buddhism does not believe in the taking of life in any form - even by suicide." The saintly monk's attitude was my first inkling of how wrong were those Americans who assumed that Thich Quang Duc's fiery suicide would produce the same instant horrific impact in a backward, illiterate Oriental country like Vietnam as it had in an advanced, televised, Western nation like America. But what about persecution or discrimination against Buddhists such as himself or his congregation?

"White people do not understand Vietnamese," said the Buddhist monk in gentle, aggrieved tones; "Vietnamese are very tolerant. There is no discrimination. There are many Cao Dai in this village, but they are our friends. So are the Catholics. Our village chief [a Buddhist] distributes fertilizer and rice seed without asking anybody his religion. The Catholics don't get more than we do, nor than the Cao Dai do, nor do we get more than the others"... "We know nothing of any religious persecution," said the Moslem priest. "President Ngo Dinh Diem was province chief here [beginning in 1923]. He may be a Catholic, but he helped our people build mosques and did more for us than any other province chief has ever done. Now he sends us rice, seed, and water [a big dam was being built in the area]. And so we are grateful to President Diem".... In the Mekong Delta, to the south, Buddhist monks and nuns were politely incredulous when I told them of the suicides by fire in Saigon and elsewhere. When I brought out a worn newspaper clipping (which was usually read out loud in Vietnamese

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there was no connection between the Buddhists and the Viet Cong. Douglas Pike, Viet Cong: The Organization and Techniques of the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam, p. 431.

⁹⁵ With reference to the Buddhist demonstrations in Saigon Burchett noted: "...the Liberation Front's organization in Saigon went into action. The latter broadened the demand for more religious freedom into one for democratic liberties as a whole, and called out its supporters in vast mass demonstrations which ended in fierce street battles with the police. The 'Viet Cong' was right amongst them, in Saigon itself, in many tens of thousands, slugging it out with Diem's shock troops." Wilfred G. Burchett, Vietnam: Inside Story of the Guerrilla War, (New York, [NY]: International Publishers, 1965), p. 210.

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by my interpreter) to prove my point, their incredulity would often shift to disapproval.

Wiser than the West in the ways of their own countrymen, the villagers to whom I showed my newspaper clippings never fell into the trap of equating voluntary self-burnings with a deliberate policy of persecution on anybody's part [my emphasis]. This is a fragmentary picture of the attitudes that I found everywhere that summer of 1963 in the deep rural countryside during journeys that took me to all four Vietnamese army corps areas in which the war was being fought.... The attitudes in the countryside were in forceful contrast to the ferment in Saigon and Hue...[my emphasis]⁹⁶

Father Gheddo's exhaustive examination of the question of the Diem government's persecution of the Buddhists in South Vietnam focussed on what the current Buddhist literature was saying. His studies reveal Buddhist recognition of Diem's benevolence toward the faith, which completely contradicts the cries of long-standing persecution that originated amongst the radical Xa Loi Pagodists and echoed by certain Western newsmen.

We have carefully gone through the collection of two international Buddhist magazines, World Buddhism, of Colombo and Young East, of Tokyo, and in many accounts of Vietnamese Buddhism we never found the slightest reference against the government before June 1963. On the contrary, there were various acknowledgements of the development of Buddhism in South Vietnam, and also words of praise for the government. For example, in the article "Buddhist Revival in Vietnam," World Buddhism, November 1960, the author, a bonze, writes expressly: "I express my gratitude to the government of Vietnam for having given me every possibility for developing my Buddhist activities without any restriction; I was given assistance by the army and the police. With the encouragement of the government, for the first time in history Vesak was celebrated in perfect harmony between Mahayanists and Theravadists to an unprecedented extent in the most important cities. Today there is a great Buddhist renaissance in Vietnam..."⁹⁷

Footnotes

⁹⁶ Higgins, Our Vietnam Nightmare, pp. 36 - 38.

⁹⁷ Fr. Gheddo, The Cross and the Bo-Tree, p. 205.

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Washington Decides to Recall Ambassador Nolting and to send out Henry Cabot Lodge in his place -

A meeting between the President, Mr. Ball, Mr. Harriman, Mr. McGeorge Bundy, Mr. Hilsman, and Mr. Forrestal took place at the White House on July 4, 1963. Hilsman, it should be noted, toned-down his anti-Diem fervour to a considerable degree when discussing South Vietnam's problems with President Kennedy. Nevertheless, it was Hilsman who dominated this meeting and he did state that "Our estimate was that no matter what Diem did there will be coup attempts over the next four months."⁹⁸ Evidently, Hilsman suffered few qualms of conscience when he did a complete reversal of the position he had taken with Diem, with regard to his objection that the GVN's treatment of the Buddhist crisis was affecting the war-effort. Thus, Hilsman informed Kennedy that "...the war between the Vietnamese forces and the Viet Cong has been pursued throughout the Buddhist crisis without noticeable let-up."⁹⁹ Forrestal, at this point, buttressed Hilsman's new-found confidence in the war effort by bringing up Marine General Krulak's contention that regardless of the rancour in Saigon, "...the military units in the field continue to confront the Communists."¹⁰⁰ Hilsman, however, was not out to praise Diem and he subtly put before the President the idea that there would be no great loss or problem if Diem was removed from power. For example, he stated that "...everyone agreed that the chances of chaos in

Footnotes

⁹⁸ Roger Hilsman, 205. "Memorandum of A Conversation, White House, Washington, July 4, 1963, 11-11:50 a.m.; Subject: Situation in South Vietnam," [Kennedy Library, Hilsman Papers, Memoranda of Conversation: 7/63. Top Secret. Drafted by Hilsman.] In FRUS: Vietnam, January-August, 1963, Vol. III, pp. 451 - 452.

⁹⁹ Ibid. p. 452.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid. p. 453.

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the wake of a coup are considerably less than they were a year ago.”¹⁰¹ Not only was he directly refuting what Colby and Nolting had been telling Washington but he also claimed that Nolting had overstated the matter when he had indicated that a civil war could well result from a successful coup against Diem.¹⁰² At this point in the discussion at the White House President Kennedy asked about returning Nolting to Washington and moving Henry Cabot Lodge out to Saigon. The President noted that Nolting had done an outstanding job:

The President volunteered that Ambassador Nolting had done an outstanding job, that it was almost miraculous the way he had succeeded in turning the war around from the disastrously low point in relations between Diem and ourselves that existed when Ambassador Nolting took over.... and the President said that he hoped a way could be found to commend Ambassador Nolting publicly so as to make clear the fine job he had done and that he hoped an appropriate position could be found for him in Washington...¹⁰³

One of the decisions President Kennedy made at this meeting was to delegate the authority of deciding the timing of Nolting’s return to Washington and, as such, Hilsman was given the power of this decision.¹⁰⁴ It is important to note that the Harriman group wanted Hilsman to act upon this decision as soon as practically possible. Indeed, in a memorandum Michael V. Forrestal sent to the President’s Special Assistant for National Security Affairs, Mr. Bundy, he stressed that they may have to recall Nolting before Lodge’s arrival in Vietnam because Nolting was seen as pro-Diem and might only encourage the South Vietnamese President to believe that US policy had not changed. Furthermore, Forrestal praised Trueheart over Nolting

Footnotes

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.* p. 452.

¹⁰² *Ibid.* p. 453.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

because, essentially, Trueheart had been obedient to the instructions emanating from the Harriman group of which Forrestal was an integral member.¹⁰⁵

For all of Hilsman's political niceties when speaking about Ambassador Nolting to President Kennedy, behind the scenes - when conferring with Harriman - he was ruthless in his determination to remove Nolting as soon as possible from Saigon.¹⁰⁶ The stalwart ambassador was the one individual, within the State Department, who had consistently thwarted the moves of the Harriman group to isolate and remove Diem from power. As such, Harriman and Hilsman

Footnotes

¹⁰⁵ Here is Forrestal's summation which he gave to Bundy in a memorandum: "...my own judgement is that we are entering a period in which our policy must be one of fence sitting, realizing of course that such a policy constitutes something less than full identification between our own interests and those of President Diem.

As a practical matter, Ambassador Nolting's return to Saigon will tend to encourage Diem to feel that he continues to enjoy our support. On balance I think that this is probably the right course to take, provided the Department is vigorous in needling Nolting to attempt to guide Diem into more political measures to stabilize the situation. It is, perhaps, the last effort we can make in this direction and should be taken if only for that reason.

It may not work, however; and we should be prepared to recall Nolting before Lodge's arrival if our estimate of Diem's survivability turns markedly adverse. At such a time it would be better, in my opinion, to leave Trueheart (the DCM) in charge pending Lodge's arrival. Trueheart has handled the situation with great skill and with somewhat less personal involvement than Nolting and could, I think, be useful in maintaining a degree of flexibility in the US position which would give Lodge a reasonably clean slate to start with." Michael V. Forrestal, 215. "Memorandum From Michael V. Forrestal of the National Security Council Staff to the President's Special Assistant for National Security Affairs (Bundy)," Washington, July 9, 1963 [Kennedy Library, Schlesinger Papers, South Vietnam. Secret.] In FRUS: Vietnam, January-August, 1963, Vol. III, pp. 481 - 482.

¹⁰⁶ The following memorandum of a telephone conversation which took place between Harriman and Hilsman illustrates just how these men viewed Nolting: "WAH [Harriman] told RH [Hilsman] that he was disturbed about the reports of Nolting's statement on the Buddhists - WAH said he ought to be recalled at once. RH said he couldn't agree more...WAH said why should he make public statements and RH replied he shouldn't. WAH said he thought when he leaves he ought to be instructed not to make any public statements - or on second thought WAH said that might be awkward but should clear his statement first in the Dept." John P. Glennon, editor in chief, 243. "Memorandum of a Telephone Conversation Between the Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs (Harriman) and the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs (Hilsman), Washington, August 1, 1963, 9:55 a.m.," transcribed by Eleanor G. McGann of Harriman's staff, [Library of Congress, Harriman Papers, Telephone Conversations.] In FRUS: Vietnam, January-August, 1963, Vol. III, p. 550.

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pounced on Nolting when he had declared to the news media, quite accurately, that there was no persecution of the Buddhists in South Vietnam.¹⁰⁷

Ambassador Nolting's sailing vacation, as noted earlier, had remained ominously quiet and uninterrupted by either his aide in Saigon, Trueheart, or the State Department in Washington.¹⁰⁸ He first heard about his replacement by Henry Cabot Lodge as United States Ambassador to South Vietnam over the ship's radio while he and his family were returning from their Aegean sail-boat holiday via ocean liner from Genoa to New York City.¹⁰⁹ Arriving back in the United States at the end of June (1963) Nolting finally received a personal message from Trueheart that conveyed the fact that a major crisis involving the Buddhists had developed in Vietnam; however, the note gave few details.¹¹⁰

In Washington, on July 5, 1963, Ambassador Nolting attended a meeting at the State Department with Under Secretary of State George W. Ball and two other State Department

Footnotes

¹⁰⁷ "In an interview with UPI on July 28, Nolting replied to a question about religious persecution and the Buddhist crisis as follows: 'I myself, I say this very frankly, after almost two and one half years here, have never seen any evidence of religious persecution, in fact, I have the feeling that there is a great deal of religious toleration among Vietnamese people at all levels.'" Frederick Nolting, Telegram 161 from Saigon, August 1; Department of State, Central Files, SOC-1 S VIET (attached as Footnote # 2 in State Department Document # 243 of Volume III [January-August 1963]) in FRUS: Vietnam, January-August, 1963, Vol. III, p. 550.

¹⁰⁸ "During this ten-day sailing vacation, I called several times from small Aegean islands to the U.S. Embassy and the CIA station chief in Athens to check for messages from Saigon and Washington. Each time I was told there were none. One of these calls was prompted by a picture we saw in a small Greek newspaper on the island of Mykonos. It was Malcolm Browne's photo of Thich Quang Duc's suicide. There were no details, and I mistakenly relied on the assurances I had received that I would be notified if any unusual disturbances occurred in Vietnam. That proved to be a cardinal error on my part." Nolting, From Trust To Tragedy, p. 111.

¹⁰⁹ "The State Department had arranged for us to return by ship from Genoa to New York City. I was scheduled to give two speeches on Vietnam in New York and then go to Washington for consultations. On the voyage from Genoa to New York, there was little news about Vietnam on the ship's radio bulletin, but we did hear that Henry Cabot Lodge had been appointed to succeed me as Ambassador to Vietnam. This was the first I heard of Lodge's appointment." Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

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officials, Chalmers B. Wood and George S. Springsteen. This meeting was significant because Ball, who was not known to have any sympathy for the Diem government, was trying to find out from Nolting what he truly thought would happen in South Vietnam if there was a coup and Diem was removed from power.¹¹¹ Linked to this query, Ball tried to ascertain just how much pressure Nolting believed they could put on Diem with regard to the Buddhist crisis. Nolting, for his part, answered forthrightly that a coup would be a disaster as it could very well unleash a melee of feuds between factions with the result that the US might have to withdraw thus leaving the country open to the Communists. Nolting further informed Ball and Wood that Diem would keep his word about no further attacks on the Buddhists up to the point where he believed the Buddhists were making an all-out attempt to overthrow his government.¹¹² Nolting went on to explain that the Buddhist crisis had no substance in true grievances, as there was no persecution of the Buddhists in South Vietnam. He further explained that, should Diem's government collapse, which he believed would likely occur if the US pressed any further on the whole Buddhist issue through publicly disassociating itself from the GVN, then the Communists would stand to gain the prize. At the end of this meeting Nolting warned Ball about his replacement, Henry Cabot Lodge, that "...the more Lodge was built up to be strong man who was going to tell Diem where to get off, the harder it would be for Lodge to do his job in Viet-Nam."¹¹³

Footnotes

¹¹¹ Chalmers B. Wood, 208. "Memorandum of a Conversation, Department of State, Washington, July 5, 1963: Current Situation in Viet-Nam," [Department of State, Secretary's Memoranda of Conversation: Lot 65 D 330, July 1963. Secret.] In FRUS: Vietnam, January-August, 1963, Vol. III, p. 466.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Ibid. p. 467.

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On July 10, 1963, Nolting was rushed back to Vietnam with Kennedy's personal instructions to try and restore Diem's trust and confidence.¹¹⁴ In early July, just before Nolting arrived back in Saigon, even Trueheart, an unlikely defender of Diem, was forced to take the side of the GVN over an issue involving the news correspondents Malcolm Browne, David Halberstam, Peter Kalischer, Neil Sheehan and Peter Arnett. The essential facts of this incident were that the Buddhists had 'tipped-off' the reporters to be at a demonstration which was proceeding down a narrow alley-way wherein a scrum or melee ensued with plainclothes GVN police who were there monitoring the situation. The reporters, being quite belligerent themselves, were not amused when Peter Arnett was knocked down to the ground and a camera got smashed during the whole process.¹¹⁵ Nevertheless, Trueheart reported to Washington that the situation was far less serious than the reporters were trying to make it out to be by claiming that the GVN planned this harassment:

On basis all available information, I am far from satisfied there was planned harassment of press in this instance, particularly considering fact that reporters had been operating freely for at least an hour before incident. Much more likely, in my view, that this was relatively commonplace contretemps in crowded place between reporters and police. Police officials on scene informed Embassy security officer that they so regard it and that incident, in their view, is closed.¹¹⁶

Footnotes

¹¹⁴ "In talks with Harriman and Hilsman, I said frankly what I thought about the way this crisis was being handled, including the evident lack of consultation and proper co-ordination in Washington. I asked to return to Saigon immediately.

President Kennedy and I had a brief meeting, and I recall that his manner was more calm and cordial than what I had encountered in the State Department. It was he who agreed that I should return as promptly as possible to Saigon, telling me to do my best to help restore confidence and trust until Lodge arrived. I do not remember any big cheers from the State Department on this decision." Nolting, From Trust To Tragedy, p. 113.

¹¹⁵ William Trueheart, 210. "Telegram From the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State [46. Dept pass USIA]," Saigon, July 7, 1963 - 6 p.m., [Department of State, Central Files, PPV 7 S VIET-US. Limited Official Use;] in FRUS: Vietnam, January-August, 1963, Vol. III, p. 470.

¹¹⁶ Ibid. p. 471.

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Browne, Halberstam, Kalischer, and Sheehan had sent a telegram of protest to President Kennedy on July 7th. They claimed that they were covering a peaceful Buddhist religious ceremony when they were hit with a swift unprovoked attack by GVN plain clothes policemen and that the regular uniformed police would not come to their aid.¹¹⁷ These enraged reporters told Kennedy that the inescapable conclusion was that the GVN had begun a campaign of open intimidation and violence against American newsmen and, thus, they wanted the President to make a strong protest to Diem "Since the United States Embassy here does not deem this incident serious enough to make a formal protest..."¹¹⁸

Trueheart cabled Washington again, on July 10, and informed the State Department that the reporters in question had lost all objectivity and were openly calling for Diem to be overthrown:

Department should be aware that in recent weeks resident correspondents have become so embittered towards GVN that they are saying quite openly to anyone who will listen that they would like to see regime overthrown. GVN no doubt has this well-documented. GVN also unquestionably considers that correspondents have been actively encouraging Buddhists. Diem is therefore most unlikely to accept view that correspondents merely carrying on normal functions of keeping US public informed.¹¹⁹

The New York Times had 'taken-the-gloves-off' in its attempts to sway public opinion and therefore American diplomacy and foreign policy in Vietnam and, thus, the paper reported on July 9, 1963, on page six, that Nolting was returning to Vietnam with a message for President Diem from President Kennedy. Of course, the implication of this New York Times report was

¹¹⁷ 211. "Telegram From Malcolm Browne of the Associated Press, David Halberstam of the New York Times, Peter Kalischer of CBS News, and Neil Sheehan of United Press International to the President," Saigon, July 7, 1963 - 10:20 a.m., [Kennedy Library, National Security Files, Vietnam Country Series, 7/1/63-7/20/63] in FRUS: Vietnam, January-August, 1963, Vol. III, p. 472.

¹¹⁸ ibid.

¹¹⁹ William Trueheart, "Telegram From the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State [65. Dept pass USIA]," Saigon, July 10, 1963, [Department of State, Central Files, PPV 7 S VIET-US. Limited Official Use:] in FRUS: Vietnam, January-August, 1963, Vol. III, p. 472.

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that Nolting was to 'lay-down-the-law' with Diem. This story had no basis in reality as Nolting had met with Kennedy on July 8, just before he left for Saigon, but he was given no messages to carry to Diem.¹²⁰ Indeed, Kennedy's direction, given directly to Nolting in the July 8 meeting, was that he wanted the policy of rapprochement with Diem fully revived as he had instructed the ambassador to restore Diem's "...confidence and trust."¹²¹ Further to this, in order to reassure Nolting, the Department of State cabled the Embassy in Saigon and, in this cable, the allegations of The New York Times were denied. Additionally, the State Department made the clear statement, on July 10, 1963, that: "There has been no change in our policy toward Vietnam, or our support for the program against the Communist Viet Cong in that country."¹²²

Once back in Vietnam Nolting found the US government policy he had been pursuing all but destroyed; he reported that the 'patient' (i.e., US – GVN relations) was on 'the critical list' and that Diem's confidence in US intentions had been badly shaken. Most disturbing of all, Nolting found Diem in what he called a 'martyr's mood' with heightened suspicions and resentments about US pressure and the Buddhist agitation. Nolting also recognised that the Buddhists held the initiative in their potential to bring down the government.¹²³ He informed Washington that the best thing to do at this point was to "...work quietly along existing

Footnotes

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, as designated in the document, to **Footnote # 1 attached to document # 218**, [Office of the Historian, Vietnam Interviews, Nolting, June 1, 1984]; Frederick Nolting, 218. "Telegram From The Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State," Saigon, July 11, 1963 - 8 p.m., [Department of State, Central Files, POL S VIET. Secret;] in FRUS: Vietnam, January-August, 1963, Vol. III, p. 486.

¹²¹ Nolting, From Trust To Tragedy, p. 113.

¹²² **Footnote # 1 attached to document # 218**, [Office of the Historian, Vietnam Interviews, Nolting, June 1, 1984]; Frederick Nolting, "218. Telegram From The Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State," Saigon, July 11, 1963 - 8 p.m., [Department of State, Central Files, POL S VIET. Secret;] in FRUS: Vietnam, January-August, 1963, Vol. III, p. 486.

¹²³ Frederick Nolting, 219. "Telegram [85. CINCPAC for POLAD] From the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State," Saigon, July 15, 1963 - 1 p.m., [Department of State, Central Files, POL S VIET. Secret;] in FRUS: Vietnam, January-August, 1963, Vol. III, p. 487.

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guidelines.”¹²⁴ Nolting, however, did not hold his fire and he let those responsible for ‘pounding-the-table’ at Diem know that they had made a serious error - all in typical Nolting diplomatic language of course:

*In my judgement, his [Diem's] motives and intentions are still good; some of his resentments and suspicions concerning the Buddhist agitation are well-founded. He is visibly tired. Our main problem at moment is to get him relaxed enough to take the helm and steer the ship on a true and sensible course....While making our views and especially US domestic considerations amply clear, we should not try to blueprint his course for him. Specifically, we should not reiterate our threat of disassociation, nor feel stuck with it if other means of easing the situation (even the passage of time) work in favour of a political modus vivendi here. Rather, I think, we should continue, as has been done, to tell him the facts of life about public opinion at home and let him work out his own accommodation....but I think we must accept the fact that we will probably continue to have a generally bad press for some time, until political calm returns and we can demonstrate the success of the overall strategy and plan. With luck - I emphasize this - [and?] an appearance of calm determination on the part of Americans to see this crisis surmounted, I believe there is a reasonably good chance of re-establishing the basis for continued progress here.*¹²⁵

During this period, when Nolting had returned to Vietnam for the remainder of the summer, he became increasingly blunt in his admissions to others about Hilsman’s unprofessional manner. He made no attempt to hide the fact that the Assistant Secretary of State for the Far East was not basing his assessments on reality in South Vietnam but, instead, upon the biased reporting of The New York Times.¹²⁶ Marguerite Higgins recalled a specific example of this divergence:

Footnotes

¹²⁴ *ibid.*.

¹²⁵ *ibid.* pp. 487 - 488.

¹²⁶ Higgins found this reality difficult to believe until Hilsman admitted it to her himself. “I was so perturbed over the contrast between Hilsman’s broadcast and the embassy findings that my first act on landing in New York (it was Saturday morning) was to telephone Hilsman. Despite the hour (eight A.M.) he was in his office. ‘The embassy says the Buddhist crisis is having no effect on the war,’ I opened. ‘But

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On August 14, 1963, for example, Assistant Secretary of State Roger Hilsman, in a broadcast over Voice of America, declared that the Buddhist crisis was "beginning to affect the war effort."

I took Hilsman's statement to Ambassador Nolting, who was then about to leave for the United States [Nolting left on August 15, 1963]. He was in conference at the time with William Trueheart, his deputy, and John Mecklin, director of the United States Information Service.

The ambassador shook his head in bafflement. "I'm telling you in all honesty, Murguerite," he said, "that all our reports show that the Buddhist crisis is not having any impact at all - though of course it could if riots should become severe enough to necessitate diverting front line troops.... I don't know what Hilsman based his statement on. But he isn't basing it on anything that went out of this embassy, the military mission, or the CIA"¹²⁷

After a Buddhist demonstration outside the American Embassy in Saigon, on July 16, Nolting cabled Washington and confirmed what many had already suspected: "...that Buddhist agitation is now predominantly controlled by activists and radical elements aimed at the overthrow of GVN."¹²⁸ In this telegram Nolting also warned Washington that even if the Buddhists were not connected to coup plots against Diem by military officers they were, none-the-less, well aware of them and their potential. The Secretary of State, Dean Rusk, personally responded to this last telegram of Nolting's and stated that they must be prepared for further Buddhist demonstrations. The best thing that Rusk could recommend to Nolting at that time was to continue to attempt to prevail on Diem with regard to some sort of accommodation with the

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your VOA broadcast said there is. What did you base it on? The *New York Times*?' 'Partly that,' said Hilsman. 'The *Times* and other press dispatches out of Saigon.' And thus is history recast. All those Vietnamese-speaking Americans circling the countryside for the purpose of testing Vietnamese opinion; all those American officers gauging the morale of the troops; all those C.I.A. agents tapping their sources (hopefully) everywhere; all those dispatches from Ambassador Nolting - an army of data - collectors in reasonable agreement had been downgraded in favor of press dispatches stating opposite conclusions. It was the first time that I began to comprehend, in depth and in some sorrow, what was meant by the *power* of the press." Higgins, *Our Vietnam Nightmare*, pp. 124 - 125.

¹²⁷ *ibid.* p. 124.

¹²⁸ Frederick Nolting, 223. "Telegram [95. CINCPAC for POLAD] From the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State," Saigon, July 17, 1963, [Department of State, Central Files, SOC 14-1 S VIET. Secret;] in *FRUS: Vietnam, January-August, 1963*, Vol. III, pp. 493 - 494.

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Buddhists.¹²⁹ There was, however, a very pronounced 'sit-on-the-fence' and 'wait-and-see' tone in Rusk's telegram and it stung Nolting into direct conflict with his boss as he could discern the mark of the Harriman and Hilsman influence in this latest cable from Washington. Considering what eventually happened, Nolting's warning to Washington was prescient:

I am very much disappointed in reftel [Rusk's Deptel # 103]. It gives us nothing to work with, on either side of equation. A wait-and-see attitude on our part at this juncture will lead only, in my judgement, to further undermining of stability here and to further jeopardizing US vital interests. It will encourage more agitation and demand on part of Buddhists; it will discourage further conciliatory action on part of government; it will increase prospects of a coup.¹³⁰

Madame Nhu –

Clare Boothe Luce attempted to restore a much needed cultural context to the whole Buddhist Crisis and Madame Nhu's position in the following excerpt from an article that she wrote:

In America, if a Catholic Priest were to burn himself to death in protest of the government's failure to provide free bus rides for parochial school children, or if a Protestant minister were to make himself a living torch to express his opposition to the Supreme Court decision against prayer in public schools, we would consider them religious maniacs. This is precisely the view Mme. Nhu has taken of the self-immolating bonzes.

Footnotes

¹²⁹ Drafted by Heavner and cleared by Kattenburg, Rice, and Rusk, 230. "Telegram [# 103] From the Department of State to the Embassy in Vietnam," Washington, July 19, 1963 - 8:53 p.m., [Department of State, Central Files, SOC 14-1 S VIET. Secret; Operational Immediate], in FRUS: Vietnam, January-August, 1963, Vol. III, pp. 517 - 518.

¹³⁰ Frederick Nolting, 232. "Telegram [# 117. CINCPAC for POLAD] From the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State," Saigon, July 20, 1963 - 7 p.m., [Department of State, Central Files, SOC 14-1 S VIET. Secret; Operational Immediate;] in FRUS: Vietnam, January-August, 1963, Vol. III, p. 521.

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In America, self-immolation is not thought to be a useful or particularly democratic way to protest grievances or discrimination. However, an insult which might barely cause one American to punch another, could, say, in Japan, lead to Hari-Kari. A Japanese who 'loses face' disembowels himself with a ritual sword, often aided by a friend or relative. In India, for hundreds of years, widows threw themselves onto the funeral pyres of their husbands: if they did not, they 'lost face.' Probably no American can understand the Asiatic concept of 'face.' This is perhaps fortunate. In view of how much 'face' the U.S. has lost in the Orient, we would have to burn Washington to recover ours.

*Clare Boothe Luce*¹³¹

Toward the end of Nolting's tenure as Ambassador to South Vietnam a serious public relations problem with the GVN was added to the Buddhist crisis. This predicament was concerned Madame Nhu and her special talent for saying exactly the wrong thing at precisely the most inconvenient moment,¹³² for example, when Thich Quang Duc had burned himself to death, Madame Nhu used the word 'barbecue' to describe the shocking event.¹³³ This, indeed,

Footnotes

¹³¹ Clare Boothe Luce, "The Lady is For Burning: The Seven Deadly Sins of Madame Nhu," in a full page advertisement taken out by the National Review in The New York Times, (Wednesday, October 30, 1963), p. 40.

¹³² "...I asked her why she had used the word 'barbecue' to describe the Buddhist suicides.... 'If I had it all to do over again, I would say the same thing,' she said defiantly. 'I used those terms because they have shock value. It is necessary to somehow shock the world out of this trance in which it looks at Vietnam with false vision about religious persecution that does not exist. If the President keeps bowing to the unreasonable demands of the Buddhists, they will keep right on taking advantage of this weakness to make new impossible demands. They are hypocrites, that's all. A handful of 'Buddhists' [here her contempt flared] who know perfectly well there is no religious persecution in this country are willing to tarnish the image of Vietnam and of every Vietnamese citizen. Why? Because they hope to build up pressures that will serve their true aim - to overthrow the government. And they are doing this in the middle of a war....I would welcome a condemnation of Vietnam by the United Nations. I will tell you why. Sometimes things have to go to the deepest depths before they rise to the top. Let the United Nations condemn us on these ridiculous grounds of religious persecution. Then they will send a team in here to investigate and they will discover the truth - and what fools they made of themselves.' ...At the time neither of us had any way of knowing how prophetic she would be proved. For a United Nations investigation of alleged persecution did take place in the autumn of 1963. And just as she had predicted, it failed to find any convincing evidence that religious persecution of Buddhists was in fact Diem's policy." Higgins, Our Vietnam Nightmare, pp. 62 - 63.

¹³³ Marguerite Higgins recalled the story, with considerable precision, which she first saw in the *Stars and Stripes* at the Caravelle Hotel: "In my hotel box was a copy of the *Stars and Stripes*, proclaiming the incredible. The first lady of Vietnam had used the word 'barbecue' in talking of the Buddhist suicides. Her exact words were that the Buddhist leaders were without a program and had done nothing except to

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stung American sensibilities but no one seemed to question where she had picked up such an un-Vietnamese description as, in fact, her daughter had told her that's what the American journalists were calling the suicide.¹³⁴ Indeed, the very reporters who were so quick to criticise Madame Nhu for her callousness stood around and took pictures of burning Buddhists, all the while not making any attempt to help or save the prospective human torches, forgetting that a fellow human being was dying before their very eyes. As such, the American newsmen, already having cast their lot with those forces arrayed against Diem's GVN, seized upon everything the very politically incorrect Madame Nhu had to say and used this material against Diem in the court of American public opinion. Both Ellen Hammer and Marguerite Higgins had interviewed Madame Nhu on various occasions and found her to be a strident Vietnamese nationalist and, in a Vietnamese fashion, an equally strident feminist.¹³⁵ She had a very forceful will, an unbridled tongue and, unfortunately for relations between Saigon and Washington, a very poor grasp of the English language - her first and preferred language being French. All of these factors combined to create, with the help of some very eager American journalists,¹³⁶ an unflattering image of the proverbial 'dragon-lady.'¹³⁷ Harriman had a much more arcane and blunt name for Madame

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'barbecue a monk and, at that, not even with self-sufficient means, since they had to import gasoline....'" Ibid. p. 59.

¹³⁴ Hammer, A Death In November, p. 145.

¹³⁵ Higgins, Our Vietnam Nightmare, p. 64.

¹³⁶ Hammer, A Death In November, pp. 216 - 217.

¹³⁷ "She had little formal education in the Western sense, but she had extraordinary vitality and energy. Being young, photogenic, and only too willing to talk, she was a natural target for the press. Her command of English seemed much greater than it was (she never used English in private conversation if there was a choice), and while her indiscreet public pronouncements influenced history, I think she did not understand the implications of some of her own outrageous remarks." Nolting, From Trust To Tragedy, p. 99.

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Nhu, as he referred to her as 'that Bitch,' and he made sure that everyone in the State Department knew exactly what he thought of her.¹³⁸

On August 8, 1963, George Ball cabled Nolting and instructed him to seek a new interview with President Diem in order to secure Madame Nhu's silence as Halberstam had just run another story in The New York Times which had carried one of Madame Nhu's unflattering outburst.¹³⁹ Nolting cabled Washington back on August 10, apologized for the delay, and then proceeded to tell State that the "Fact is Madame Nhu is out of control of everybody - her father, mother, husband and brother-in-law."¹⁴⁰ Nolting relayed that Diem promised that he would find a way to place Madame Nhu on vacation status, although his attempts up to this point had been ... *footnote continued from previous page:*

When Ambassador Lodge arrived in Saigon he made the comparison between Madame Nhu and Madame Chiang Kai-shek, 'the dragon-lady', "...who he said had played a decisive role in losing China to the Communists." Hammer, A Death In November, p. 218.

¹³⁸ "At a conference of American regional ambassadors at Baguio called by Averell Harriman, while some fifteen of us were seated at a long table, the chairman, Harriman, was handed a telegram from Saigon. It contained a description of another 'anti-American' speech made by Madame Nhu. Harriman read it and passed it down the table with a note to me: 'Nolting - what are you going to do about this b- -ch?' I passed it back with a note: 'What would you propose, Sir?'" Nolting, From Trust To Tragedy, pp. 101 - 102.

¹³⁹ Specifically, Ball told Nolting: "You are accordingly to seek new interview with Diem and tell him again that while we recognize Mme Nhu is private citizen rather than GVN official it clear we cannot ignore such destructive and insulting statements by person so clearly identified with him. Diem cannot overlook effect this has of undercutting his authority and creating image abroad that he being led around by apron strings.

Contradictory statements on Buddhist policy by President and Mme Nhu leaves us, and Vietnamese people as well, in dark as to actual policy GVN pursuing.... Tell Diem frankly, however, that at this crucial juncture most convincing action vis-à-vis both Vietnamese and US opinion would be to remove Mme Nhu from scene. We have in mind action similar to that taken in early years Diem regime when she sent to Hong Kong convent." George Ball, 248. "Telegram [# 178] From the Department of State to the Embassy in Vietnam," Washington, August 8, 1963 - 8 p.m., [Department of State, Central Files, POL 15-1 S VIET. Secret. Drafted by Heavner and Kattenburg, cleared in substance by Harriman and in draft by Forrestal, and approved by Hilsman.] In FRUS: Vietnam, January-August, 1963, Vol. III, pp. 557 - 558.

¹⁴⁰ Frederick Nolting, 250. "Telegram [# 204] From the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State," Saigon, August 10, 1963 - 7 p.m., [Department of State, Central Files, POL 15-1 S VIET. Secret; Priority.] In FRUS: Vietnam, January-August, 1963, Vol. III, p. 560.

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less than successful. Yet, regardless of the Madame Nhu annoyance, Nolting stressed that it was most important that they let Diem maintain authority in his own way and that urging Diem "...to have Nhu make public statement of support for Diem's policy," was not a good idea "...as this brings into question who is running the GVN and related problems. Please reconsider."¹⁴¹

For all the criticism of Madame Nhu, justified or not, she did have the singular ability to make extremely prescient statements. For example, she had predicted that if the United Nations sent in a team to determine whether or not there had been any religious persecution of the Buddhists under the government of Ngo Dinh Diem, they would find no such phenomenon. True to her prediction, the United Nations did send in a team and found no justification for accusing Diem's GVN of persecuting Buddhist monks. Because Diem had already been murdered and his government destroyed by the time the UN Committee's investigations were complete the report was never published; nevertheless, William F. Buckley Jr. managed to obtain a copy of the committee's findings and he duly published their verdict of "not guilty." Amongst other things, the United Nations Committee's findings were a damning indictment of the story that Halberstam et al. sold to the American public and the story that the Harriman faction managed to foist onto the Kennedy Administration:

Here is what the Costa Rican member of the Committee, who had gone to Viet-Nam predisposed to accept the guilt of the Diem Government, has concluded, "The charges made in the General Assembly against the Diem Government were not sustained.... There was no religious discrimination or persecution, no encroachment of freedom of religion.... There is no other way to see it. The clash between a part - not all - of the Buddhist community and the Diem regime was on political grounds... I have the feeling that the majority of the Mission members (Afghanistan, Brazil, Ceylon, Costa Rica, Dahomey, Morocco, and Nepal) considered it a political question, not a religious question."

Witnesses were heard representing every point of view, and the Diem Government, in the expressed opinion of the Mission, behaved impeccably, co-

Footnotes

¹⁴¹ *ibid.* pp. 561 - 562.

operating with the Mission with the kind of zeal that tends to be shown by men confident of vindication.

Political Abuses, The upshot of the witnesses' testimony suggests, as the Costa Rican member stated: "That the real difficulty was political, not religious, but that there had been a cynical abuse of the presumption in favor of religious liberty for all non-Russian-dominated states of the United Nations - sufficient to manufacture an international cause celebre and undermine a government that had been the key to American policy in Southeast Asia."

.... "The (UN) Mission took note of the names of Buddhist monks, leaders and students who had allegedly been arrested, kidnapped or killed. Later it (the Mission) was able to interview Thich Tri Tu, Thich Quang Lien, Thich Tarn Giao, and Thich Tien Minh who, in some communications, were said to have been killed."

The Mission also took note (pp. 347, 348) of allegations in communications sent to it concerning alleged Diem government persecution of Buddhists and reported objectively on their import. Of a total of 25 communications, the UN Mission says: "In five of these communications, the authors allege that such persecutions (of Buddhists) were the result of a deliberate policy of the (Diem) government...."

"In four communications, the persecutions were regarded as being essentially the acts of anti-Buddhist elements in the population or of local authorities, and the central Government is being held responsible only for not paying enough attention to Buddhist grievances...."

"The authors of twelve communications deny that the Buddhist community was ever the victim of discrimination and persecution by the (Diem's) Government."

"It is stressed in four communications that, under the Diem Government, the Buddhist community had grown larger and that numerous pagodas had been built or repaired with the financial help of the (Diem) Government authorities."¹⁴²

Of course, while history has proved Madame Nhu's prescience accurate and Ambassador Nolting's statements about the Buddhists true, Diem and his government, regardless of the truth, were still destroyed. The damage was done and for those who wanted it that way, both American and Vietnamese alike, truly, "sufficient unto the day was the evil thereof."

Footnotes

¹⁴² William F. Buckley, Jr. was quoting from United Nations Document # A/5630 - dated December 7, 1963; the document is entitled "The Violation of Human Rights in South Vietnam;" this copy appears in R621/102.921; Box Number: 23; Professional Papers, Newsclippings 1 of 2, The Nolting Papers.

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Simultaneous to the problems with Madame Nhu, and related to her negative impact in the press, the whole burgeoning negativity and destructiveness of the American press was forcing itself to the fore in Washington's considerations. Because of the on-going bad press, which Nolting had warned Washington about, the Kennedy Administration deemed it necessary to send the Honourable Robert J. Manning, the Assistant Secretary of State for Public Affairs, along with his special assistant, Mr. Marshall Wright, to meet with Ngo Dinh Nhu for the purpose of discovering just how the GVN was dealing with the press problem.¹⁴³ In a meeting that took place in Saigon on July 17, 1963, and which was attended by Ngo Dinh Nhu, Robert J. Manning, John Mecklin, Troung Buu Khanh (of the Vietnam Press), and Marshall Wright, some remarkable revelations were made. The most astonishing illumination in this meeting, most likely to the Americans present and certainly to the student of this history, was the political acumen and sheer intelligence of Ngo Dinh Nhu. His political competence and insight into all that was going on with the Americans was, quite simply, astounding when compared to the popular derogatory image that was created of Nhu by the young American journalists in Vietnam and has, in one form or another, been maintained down through the decades.

Perhaps more than anyone, on either side of the Washington - Saigon debate, Nhu was aware of the trouble that was fermenting. In this context it is not surprising that Madame Nhu would later admit that her husband was very unhappy with his brother Diem and with her: "He

Footnotes

¹⁴³ According to the historian at the State Department, "Manning was sent to Vietnam by President Kennedy to investigate and report on the type of problems relating to American journalists which had led to the telegram sent to the President by a group of journalists on July 7, Document # 211." Footnote # 1 attached to 226. "Memorandum of a Conversation, Saigon, July 17, 1963," [Kennedy Library, National Security Files, Vietnam Country Series, 7/1/63-7/20/63. Secret.] In FRUS: Vietnam, January-August, 1963, Vol. III, pp. 496 - 497.

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considered both of us as babes in the woods. He said to his brother, 'You should be a monk,' and 'You,' to me, 'just keep quiet -- don't say anything.'"¹⁴⁴

When one peruses the document which resulted from the Manning-Nhu meeting, there is little doubt that Nhu possessed a formidable intelligence and that he controlled the meeting from beginning to end simply because he had such a firm and ready grasp of all the pertinent facts. Conversely, the Americans were caught rather 'flat-footed', and what was supposed to have been a 'dressing-down' of Nhu turned, almost, into an apology by Mr. Manning. At one point Manning blurted out a re-assurance of American support for the GVN and that the journalists were not 'the-tail-that-wagged-the-dog' of American foreign policy as Nhu was seriously questioning this:

*Mr. Manning said that Mr. Nhu had expressed the belief that there was widespread disillusionment about the situation in Vietnam, both on the part of US leaders and the US public. Mr. Manning said that this belief was in no sense justified... there is a conviction within the United States Government that we are involved in a winning program in Vietnam. "... that the question of changing the nature of the American commitment will not be decided by journalists either in Vietnam or elsewhere. Such decisions will be made by the United States Government, and the position of the United States Government at the present time is clear as is the support of the American people for that commitment."*¹⁴⁵

Another noteworthy point that Manning alluded to, and this relates to one of the arguments that Seymour Hersh made for why the Kennedy Administration abandoned Diem, was that 1964 was to be an election year "...and as the campaign heats up, it will become more and more necessary that the President have the necessary tools to insure a continuance of American public support for

Footnotes

¹⁴⁴ Transcript of Vietnam, A Television History: #103 America's Mandarin (1954-1963), p.14 in R621/102.921; Box Number: 28; Professional Papers, Historical Background Records, 8 of 10, The Nolting Papers.

¹⁴⁵ Marshall Wright, 226. "Memorandum of a Conversation, Saigon, July 17, 1963," [Kennedy Library, National Security Files, Vietnam Country Series, 7/1/63-7/20/63. Secret.] In FRUS: Vietnam, January-August, 1963, Vol. III, pp. 502 -503.

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the effort in Vietnam."¹⁴⁶ When the whole conversation was over, Nhu had been given the assurance by Manning of continued Kennedy Administration support. Manning asserted that he would also attempt to address the bad-press problem with editors back in the United States. His solution was to urge editors to send out reporters who would practice more self-discipline in their reporting as Manning had agreed with Nhu that reporters, such as Halberstam and Sheehan, had abandoned all sense of professional ethics and were running with their emotions.¹⁴⁷ Yet this high-level meeting, which began with an inquisitor's imperious manner on Mr. Manning's part and ended with positive agreement, amounted to nothing, as Manning's efforts evidently had no discernible effect on toning-down the emotion-laden reporting. Likewise, the Harriman group did not veer one iota from their steady course to have Diem removed from power.¹⁴⁸ Again, and

Footnotes

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.* p. 503.

¹⁴⁷ "Mr. Manning said that he agreed with Mr. Nhu on one important point. That point was that the present state of mind of the American correspondents is grounded on passion. This being so, the problem was not a technical one of press treatment, but a problem of tone...Mr. Manning said that he was in a position to go back to the United States and to see a number of influential and fair minded editors and to discuss with them candidly the situation in Vietnam. He would convey to them the fact that it was necessary to view developments in Vietnam in the total world context. He would convey to them the need in the complex Vietnam situation for self-discipline on the part of the American correspondents." *Ibid.* pp. 506 - 507.

¹⁴⁸ Nolting had a similar experience with U. Alexis Johnson of the State Department back in May of 1963 at a Honolulu meeting. Johnson had assured Nolting that policy had not been changed but Harriman and Hilsman had another view entirely: "As the conference participants discussed the comprehensive plan, which Defense and the Joint Chiefs of Staff had revised and returned to Saigon for implementation, I began to develop suspicions about exactly who was backing whom in Vietnam. Some of those present expressed views about a change in the South Vietnamese government, or at least 'cultivating the opposition.' Hearing this from Harriman did not surprise me, but I did not expect it from Roger Hilsman. After one of these sessions, I privately asked Alex Johnson, 'What goes on here? Am I hearing that our policy has been changed?' As Deputy Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs, U. Alexis Johnson had regularly attended the Honolulu meetings since their inception. He represented the State Department's highest professional echelons and should have known the answer to my query. He responded unequivocally: there was no cleavage on policy between Washington and Saigon; no change of policy had occurred or was to be expected in Washington. As we walked up and down the beach, he assured me that our program in Vietnam was on an even keel, that I would, of course, be advised if there was any change in policy." Nolting, *From Trust To Tragedy*, pp. 105 - 106.

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regardless of the good efforts of men like Manning, the historical parallel between the momentum of the anti-Diemists in the United States and the momentum of those Americans who advocated war with Spain at the turn of the last century, springs to the fore. In both cases the sheer emotion and momentum, in no small part created and spurred-on by American newsmen, overwhelmed the facts and reason, whereupon violence was the result.

Averell Harriman Takes Charge –

At this point in American - Vietnamese relations the direction for change emanating from the State Department was so strong and so firmly under the command of Harriman that when Nolting called upon Dean Rusk to step in and re-affirm policy the latter merely shrugged and declared: "Well, Averell is doing this [i.e., he's in charge of the Far East - talk to him]."¹⁴⁹ As such, Nolting declared to O'Brien that, effectively, Harriman was 'running-the-show': "I found that he [Harriman] was sort of running the State Department and that the Secretary of State was either not very interested or wasn't doing much about it."¹⁵⁰

Evidently, Harriman, Hilsman or both, were marshalling a powerful anti-Diem lobby which, at this point, was moving from continual severe criticism of the policy of supporting Diem (and severe criticism of Diem, himself) to suggestions for outright removal of Diem through a coup. Chester Bowles was to figure prominently in this support group. In this context it is worth noting that there may have been more than one reason for Bowles' commitment to the Harriman faction. According to John Kenneth Galbraith, Dean Rusk had deposed the former Under-

Footnotes

¹⁴⁹ Frederick Nolting, "The Third Oral History Interview with Frederick Nolting." Recorded interview by Dennis O'Brien, May 7, 1970 (Washington, [DC]), p. 109, John F. Kennedy Library, Oral History Program, Boston, Ma.

¹⁵⁰ *ibid.*

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secretary of State because he had disagreed with the Secretary's brisk anti-Communism. Rusk had made it known that he was not in favour of the route that Harriman was steering US policy in. Naturally, then, the Harriman faction was a likely group within the State Department for Bowles to align himself with. Thus, Galbraith reveals what was going on with Bowles and his appointment as United States Ambassador to India in the summer of 1963:

In any case, I determined to resume teaching in the autumn of 1963 and, more particularly, to finish The New Industrial State.

Accordingly, in mid-July [1963] we left New Delhi. In November 1961, Chester Bowles had been removed as Under-secretary of State, ostensibly because of his unduly loquacious style, in fact because he was not in harmony with the brisk, sanguinary anti-Communist faith of Dean Rusk. Bowles had persuaded himself that beneath the evil of Communist design and supporting it were social discontents and political abuses that drove men and women to extreme solutions. That there were forthright military remedies he thought overly simple. And admittedly he was inclined to enlarge at length on these views as well as to be guided by them. The stern foreign-policy men of the time had responded with amused contempt but also with a firm determination to bring an end to such nonsense. In consequence, Bowles had been idling for many months in a face-saving White House post, that of presidential adviser on economic development. Now, to his great relief, he became my replacement. He had, of course, previously served as Ambassador to India (and Nepal) under Harry Truman.¹⁵¹

Certainly, we have a document which proves that Chester Bowles, then the Ambassador to India,¹⁵² was well on-side with the Harriman group with regard to a coup. The document was a top-secret letter Bowles sent to McGeorge Bundy, the President's Special Assistant for National Security Affairs. In this letter the 'gloves come off' and the intent of the Harriman group is laid

Footnotes

¹⁵¹ John Kenneth Galbraith, A Life In Our Times: Memoirs, (Boston, [MA]: The Houghton Mifflin Company, 1981), p. 444.

¹⁵² According to John Kenneth Galbraith's memoirs, Chester Bowles was not a happy man. The former Under-secretary of State realised that his shuffle out of the State Department to a White House face-saving job, as an adviser to the President on economic development, was a clear signal that his career was over. The posting to India, however, did give Bowles some relief from his humiliation in Washington. John Galbraith, Ambassador's Journal, p. 308.

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bare. It is important to note that Bowles 'played the China card' in this letter in order to assist Harriman and Hilsman in provoking the Kennedy cabinet into action against Diem. For, to be accused of 'losing' Vietnam as China had been 'lost' held serious political ramifications in Washington, especially, for a president seeking re-election in 1964:

3. We cannot achieve our objectives in Southeast Asia as long as Diem and his family run Vietnam.... In Diem and his family we have a set-up comparable to that presented by the Generalissimo in China in the 1940's. We failed in China largely because we failed to find an effective means of dealing with an inept ruling power that had lost touch with the people. We will fail in Southeast Asia, and perhaps even more decisively, if we repeat this mistake in Vietnam.... It is not too much to say that almost any articulate, courageous, anti-Communist Vietnamese with a good reputation who puts himself at the head of a coup to overthrow Diem, and who outlines a policy of continued vigorous anti-communism combined with anti-favoritism, better government administration and land reforms, would find himself a national hero in a matter of weeks.¹⁵³

Bowles' expertise with regard to South Vietnam was not founded on much in-depth knowledge. Even for a president longing for the whole volatile Vietnamese situation to calm down, Bowles' opinion would have to be weighed against what the experts, such as William Colby, the former CIA Saigon Station Chief, were saying.

Colby, a man not given to hasty or imprudent judgements, put substantial emphasis on the fact that the Buddhist crisis caused Diem's government to switch its focus. In his professional estimation, the GVN focus went from the war-winning strategic hamlet program, a focus that had required enormous effort and attention from the GVN,¹⁵⁴ to dealing with public relations

Footnotes

¹⁵³ Chester Bowles, 231. "Letter From The Ambassador in India (Bowles) to the President's Special Assistant for National Security Affairs (Bundy)," New Delhi, July 19, 1963, [Department of State, Central Files, POL 27 VIET S. Top Secret; Eyes Only; Personal.] In FRUS: Vietnam, January-August, 1963, Vol. III, p. 519.

¹⁵⁴ William Colby, "William Colby on Vietnam, Interview I." Recorded interview by Ted Gittinger, June 2, 1981 (at Mr. Colby's office in Washington [DC]), p.22, Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, Oral History Program.

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damage-control which, in turn, developed into a fight with the Americans.¹⁵⁵ This diversion from the strategic imperative of protecting the rural village and hamlet system benefited the Communists directly. The NLF had been so concerned about the impact of the strategic hamlets program that they had "...instructed their people that they were to destroy this program at all costs, because it really did threaten them strategically."¹⁵⁶ Colby maintained that during the Buddhist revolt the Communists were permitted to direct their fire at what threatened their life-blood: the strategic hamlets of South Vietnam. Further to this, in the estimation of the former CIA Saigon station-chief, those people in the Kennedy Administration who wanted Diem removed unwittingly paved the way for supporting the Communist attacks on the strategic hamlets. By forcing the GVN to focus on the Buddhist issue, governmental energy and direction was sapped from the Strategic Hamlet program. These combined actions, simultaneously, encouraged the eventual revolt by the ARVN generals which,¹⁵⁷ in Colby's view, was the greatest mistake the Americans could have made; in his own words:

When the Buddhist thing blew up and then the fight with the Americans developed, all of that stimulus and drive had to be diverted onto the other problems. The program [strategic hamlets] was let lag at exactly the time when the communists had identified it as a major threat....So they began to attack it in about June or July, and you can see the terrorist incidents grow at that time against it...I take the communist direction as the key element. I know these are arguable, and I don't mind. But the fact was that they wouldn't have had a revolt if the United States had not encouraged it. There is no doubt about that

Footnotes

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁷ Those generals who sought power argued that Diem was diverting so much away from the fight against the Communists by attempting to resolve the Buddhist problem, which was only one amongst many other urban based sources of complaint and protest, that "...he was risking American support of Vietnam against the communists...that he was going to lose the war because the Americans were going to back away." *Ibid.* p. 21.

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*whatsoever. I think it's the greatest mistake we made. I know Mr. Johnson also thought it was a terrible mistake, but vice presidents don't have much power.*¹⁵⁸

Colby knew his business well and what he was describing, in effect, was that the Buddhist Crisis served as a 'holding attack' while the real assault of the Communists went in at the strategic hamlet level. Normally, one has to provide one's own 'holding attack' in order to focus one's enemy's attention away from where the real attack will go in. The Communists, however, were most fortunate in receiving the timely and, most likely, unsolicited assistance they were provided with by the American press coverage of the Buddhist Crisis.

In support of what Nolting had argued all along, Colby told the Johnson Library interviewer, Ted Gittinger, that there was no doubt about the fact that Diem could have sustained his government through the Buddhist Crisis, the rioting in Saigon and the unrest in the army if the Americans had maintained a steady course and adhered to their original policy of support.¹⁵⁹ "But when the Americans [i.e., as led by Harriman and Hilsman] indicated a change, then bing, it was gone, it went."¹⁶⁰ As such, Colby, like Nolting, came to the realisation that Hilsman and Harriman had been gravely mistaken in their assessment of the nature of the problem in South Vietnam and, thus, the policies they so forcefully pursued were seriously ill-conceived and misdirected.¹⁶¹ The former CIA Director did acknowledge, however, that the public-relations impact of the 'Buddha in the Fire' back in the United States tended to drive the policy in the direction that it went:

Footnotes

¹⁵⁸ *ibid.* p. 22.

¹⁵⁹ After all, Diem had survived much tougher crises in the past, such as the internecine wars with the sects back in the mid-1950's. *ibid.*

¹⁶⁰ *ibid.*

¹⁶¹ *ibid.*

Now I must admit that they [Harriman and Hilsman] weren't entirely free in that because they had a lot of pressure behind them from the American people and the American press. That's why I say, when that picture appeared in LIFE magazine ['the Buddha in the Fire'], the game was almost over. Because we do have a government which has to reflect strong attitudes by the American people. That certainly had a strong element, a strong impact on the situation. Now I'm not one of those who believes that you can ignore the American people. You cannot. You've got to listen to them. You've got hopefully to educate them as to what the reality of the problem is, but they are the ultimate repositories of power, and when they decide something it's done. And it was done with Diem on that image, and it was done with Vietnam on the Tet image.¹⁶²

One of Ambassador Nolting's last cables to Washington, in his capacity as United States Ambassador to South Vietnam, was sent on August 12, 1963. This telegram covered, in depth, Nolting's meetings with President Diem, which were concerned, primarily, with Madame Nhu's attacks on Americans in the news media.¹⁶³ This whole area of Washington-Saigon relations had so infuriated the anti-Diemists in Washington that they insisted that Nolting attempt, one last time, to secure from Diem an effective muzzling of Madame Nhu. Of course, George Ball, Averell Harriman, and Roger Hilsman failed to perceive the irony in their demands as they expected Diem to withstand attack after insulting attack from American critics and newsmen and, yet, when Diem's family struck back in his defence this was seen as unacceptable. Accordingly, Nolting reported the following:

Throughout discussion, there was evident on Diem's part a feeling it was not so much what Madame Nhu said but how she said it that gave him trouble. He reverted again and again to the bad faith of the bonzes, to their sabotage of the war effort, etc. He also mentioned the pressure he was under from 'good people' in the provinces and elsewhere not to knuckle under to the false monks. He

Footnotes

¹⁶² *ibid.* pp. 22 & 23.

¹⁶³ Frederick Nolting, 251. "Telegram [# 208. CINCPAC for POLAD] From the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State," Saigon, August 12, 1963 - 6 p.m. [Department of State, Central Files, POL 15-1 S VIET. Secret; Operational Immediate.] in FRUS: Vietnam, January-August, 1963, Vol. III, p. 563.

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complained that nobody in the outside world recognized the falsity of the religious issue or the fact that it was being used for subversive action.¹⁶⁴

Diem's response to Nolting's probing was noteworthy, for at no time did he relinquish a very firm position about the falsity of what the Buddhist bonzes were claiming and doing under the guise that they had been wrongfully persecuted for their religious beliefs. He emphasised to Nolting that many good people in the provinces were expecting him to act according to the principles of a true Vietnamese leader who had the 'mandate of heaven' and, therefore, to not cave-in to the false Buddhists. Diem was, indeed and in fact, the 'genuine article' as he was everything that traditional culture in Vietnam demanded of a Confucian leader. His position vis-à-vis the Buddhists was not anchored to mere stubborn pride. Instead, Diem's assertion was founded on a deep-seated Oriental understanding. Even if the capriciousness of chance was in favour of the radical bonzes, who were known to be false by every litmus-test of ancient Annam and traditional Buddhism, then he must accept this and stand by what was correct, proper and rightly expected of a Confucian mandarin. Diem knew that such a disciplined stance could well mean his own demise.¹⁶⁵ Nolting had told Washington before that Diem was in a 'martyr's mood' and, indeed, this mood was still evident but no one in the Kennedy Administration seemed to grasp this and that they were propelling this 'martyrdom' forward.

Footnotes

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁵ Marguerite Higgins had encountered this, almost other-worldly, nobility of Diem's and she duly noted it in her memoirs: "Another item of interest that I found one day in my box at the Caravelle Hotel were these lines of Buddha taken from verses of the Sutta-Nipata, a collection of the teachings of the Enlightened One. 'The wise man who fares strenuously apart, Who is unshaken in the midst of praise or blame, Even as a lion that trembles not at noises, Or as the wind that is not caught in a net, A leader of others, and not by others led, Him verily the discerning proclaim to be a sage.' - These lines had been neatly typewritten on stationery from the Presidential Palace. A hand-written note in French, apparently from a presidential secretary, said: 'President Diem thought you would be interested in the fact that an Oriental like Buddha had ideas about the nature of a wise leader that are not unlike his own.' - I judged the note to be Diem's way of saying that what seemed 'aloof and stubborn' to an Occidental might seem wise and praiseworthy to many an Oriental, including Buddha." Higgins, *Our Vietnam Nightmare*, p. 178.

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For their part, the anti-Diemists within the State Department not only kept the pressure up but increased it as well and they, clearly, sided with the radical bonzes when it came to 'conciliation' talks between the GVN and the Buddhists. In one of the very last cables sent to Nolting he was told Diem's position, vis-à-vis who had caused the deaths in Hué back in May, was unacceptable to Washington. Regardless of the forensic facts, which cleared Diem's officials, Washington insisted that he 'knuckle-under' to the bonzes' demands on this key issue.¹⁶⁶ The cynical observer of this vicious segment of Washington - Saigon relations might believe, understandably enough, that in fact, the anti-Diemists knew Diem could not abide by such outrageous demands and his 'unpenitent' stance, in turn, would ensure the inevitability of a coup supported by the Kennedy Administration.

Footnotes

¹⁶⁶ Accordingly, the State Department wrote the following in this cable to Nolting: "We note that Tho appears indicate GVN intends prosecute Buddhists for May 8 affair, which is in direct conflict with Buddhist insistence GVN officials responsible for May 8 deaths. Such action is not only refusal of Buddhist request that these officials be identified and punished but is sure to provide further and legitimate grounds for Buddhist charges of persecution." Theodore JC Heavner, 252. "Telegram [# 193] From the Department of State to the Embassy in Vietnam," Washington, August 13, 1963 - 7:20 p.m., [Department of State, Central Files, SOC 14-1 S VIET. Secret; Operational Immediate; Limit Distribution. Drafted by Heavner, cleared by Kattenburg, and approved by Hilsman.] in FRUS: Vietnam, January-August, 1963, Vol. III, p. 564.

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Ambassador Nolting Says Farewell to President Diem & South Vietnam -

On August 14, 1963, Ambassador Nolting said his official farewell to President Diem and, because of State Department pressure, even this last meeting was tense as it focused on the Buddhist question and Madame Nhu's intemperate public statements. Diem promised that he would make a public statement through Marguerite Higgins and *The Herald Tribune* that would offer some conciliation to Americans affronted by Madame Nhu. On this point, Diem did keep his word:

Diem's statement was made to newspaper correspondent Marguerite Higgins. As quoted in The Herald Tribune, August 15, Diem stated "the policy of utmost reconciliation is irreversible" and "that neither any individual nor the government could change it at all." In a veiled reference to Madame Nhu, Diem was quoted as saying, "It is only because some have contributed, either consciously or unconsciously, to raising doubts about this government policy that the solution of the Buddhist affair has been retarded."167

At the end of this meeting Diem, graciously, told Nolting "...that he considered my tenure here to have been one of the best souvenirs of his life, and that such frank exchanges as we had today would in no way mar our friendship."¹⁶⁸ The next day Nolting and his family left for the United States with many concerns still unresolved, especially, with regard to United States policy toward South Vietnam and Ngo Dinh Diem's government. In fact, Nolting, recognising that American - Vietnamese relations now were extremely tenuous, requested to stay on in order to reconfirm the old pattern of trust which had been destroyed during his absence that summer. But this request was denied by the State Department; indeed, the Harriman group wanted Nolting out even if there was no ambassador in Vietnam for the interim until Henry Cabot Lodge could take

Footnotes

¹⁶⁷ Footnote # 1 of Frederick Nolting's 253. "Telegram [# 226. CINCPAC for POLAD] From the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State," Saigon, August 14, 1963 - 8 p.m., [Department of State, Central Files, POL 15-1 S VIET. Secret;] in FRUS: Vietnam, January-August, 1963, Vol. III, p. 566.

¹⁶⁸ Frederick Nolting 253. "Telegram [# 226. CINCPAC for POLAD] From the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State," Saigon, August 14, 1963 - 8 p.m., [Department of State, Central Files, POL 15-1 S VIET. Secret;] in FRUS: Vietnam, January-August, 1963, Vol. III, p. 566.

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up the post.¹⁶⁹ Diem, Nolting recalled, was as concerned about US policy as he was and, again, asked Nolting if his return to the United States signalled a change and Nolting was unable to assuage Diem's fears in this regard.¹⁷⁰ "Does your departure mean that the American government has changed its policy from what you and I agreed two and one half years ago?" Diem asked. Nolting replied: "No, Mr. President, it does not."¹⁷¹ Diem asked Nolting to check this in Washington just to be sure and Nolting complied straightway:

... he said, "Well, could you just check that for me?" I sent a special telegram to what was called the highest levels and got one back from "the highest levels" - that's supposed to be the president although you can never know for sure - saying, "No change in policy and you can tell him that straight out." So, I took the telegram and translated it for him. While it was in my hand he said, "Mr. Ambassador, I believe you, but I'm afraid your information is incorrect." He was quite right....¹⁷²

Even Nolting's departure from Vietnam became a point of acrimony and controversy. Dean Rusk would later try to absolve himself from any connection to the coup and murder of Diem by claiming that he had asked Nolting to stay on in Saigon and that Nolting was the one who insisted on going home. Rusk's implications were clear, and Nolting discerned them

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¹⁶⁹ Nolting recalled this terrible time and the rush to get him out of Vietnam in his memoirs: "...the mutual respect and personal confidence we shared endured until I left Saigon. In fact, during my last weeks there, I had more influence with Diem than with my own government. Little by little, our mission had restored relations with the South Vietnamese government, despite the American press and TV. Thanks to General Harkins, John Richardson, and others, things had calmed down, and some reconciliation occurred. People in the mission and the government could once again talk to each other. But the atmosphere was changed. The trust we had so carefully constructed over two and a half years was not to be revived.... My wife and I left Saigon for the last time on August 15, 1963. During my farewell call on President Diem, we again discussed whether my departure signalled a change in policy. I left knowing that I had not convinced him that American policy would remain the same." Nolting, From Trust To Tragedy, pp. 118 - 119.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid. p. 119.

¹⁷¹ Frederick Nolting, Foreign Service Journal, (July 1968), p. 20.

¹⁷² Nolting, "Kennedy, NATO, and Southeast Asia," Chapter Two of Diplomacy, Administration, and Policy, Thompson, ed., p. 26.

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immediately upon hearing rumour of them, that Nolting had deserted his post during a crucial and tough period. Rusk's position, however, cannot be sustained by the facts and the weight of evidence is certainly on Nolting's side on this issue. First of all, as the cable traffic and memoranda from the State Department's files show, Harriman and Hilsman wanted Nolting out of Saigon as rapidly as possible and, as previously noted, even if this meant there was no Ambassador at the post.¹⁷³ Hilsman had been given the authority by President Kennedy to determine the departure date of Nolting and, accordingly, he acted upon this authority in short order. The weight of documents supporting this is substantial and lends support to Nolting in manifest manner. Secondly, and relatedly, at the time Nolting had placed a request to stay on as Ambassador and for the obvious reasons just mentioned, his request was denied.¹⁷⁴

On March 18, 1964, Nolting wrote to Rusk about the controversy surrounding his leaving Saigon and his subsequent resignation from the State Department. The key issues which had found their way into the public forum and which the Ambassador was concerned about and required explanation for, were as follows:

1.) That he had been unwilling to go along with the State Department's policy while serving as US Ambassador in Viet Nam.

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¹⁷³ As noted earlier, Michael V. Forrestal reiterated the point about Nolting being removed even before Lodge's arrival in a memorandum sent to the President's Special Assistant for National Security Affairs (Bundy). Michael V. Forrestal, 215. "Memorandum From Michael V. Forrestal of the National Security Council Staff to the President's Special Assistant for National Security Affairs (Bundy)," (Washington, July 9, 1963) [Source: Kennedy Library, Schlesinger Papers, South Vietnam. Secret.] In FRUS: Vietnam, January-August, 1963, Vol. III, pp. 481 – 482.

¹⁷⁴ "I requested permission to remain in Vietnam until we could reinforce this tenuous relationship. But Washington denied my request and ordered me to leave before Ambassador Lodge got there." Nolting, From Trust To Tragedy, p. 119.

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2.) That he had refused Rusk's personal request to extend his tour of duty in Saigon beyond two years.

3.) That he had been over-zealous after his return from Saigon in urging in US Government councils that they should continue to support South Viet Nam through the Diem Government, and in opposing actions which would weaken that Government.¹⁷⁵

Rusk wrote a very terse letter back to Nolting on April 9, 1964, which admitted that there was "...not an iota of truth in the first..." rumour that the Ambassador had brought to his attention and then stated "...and you and I know to what extent there is anything in the other two."¹⁷⁶ Nolting responded immediately to Rusk's brief note and spelled-out the specific details of how he was treated with regard to being informed about Henry Cabot Lodge replacing him and the timing of his being sent home:

On the second point, I am quite sure that I never received a personal request from you to stay on in Saigon. If I had, I would have stayed. After our initial exchange of letters on this subject (December 2, 1962, and January 17, 1963), I had a further exchange with Averell Harriman, who approved our plans for home leave in May, 1963, and added that, due to the time required to find a replacement, it would be necessary for me to return to Viet Nam after home leave. This I agreed to do, and so notified Diem, on instructions. The next word from Washington on this subject was the public announcement of Lodge's appointment, while we were en route home on leave and consultation.¹⁷⁷

Footnotes

¹⁷⁵ Correspondence to Dean Rusk, p. 1 of 2 in R621/102.921; Box Number: 13; Selected correspondence, The Nolting Papers.

¹⁷⁶ Letter from the Secretary of State, Dean Rusk, to The Honorable Frederick E. Nolting, Jr., April 9, 1964, p. 1 of 1 in R621/102.92; Box Number: 13; Selected Correspondence - Dean Rusk, The Nolting Papers.

¹⁷⁷ Letter From Frederick Nolting to The Honorable Secretary of State, Dean Rusk, April 14, 1963, p. 1 of 2 in R621/102.92; Box Number: 13; Selected Correspondence - Dean Rusk, The Nolting Papers.

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Nolting heard no more from Rusk on this issue, at least, directly until late summer of 1964 when more than just rumours began to reach the Ambassador's ears. A member of the House Foreign Affairs Committee (Nolting does not give his name) told Nolting that testimony given by Rusk to his committee indicated that Nolting had refused to stay on as Ambassador in Viet Nam in 1963. Even this committee member noted that Rusk's implication was clear: that Nolting had quit when the going got rough and was therefore to blame for the deterioration of the situation in Viet Nam during that year.¹⁷⁸ The committee member told Nolting that he believed Rusk had made an unfair charge. Nolting concurred and promptly took Rusk to task in a five page letter which concerned itself with all the pertinent issues related to his departure from South Vietnam. Accordingly, Nolting told Rusk, straight out, that he was disappointed that he had chosen not to talk to him in a direct manner about these issues - something that Nolting had requested.¹⁷⁹ Nolting then proceeded to lay out an accurate chronology of events and correspondence related to his permanent return to the United States. The Ambassador also pointed out that regardless of the serious problems that erupted with the Buddhists when he was on leave in Europe, no one informed him. None of this was reported to Nolting, even though his deputy, Trueheart, and the State Department in Washington had been instructed to let him know immediately if a real problem came up, as he would have cut his vacation short and returned to

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¹⁷⁸ Draft of Letter to The Honorable Dean Rusk, Secretary of State, from Frederick Nolting, September 24, 1963, p. 1 of 5 in R621/102.92; Box Number: 13; Selected Correspondence to Dean Rusk, The Nolting Papers.

¹⁷⁹ "This is the third time I have heard reports of remarks attributed to you to which I take strong exception. Your reply to my letter several months ago was not conclusive or satisfactory from my point of view, and I was frankly disappointed that, after our long association, you did not respond to my suggestion that we should clear up any misunderstanding by face-to-face talk." *Ibid.*

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Saigon had he known.¹⁸⁰ Further implicating the Department's attempts to keep him uninformed and also displaying a gross lack of respect, Nolting was not even told about Henry Cabot Lodge's appointment as new United States Ambassador to South Vietnam. Instead, and as he duly noted in his memoirs (mentioned earlier in this chapter), he first heard about it over the ship's radio on his way back from Europe at the end of his vacation.¹⁸¹ Once in Washington both the State Department and Ngo Dinh Diem requested his further presence in Vietnam; he promptly returned there only to find relations between the US Government and the GVN all but destroyed and in serious jeopardy. As such, he set to work, working with Diem, as opposed to the Harriman/Hilsman instructions of table pounding, which Trueheart had carried out in his absence. Thus, Nolting was able to stabilise the situation so that by the date that he was actually recalled and went home to the United States, affairs were much calmer in Vietnam and between the GVN and Washington.¹⁸² Nolting pointed out that the renewed agitation of the Buddhists and the

Footnotes

¹⁸⁰ "On the substance of the matter, the facts as I know them are these. Correspondence on the duration of my tour of duty in Viet Nam began with my letter to you from Saigon in December 1962, at a time when things were going well in Viet Nam, requesting you to bear in mind my desire, for family reasons, to be relieved after about two years - the period of time you and I had discussed before my departure to Viet Nam. Following your interim reply in January 1963, there was a series of correspondence with others in the State Department, the upshot of which was an understanding that I should come home on leave and consultation at the end of May 1963 and then return to Saigon for an indefinite period, pending the selection of a successor and an orderly transfer of responsibility. I was instructed to tell the Vietnamese government that I would return to my post after six weeks of leave and consultation, and I did so inform President Diem. On State Department orders my family and I left Saigon on May 23 for leave in Europe and consultation in Washington. While we were on vacation, the so-called Buddhist crisis broke out in Viet Nam, in June last year. I was not informed of this dangerous development, although my clear travel instructions had been left with my deputy in Saigon to notify me of any change in the situation. The sudden adverse development in Viet Nam clearly warranted my being notified. Yet neither the State Department nor Embassy Saigon did so." *Ibid.* pp. 1 & 2 of 5.

¹⁸¹ "Ambassador Lodge's appointment was announced in June 1963 while I was enroute from Europe to Washington for consultation. I had no advance notification or indication of this." *Ibid.* p. 2 of 5.

¹⁸² "Arriving in the United States in June 1963, I was asked by the Department to return immediately to Viet Nam, following a specific request of President Diem. I did so, finding there an inflamed political situation and a US - Vietnamese government relationship vastly different from what it

Footnote continued on next page: ...

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subsequent crack-down of the GVN coincided with the facts that he had already left Vietnam and that Henry Cabot Lodge had not yet arrived.¹⁸³ The facts, as Nolting stated, cleared his name and placed the onus on the State Department,¹⁸⁴ and the Ambassador went further than this by clearly implicating Harriman as the leading force in ensuring a revolt broke-out in South Viet Nam:

I have my own views as to why this matter was handled the way it was. The reason, I think, lies in the uncontrolled plotting going on in Washington at that time. When I arrived in Washington for consultation in early July 1963, I reported first to Averell Harriman. He opened the conversation by saying that if he had had his way, I would have been relieved of my post in May, at the expiration of a two-year tour of duty. I said that, however that might be, I could not understand the State Department's failure to let me know about the troubles that had broken out in Viet Nam when I was on vacation, which threatened the whole basis of our policy there. He replied that he did not think that my presence in Viet Nam would have helped the situation in any way. The implication was clear - he wanted to see a revolution there. It is noteworthy in this connection that it was Harriman who controlled the correspondence respecting the duration of my tour of duty, the timing of my home leave and, I suspect, the decision not to notify me when things began to get out of hand in Saigon.¹⁸⁵

... footnote continued from previous page:

had been a month before. I remained in Viet Nam until August 15, 1963 at my own request in view of the difficult situation. The Vietnamese Government requested that I remain longer to assist in reaching a settlement of the Buddhists demands, but August 15 was the latest date the State Department would allow in view of Ambassador Lodge's impending arrival. During the six weeks' period after my return and before my final departure, the political agitation against the government of Viet Nam died down considerably, and the relations between the US Mission and the government of Viet Nam were considerably improved. All this, I believe, is a matter of record." *Ibid.* p. 2 & 3 of 5.

¹⁸³ "My wife and I finally left Saigon on August 15, 1963, after two years and 4 months' duty, to meet Ambassador Lodge in Honolulu for consultation before his arrival in Viet Nam. Shortly after our departure, renewed Buddhist and student demonstrations broke out, culminating in the Vietnamese government's crackdown on August 21st, while Lodge and I were conferring in Honolulu." *Ibid.* p. 3 of 5.

¹⁸⁴ "From the facts, I do not see how anyone can infer that I quit when the going got rough, or that I am responsible for the events which followed. The fact is that my successor was appointed and announced while I was on authorized leave and before I had any official information whatsoever about the abnormal difficulties that had arisen in Viet Nam during my absence." *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.* pp. 3 & 4 of 5.

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Nolting went on to tell Rusk what he believed and thought to be the major defects which had led up to the debacle in Saigon; he apportioned a fair amount of blame to State Department misjudgements and actions:

To me it is clear that the divided counsels in the Department of State on this critical issue, our government's susceptibility to press pressures, the lack of coordination in Washington and plain bad judgement contributed greatly to the deplorable coup d'etat in Viet Nam last November 1 and the subsequent events which underlie our country's grave predicament now.¹⁸⁶

Not all of Ambassador Nolting's experience with leaving Vietnam was as sordid as his treatment at the hands of the State Department as, ironically, the Vietnamese seemed to have sincerely appreciated his mission to Saigon. A very moving and relatively accurate article appeared in The Times of Viet-Nam on August 12, 1963, just a couple of days before Nolting left Vietnam and it was concerned with the ambassador's tenure in Saigon. Maybe the saddest and most profound indictment ever made of the out-of-control American press was alluded to in this article which noted that the American newsmen had accomplished what the Viet Cong had been unable to do and that was get rid of Nolting.

The first American Ambassador to Vietnam really worthy of being addressed by this title is being recalled from Vietnam.

The Nolting era in Vietnam has been marked by the kind of friendship capable of sustaining differences of opinion and direct attack of the Viet Cong propaganda machine, but apparently the criticism and ridicule of the American press was too much.

For the past eight months the American press has apparently been out to get Nolting. Their antipathy for President Ngo Dinh Diem, his family and his government is nothing new and it has rubbed off heavily on Ambassador Nolting. He has been attacked and offended consistently by the American press.

The why is not a pretty story. The Ambassador has exhibited the courage to do his job without pandering to any press. In return they discredit his considered

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¹⁸⁶ *ibid.* p. 5 of 5.

evaluations of the situation in Vietnam. They scorn him because he does not try to run the show as a good imperialist should.

And now the Buddhist leaders are profiting from the image of Nolting projected abroad by the press to attack him for an honest, reasoned, intelligent statement,¹⁸⁷ attacking him with an insidious and not so subtle appeal for 'good' Americans to identify themselves in opposition to Nolting. This would, of course, serve well the interests of those toting neutralism as the 'solution to the Vietnam problem,' which is exactly what the Viet Cong want.

But in Free Vietnam Nolting will be remembered as the symbol of an era when, nation to nation, the United States and Viet Nam found the basis of understanding which resulted in a workable collaboration for the national interests of both countries and the interests of the Free World. Ambassador Nolting somehow seemed intuitively to know how to represent in its Sunday best the greatest power of the Free World in this newly independent nation while always showing the respect for Vietnam's national integrity.... Henry Cabot Lodge is to represent the United States in Vietnam, but he will have mighty big shoes to fill.¹⁸⁸

Later, in an interview with President Lyndon Baines Johnson, the American President revealed that he thought Nolting's recall was a serious mistake. Johnson noted that Nolting had the courage of his convictions and could not be cajoled into a contrary position by influential reporters like David Halberstam. More importantly, Johnson believed that Nolting's judgement was sound:

"And I thought that we made a mistake in removing our Ambassador out there. His name is a German name -- I thought he was a very good man. But he wasn't a Charles River man and he wasn't a fellow who would give up his conviction to satisfy Halberstam."

Mr. Jorden: "That was Fritz Nolting."

Footnotes

¹⁸⁷ This is in reference to Nolting's statement that stung the Buddhist radicals in Saigon as well as the Harriman group in Washington as he declared that there was no persecution of Buddhists in Vietnam - at that time or in the past.

¹⁸⁸ The Editors, "Big Shoes To Fill," in The Times of Viet-Nam: A Chronicle of the Nation's Progress, August 12, 1963, p. 4 in R621/102.92; Box Number: 23; Professional Papers: Newsclippings 1 of 2, The Nolting Papers.

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President Johnson: "My impression was that he was treated unjustly and unfairly. And my impression was his judgement was good and I thought there was a lot of dissension when they removed him..."¹⁸⁹

David Halberstam, and his editors at The New York Times, recognised, astutely enough, that Nolting's removal, more than Lodge's appointment, represented the undoing of the official United States Government policy toward Diem's GVN. This was because, in their relatively accurate estimation, Frederick Nolting had become "...the symbol for all-out American support for the anti-Communist cause and for Mr. Ngo Dinh Diem personally."¹⁹⁰

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¹⁸⁹ "Interview With President Johnson," p. 10 of 10 in R621/102.92; Box Number: 28; Professional Papers: Historical Background Records, The Nolting Papers.

¹⁹⁰ David Halberstam, "Some U.S. Officials In Saigon Dubious About Diem Regime," in The New York Times, (Wednesday, July 3, 1963), p. 1.

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Chapter Eleven: Other Considerations

All along, during the spring and summer of 1963, behind the scenes and running parallel to the Buddhist crisis, a distrustful attitude toward Diem had been building, as there were many other issues that were fostering a deep-seated malevolence in Washington toward the beleaguered Vietnamese president. As such, it is necessary, at this juncture, to review the most salient of these issues as they did have some bearing on how the Buddhist problem affected Washington. Not least of these issues, which seemed to come to a head in the spring of 1963, was the problem of Diem's recalcitrance toward increasing American force levels in South Vietnam.

Diem Worried About Too Many Americans Being in South Vietnam –

Diem had signed the agreement over the joint counter-insurgency-funding program after much obfuscation and delay. The real reason the Vietnamese leader had hesitated was best stated by Nolting in a cable which he had sent to Washington back in early April of 1963 while the negotiations over the joint counter-insurgency fund and direction were still going on:

In assessing Diem's rejection of our proposal for counter-insurgency fund, most significant point is that grounds advanced for rejection approach repudiation of concept of expanded and deepened US advisory effort, civil and military.¹

Ellen Hammer contends that the real problem for Diem was not giving up control of counter-insurgency aid money to the Americans but, instead, the men who would start filtering into the country from the US in ever-increasing numbers. The crux of the problem for Diem was the kind of control that the Americans would have:

Footnotes

¹ Frederick Nolting, 82. "Telegram From The Embassy to the Department of State, 888," Saigon, April 7, 1963 - 1 a.m., [Department of State, Central Files, POL 26-1 S VIET. Secret; Priority; Limit Distribution.] In FRUS: Vietnam, January-August, 1963, Vol. III, p. 213.

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... - the American advisors who seemed to be everywhere, too numerous, too deeply involved in Vietnamese affairs. And now the Americans wanted still more influence for their officers serving with Vietnamese fighting units and intended to bring in many more military advisers. Worst of all, they insisted on bypassing the central government to deliver supplies directly to the provincial authorities, allowing the American advisers on duty in the provinces to control the distribution of aid to the hamlets. The Americans would run the new rural economic development plan (and run it more efficiently than the Vietnamese government, they would say). For Diem, this amounted to direct administration by foreigners, a new colonialism that he could not tolerate. The Saigon government requested that the Americans withdraw most of the two thousand advisers they had in the provinces.²

Diem was so worried about the problem of American neo-colonialism that he turned to the French for advice and he complained directly to the French Ambassador about the influx of American military personnel. The Vietnamese president told the French Ambassador, Roger Lalouette, that the new American advisers had not been invited and that they did not even have passports.³ Lalouette tried to calm the frustrated Diem and suggested that a “gentle” request that some of the Americans leave would be Diem’s best approach.⁴ Lalouette, however, had mistaken the American mood and Diem’s “gentle” request that some of the provincial advisers be removed set off alarm-bells in Washington.⁵ Years later, in June of 1970, Roger Lalouette told Ellen Hammer that he had traced the American decision to abandon Diem to this attempt of the Vietnamese president’s to have American provincial advisers recalled in April of 1963.⁶ The Vietnamese, themselves, recognised the severity of the problem that Diem was facing and made mention of this in the South Vietnamese newspaper *Hoa Binh*. As one well-informed Vietnamese

Footnotes

² Hammer, *A Death In November*, pp. 120 -121.

³ Marianna P. Sullivan, *France's Vietnam Policy*, (Westport, [Ct.]: Greenwich Press, 1978), p. 67.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Hammer, *A Death In November*, p. 121.

⁶ This interview between Hammer and Lalouette took place in Paris, June 1970. *Ibid.* p. 121.

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national, Dr. Tran Kim Tuyen, later wrote: "Everyone close to Ngo Dinh Diem knew that for him the question of Vietnamese sovereignty was primordial; no question of foreign aid could supersede that."⁷ Dr. Tuyen, in this context, also quoted Ngo Dinh Nhu as having stated: "If we don't seek a way to make peace and the war goes on, it will be a danger to the regime."⁸ According to Ellen Hammer, Diem rejected all American proposals for a large base to be built at Cam Ranh Bay and he maintained his defiant position on this issue into August of 1963; in fact, the famous base only got official approval to be built after Diem was killed.⁹

It is noteworthy that the CIA Station Chief in Saigon, William Colby, had made, roughly, the same assessment about Diem's distaste for American troops as had the French Ambassador. Colby had discerned this back in early 1961 when the situation in Laos had so deteriorated that Diem was calling for a greater American commitment to stemming the advance of Communism in Southeast Asia.¹⁰ The South Vietnamese president asked the Americans about constructing a formal defence treaty, as he feared that Vietnam would be allowed to drift under the sway of the Communists as had Laos.¹¹ Yet, Diem was loathe to accept the notion of American combat

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⁷ Dr. Tran Kim Tuyen, *Hoa Binh*, August 8, 1970.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Hammer, *A Death In November*, pp. 121 - 122.

¹⁰ Colby, *Lost Victory*, p. 96.

¹¹ In an interview, given for the LBJ Library Oral History Program, in 1970, Dean Rusk admitted that President Kennedy acknowledged Laos as a failure at least as far as the notion of 'neutrality' was concerned. Rusk admitted that they simply had not accounted for the North Vietnamese willingness to ignore the Geneva Conference stipulations on Laos. "But the trouble is that we did not get any performance out of Hanoi on those Laos accords for a single day. The agreement specified that all foreign forces would leave the country. North Vietnamese forces did not leave the country. The agreement specified that Laos would not be used as an infiltration route into other countries. At no time did Hanoi stop using Laos as an infiltration corridor into South Vietnam. The Pathet Lao -- the Communists -- did not permit the coalition government to exercise authority in those areas of Laos held by the Communists; and they did not permit the International Control Commission to exercise its functions in those areas of Laos held by the Communists. So President Kennedy was bitterly disappointed by the failure of the Laos accords to achieve

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forces in his country other than under the strict guidelines as stipulated for the role of advisors. Instead, he asked them how they would view his acceptance of a division of Nationalist Chinese troops from Taiwan, which had been offered to him by the Taiwanese.¹² These plans went no further as Diem was convinced by the Americans that the extra American military personnel that would be sent to Vietnam would only be used in the training and advisory role.¹³

The Problem of the Saigon – Hanoi Dialogue -

The problem of Diem and Nhu talking about peace with the Communists in early 1963 must be considered to be of critical importance amongst these issues. It is true that Ngo Dinh Nhu had held talks with various guerrilla leaders in the Viet Cong (NLF) but these talks had been concerned with negotiating the large-scale defection and surrender of VC units.¹⁴ Mrs. Lindsay

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their purpose, and President Johnson inherited that failure..." Dean Rusk, "Dean Rusk Oral History Interview III." Recorded interview by Paige E. Mulhollan, January 2, 1970, p. 11, Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, Oral History Program, University of Texas at Austin.

One could add to the litany of Laos failures that Diem had warned the State Department and President Kennedy that the North Vietnamese would never honour the notion of a 'neutral' Laos.

¹² Colby, Lost Victory, p. 96.

¹³ ibid.

¹⁴ Nolting explained, in his memoirs, just exactly what Nhu was about with his private meetings attended by Communist leaders: "We had been aware for some time that Nhu had been meeting with Viet Cong leaders. In the spring of 1963, I had gone to see him in his office to protest one of his wife's unfortunate speeches and to enlist his help in preventing them. He received me pleasantly. After I sat down, he asked, 'Do you know who just left that chair?' I said I did not, and he named a prominent Viet Cong leader. I inquired what the man had been doing there. Nhu answered that he came at his invitation, that the government was trying to bring this Viet Cong officer and his units to the side of the Republic of Vietnam. He added that he met frequently with high Viet Cong cadres and that President Diem knew about these meetings. The Viet Cong leaders came to Nhu's office under a gentleman's agreement that they would not be arrested while they were there.

The South Vietnamese government had announced in April 1963 a policy of 'Chieu Hoi,' or 'Open Arms,' a formal program to encourage Viet Cong defections. The revelation that Communist leaders were coming to the Palace surprised me, but it fit into Nhu's ideas about attracting Viet Cong political leaders and military cadres away from the rebellion and into a broadened government, which Diem would head." Nolting, From Trust To Tragedy, pp. 117 - 118.

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Nolting informed this writer, in a recent interview, that this process of 'Chieu Hoi' or 'open-arms', was not Nhu's original idea. Instead, she stated that the concept had, in fact, been introduced to him by Sir Robert Thompson and heavily endorsed by the British counter-insurgency expert as an effective technique for breaking the solidarity of the Communist insurgent organisation.¹⁵ Ambassador Nolting explained this process and its motivation to Dennis O'Brien of the JFK Library when the latter asked the ambassador about the extent of these negotiations:

...I think Ngo Dinh Nhu felt this quite strongly -- of weaning off a number of Viet Cong political leaders and military cadres away from the rebellion and into a broadened government, which Diem would head; in other words, getting major unit and group defections. It was for this reason that he saw quite a number of Viet Cong political leaders in his office. This was, at the time, misinterpreted as being almost a treasonable thing. I am, myself, convinced that Nhu never had any idea of selling out to the Viet Cong. On the contrary, he was trying to get them, for units of the Viet Cong, to sell out, in effect, to the government.¹⁶

Nolting also explained, in the above interview, that he had informed Washington, through normal State Department channels, about Nhu's contacts with the Communist insurgents and that the process was no deep, dark, hidden secret.¹⁷ Furthermore, the reaction that Nolting got back from the State Department was that he should not interfere with Nhu's process as long as the Saigon Embassy was convinced that Nhu wasn't 'selling out'.¹⁸ Later, however, in his memoirs, Nolting

Footnotes

¹⁵ This interview with Mrs. Nolting was conducted, by telephone, on Thursday, January 2nd., 1998, at 1:00 p.m. in the afternoon - Winnipeg time.

¹⁶ Frederick Nolting, "Third Oral History Interview With Frederick Nolting." Recorded interview by Dennis O'Brien, May 7, 1970 (Washington, [DC]), p. 15, John F. Kennedy Library, Oral History Program.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* p. 116.

¹⁸ Nolting admitted to Mr. O'Brien that it was hard to tell who had drafted the returning cables from the State Department which sanctioned the Nhu process as, indeed, all cables were signed "Rusk" but clearly were not written by him. *Ibid.*

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did admit that there had been some unfavourable reaction to Nhu's meetings with Communist leaders, especially, amongst the enemies he had made in the State Department who mistrusted Nhu as much as they disliked him.¹⁹

The timing of the planning for a North - South dialogue was significant as it actually took place in the spring of 1963 just as the Buddhist crisis was beginning to foment political mayhem.²⁰ This timing, of course, lends itself to the body of evidence that suggests the Washington - Saigon divorce was already underway before the Buddhist Crisis. Toward the end of the summer of 1963, though, it became apparent to all observers that the Buddhist Crisis had been permitted to do critical damage to American - Vietnamese relations. Much of this damage was due in no small part to the unconscionable and undisciplined American press. This summer of discontent, directed at the GVN by American diplomatic leaders and newsmen, had only served to encourage the South Vietnamese Government to consider the potential of talks with North Vietnam. In support of this understanding, Mrs. Lindsay Nolting told this writer that her husband had always believed that Diem and Nhu had been pushed by the Kennedy administration into considering talks with the North as they, simply, had no options for survival left.²¹ This new position of theirs was due to the sense of abandonment they experienced at the hand of the

Footnotes

¹⁹ Nolting, From Trust To Tragedy, p. 118.

²⁰ "During the spring of 1963, Ambassadors Goburdhun, Lalouette, and Orlandi mentioned to me repeatedly that they were trying to arrange a meeting with Nhu for me on "neutral" ground. But 1963 abounded in rapidly changing political tides. The antagonisms between the Ngo family and the American government became an open rift...Nothing could be arranged before the outbreak of the 'Buddhist crisis,' and then it became even more difficult.

Nevertheless, a dialogue between us began." Mieczyslaw Maneli, War of the Vanquished, (New York, [NY]: Harper & Row, 1971), p. 118.

²¹ This understanding of Frederick Nolting's perspective on the contact with the North was relayed to this writer in an interview with Mrs. Lindsay Nolting; the interview was conducted at 1:00 p.m., Thursday, 29 of January 1998, over the telephone.

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American government over the Buddhist affair as relayed in the American Press and, also, because of William Trueheart's 'table-banging' technique of talking with Diem and Thuan when Nolting was on leave.²²

The French, the Italians, and the Indians attempt to 'Woo' the Ngo Dinh away from the Americans -

In accordance with the understanding that the Diem government had no option left but to consider talks with the North, neutral allies of the GVN initiated the process. The Indian chairman of the ICC (International Control and Supervisory Commission), Ramchundur Goburdhun,²³ the Italian Ambassador, Giovanni d'Orlandi,²⁴ and the French Ambassador, Lalouette,²⁵ set up an 'impromptu' meeting for Nhu and Mieczyslaw Maneli, the head of the

Footnotes

²² Telephone interview with Mrs. Lindsay Nolting, conducted at 1:00 p.m. on Thursday, 29 of January 1998.

²³ Ramchundur Goburdhun represented the Indian Government's attitude toward Diem (which was also representative of other non-aligned Asian and Southeast Asian governments'), his family and government, in that they fully supported Diem and, indeed, viewed him as a model of an Asian ruler. As such, Maneli recognised this when he wrote of Indian motives in encouraging the North - South dialogue in Vietnam: "He believed that personal charm and intelligence in 'the family' were bound to make an impression on me...at the same time, Ambassador Goburdhun represented a country that had not yet rid itself of neutralist ambitions to mediate." Maneli, *War of the Vanquished*, p. 119.

²⁴ "Ambassador Orlandi was the most reticent of the three in this affair. Italy had no particular interests in Vietnam, outside of the general Western hope of maintaining a reasonable balance of power in Southeast Asia and of making decisions in a more thoughtful and restrained way than was the habit of the impetuous and inexperienced Americans. Ambassador Orlandi carried out his mission with dignity, talent, and tact, in keeping with the best traditions of Italian diplomacy." *Ibid.* p. 118.

²⁵ "French Ambassador Lalouette had even more reason for arranging and watching over my future relations with Nhu. He probably shared the motives of Ambassador Orlandi: a desire for peace, and the means of attaining it, which meant the establishment, maintenance, and cultivation of all contacts and acquaintances. But this general calculation was secondary in the case of the French ambassador. His stakes in the game were incomparably higher and more portentous... He had a long-term plan and saw the means that led to its realization. This plan was to open a dialogue between Saigon and Hanoi, and then a token cultural and economic exchange between the two regions. In this way, the ground would be laid for political talks. Tension, suspicion, and enmity between the two governments would be reduced and peace would be assured. A lasting peace and a political dialogue are the indispensable conditions for long-term political solutions, including peaceful unification, free elections, and international control. One must begin

Footnote continued on next page:...

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Polish delegation to the ICC. This meeting actually took place at a diplomatic reception attended by the new American Ambassador, Henry Cabot Lodge.²⁶ Ellen Hammer was amongst the guests at the reception where this meeting took place and she discerned, very rapidly, that something was afoot which excluded the Americans:

In another part of the room, Monsignor Asta, the papal delegate, was talking to Maneli with no indication that there was anything unusual in the presence of the Pole, the first time a diplomat from any Communist country had been invited to a reception in Saigon by a foreign minister of South Vietnam.

Monsignor Asta turned to Ngo Dinh Nhu and introduced Maneli to him. As if on signal, other diplomats moved toward them, apparently engaged in conversation, to give an impromptu air to this encounter they had separately urged on Nhu. They were Lalouette, ambassador of France; Goburdhun, the Indian chairman of the ICC; and d'Orlandi, ambassador of Italy.

"I have heard a great deal about you from our mutual friends," Nhu said to Maneli.

He continued, "There exists in the Vietnamese people a sensitivity and mistrust not only of the Chinese but of all occupants and colonizers, all." Maneli wondered whether Nhu were speaking of the United States, and he was probably not alone among the listening diplomats to speculate about that.

Then Nhu said: "Now, we are interested in peace and only in peace. I believe the International Commission can and should play an important role in restoring peace to Vietnam."

Maneli replied that he was ready to play "the most active and constructive role possible" in the ICC to restore peace and unity to Vietnam.

"The Vietnamese government wishes to act within the spirit of the Geneva Accords," Nhu said.

...footnote continued from previous page:

with first steps: I should conduct the necessary talks with Hanoi, and he would maintain contact on the subject with the Southern authorities." *ibid.* pp. 120 - 121.

²⁶ Hammer, *A Death In November*, pp. 220 - 221.

Shortly after this encounter Maneli received an invitation to call on Nhu at Gia Long Palace.²⁷

The politics and diplomacy of this meeting were complicated, intricate and decidedly anti-American.²⁸ The shared belief common to all those interested in seeing this meeting bear fruit was straightforward enough: the Americans had 'dropped the ball' and publicly seemed to be readying themselves to abandon Diem.²⁹ To this it must be added, as made plain in Maneli's

Footnotes

²⁷ *Ibid.* p. 221.

²⁸ Maneli's recollection of this first 'chance' encounter with Ngo Dinh Nhu supports, almost verbatim, Ellen Hammer's account. The Polish diplomat recalled how the European diplomats detested Lodge's aloof and condescending manner. Maneli, *War of the Vanquished*, pp. 136 - 139.

²⁹ Mieczyslaw Maneli was a keen observer of these intricate, anti-American politics and he made detailed reports to Poland, which were duly passed on to the Soviets, about the mechanics of this diplomatic subterfuge: "In a situation in which the Americans themselves wish to be rid of Diem and his family [I wrote in my report of May 5, 1963] the position of the French and Indian ambassadors is increasingly significant. The Indians are so engaged on the side of Diem and they have fetched and carried for him so much in recent years (especially during the period when the Special Report was being prepared) that they are sorry to lose this special investment.... Even if the motives for Indian behaviour are not exactly as I presented them, it is certain that they are not only the faithful friends of the regime but also their active defenders against the Americans. Ambassador Goburdhun has taken on the role of Mr. Nhu's advocate. He recommends him as a brilliant politician to the Americans, the British, The Vatican, the French, and of course to me, so that I will spread the word everywhere I go that he is the best and only man with whom to negotiate.... But Ambassador Lalouette is playing the game on a much larger scale - one might say a global scale. It seems that he would like to redeem the Diem regime for France from the reckless Americans. Since the Americans reject the merchandise, the French may want to buy it at a bargain price, the price for which bankrupt businesses are bought. And the Americans are behaving like an unfaithful wife: she betrays her husband, but she is jealous of him and does not want to give him up to anyone else. Of course, the French cannot afford to keep this expensive mistress, cannot give her as much as the American nouveaux riches. Thus, they advise this mistress to change her style of living to a less extravagant one: to make peace with the North and the National Liberation Front. The next step will be neutralization: not under the direction of India, but rather Charles de Gaulle. In this way Vietnam, in addition to neutral Cambodia and Laos, will again become a pearl in the 'grandeur de France.' It is difficult for me to judge to what extent this concept is realistic. But whoever believes in miracles (and in politics such miracles occur often) should admit that this de Gaulle-Lalouette scheme is one of the boldest plans in twentieth-century politics.

These far-reaching French plans explain to some degree, as it seems to me, the modest undertakings in which I took part: establishing trade and cultural relations between North and South. (Report of May 5, 1963)" *Ibid.* pp. 125 - 126.

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memoirs, that the Polish ICC member could discern substantial political damage waiting to fall upon the Americans and he was not adverse to encouraging this potential.³⁰

Mieczyslaw Maneli -

Mieczyslaw Maneli, there can be little doubt, was an interesting and complex man - by no means a mere 'knee-jerk' Communist. He had been a partisan fighter in Poland against the Nazis during the Second World War and, as a result of his guerrilla activities, he was eventually captured by the Nazis and sent to Auschwitz from whence he escaped with some other Polish officers. His patriotism won him a place in the Polish Communist Party after the war and he worked in various prestigious jobs and through extensive university education he received a Doctor of Law degree by 1954. Because he was known as an "old" left-wing activist he received a prestigious appointment as associate professor at Warsaw University. It was from this job that the Polish Central Committee appointed him to the ICC in 1954. Yet, regardless of all his close Party ties, he was attacked by the Stalinists as a "revisionist" sympathetic to "bourgeois liberalism" as he had spoke out against the intolerance and violence visited on the Polish people in the mid-1950's. He refused to condemn the Israelis as a result of their victory in the Six-Day War even though he had been pressured to do so and, eventually, he was purged out of Warsaw University because he was deemed anti-Socialist. During his tenure as Poland's ICC ambassador he was outrightly sympathetic to the Communist cause in Vietnam and fully supported Ho Chi Minh's regime while, at the same time, harbouring open concerns about what the Chinese Communists wanted in Vietnam. In short, Maneli was his own man and he was a dedicated, if somewhat unconventional, Communist. As such, from the ICC's [International Control

Footnotes

³⁰ *Ibid.* p. 129.

Commission] very inception, Maneli was at odds with the Canadian and Indian representatives - Gordon Cox and Ram Goburdhun respectively.³¹

Maneli argued for the Diem - Ho rapprochement with the Chinese ambassador to Hanoi and thus revealed where he stood regardless of his keen Socialist aversion to the Ngo brothers and their government:

*"I said that there was a conflict between the Diem-Nhu government and the Americans, which created a new political situation in the South. Diem and Nhu, fearing a coup inspired by the Americans, were switching their police and military forces for a defense against the Americans instead of the National Liberation Front. I asked him: Should not the socialist forces, in this new political situation, seek new methods and solutions?"*³²

It was hoped, particularly by the French, that Maneli, who had had meetings with the Hanoi leadership, could smooth the way for peace talks between North and South Vietnam and it would be a peace that would exclude the Communist Chinese and the Americans alike.³³ When Maneli first broached the subject with the North Vietnamese, during one of his routine visits to Hanoi, their response was immediate and exhaustive. Pham Van Dong, the Premier, and Ho Chi Minh were ready to begin negotiations at any time and they even had a list of goods compiled which they believed could be exchanged for South Vietnamese products in order to cement a direct economic foundation between the two Vietnams.³⁴ Another important and telling feature about the North Vietnamese response was that, in private conversations with both Maneli and Lalouette, they dropped all pretence of viewing Diem as a monster and a puppet of the Americans, as Maneli related in his memoirs:

Footnotes

³¹ *Special Note* - material on Maneli's background can be found on pp. 1 through 18 inclusive in Mieczyslaw Maneli's, War of the Vanquished, pp. 1 - 18.

³² Ibid. p. 129.

³³ Ibid. pp. 136 -139.

³⁴ Ibid. p. 121.

In Hanoi, despite all the open, official hostility toward Diem-Nhu, there still existed an atmosphere that could be described as favourable to negotiations and contact with that government. Pham Van Dong even said that Nhu certainly was capable of thinking logically, since he was a graduate of the lyc ee in Chartres.³⁵

Ellen Hammer's interviews with the Indian Ambassador, Goburdhun, who had direct conversations with Ho, and Lalouette, confirmed what Maneli had claimed. In fact, and this would be absolutely consistent with the past dealings both Vietnamese leaders had had with one another, Ho told Goburdhun to convey his sympathy to Diem with regard to the terrible position the Americans had placed him in.

Ho Chi Minh had said to Goburdhun that Ngo Dinh Diem was "a patriot in his way." Ho had once remarked with apparent sympathy that Diem with his independent character would have a hard time dealing with the Americans who liked to control everything. To Goburdhun, Ho had said, "Shake hands with him for me if you see him."³⁶

Of course, the irony here is profound. Even Diem's enemies in the North, indeed those who had been responsible for the death of his brother Khoi, seemed to have been more willing to work with the South Vietnamese President than had the Americans. When all the propaganda was stripped away, the North Vietnamese accepted Ngo Dinh Diem as a bonafide Vietnamese patriot and leader. Paradoxically, it was his so-called American supporters who could find no good in him or his government by this time.

Ngo Dinh Nhu was interested in this approach with the Northerners, having seen and experienced the reality of the Kennedy administration's ability to abandon allies,³⁷ and having

Footnotes

³⁵ *Ibid.* p. 122.

³⁶ Hammer, *A Death In November*, p. 222.

³⁷ No matter how much Averell Harriman et al. attempted to put a brave face on the Laos Accords, all of America's allies in the region were alarmed and not least of those so frightened were Diem and Nhu.

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recognised the power of the American news media to make and break American policy, he and Diem perceived that their time was short. Accordingly, Maneli moved forward with his attempts to bring the two sides together for negotiations:

...As I reported earlier, I asked Pham Van Dong and Xuan Thuy how I should act, as things are, if Ngo Dinh Nhu invited me for a talk. They answered immediately: go to the meeting and listen intently.

I then asked whether there was anything they wished me to convey. The answer was: "Everything you know about our stand on economic and cultural exchange and co-operation, about peace and unification. One thing is sure: the Americans have to leave. On this political basis, we can negotiate about everything.

I asked Pham Van Dong, in the presence of Ho Chi Minh, whether they see the possibility of some kind of federation with Diem-Nhu or something in the nature of a coalition government. Pham answered: "Everything is negotiable on the basis of the independence and sovereignty of Vietnam...We can come to an agreement with any Vietnamese...We have a sincere desire to end hostilities, to establish peace and unification on a completely realistic basis. We are realists."³⁸

Quite apart from the issue of the North - South dialogue, Maneli's contacts with the leadership in Hanoi revealed a profoundly important point concerned with the historiography of the American involvement in Vietnam. This salient point was, simply, that the leaders of the North tacitly acknowledged, in the spring of 1963, that they were responsible for the continuation of hostilities in the South by admitting they could bring the war to an end. Even Maneli accepted this fact on the ground and it seems that the only people who never did accept this reality were those Americans who wished to blame all of their own failings on Diem - as the originator of the problem in the South. Further proof of just how direct the control from Hanoi was over the southern forces was made manifest during the time that the foundations were being laid for talks

Footnotes

³⁸ Maneli, War of the Vanquished, pp. 127 - 128.

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between Hanoi and Saigon.³⁹ For, during this period when Diem and his government were most vulnerable to attack, owing in no small part to American vacillation over the Buddhist Crisis, the Communist insurgent forces, in fact, backed off and, indeed, an unofficial cease-fire had been accepted amongst opposing commanders.⁴⁰ As Dr. Hammer explains:

The talks were not about a detailed agreement; it was too soon for that. They dealt with parallel actions each side might take, such as lessening guerrilla activities and limiting government military initiatives. To Lalouette, it was evident that these secret talks were the reason the Viet Cong did not seek to profit from Diem's growing difficulties with the Americans by launching a major offensive against the Saigon forces. In certain areas where fighting had petered out, local military understandings between opposing commanders were reported.⁴¹

Footnotes

³⁹ Maneli intimates that secret talks had already begun by July of 1963: "Saigon is buzzing with rumors about secret contacts between Diem-Nhu and Ho Chi Minh. In Hanoi no one confirms this, but no one has given me - when I have asked - a clear, negative answer.

On the basis of information I received strictly privately in the North, it is possible to conclude that some kind of Ngo-Ho talks have already begun: through direct emissaries of the North, with the help of the French - at least technical help at this stage." *Ibid.*, p. 127.

⁴⁰ There was of course one notable exception to this unofficial cease-fire and that was the Communist propaganda-venom directed at the strategic hamlets. Likewise, violence directed toward the strategic hamlets continued unabated until the program was abandoned. William Colby had noted this and, indeed, this fact was illuminated earlier in this work.

⁴¹ Hammer, *A Death In November*, pp. 224 - 225.

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Charles de Gaulle & Roger Lalouette Recognised an Opportunity for France in the American Abandonment of Diem -

Charles de Gaulle recognised the opportunity for France to gain a new foundation in Vietnam through the process of a North - South dialogue. Consequently, in August of 1963, when the Americans were feverishly trying to find South Vietnamese generals to throw Diem out of office, the French President publicly called for peace and unity talks between Hanoi and Saigon.⁴² De Gaulle's offer, vague promise of French co-operation though it was, had weight which had an authority beyond the best efforts of American aid, for he appealed to older ties which still bound the Vietnamese to the French.⁴³ At this time, however, Ngo Dinh Nhu was more cautious than the French or the North Vietnamese as he did not want to unnecessarily 'burn the bridge' between the Diem government and the Americans.⁴⁴

Nhu himself told Lodge about his meeting with Maneli later that same day, September 2, when he talked to the American ambassador about leaving the government and retiring to Dalat. He said that Maneli had spoken of de Gaulle's declaration and of Ho Chi Minh's recent appeal for a cease-fire and asked what he could tell Prime Minister Pham Van Dong on his next visit to Hanoi. Say nothing to Dong, Nhu said he had replied... , "Our loyalty to the Americans forbids us to consider either statement. The Americans are the only people on earth who dare to help South Vietnam. Therefore I have no comment."

Then Nhu spoke of his contacts with the other side and told Lodge that the talks whose existence he had denied to Maneli were already under way. The Italian ambassador d'Orlandi, who was present at this meeting, recorded in his diary an account of Nhu's words that was not limited to the generalities Lodge reported to Washington. D'Orlandi, not Lodge, was the source for Nhu's

Footnotes

⁴² *Ibid.* p. 225.

⁴³ "There was no doubt that the French government, and de Gaulle personally, decided to seize the chance, to take control of the Diem government, make it dependent on the help of the French government, and somehow oust the Americans. In this way at last the barbarians from across the ocean would learn what French culture, intelligence, and experience meant.

De Gaulle and Lalouette were right. In 1963-64 it might have been possible to end the war and achieve neutralization in a sovereign Vietnamese state independent of Moscow and Peking..." Maneli, War of the Vanquished, pp. 151 - 152.

⁴⁴ Hammer, A Death In November, p. 228.

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statement... "I am now the intermediary accepted by the Viet Cong for their dialogue." And d'Orlandi reported Nhu's explanation that the other side had put forward peace proposals not only because of the success of the strategic hamlet program but also because they resented the yoke the Chinese were imposing on Hanoi, and they realized the resumption of trade between North and South would be of advantage to both. According to d'Orlandi, not Lodge, Nhu had said the Communists did not even insist on neutralizing the South because they were satisfied that when the fighting ended the American presence would be less necessary to the Saigon regime.⁴⁵

The French Ambassador, Lalouette, believed that Nhu was making a fatal error in trying to hold on to American support because, regardless of all the good-will between Nolting and the Vietnamese, Lodge had undone this. Furthermore, the Americans had, obviously, already decided to abandon the Ngo brothers and their government, indeed, the French believed that was why Lodge was sent out to Vietnam in the first place.⁴⁶ Lalouette told Maneli that Nhu had to make the move away from any delusion he held of the Americans still being friends of the Diem government: "Nhu is still deluding himself that he can arrive at an understanding with Lodge. He does not want to burn his bridges behind him. If he does not rid himself of these illusions he will be lost. It is a tragic mistake."⁴⁷

Perhaps, one of the greatest ironies, amongst so many great ironies, to emerge from the breakdown in relations between the Diem government and Washington was that, at the inception of Ngo Dinh Diem's fledgling Republic of Vietnam it was the Americans who defended him to

Footnotes

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* pp. 228 - 229.

⁴⁶ "Ambassador Lalouette tried to persuade the American ambassador that Diem should be left in power and told him about Goburdhun's report that Pham Van Dong was ready to exchange Northern coal for Southern rice. "I urged Lodge not to make the coup," he recalled to this writer years later. By that time he was convinced that nothing he might have said that September would have swayed Lodge: Lalouette had come to believe that the American had been sent to Vietnam with instructions to remove Diem as soon as he could.... It was hopeless, Lalouette said later. "They had made up their minds to negotiate from a position of force." *Ibid.* p. 229.

⁴⁷ Maneli, *War of the Vanquished*, p. 151.

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the French and now, in the late summer of 1963, it was the French who were trying to save Diem's government from the Americans' impatience and wrath which had been whipped-up by the American newsmen. Lalouette revealed, in conversation with Maneli, that the French had come to accept the fact that Diem and Nhu were the only ones who could bring about a peace with the North:

*Lalouette continued: "...The situation is tragic. It is difficult to defend the Diem-Nhu regime since the raid on the pagodas. They are discredited, but nevertheless I feel that only Diem can conclude peace with the North and come to an agreement with the Front.... You are not the only person to whom I have told this.... I have said the same thing to Ambassador Lodge. I insisted that Diem's removal by force would be a mistake impossible to repair...I repeated the same thing to Ambassador von Wentlandt...If Diem and Nhu are removed, all our plans designed to end the fighting and bring about agreement with the North will come to naught.... it is only they who can now stand up to the Americans. Any other government will be even more dependent on the Americans, will be obedient to them in all things, and so there will be no chance for peace."*⁴⁸

The New York Times attacked the French Ambassador claiming that he was trying to align other Western diplomats to put pressure on Lodge in order to soften the American stance over Diem. There were also newspaper reports that France was backing Nhu as the man to "lead a great national movement toward reunification."⁴⁹ The French position was officially denied in Paris and assurances were given to the Americans that France had no intention on supporting Ngo Dinh Nhu; Lalouette told Ambassador Lodge on September 10 that he had been summoned to Paris for consultations for a week but he never returned.⁵⁰ Yet even with the recall of Lalouette

Footnotes

⁴⁸ Ibid. pp. 141 - 142.

⁴⁹ Hammer, A Death In November, p. 229.

⁵⁰ Ibid. pp. 229 - 230.

the rumours in Saigon and amongst American newsmen about a North - South rapprochement carried on unabated.⁵¹

Consideration of the Seymour Hersh Thesis -

One of the latest published works which deals with the Kennedy era and the American President's decisions vis-à-vis Diem and Vietnam, places enormous weight on the whole North - South dialogue and its potential as the leading cause for Kennedy's administration disposing of Diem. For his book, The Dark Side of Camelot, author Seymour M. Hersh interviewed a good friend of Kennedy's, Charles Bartlett,⁵² about this entire issue. Bartlett quoted Kennedy as saying:

*"Charlie, I can't let Vietnam go to the Communists and then go and ask these people [the voters of America] to re-elect me. Somehow we've got to hold that territory through the 1964 election. We've already given up Laos to the communists and if I give up Vietnam I won't really be able to go to the people. But we've got no future there. [The South Vietnamese] hate us. They want us out of there. At one point they'll kick our asses out of there."*⁵³

In this seemingly innocuous chat with Bartlett, Kennedy exposed many secrets about his administration that had caused so much difficulty. Not least of these was the fact that he recognised Laos for the hand-over to the Communists that it was and that, knowing this, he had seriously misled his allies in South Vietnam when he had tried to claim that Laotian 'neutrality' was not a Communist victory. Diem and Nhu, regardless of State Department protests and

Footnotes

⁵¹ *Ibid.* p. 230.

⁵² Charles Bartlett was, indeed, a close confidant and friend of John F. Kennedy as Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., recalled that it was at one of Bartlett's many dinner parties for Kennedy that the, then, United States Senator met his future wife, Jacqueline Bouvier. Charles Bartlett remained such a close friend that even when Kennedy became more secluded in the White House, as President, he still made time to go to dinner at Bartlett's. Schlesinger, A Thousand Days, pp. 94 & 667.

⁵³ Seymour M. Hersh, The Dark Side of Camelot, (Boston, [MA]: Little, Brown and Company, 1997), p. 418.

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assurances to the contrary, had been right all-along about Laos and their fears about how Kennedy would treat them were equally well-justified. Ambassador Nolting, amongst many other experts such as William Colby, traced Kennedy's troubles with the Diem government to the abandonment of Laos by the United States. Nevertheless, Hersh's latest effort ignores these earlier problems and focuses almost exclusively on the problem of the Ngo brothers talking with the Communists as the main reason for the November coup. Hersh's argument has power, though, in as much as he quite rightly points out that many of the American newsmen ignored what the Polish ICC Representative, Maneli, had drawn attention to.⁵⁴

Maneli, an intellectual who taught law at the University of Warsaw, had by 1970 emigrated to the United States, and he began teaching political science at Queens College. He offered a first-person account of the talks between North and South Vietnam in a 1971 memoir, War of the Vanquished, published by Harper and Row. Astonishingly, the American press ignored it: the book was not reviewed by any major newspaper or magazine. Still prosecuting the war, the America of 1971 was not ready to be told that the war did not have to be.⁵⁵

Specifically, Maneli had underscored the fact that, even though Diem was sorely under assault from the Americans, the Buddhists, and a plethora of other dissident groups in Saigon during the summer of 1963, Hanoi, being aware of this as the window of opportunity for bringing down the GVN, chose, instead, to back-off across the political and insurgency spectrum. There were, of course, two notable exceptions to the Communists' relaxation of political and military pressures

Footnotes

⁵⁴ David Halberstam, it should be noted, was not amongst those newsmen who ignored the alleged North - South talks as Ellen Hammer's research shows that Halberstam could not resist the opportunity to take a shot at Diem and Nhu and criticised them in his reporting for causing fear and panic amongst "...high officials, civil servants, and Catholic refugees from the North [owing to the fact] that Nhu might turn to neutralism." Hammer, A Death In November, pp. 231 - 232. Of course, the hypocrisy of Halberstam's position on this issue was as staggering as it was self-evident; for, he had always argued that Diem and Nhu were the trouble in South Vietnam and the cause of the conflict, yet when they tried to talk peace with the North he criticised them for, essentially, 'selling-out' the Catholic and civil-servant contingents - the very people whom he had accused of being the most corrupt!

⁵⁵ Hersh, The Dark Side of Camelot, p. 422.

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on the GVN and they were the Buddhist provocation, which became even more strident and the assault on the strategic hamlets. Without a doubt, this would have been the best time for Hanoi to substantially increase political and military pressures on Diem but, notably, the North Vietnamese political strategists chose to give the beleaguered South Vietnamese leader a respite. Thus Maneli pointed out: "If the government in Hanoi does not undertake an offensive designed to remove Diem and Nhu from Saigon, this is certainly because it wishes them to survive for a time yet - long enough to come to an agreement with them behind the Americans' backs."⁵⁶

Here, in its most fundamental form, is the Hersh thesis:

Richard R. Smyser, a State Department officer who arrived in Saigon in early 1964 and worked closely with Ambassador Lodge, told me that it was his understanding that a major motive for US support of the coup d'état was the fact that "Diem was trying to make a deal" to establish a neutral South Vietnam. "Remember what neutralism was in 1963" for most Americans - [and one might add for most Vietnamese too - especially with regard to the Harriman/Kennedy 'neutralisation of Laos], Smyser said - "a new word for communism. If Diem made a deal, the deal was that the US would leave and South Vietnam would become a neutral country. Vietnam would still be divided. For Kennedy, this was anathema, because they [his political opponents in the 1964 elections] would say, 'He lost Vietnam because he let it go neutral.' So that meant you had to get rid of Diem."⁵⁷

Hersh's argument has some credibility,⁵⁸ however, this writer would contend that it represents only the proverbial 'tip' of a very deep-set 'iceberg.' The problem of the Kennedy administration's double-mindedness in policy toward Diem's GVN finds its foundations in the

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⁵⁶ Maneli, War of the Vanquished, p. 142?

⁵⁷ Hersh, The Dark Side of Camelot, pp. 422 - 423.

⁵⁸ There is little doubt that the possibility of a 'deal' done with the North by Diem and Nhu was worrying Washington. For example, Ambassador Lodge had sought out the advice of Robert Thompson of the British Advisory Mission, with regard to Nhu's capabilities for pulling-off a deal with the North. Thus, Lodge reported the following to Washington through a classified cable: "2. Brother Nhu was always thinking of negotiating with North Vietnam and believed [believed by Thompson] he was clever enough to bring it off now that, in his opinion, South Vietnam was somewhat stronger than it was two years ago. Thompson believed the only trump card Nhu had was the withdrawal of the US. For this, he said, North

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bitter animosity that arose between Diem and Harriman over the Laos 'neutrality' Accords. As this work has shown, Averell Harriman was an extremely powerful man and he had powerful and respected colleagues ranging from the eloquent Galbraith, who had the President's ear, through to the persistent Roger Hilsman. Because of this fundamental reality of American power politics, Diem's days had probably been numbered for some time prior to the Buddhist Crisis of 1963 or the alleged talks with the North Vietnamese. Nolting maintained that, while Kennedy truly liked President Diem and did not want to see him ousted, the American President's position on this critical issue was, nevertheless, weak. The sheer cultural and political prestige of Averell Harriman, who was linked to nothing less than the 'New Deal' aura of the whole Roosevelt presidency, intimidated Kennedy. Compared to the Harrimans, the Kennedys were, at best, nouveau-riche 'bootleggers' and, at the worst, poor Irish 'upstarts;' and it was indeed possible that the American President would have felt this keenly.⁵⁹ Thus, the President, regardless of his good intentions toward Diem, could not stand up to the constant pressure exerted by Harriman and his cohorts in the State Department who wanted Diem gone at just about any cost.⁶⁰ Diem and Nhu had been right about just what 'neutrality' meant for Laos and Ambassador Nolting had supported them in their contention. This, of course, had also put the seal on the fate of Nolting's

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Vietnam would pay almost any price. What, he asked, would we do if the Govt of Vietnam invited us to leave?" Henry Cabot Lodge, Telegram # 496, "Conversation With Thompson, British Advisory Mission," September 12, 1963 - 9:52 a.m., [Classification - Secret], photocopy of original document, p. 1 of 2 in R621/102.921; Box Number: 26; Professional Papers, 1963 - 1982, Box 1 of 3, The Nolting Papers.

⁵⁹ The Kennedy social background is common-knowledge and, certainly, the record is clear that Kennedy seemed to be intimidated by Harriman. Nevertheless, for particular details concerned with this subject the reader may consult author Seymour Hersh's work as he certainly manages to convey the less than savoury background of the Kennedys, and specifically that of John Kennedy's father, Joseph. Hersh, The Dark Side of Camelot, pp. 44 - 60.

⁶⁰ The Nolting perspective, more courteous than Hersh's, was that, certainly, Harriman was able to intimidate nearly everyone he came into contact with and this would have included Kennedy. This perspective was relayed to this writer in an interview with Mrs. Lindsay Nolting; the interview was conducted at 1:00 p.m., Thursday, 29th of January, 1998, over the telephone.

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career with the State Department and after, when he had resigned and attempted to re-establish his academic career with the publication of his memoirs.⁶¹

In the end, the coup of November 1, 1963, brought to an unceremonious close all possibility of a negotiated settlement in Vietnam. How far Ngo Dinh Nhu's talks had gone with the North, without further documentary proof, is a matter of speculation. Nevertheless, having had the chance to study all the available material on this question at the time, Ambassador Nolting told Washington: "Give them a chance...The South Vietnamese leaders are not stupid, and they are not going to risk their necks or betray us."⁶² Nolting's admonishment to Washington was right.⁶³ Unfortunately, French ambassador Roger Lalouette was also correct in his warnings to the Ngo brothers about American betrayal. By not "burning their bridges" with the Americans Diem and Nhu's fate became sealed and to quote Lalouette once again, they had made a "tragic

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⁶¹ This was so much the case that when Ambassador Nolting tried to get his memoirs published at the University of Virginia Press, after he had resigned from the State Department in protest over the betrayal and murders of Diem and Nhu, and even after many years had gone by, he suffered much abuse and vicious invective. The source for this attack came from Cornell University where an outside reader had been given his manuscript. This befell him because of his firm stand in support of the Ngo Dinh's, that he could not find a publisher for two years - when Greenwood finally opted to publish one of the most important memoirs of American diplomatic engagement in South Vietnam. These personal facts, concerned with Ambassador Nolting's travail after he left the State Department, were relayed to this writer in an interview with Mrs. Lindsay Nolting; the interview was conducted at 1:00 p.m., Thursday, 29 January 1998, over the telephone.

⁶² Nolting, From Trust To Tragedy, p. 118.

⁶³ "I believe that somewhere in the back of the minds of Diem and Nhu lingered the idea that in case of a final break with the Americans, they might find some *modus vivendi* with Hanoi. And for the time they were exploiting certain contacts or appearances of contacts with the Communist camp to frighten and blackmail their anti-Communist allies. They viewed anti-Communism not only as an exportable commodity, but also as a medium of exchange. Hence, Nhu wished to stay in contact with me and acted - to use his favourite expression - dialectically: he stayed within the bounds of officiality and went beyond it, creating appearances and suggestions of little consequence. He was at the same time and with the same words confirming and denying. Despite appearances, Diem and Nhu were flexible politicians. And yet, although they were able to accept certain compromises, they could not make a clean break out of the cage of their own illusions [i.e., the illusion of continued American support]." Maneli, War of the Vanquished, p. 150.

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mistake.”⁶⁴ Because once Lodge was on the scene, whom most foreign diplomats and the North Vietnamese suspected had been sent out to oversee Diem’s removal from power, the possibility of reconciliation between Diem’s GVN and the Kennedy Administration became, effectively, impossible.⁶⁵

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⁶⁴ Lalouette is quoted in Maneli, War of the Vanquished, p. 151.

⁶⁵ “The following day I cabled that the appointment of Lodge spelled the end of the Diem regime.” Ibid. p. 135.

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They came to land in the country of the Gerasenes [Gadarenes], which is opposite Galilee. He was stepping ashore when a man from the town who was possessed by devils came towards Him; for a long time the man had worn no clothes, nor did he live in a house, but in the tombs.

Catching sight of Jesus he gave a shout, fell at his feet and cried out at the top of his voice, 'What do you want with me, Jesus, son of the Most High God? I implore you, do not torture me.' - For Jesus had been telling the unclean spirit to come out of the man. It was a devil that had seized on him a great many times, and they used to secure him with chains and fetters to restrain him, but he would always break the fastenings, and the devil would drive him out into the wilds. 'What is your name?' Jesus asked. 'Legion' he said - because many devils had gone into him. And these pleaded with him not to order them to depart into the Abyss.

Now there was a large herd of pigs feeding there on the mountain, and the devils pleaded with him to let them go into these. So he gave them leave. The devils came out of the man and went into the pigs, and the herd charged down the cliff into the lake and were drowned.¹

While the mystery of iniquity and its accompanying insanity is made clear in the above passage from the Gospel According to Saint Luke, Frederick Nolting nevertheless was dismayed when he witnessed a similar propensity for the Kennedy Administration to rush head-long into disaster:

In twenty-two years of public service, I never saw anything resembling the confusion, vacillation, and lack of co-ordination in the U.S. government. While I had sympathy for President Kennedy in his dilemma, one cannot admire his failure to take control. The Harriman-Lodge axis seemed too strong for him.

In Saigon, Lodge was doing everything possible within his loose and often conflicting instructions to encourage a revolution. In Washington,

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¹ The Gospel According to St. Luke, Lk 8:26 - 8:39, in The Jerusalem Bible, (Garden City, [NY]: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1966), p. 106.

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Harriman saw to it that the pressures against Diem - both moral pressures and physical sanctions - were not relaxed.

In the end, the American position came down to a disgraceful one: encouraging a coup while pretending we had nothing to do with it.²

The GVN was left in a most precarious position with the recall of Nolting and the promise of a new ambassador, Henry Cabot Lodge, who had been built up in the American news media as a man who would 'lay down the law' with Diem. As such, Diem and Nhu were forced to take a long hard look at their involvement with the United States and, in their estimation, the 'cons' were starting to substantially outweigh the 'pros'. For example, they had to consider the depth of the ill will that Averell Harriman had shown toward Diem with regard to the latter's hesitance over the Laos Neutrality Accords. This consideration was especially poignant given the fact that it had been made manifest that US policy was being steered in an opposing direction to the GVN ever since the Laotian question came up. They must have realised by this point just how powerful Harriman was and this, by itself, was cause for their genuine concern. They had to consider that, regardless of their dire warnings and pleadings, the Laotian deal, as formulated by Harriman, went ahead. Indeed, their warnings had been based on an accurate assessment of precisely what the North Vietnamese Communists would do. Laos had become a staging area and line of communications for insurgent manpower and supply into South Vietnam. Yet, no allowance was made for South Vietnam to protect itself from this assault as cross-border raiding was expressly forbidden in the Accords and Averell Harriman promised to hold Diem's 'feet-to-the-fire' on this crucial issue.³ They had to consider the fact that the Kennedy Administration did

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² Nolting, *From Trust To Tragedy*, p. 132.

³ Perhaps unwittingly, Roger Hilsman attested to this absurd policy by, of all things, trying to paint the American position of not raiding into Laos in the whitewash of 'moral purity'. Anyway, the sceptical reader can indulge his credulity in the following excerpt from an interview Hilsman gave to the
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not appear to be remotely interested in what the reality of the so-called 'Buddhist Crisis' truly was. Their proof of Washington's lack of discernment, discretion, and patience was that the minute Nolting was on holidays Trueheart had 'taken off the gloves' and, in effect, threatened them (Diem and Nhu) over the 'persecuted' Buddhists. They knew that Trueheart was not acting alone and that the source of this betrayal lay in Washington. They had to consider the fact that the US news media were showing manifest bias in favour of the radical Buddhist bonzes. It was these political 'monks' who had openly stated that they would overthrow the Diem government and all the while the Kennedy government did nothing to bolster deteriorating relations in the face of such a clear danger. Now they had to consider that the one calm and rational link that

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JFK Library historian, Mr. O'Brien, on this very point: "As far as any bombings of the trail go, of any type, Harriman stated this -- and I totally agreed with it and implemented it. Harriman said, "We are going to be absolutely pure, absolutely pure. We're going to let them take all the onus. We're going to be absolutely clean. And the reason we're going to be clean is because when the break comes between the three factions, we want it to come not between the neutralists and the right, as it happened before, so that the neutralists and the communists are lined up against the right, but between the neutralists and the other side. We want to make the communists wreck themselves, hang themselves, give them rope." So we were absolutely pure, absolutely pure.

The only thing I permitted, as Assistant Secretary, to happen over Laos, until the day I left office in March of '64, was high level reconnaissance, that is, the U-2." Roger Hilsman, "Oral History Interview with Roger Hilsman, Jr." Recorded interview by Dennis J. O'Brien, August 14, 1970 (Hamburg Cove, Lyme, Connecticut), p. 25, John F. Kennedy Library, Oral History Program.

The amazing thing about Hilsman's testimony here is, if what he claims truly represents the motives behind the US policy vis-à-vis Laos, then academic considerations over-ruled common-sense in Washington or the Americans were trying to be 'too-clever-by-half.' In other words, while the Americans were willing to alienate Diem - in order to be 'pure' - the Communists, quite astutely, moved ahead with full-force to secure the Ho Chi Minh Trail area and all the American 'hand-wringing' failed to stop this. World public opinion meant nothing in comparison to the real-estate Giap had managed to secure on the ground. In this sense, with regard to both the Laos Accords and the Buddhist Crisis, one is forced to admire the Communists' matter-of-fact acceptance of reality and their ability to exploit it to their maximum advantage while the Americans engaged in sophistry and moral grandstanding - all the while at their ally's expense! In this writer's estimation nothing sums up the unreality of the Harriman/Hilsman era in American foreign policy during the Kennedy era better than this testimony of Hilsman's. Indeed, the cynical title for the Ho Chi Minh Trail: The Averell Harriman Memorial Highway takes on a whole new effectiveness and accuracy when one considers what motivated Harriman and Hilsman.

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they had to Washington, Frederick Nolting, was removed from Saigon. Indeed, their position was as desperate as it was precarious and they had to act if they were to maintain even a semblance of legitimacy as an autonomous Vietnamese government. In this context it is worthwhile to consider the research of Anne Blair, who wrote a critical historical analysis on Ambassador Lodge's mission. Thus, she noted the serious mistake of moving Nolting out at this time and its impact on Diem. "Since Diem was expecting Nolting to return to Saigon on a continuing basis after his vacation, Department of State shifts in policy could only serve to make him feel besieged and betrayed by his American patrons, while doing nothing to advance the war effort."⁴

Diem and Nhu finally get 'Tough' with the Radical Bonzes -

Quite apart from the contacts the GVN began with Hanoi, desperation also drove Diem and Nhu to consider firm measures for dealing with the radical Buddhists as this particular struggle had become one of their very survival. Their choice was as simple and as profound in its ramifications as the one they had to face back in the mid 1950s with the Sects: they had to suppress the political bonzes or give up legitimate authority in South Vietnam. Very much like the mid-1950s crisis, they could expect no help from the Americans and, this time around, they could expect the new element of hostility toward their actions as the Kennedy Administration seemed to be falling over itself in order to placate these obvious enemies of the GVN. The Americans failed to see or, perhaps, were so concerned with the media play in the United States of these events in Saigon that, with an election coming up, political legitimacy in South Vietnam ceased to mean that much in Washington. Regardless of American hand-wringing, Diem and

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⁴ Anne E. Blair, Lodge in Vietnam: A Patriot Abroad, (New Haven, [CT.]: Yale University Press, 1995), p. 17.

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Nhu had considered that the best time to deal effectively with the radical Buddhists was the interim between US ambassadors and, as such, they declared martial law and finally moved against the bonzes of Xa Loi and Tu Dam pagodas on August 20, 1963.⁵

The news that martial law had been declared in South Vietnam and that the insurgent pagodas, Xa Loi and Tu Dam, had been seized and cleared of the radical bonzes was treated with shock and confusion in Washington.⁶ Nolting recalled that the news shocked him as well and that he could not understand why Diem had acted so rapidly and against his own policy of conciliation. Nolting sent a Diem a telegram with a personal note to this effect and this was

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⁵ The President's Intelligence Checklist of August 21, 1963, lists these developments in a laconic manner:

"a. Diem's regime seems determined to repress forcefully the rising Buddhist agitation, despite strong advice from US representatives and an urgent plea from Saigon's ambassador to Washington.

b. Police and army personnel raided Buddhist pagodas in Saigon and Hué yesterday using arms, grenades and tear gas.

c. A number of Buddhists were reported killed or wounded, and many others were arrested. The fate of key Buddhist leaders is not yet known.

d. Martial law has been declared throughout the country, and all communications are in military hands.

e. These harsh measures may only serve to further alienate the Vietnamese public and will further damage Diem's image throughout the world.

f. Some senior Vietnamese officers may have agreed with this action as necessary to prevent the spread of unrest." The President's Intelligence Checklist, August 21, 1963, Kennedy Library, National Security Files, Chester V. Clifton Series attached as #262 Editorial Note to William Trueheart's 261. "Telegram From The Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State," Saigon, August 21, 1963 - 10 p.m. [Source: Department of State, Central Files, POL 2-4 S VIET. Secret; Operational Immediate] in FRUS: Vietnam, January to August, 1963, Vol. III, pp. 597 - 598.

⁶ "We expect to issue a statement on August 21 stating that the repressive measures against the Buddhists undertaken by the GVN represent a direct violation of its assurances that it was pursuing a policy of reconciliation with the Buddhists and consequently the actions of the GVN cannot be condoned by the United States." This initial Washington response was spelled-out in a 263. "Department of State Daily Staff Summary," Washington, August 21, 1963, [Department of State, Top Secret and Secret Summaries: Lot 65 D 142. Top Secret; Eyes Only for Designated Recipient.] In FRUS: Vietnam, January to August, 1963, Vol. III, pp. 598 - 599.

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something that the American ambassador would later regret as Diem had ample reason to move on the pagodas with all due haste.

The news stunned us equally in Hawaii. We were amazed and angered that it came on the heels of Diem's statement of his policy of conciliation. I was shocked and immediately sent President Diem a personal telegram: "This is the first time that you've gone back on your word to me." Now I regret sending that telegram. Later I saw Nguyen Dinh Thuan in Paris and asked him if he recalled it. He answered, "Yes, I took it to the President. The President read it, shook his head and said, 'He doesn't know what the provocation was.'" The "provocation" was, in fact, continued packing of arms in the Xa Loi and other pagodas, continued riots clamouring for the government's overthrow, and a total unwillingness on the part of Thich Tri Quang and his militants to compromise on anything. When I returned to Washington, I would plunge immediately into a controversy over what to do about the Diem government, but by that time it was too late.⁷

William Colby, however, believed that this was a good opportunity for the GVN to 'clear-the-decks', sort things out with a final compensation offer to the Buddhists who had suffered loss from the Hué tragedy, and, then, to get the counter-insurgency fight,⁸ particularly the strategic

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⁷ Nolting, From Trust To Tragedy, p. 121.

Nolting's recollection in his memoirs is consistent with earlier interviews he conducted with the LBJ Library Oral History Program as the historian at the State Department indicates in the following note: "Lodge and Nolting accompanied by Hilsman and Kattenburg met in Honolulu to confer on Vietnam on August 20 and 21. Lodge was going to Saigon, Nolting was returning to Washington. Kattenburg went on to Vietnam for a 10-day stay and Hilsman returned to Washington. No account of their discussions has been found... In an oral history interview, Nolting remembers that he was "shocked" at the raids and that he sent Diem a personal message from Honolulu in which he told Diem: "This is the first time that you have ever gone back on your word to me." Johnson Library, Oral History Program, Frederick E. Nolting Jr., November 11, 1982, footnote # 6 of Bromley Smith's, 303. "Memorandum of a Conference With the President, White House, Washington, August 27, 1963, 4 p.m. [Kennedy Library, National Security Files, Meetings and Memoranda, Meetings on Vietnam. Top Secret. Drafted by Bromley Smith] in FRUS: Vietnam, January to August, 1963, Vol. III, p. 661.

⁸ "From Colby: - endeavour to induce the GVN quickly to take a series of favourable actions respecting the Buddhists to exhibit that the repressive measures were necessary to establish the tranquillity in which the religious problem could be solved;..." Victor H. Krulak, Major General, USMC, 265. "Memorandum for the Record by the Joint Chiefs of Staff's Special Assistant for Counter-insurgency and
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hamlets program, back on course.⁹ Colby also believed that the massive show of force that Diem and Nhu had shown toward the Buddhist radicals by raiding the pagodas, unfortunately, gave too much power to the arguments of their enemies in Washington and particularly within the State Department.¹⁰ The raids also caused immediate problems for the CIA because they were known to be very close to Diem and Nhu and to have been involved, at all levels, with the Vietnamese Special Forces used against the radical pagodas, as Colby explains:

Because of the CIA's secrecy and its long-time close relations with Nhu and Diem, the immediate question was raised in many minds whether the Agency might be pursuing its own policy at cross purposes with the official United States

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Special Activities (Krulak)," Washington, August 21, 1963, [National Defense University, Taylor Papers, T-172-69. Secret.] In FRUS: Vietnam, January to August, 1963, Vol. III, pp. 601 -602.

William Colby, in his memoirs, fleshed out why he had taken this position on the Buddhists and this is an important consideration for the student of this history as Colby had access to daily intelligence reports which had allowed him to formulate a realistic appraisal of just what the Buddhist Crisis was about. "All during this period I was in daily contact with John Richardson, the CIA Chief of Station in Saigon, who in his turn was in equally close contact, as was traditional for the Agency's station chief there, with Nhu, as well as with a wide number of political and military leaders and groups in the country. And as a result of our constant interchange of intelligence, I have to say that I didn't then - nor, in fact do I in retrospect now - regard the Buddhist situation itself as quite the serious crisis that it was considered in Washington. Indeed, I agreed with Diem and Nhu that the Buddhists were raising an essentially false issue of religious discrimination, that the Diem regime was not a Catholic government, that the Buddhists were challenging the government's basic authority in a series of escalating demands, and that they had to be met with a firm hand. But most of all, I felt, we must not allow the matter to distract the United States from the main issue in Vietnam: the fight against the Communists in the countryside. And it was apparent that the Buddhist crisis and its repercussions in Washington were doing just that. I did not minimize the turmoil that prevailed, but I remembered that Diem had survived even greater turmoil in 1955, and I believed that he could do so again if the Americans kept a cool head and gave him the support now that they gave him then. And in that context, I believed we would be able to influence him and work out between us a way to handle the Buddhists proper concerns and ours, while still pursuing the war against the Communists." Colby, Honorable Men, p. 206.

⁹ "Of course, strategic hamlets stopped with the overthrow of Diem. They stopped before, when the attention of the palace drifted off after May of 1963 to the problems with the Buddhists and with the Americans. The strategic hamlets essentially stopped." William Colby, "William Colby in the Second Oral History Interview." Recorded interview by Ted Gittinger, March 1, 1982, p. 6, Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, Oral History Program.

¹⁰ Colby, Honorable Men, pp. 208-209.

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position, and even have had something to do with the raids. For, as it developed, the troops who had carried out the raids had been led by the Vietnamese Special Forces which were supported by CIA... In fact, however, they had been assembled for the pagoda raids totally without the CIA's knowledge, and it fell to me to convince Americans and Vietnamese alike that this was so.¹¹

Colby's overall assessment was, nevertheless, relentless as he always kept in focus what it was that America was supposed to be doing in Southeast Asia or, in other words, where their strategic purpose lay. He enunciated this position, which supported Nolting's arguments entirely, in an interview with the BBC - several years after the fact:

Our position was that Diem is about as good a leadership as you're going to get in Vietnam in this damn time. That America's main interest in Vietnam is not the small details of how it runs its internal government structure, but whether it's meeting the communist challenge, that the strategic hamlet programme is the proper strategy. Let's not be diverted from it. Let's support it, and that our interests are that it gets strong enough to fend off the communists in that fashion. Now, there were other people in Washington who claimed that it was hopeless with Mr. Diem, that the dislike for his authoritarian rule, the political opposition was so strong, that the communists could not help but win in the long term with that kind of government.... The key question was never answered. Which one are we interested in? Are we interested in a perfect constitutional democracy in a small under-developed country in Asia, recently freed from a hundred years of colonial rule? Or are we interested in some kind of a structure that will prevent further expansion of communist control?¹²

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¹¹ *Ibid.* p. 209.

¹² Michael Charlton interviews William Colby in "Many Reasons Why: The American Involvement in Vietnam," Programme 4, Part II in a series of eleven programmes, "The New Frontiersmen Hold The Line." Recorded: Thursday 23rd., June, 1977, Transmission: Tuesday, 11th., October, 1977, 2130-2215, pp. 8 – 9 in R621/102.921, Box No.: 27, Professional Papers, The Nolting Papers.

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Roger Hilsman Sends the August 24, 1963, Cable that supports a Coup against Diem –

At this point, using the crack-down on the pagodas and the fictitious threat that Nhu was consolidating power to take over the government as a pretext, Roger Hilsman engineered what amounted to a clear break with past US policy toward the GVN. His purpose was to engage the Kennedy administration in the planning of a coup against Diem. Hilsman accomplished this 'end-run' on US policy by sending a dangerously worded telegram to Lodge in Saigon on the weekend of August 24, 1963, when President Kennedy was out of town.¹³ The salient passages of this now infamous August 24 telegram are as follows:

243. Eyes only Ambassador Lodge... US Government cannot tolerate situation in which power lies in Nhu's hands. Diem must be given chance to rid himself of Nhu and his coterie and replace them with best military and political personalities available.

If, in spite of all your efforts, Diem remains obdurate and refuses, then we must face the possibility that Diem himself cannot be preserved.

We now believe immediate action must be taken to prevent Nhu from consolidating his position further...(1) First, we must press on appropriate levels of GVN following line: (a) USG cannot accept actions against Buddhists taken by Nhu and his collaborators under cover of martial law. (b) Prompt dramatic actions redress situation must be taken, including repeal of decree 10, release of arrested monks, nuns, etc.

(2) We must at same time also tell key military leaders that US would find it impossible to continue support GVN militarily and economically unless above steps are taken immediately which we recognize requires removal of the Nhus from the scene. We wish give Diem reasonable opportunity to remove Nhus, but if he remains obdurate, then we are prepared to accept the obvious implication that we can no longer support Diem. You may also tell appropriate military commanders we will give them direct support in any interim period of breakdown central government mechanism.... Concurrently with above,

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¹³ Henry Cabot Lodge had taken over the post of United States Ambassador to South Vietnam and had first set foot in Saigon on the night of August 22, 1963. Blair, Lodge in Vietnam, p. 24.

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Ambassador and country team should urgently examine all possible alternative leadership and make detailed plans as to how we might bring about Diem's replacement if this should become necessary...we will back you to the hilt on actions you take to achieve our objectives.¹⁴

Nolting saw this telegram, just a short while after it had been sent, as he stood in Hilsman's office at the State Department. He stated that the 'other shoe had finally dropped' when he saw this sinister document. To Nolting there was now no mistaking the fact that US policy had done an about-face and that the Kennedy administration was engaged in the overthrow of the Diem government.¹⁵ He also perceived that the impact of this nefarious document would be far-reaching, certainly, beyond the combined imaginations of the group of men who were behind its content. **"The telegram of August 24 turned out to be a decisive factor in leading our country into the longest and most unnecessary war in American history [my emphasis]."**¹⁶ The historian at the State Department gives the best overall view of the deception that the Harriman group used to get this telegram rammed-through before reaction could mount:

Drafted by Hilsman and cleared by Hilsman, Forrestal, and Ball. Approved by Harriman for transmission and classification. The drafting and clearance of this message has occasioned subsequent controversy which is reflected in the memoirs and recollections of some of the principal personalities involved at the time. General Maxwell Taylor stated in Swords and Plowshares, pp. 292-294, that the cable was an "end run" by an anti-Diem faction in Washington including Hilsman, Harriman, and Forrestal. Taylor believed the cable was ill-conceived, confusing, and would never had been approved had Hilsman and his

Footnotes

¹⁴ Roger Hilsman (even though the telegram bears George Ball's name), 281. "(DEPTEL 243) Telegram From the Department of State to the Embassy in Vietnam," Washington, August 24, 1963 - 9:36 p.m., [Department of State, Har-Van Files, Overthrow of the Diem Government in South Vietnam, 1963. Top Secret; Operational Immediate.] In FRUS: Vietnam, January to August, 1963, Vol. III, pp. 628 - 629.

¹⁵ Nolting, From Trust To Tragedy, p. 124.

¹⁶ Ibid.

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colleagues not taken advantage of the absence from Washington of most of the high-level officials of the administration.¹⁷

Nolting's assessment of how the telegram was forced through in rapid order agrees with the above account:

They had cleared this text over the telephone with representatives of State (George Ball was acting Secretary because Rusk was away), Defense, CIA, and the White House staff. The President was consulted. Each person, including President Kennedy, who was vacationing on Cape Cod, had approved the telegram under the impression that other top officials had agreed with it. There was no formal meeting to discuss or co-ordinate the message.¹⁸

Robert McNamara, Kennedy's Secretary of Defense, remembered the details of how this cable was approved and sent forward and his description supports Nolting's assertion about the fact that everyone was presented with the cable having been told it was already approved by everyone else concerned.¹⁹ McNamara also recalled that Maxwell Taylor, whom he considered by far and

Footnotes

¹⁷ Footnote # 1 attached to document # 281. "(DEPTEL 243) Telegram From the Department of State to the Embassy in Vietnam," Washington, August 24, 1963 - 9:36 p.m., [Department of State, Har-Van Files, Overthrow of the Diem Government in South Vietnam, 1963. Top Secret; Operational Immediate. Drafted by Hilsman and cleared by Hilsman, Forrestal, and Ball. Approved by Harriman for transmission and classification. Signed 'Ball'] in FRUS: Vietnam, January to August, 1963, Vol. III, p. 628.

¹⁸ Nolting, From Trust To Tragedy, p. 124.

¹⁹ McNamara, In Retrospect, p. 54.

McNamara's description, certainly, supports Nolting's contention that the Harriman group had master-minded this effort: "After Hilsman completed the cable, on August 24, Averell Harriman, who had just become under-secretary of state for political affairs, approved it. Michael Forrestal, son of the first secretary of defense and a member of the NSC staff, immediately sent the cable to President Kennedy in Hyannis Port, stating, 'Clearances are being obtained from [Under-secretary of State George] Ball and Defense.... Suggest you let me know if you wish...to hold up action.

The cable's sponsors were determined to transmit it to Saigon that very day. They found George Ball on the golf course and asked him to call the President on Cape Cod. He did, and President Kennedy said he would agree to the cable's transmission if his senior advisers concurred. George [Ball] immediately telephoned Dean Rusk in New York and told him the president agreed. Dean [Rusk] endorsed it, though he was unenthusiastic. Averell, meanwhile, sought clearance from the CIA. Since John McCone was absent,

Footnote continued on next page:...

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away Kennedy's most capable geopolitical thinker and security advisor, was appalled by what Hilsman had done.²⁰ Roswell Gilpatric, who initially had fallen prey to the efforts of Hilsman and Harriman to get instant approval of the telegram, had immediate doubts and, even while it was in the process of being sent, he made sure that Maxwell Taylor got a copy immediately.²¹ Regardless of Nolting's, Taylor's, and McNamara's disapproval the cable was sent and "Lodge understood the August 24 cable as instructing him to initiate action to remove Diem as leader of South Vietnam."²²

Years later - in 1977, in an interview with the BBC - Ambassador Lodge claimed that he was stunned by the content of the August 24 telegram and that he agreed with the Nolting assessment that it was very ill-advised:

*"I was thunderstruck... So I get on down to Saigon on Friday and then Sunday comes this telegram telling me to do whatever I could to overthrow Diem, and to, in effect, press the button...I thought about asking for clarification of instructions and then I thought no, that I wouldn't do that...I can read English, I could understand perfectly well what the telegram said, I thought it was very ill-advised; but I only had had twenty-four hours in the country and my opinion wasn't worth very much to me or anybody else. So I said I'm going to try to carry it out."*²³

...footnote continued from previous page:

he talked to Richard Helms, the deputy director for plans. Helms was reluctant, but, like Rusk, went along because the president had already done so.

Forrestal, meanwhile, called Ros [Roswell] Gilpatric at home and told him the same story: the president and the secretary of state had seen the cable and concurred." *Ibid.* p. 53.

²⁰ *Ibid.* p. 54.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.* p. 55.

²³ Michael Charlton interviews Henry Cabot Lodge in "Many Reasons Why: The American Involvement in Vietnam," Programme 4, Part II in a series of eleven programmes, "The New Frontiersmen Hold The Line," Recorded: Thursday, 23 June, 1977, Transmission: Tuesday, 11 October, 1977, 2130-2215, pp. 27 - 29 in R621/102.921, Box No.: 27, Professional Papers, The Nolting Papers.

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Lodge went on to tell the BBC interviewer, Michael Charlton, that he believed the instigators of the telegram, i.e., the Harriman group in Washington, had got carried away. "...in the State Department you had men who had devoted a large part of their lives to this thing, they were on it day and night and they'd get worked up and I think it's all done in the spirit of sincerity. That doesn't make it any less reprehensible."²⁴ The BBC interviewer then asked Lodge, straight out: "Do you think that a group in the State Department opposed to Diem seized their opportunity that weekend in a quite deliberate way?"²⁵ Lodge answered this question in the affirmative. Now, what warrants the reader's attention here is that it was apparent to Lodge that there was a malevolent drive within the State Department that wanted Diem gone, nearly at any cost. In turn, this would seem to indicate, quite powerfully, that Harriman and his group were emotionally involved in their ardour to get rid of Diem. It was ironic that one of their chief accusations against Nolting was that he was emotionally involved in supporting Diem, for they could not perceive their own emotional involvement that ran in a contrary direction.²⁶

Footnotes

²⁴ *Ibid.* p. 29.

²⁵ *Ibid.* p. 30.

²⁶ Just a little earlier in this programme, Roger Hilsman had told the BBC interviewer: "Kennedy would send people out there, you know, like myself or Mike Forrestal and others, and they would come back and say Nolting was wedded to Diem. Localitis, we used to call it, you know." Michael Charlton interviews Roger Hilsman in "Many Reasons Why: The American Involvement in Vietnam," Programme 4, Part II in a series of eleven programmes,, "The New Frontiersmen Hold The Line," Recorded: Thursday 23 June, 1977, Transmission: Tuesday, 11 October, 1977, 2130-2215, p. 11 in R621/102.921, Box No.: 27, Professional Papers, The Nolting Papers.

Yet, Lodge claims that the real emotion lay within Harriman' and Hilsman's camp: "Well, that's the obvious explanation, that there was a group that had been working on this question for a long time and they were emotionally involved and very sincere." Michael Charlton interviews Henry Cabot Lodge in "Many Reasons Why: The American Involvement in Vietnam," Programme 4, Part II in a series of eleven programmes,, "The New Frontiersmen Hold The Line," Recorded: Thursday, 23 June, 1977, Transmission: Tuesday, 11 October, 1977, 2130-2215, p. 30 in R621/102.921, Box No.: 27, Professional Papers, The Nolting Papers.

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Nolting recalled that McNamara was so upset by what he had read in the Hilsman telegram that the Secretary called him and asked him to attend a meeting he was trying to set up with the President in order to have the telegram's instructions voided.²⁷ Nolting assured McNamara that he would attend if he was invited, whereupon, he received an immediate invitation from President Kennedy's military aide, General Chester V. "Ted" Clifton.²⁸ The meeting turned out to be, in Nolting's words: "...a kind of National Security Council special group meeting, chaired by President Kennedy, who appeared to be harassed and worried."²⁹ The meeting illustrated that a very deep division existed in Kennedy's administration with regard to how Diem was being treated and US policy toward South Vietnam in general.³⁰

Just prior to the meeting noted in the previous paragraph another one had taken place at the White House on August 26, 1963, wherein all of the major forces in the Harriman group were involved. These included: Ball, Forrestal, Harriman and Hilsman.³¹ Kennedy was plainly annoyed at the way US policy was being driven by forces outside of the offices of his administration and, indeed, the US Government, which were supposed to be making the

Footnotes

²⁷ Nolting, From Trust To Tragedy, pp. 124 - 125.

²⁸ Ibid. p. 125.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ All those who attended this meeting included: "The President, Secretary Rusk, Secretary McNamara, General Taylor, Mr. Ball, Governor Harriman, Mr. Gilpatric, General Carter, Mr. Helms, Mr. Hilsman, Mr. Bundy, Mr. Forrestal, Major General Krulak. Major General V.H. Krulak (USMC), 289. "Memorandum for the Record of a Meeting at the White House, Washington, August 26, 1963, Noon," [National Defense University, Taylor Papers, Vietnam, chapter XXIII. Top Secret; Sensitive. Drafted by Krulak.] In FRUS: Vietnam, January to August, 1963, Vol. III, p. 638.

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decisions on the direction of such policy. Although he was a man who held a great fondness for the news media, he was clearly fed up with what the press had been doing:

The President observed that Mr. Halberstam of The New York Times is actually running a political campaign; and he is wholly un-objective, reminiscent of Mr. Matthews in the Castro days [my emphasis]. He stated that it was essential that we not permit Halberstam unduly to influence our actions.³²

Of course, this revelation about Halberstam was not new to Diem and Nhu. All the President was repeating here was precisely what William Colby, Ellen Hammer, Marguerite Higgins and Ambassador Nolting had been stating all along: Halberstam was a 28 year-old 'kid' out of control and doing a great deal of damage to American and Vietnamese interests.

As the meeting progressed, President Kennedy tried to find out if it was possible for the US to live with Diem and Nhu but Hilsman rounded on this idea right away by slandering Nhu: "Hilsman replied this would be horrible to contemplate because of Nhu's grave emotional instability."³³ Hilsman continued his pitch to have the regime overthrown, which seemed to annoy the President.³⁴ Hilsman wanted the President to act. According to Robert McNamara's memory of this meeting Hilsman tried to stop Kennedy from listening to Nolting:

But the President told him he wanted another meeting the next day and asked that former Ambassador Nolting be present. Hilsman did not like that. He complained that Nolting's views were colored and that he had become emotionally involved in the situation. The president replied acidly, "Maybe logically."³⁵

Footnotes

³² *Ibid.*, p. 638.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 641.

³⁴ Harriman supported Hilsman during this conference by stating that they had acted, by sending the August 24 telegram, at this time because they believed they had Vietnamese support, as a result of the pagoda raids, to move against Diem. *Ibid.* p. 638.

³⁵ McNamara, *In Retrospect*, p. 58.

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McNamara's recollections of this meeting (i.e., the one just prior to Nolting's attendance) were quite accurate as the President's reaction toward Hilsman was noted in the State Department papers.³⁶ President Kennedy was plainly not happy that Nolting was not in attendance and he clearly detected bias on Hilsman's part. Indeed, it was the President's job to uncover why Hilsman would be so adamant about preventing the former, but most recent, Ambassador to South Vietnam from elaborating on his views. In other words, as President, Kennedy had to know what it was that Hilsman and the Harriman group feared in the testimony of Nolting. Unfortunately for the historian, there is no clear indication that this crucial question was ever answered. However, one could interpret, credibly, Kennedy's remarkable vacillation on turning US policy in favour of a coup as a sign that the Nolting testimony had, indeed, given him pause to reflect.

Nolting did attend the next meeting, as previously noted, and he continued to stress that the United States was embarking on a disastrous journey by attempting to overthrow Diem's legitimate government:

During the next couple of weeks, I attended several meetings on Vietnam. At the President's request, I expressed my own convictions, independently of those held by my superiors in the State Department. I felt too strongly to do otherwise. The basic issue was whether the U.S. government should connive to overthrow the Diem government. I argued that it should not. A coup would create a political

Footnotes

³⁶ The official record states the following: "The President stated that there should be another meeting tomorrow to discuss the matter further. Mr. McNamara stated that, as a matter of first priority, we should procure biographical sketches of the key personalities involved, following which General Taylor suggested that we should talk to Ambassador Nolting. The President agreed and stated that Nolting should be brought to the meeting tomorrow, following which Mr. Hilsman commented that Nolting's views are colored, in that he is emotionally involved in the situation. Upon hearing this, the President observed, 'Maybe properly.'" Major General V.H. Krulak (USMC), 289. "Memorandum for the Record of a Meeting at the White House, Washington, August 26, 1963, Noon," [National Defense University, Taylor Papers, Vietnam, chap. XXIII. Top Secret; Sensitive. Drafted by Krulak.] In FRUS: Vietnam, January to August, 1963, Vol. III, p. 641.

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vacuum, encourage the Communists, and wipe out the nine years of relatively successful support we had given South Vietnam - without the use of American combat forces. Furthermore, in supporting a coup, the United States would be doing exactly what President Kennedy had promised President Diem we would not do, namely, interfering in South Vietnam's internal affairs. Our moral commitment, the integrity of the United States, was at stake. Finally, I argued that the generals would be ineffective leaders. They would not gain the support of the South Vietnamese people and would naturally turn to the United States for more and more military help, including, probably, U.S. combat forces. I was appalled that our government would encourage a coup of dissident generals to overthrow their elected government. It was wrong in principle and would, even if successfully executed, have disastrous long-range consequences for the United States as well as for Vietnam.³⁷

Regardless of Nolting's efforts to stay the hand of those who would overthrow Diem's government and, regardless of Kennedy's willingness to listen to him, there was never any evidence presented then or now that the coup 'green light' was 'switched-off' or retracted. In fact, from what can be discerned from a top-secret telegram that Kennedy sent to Lodge on August 29, 1963, Kennedy approved the go-ahead for a coup by the generals:

Top Secret, Eyes Only,

Emergency Personal For The Ambassador From The President - No Department or Other Distribution Whatever

I have approved all the messages you are receiving from others today, and I emphasize that everything in these messages has my full support.

We will do all that we can to help you conclude this operation successfully. Nevertheless, there is one point on my own constitutional responsibilities as President and Commander in Chief which I wish to state to you in this entirely private message, which is not being circulated here beyond the Secretary of State.

Until the very moment of the go signal for the operation by the Generals, I must reserve a contingent right to change course and reverse previous instructions. While fully aware of your assessment of the consequences of such a reversal, I

Footnotes

³⁷ Nolting, From Trust To Tragedy, p. 125.

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know from experience that failure is more destructive than an appearance of indecision. I would, of course, accept full responsibility for any such change as I must bear also the full responsibility for this operation and its consequences. It is for this reason that I count on you for a continuing assessment of the prospects of success and most particularly desire your candid warning if current course begins to sour. When we go, we must go to win, but it will be better to change our minds than fail. And if our national interest should require a change of mind, we must not be afraid of it.³⁸

The Australian, the French, and the Philippines Governments' attempt to warn Kennedy away from a Coup –

In sending such a telegram, as noted in the preceding quotation, Kennedy had not just ignored Colby, Nolting, Taylor and McNamara but, also, the expert opinion of several foreign governments. For example, on August 30, 1963, Ambassador Lodge sent a classified - Secret cable to George Ball at the State Department informing him that the French Ambassador, Roger Lalouette, suggested that Diem was the best Vietnamese leader available. Lalouette pleaded with Lodge to consider the fact that the very heated political climate in Saigon was largely the work of the press and that, indeed, the whole concept of Buddhist suicides was nothing new as they had occurred during the days of French Colonial administration. He asked two things of Lodge in this meeting: 1.) To try to calm American opinion and 2.) No coups.³⁹ In fact, in this overall assessment by Lalouette, it was made plain that a coup would undo much good work:

Footnotes

³⁸ Kennedy had also instructed Lodge, if he chose to reply, to send his answer as "For President Only, Pass White House directly, no other distribution whatever." President John F. Kennedy, "Emergency Personal For The Ambassador From The President No Department or Other Distribution Whatever," pp. 1 – 2 in R621/102.921, Box No.: 26, Professional Papers, file 2 of 3, The Nolting Papers.

³⁹ Henry Cabot Lodge, Control: 2570 "Telegram From the Embassy in Saigon to the State Department," Saigon, August 30, 7 p.m., [Action Department 384 Information CINCPAC Paris 10 From Saigon August 30, 7 p.m., Secret; Limit Distribution.] pp. 1 – 2 in R621/102.921, Box No.26: Box 1 of 3 , Professional Papers, The Nolting Papers.

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Diem has steadfastness and determination which is rare in Asia and is valuable. In many ways he is the best Chief of State in Southeast Asia [my emphasis]. His weakness is that he is not a political leader, cannot make speeches, cultivate the press, etc.,

He is much better off with Nhu than without him. Nhu is efficient and intelligent. The war against the Viet Cong can be won with Diem Administration in office [my emphasis].

The present situation is largely the work of the press [my emphasis], helped greatly by Vietnamese ineptness. In the days of French administration, suicides of Buddhists were very common and had no effect whatever on the population. They create much more excitement abroad than they do in Viet-Nam.

Things are now quieting down. Buddhists are being released, Decree Law No., 10 will be repealed. The pagodas will be repaired at Government expense; a ceremony is planned to be held at the Xa Loi pagoda...In a year or two the guerrilla danger might be ended. The Viet Cong are very discouraged and morale is very low in North Vietnam, concerning which he said [Lalouette] he was well informed inasmuch as the French have a mission there...When I left he said: let me say two things -- First, try to calm American opinion and, second, no coups.⁴⁰

Similar to what the French were saying, a CIA report, dated September 7, 1963, illustrated the strong support that the Philippine government was willing to give to Diem and the GVN. Specifically, the Philippine Foreign Secretary, Lopez, stated that he could foresee a role for the Philippine government acting as an agent for reconciliation between Diem and the United States Government.⁴¹ Lopez, according to the CIA report, had come to understand that the Communist threat was the most important issue in South Vietnam and that, while Diem was

Footnotes

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Reference: 17430; Report No.: TDCS - 3/558,907, Telegram Information Report, Central Intelligence Agency, Classification: Confidential - No Foreign Dissemination, "Philippine Foreign Secretary Lopez' Belief That The Philippines Must Support the United States' Backing of Ngo Dinh Diem as An Anti-Communist Bulwark," September 7, 1963, p.1 in R621/102.921, Box No.: 26, Professional Papers 1963-1982, Box 1 of 3, The Nolting Papers.

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nothing without United States support, without him the United States could not hold back the Communists.⁴² Lopez went on to state that the situation concerned with Buddhists was a South Vietnamese internal matter and that he would not hesitate to back the United States in support of Diem. He indicated that he could arrange for a more sympathetic hearing of Diem's cause by, amongst other things, making public the findings of the Philippine National Intelligence Coordinating Agency which showed that the Buddhist revolt was Communist inspired.⁴³

The Australian Government's position was remarkably similar to the Philippines' one. A telegram sent from the American Embassy in Canberra to the Secretary of State in Washington spelled out the Australian First Assistant Secretary's (Waller) position on Diem and the GVN and this position was endorsed by the Minister for Foreign Affairs Barwick.⁴⁴ The Australian Government's policy was, essentially, that there was no alternative to Diem and that the regime was by no means beyond constructive influence. Moreover, the Australians held that the radical Buddhists had 'shot their bolt' for the time being and that the crisis had calmed down somewhat.⁴⁵ The Australians were hopeful that the calm would allow the fight to be refocused on the Communists.⁴⁶ The Australian position was echoed by the British Ambassador to South

Footnotes

⁴² *ibid.*

⁴³ *ibid.* pp. 1 - 2.

⁴⁴ Incoming Telegram - Department of State, From: Canberra, To: The Secretary of State, "225. Government of Australia Policy Statement on Diem and GVN," September 10, 1963, 5 p.m., [Confidential], p. 1 in R621/102.921, Box No.: 26, Professional Papers 1963-1982, Box 1 of 3, The Nolting Papers.

⁴⁵ *ibid.*

⁴⁶ *ibid.*

Vietnam, Etherington-Smith, as noted by Lodge in a cable he sent to Washington on September 11, 1963 at 7 p.m.⁴⁷

On the general situation, Etherington-Smith thinks that the Diem Govt. has overcome the Buddhist problem and is strongly in the saddle and that apparently nothing much can be gained by trying to bring about a change...in other words, attempts to get another govt. will probably fail and therefore should not be undertaken...⁴⁸

Anne Blair asks the basic question in her research: how did Kennedy become so divorced from the expert opinion of what was really going on in Saigon so as to, eventually, get behind a coup signal? Her answer coincides, for the most part, with what Nolting and Colby have stated on the whole matter and, indeed, what has been shown in the body of this work. She identified the power of the Halberstam-Sheehan group to draw attention to the whole Buddhist crisis at Kennedy's political expense:

By their own admission, they had taken up the story of a developing dispute between Diem and various Buddhist groups as a vehicle for writing about the political situation in South Vietnam with the quite conscious motive of promoting a coup against Diem. The Halberstam-Sheehan group made the 'Buddhist Crisis' story their own; their copy was the basis for almost all the reports that appeared in major American daily newspapers and weekly magazines such as Time and Newsweek. The group's promotion of the story put Vietnam on front pages for several weeks, prompting many editorials and readers' letters abhorring U.S. support of Diem. This development threatened to open up public debate on the conduct of the war that Kennedy wished to avoid.⁴⁹

Footnotes

⁴⁷ Henry Cabot Lodge, "484. Telegram From The Embassy in Vietnam to The Department of State, " September 11, 1963, 7 p.m., [Secret], p. 1 in R621/102.921, Box No.: 26, Professional Papers 1963-1982, Box 1 of 3, The Nolting Papers.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ Blair, Lodge in Vietnam, p. 13.

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According to Anne Blair's research, Kennedy was so driven by domestic concerns related to bad publicity over Diem and South Vietnam that he made himself prey to a very flawed and inexperienced group (with regard to what was really going on in South Vietnam) headed by the powerful Averell Harriman. In turn, these [domestic concern] 'blinkers' prevented him from seeing or hearing what the real experts were pointing out, i.e., to stay the course with Ngo Dinh Diem.

From South Vietnam, Gen. Paul Harkins and John Richardson, head of the CIA station in Saigon, advocated continued support of Diem...the voices most often raised in criticism of Diem were those of Averell Harriman, Roger Hilsman, and Michael Forrestal...During the summer of 1963, Kennedy seems to have conceptualized Vietnam as a political and public relations issue rather than a war. He consulted only with a select few from State, especially Harriman and Hilsman. Representatives of the Defense Department, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the CIA were not included in these discussions. As a result, William Bundy recorded, these principals did not know the thinking of Harriman, Hilsman, Kennedy, and Lodge on the political situation in Saigon.

If Kennedy's bypassing key representatives of the National Security Council on Vietnam policy seems grave enough, there was yet another twist. In effect, the Department of State team had also cut themselves off from those officials most in a position to advise them on how to deal with Diem and his family. Two of these men were John Richardson of the CIA, whose special job it was to liaise with Ngo Dinh Nhu, and William Colby, then chief of the Far Eastern Division of the CIA in Washington and formerly head of the agency in Saigon.... As the incumbent ambassador, Nolting was not informed of the adverse Hilsman-Forrestal report of January on Diem and the U.S. mission. He learned that he was to be replaced by Lodge only weeks before the event, when he picked up a newscast on ship's radio while touring in the Mediterranean...he had been prevented from counselling Diem when the Vietnamese leader most needed his advice.⁵⁰

Footnotes

⁵⁰ *ibid.* pp. 16 - 17.

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Frederick Nolting puts up a Valiant Defence of Diem and Nhu at the White House –

Regardless of how others in Washington acted at this time, Nolting had made it plain to President Kennedy that Diem's GVN was worth saving and that the Buddhist Crisis was about politics and not religion. As such, the reader needs to consider the high-level meeting, which took place at the White House on August 27, 1963, at 4:00 p.m. The President was in attendance and so were all those who had wanted to see a fundamental change in US policy toward South Vietnam and, also, those who wanted to hold the line.⁵¹ It was at this conference that Nolting began his desperate Washington-based campaign to stop the Harriman faction from forcing a change in US policy that would favour a coup. President Kennedy asked Nolting questions on specific and pertinent points directly, for example, he asked why President Diem's raids on the pagodas did not upset the rural peasants in South Vietnam.⁵² Nolting, quite accurately, responded with the truth: that the Buddhists were not the organised religious force that they had been made out to be by the news media and that they had no real base of support amongst the average Vietnamese peasant.⁵³ Of course, this was exactly what any of the experts, who had spent years in Vietnam already knew, from Paul Mus through to Dr. Ellen Hammer. Yet

Footnotes

⁵¹ These individuals included The President of the United States - John F. Kennedy, Secretary of State Rusk, Under Secretary Ball, Secretary of Defense McNamara, Deputy Secretary Gilpatric, Attorney General Robert Kennedy, General Taylor, General Carter, Director Murrow, Ambassador Nolting, General Krulak, Assistant Secretary Hilsman, Mr. Helms, Mr. Colby, Mr. McGeorge Bundy, Mr. Forrestal, and Mr. Bromley Smith. Notably, Averell Harriman was missing from this meeting, however, he had strong representation from Hilsman, Forrestal and Under Secretary Ball. Bromley Smith drafted the minutes of this meeting, "Memorandum of Conference With The President," August 27, 1963 --- 4:00 p.m., Subject: Vietnam, [Kennedy Library, National Security Files, Meetings and Memoranda, Meetings on Vietnam, Top Secret, Vol.1, Box 316]. This copy appears in the Nolting Paper's with Nolting's handwriting in the margins. p. 1 in R621/102.921, Box No.: 26, Professional Papers, file 2 of 3, The Nolting Papers.

⁵² *Ibid.* p. 2.

⁵³ *Ibid.* pp. 2 - 3.

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Kennedy gave no indication that he had come to the conclusion that the information he had been receiving from the Harriman group and The New York Times was, in fact, distorted. President Kennedy then raised the issue about why Diem had lashed out at the pagodas when he had given his assurance to Nolting that he was on a course of conciliation with the radical Buddhists. Nolting explained that Diem had, in fact, been true to his word up until the point where national security concerns had become overwhelming. His generals had started raising serious security concerns with regard to what was going on in the pagodas and with regard to the effect that the Buddhist crisis was having on the real war against the Communist Viet Cong.⁵⁴ Ambassador Nolting also told the President that he believed the final push toward hitting the pagodas may have come from Madame Nhu. She had made public attacks on the Buddhists, which made Diem's policy of conciliation very difficult, as the radical bonzes no longer wanted to communicate with Diem or the GVN.⁵⁵ President Kennedy then asked Nolting about the place of Madame Nhu and just what her authority was - the implications were obvious: that they had to remove Madame Nhu from access to power. But Nolting countered this direction by informing the President that the situation was a lot more delicate than it might appear to be. Nolting, with accurate testimony, defended Ngo Dinh Nhu as the driving force, spiritually and intellectually, behind the successful strategic hamlets program. He countered the rumours that had been running around Washington, i.e., that Nhu was going to overthrow Diem, by stating, quite accurately, that Diem and Nhu were absolutely loyal to each other. Furthermore, he predicted, uncannily, precisely what would happen if a successful coup ousted Diem or Nhu from power:

Footnotes

⁵⁴ Ibid. p. 3.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

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that if the generals moved against Nhu then Diem would go down with him.⁵⁶ In this regard, Nolting warned the President that Diem and Nhu were inseparable⁵⁷ and that, by themselves, the generals in the ARVN did not have the 'guts' to move against the brothers and that military support did not exist for a coup. Again, with an uncanny precision, Nolting outlined the fact that there was one specific set of circumstances wherein the generals would move against Diem and that was if they believed that they had the support of the United States government. With this caveat Nolting had placed the responsibility for a coup where it properly belonged: with President Kennedy and his administration.⁵⁸

President Kennedy indicated that he had a certain sympathy toward what Nolting had to say on the situation in Saigon - as most of this meeting took place in conversation between Kennedy and Nolting even though there were many high-powered Washington officials, including Dean Rusk and Robert McNamara in attendance.⁵⁹ Kennedy asked Nolting for his overall assessment of the situation and what should be done vis-à-vis US policy direction in South Vietnam. Nolting gave the US President his overall considerations which reflected what he had always argued for: continuity of policy, steadiness, support for Diem and basically to weather the media storm in as calm a manner as possible. The one caution that this writer would

Footnotes

⁵⁶ Ibid. p. 4.

⁵⁷ Nolting told Kennedy that the Ngo Dinh brothers were like Siamese twins who could not be forced apart. He also warned Kennedy that the generals, while they feared Nhu and might actually rally to a coup against him, would be reluctant to move against Diem because of his great stature amongst the Vietnamese as a true leader. Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Robert McNamara had picked up on this understanding of Kennedy's. McNamara, In Retrospect, p. 58.

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ask the reader to bear in mind with regard to this conference is that nearly a page and a half of what Nolting told the President has been erased from the record because of its classified nature.

Ambassador Nolting recalled that the circle had nearly been completed in a three year period. Ambassador Durbrow had told Diem three years ago that Nhu must go. Diem refused to accept the suggestion and Durbrow was removed from Vietnam. (The President recognized the irony of the situation by smiling.) Ambassador Nolting said we should not fight the internal political situation in Vietnam too hard. He urged that we keep our eye on fighting the Viet Cong. In his view, newspaper pressure cannot clean up the messy internal politics of Vietnam which will be with us for a long time.

The President asked whether Ambassador Nolting agreed that Diem's actions in the last few months would prevent him from carrying forward the war against the Communists. Ambassador Nolting responded that he thought we should take it slow and easy over the next several weeks. It is possible that the brutal surgical operation may succeed as Diem and Nhu have predicted. We will take our lumps because of the actions of Diem and Nhu, but if they succeed, we will have preserved a base for the fight against the Viet Cong.⁶⁰

Nolting attended White House conference after White House conference and his stalwart argument for staying the course always remained the same. However, as time went on and the ascendancy of the Harriman group's sway over the President became manifest, his arguments became more desperate, to the point of allowing that Nhu should be cut-loose from Diem and the GVN.⁶¹ The fundamentals of the history of Nolting's desperate fight in Washington to preserve

Footnotes

⁶⁰ Drafted by Bromley Smith, "Memorandum of Conference with The President," August 27, 1963 --- 4:00 PM, Subject: Vietnam, [Kennedy Library, National Security Files, Meetings and Memoranda, Meetings on Vietnam, Top Secret, Vol.1, Box 316]. This copy appears in the Nolting Paper's with Nolting's handwriting in the margins. p. 5 in R621/102.921, Box No.: 26, Professional Papers, file 2 of 3, The Nolting Papers.

⁶¹ Robert McNamara recalled, in his memoirs, how Nolting put up a stalwart defence against the coup direction being advocated by Harriman et al.: "Nolting expressed grave doubts about moving against Diem. He said we could not assume a new government would be any easier to deal with or provide a stronger base on which to prosecute the war. George [Ball] dismissed that, arguing we could not win the war with Diem in power and, therefore, must throw him out. Averell Harriman agreed, saying we had lost

Footnote continued on next page: ...

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a stable policy for the United States in South Vietnam and to preserve the only legitimate leader of South Vietnam - Ngo Dinh Diem - can be traced and illustrated through a series of memoranda of conferences he was asked to attend at the White House.

On August 28, 1963, Nolting attended a meeting with President Kennedy at the White House and, while he had the support of Vice President Johnson,⁶² William Colby, General Taylor, and General Krulak, he also had to contend with Ball, Harriman, Hilsman, and Forrestal.⁶³ Significantly, and this lends weight to Nolting's claim that Dean Rusk abandoned Far East Policy to Harriman, the Secretary of State was not at this meeting while the Secretary of Defense was. Nolting told the President that he was sure that Diem and Nhu were aware of the US Government's complicity with the generals in planning a potential coup.⁶⁴ Then, when queried by the President, Ambassador Nolting proceeded to point out, once again, the relevant issues and problems with the US going back on its agreements with Diem.

Further encouragement to the generals opposing Diem runs counter to our agreement on continuing economic assistance which we reached with Diem
...footnote continued from previous page:

the fight in Vietnam and would have to withdraw if a coup did not occur. Hilsman added there was no stopping the generals now.

Nolting then repeated a fundamental question we had raised before but never fully explored or answered. What condition would South Vietnam be in if a coup succeeded? Hilsman admitted we had little insight into how the generals planned to run the country if they took control. Nolting said only Diem could hold the fragmented country together.... But Harkins wanted to try to detach the Nhus from Diem, and Nolting agreed." McNamara, In Retrospect, pp. 59 - 60.

⁶² Johnson, as previously noted, had been instructed by Kennedy that, though he could attend and listen in on these important meetings, he was not allowed to interfere or even express his opinion in any persuasive manner.

⁶³ Drafted by Bromley Smith, I. "Memorandum of a Conference With the President, White House, Washington, August 28, 1963, Noon," [Kennedy Library, National Security Files, Meetings and Memoranda Series Meetings on Vietnam. Top Secret.] In FRUS: Vietnam, August - December 1963, Volume IV, 1961 - 1963; John P. Glennon, editor in chief, (Washington, [DC]: United States Government Printing Office, 1991), p. 1.

⁶⁴ Ibid. p. 2.

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*some time ago. Diem foresaw at that time a disagreement with the U.S. about how they were running the internal affairs of Vietnam. Nolting said he had grave reservations about proceeding against Diem. The good faith of the U.S. is involved. In addition, he had given personal commitments to Diem which were based on instructions sent to him from Washington when he was Ambassador. We should not support a coup in the expectation that we can get another government which we can deal with and a base on which we can win the war against the Viet Cong. Supporting a coup is bad in principle and sets a bad precedent.*⁶⁵

As the meeting progressed, it became more heated as Ball rounded on Nolting claiming, falsely, that Diem was breaking his promise of 'good faith' to the U.S. and Harriman immediately lent his support to this.⁶⁶ Harriman proceeded from this point with the kind of nastiness he normally let Hilsman demonstrate,⁶⁷ as he claimed that the US would lose Vietnam if the proposed coup against Diem failed. With incredible arrogance, Harriman stated that the US had set Diem up in power and now that he had double-crossed them, they had the right to remove him from power.⁶⁸ Hilsman seconded this arrogant distortion of Harriman's. Nolting stuck by his position steadfastly, claiming that the Kennedy Administration had no way of telling what they were opening themselves up to if a coup succeeded. He further insisted that Diem was the only South Vietnamese leader who could hold such a fragmented country together; it was at this point that Harriman exploded in rage against Nolting:

Footnotes

⁶⁵ *Ibid.* p. 3.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.* p. 4.

⁶⁷ Harriman and Hilsman had a kind of 'tag-team' approach wherein, normally, Hilsman would be the 'bad-cop' while Harriman played 'good-cop', however, owing to the opposition that Nolting was stirring up against their planned direction for US policy in Southeast Asia, Harriman abandoned all theatrics and revealed a very nasty and vindictive side to his character as these meetings progressed.

⁶⁸ Drafted by Bromley Smith, 1. "Memorandum of a Conference With the President, White House, Washington, August 28, 1963, Noon," [Kennedy Library, National Security Files, Meetings and Memoranda Series Meetings on Vietnam. Top Secret.] In FRUS: Vietnam, August - December 1963, Vol. IV, p. 5.

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"Mr. Nolting again intervened saying that he profoundly felt that only Diem could hold this fragmented country together.

The President said, 'Even with the Nhus?' Nolting replied that he thought President Diem could be persuaded to remove Madame Nhu from the scene and at least to make brother Nhu less conspicuous..."With some heat Mr. Harriman said that he had disagreed with Mr. Nolting from the beginning when he first assumed office as Assistant Secretary; that he felt he was profoundly wrong about this; and that he was sorry to have to be so blunt about saying so.

"Mr. Hilsman said that he wished to associate himself with Mr. Ball and Mr. Harriman... [my emphasis]"⁶⁹

Years later, in Robert Kennedy's biography entitled: Robert Kennedy and His Times, Roswell Gilpatric told the Kennedy biographer that he could not remember when anyone had suffered such abuse in front of the President the way Nolting had at the hand of Harriman. He also noted that the President seemed to allow from Harriman what he would not allow from any one else.⁷⁰

On August 29, 1963, Ambassador Lodge sent his now infamous cable wherein he declared: "We are launched on a course from which there is no respectable turning back: The overthrow of the Diem Government."⁷¹ It should be noted that statements like this make it clear that Lodge's position as a credible diplomat was suspect right from the beginning as he had made

Footnotes

⁶⁹ Drafted by Bromley Smith, 1. "Memorandum of a Conference With the President, White House, Washington, August 28, 1963, Noon," [Kennedy Library, National Security Files, Meetings and Memoranda Series Meetings on Vietnam. Top Secret.] In FRUS: Vietnam, August - December 1963, Vol. IV, pp. 8 - 9. (Editorial Note found on pp. 6 through 9 of this document.)

⁷⁰ Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., Robert Kennedy and His Times, Volume II, (Boston, [Ma.]: The Houghton Mifflin Company, 1978), p. 747.

⁷¹ Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge, 12. "(375. CINCPAC exclusive for Felt.) Telegram From the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State," Saigon, August 29, 1963 - 6 p.m., [Department of State, Central Files, POL 26 S Viet. Top Secret. Emergency; Eyes Only.] In FRUS: Vietnam, August - December 1963, Vol. IV, p. 21.

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no effort to talk to Diem before embarking on coup planning.⁷² On this same date, the White House drafted a Top Secret, Eyes Only - cable, which was approved by the President, Secretary Rusk, and Hilsman. The cable informed Lodge that: **“The USG will support a coup which has a good chance of succeeding but plans no direct involvement of U.S. Armed Forces [my emphasis].”**⁷³ Essentially, this telegram was ‘fleshing-out’ what had been hinted at in another cable Kennedy had sent to Lodge on that same day.⁷⁴ Nevertheless, Nolting continued to push for exactly what Lodge had claimed that there was no turning back from. Related to this, there is

Footnotes

⁷² In this context, McNamara recalled how Nolting’s suspicions were aroused over how Lodge was behaving, right from the outset, in Saigon: “Nolting pointed out that Lodge still had not had a substantive talk with Diem. What Nolting did not say - but I suspect knew - was that Lodge did not want such a meeting and that his superiors at the State Department had not ordered him to arrange it.” McNamara, *In Retrospect*, p. 60.

⁷³ Drafted at the White House, 272. “Amembassy Saigon, Emergency, Top Secret Eyes Only For Ambassador Lodge & General Harkins,” August 29, 1963, - 5:03 p.m., [Cleared by the President, Rusk, and Hilsman], p. 1 in R621/102.921, Box Number: 26, Professional Papers, 1963 - 1982, Box 1 of 3, The Nolting Papers.

⁷⁴ This other, more general, coup-supporting cable is designated earlier in this chapter as footnote #: 38. President John F. Kennedy, “Emergency Personal For The Ambassador From The President No Department or Other Distribution Whatever,” pp. 1 – 2 in R621/102.921, Box No.: 26, Professional Papers, file 2 of 3, The Nolting Papers.

The same telegram can be read as 18. “Message From the President to the Ambassador in Vietnam (Lodge).” Washington, August 29, 1963. [Source: Kennedy Library, President’s Office Files, Staff Memorandum, MG Bundy. Transmitted in telegram CAP 63465 with the notations: “Personal for the Ambassador from the President” and “No Department or other distribution whatever”. The source text is a copy that Bundy sent to Clifton under cover of a Top Secret Eyes Only memorandum of August 30, which reads as follows:

‘The enclosed envelope should be opened by the President only, and when he has read the message it contains you should destroy them. The reason for this extraordinary procedure is that these messages are not in the normal series and their existence is not known except to the President and the Secretary of State, so I do not want them in a message file that may be seen by others who believe themselves privy to the most classified material. You should tell the President, however, that I discussed the outgoing message in draft with the Secretaries of State and Defense who concurred in it. The Secretary of Defense in particular thought it was a wise and necessary cable.] In FRUS: Vietnam, August – December, 1963, Vol. IV, pp. 35 – 36.

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no record that this writer has seen which would indicate that Nolting was fully aware of the salient points of this last State Department cable. It was almost as if Nolting was now striving against the State Department and the White House to a certain extent. Accordingly, at another White House meeting, held on August 29, 1963, Nolting relentlessly drove home his caveats. He argued that Diem was firmly in control of the government, working his usual eighteen-hour days, and that it was still not really clear whether the generals wanted to get rid of both him and Nhu. Desperately he added that if the Nhus had to go, the US could certainly live with a new government headed by Diem.⁷⁵

At these White House meetings President Kennedy's tone was one of query. He certainly gave the impression to those in attendance that he was not sure about the whole coup enterprise. There is little doubt that Nolting had picked up on this, as he noted years later, in his memoirs: "President Kennedy seemed doubtful of the wisdom of a coup, but unsure as to what he could do. He had two powerful politicians to deal with, Harriman and Lodge. Both seemed determined to bring Diem to his knees. The young President cannot have relished his position. He called on many people for their opinions."⁷⁶ Nolting, of course, was having his own difficulties with Averell Harriman who was becoming ruder and more arrogant in his treatment of the former ambassador as the White House and Security Council meetings proceeded:

Once, during a National Security Council meeting, Harriman shouted [at Nolting], "Shut up! We've heard you before!" President Kennedy intervened to say that he wanted to hear what I was saying. Harriman's rudeness did not

Footnotes

⁷⁵ Drafted by Bromley Smith, 15. "Memorandum of a Conference With the President, White House, Washington, August 29, 1963, Noon," [Kennedy Library, National Security Files, Meetings and Memoranda Series Meetings on Vietnam. Top Secret.] In FRUS: Vietnam, August - December 1963, Vol. IV, pp. 27 & 31.

⁷⁶ Nolting, From Trust To Tragedy, p. 127.

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surprise me. I had encountered it before in his office, on my first day back in Washington.

The last time I had seen Harriman before that was when he came to Saigon in 1961 to demand that President Diem sign the Laos accords. He had stayed with us and, despite our disagreements about the terms of the Laotian treaty, he was a courteous and pleasant houseguest. My family and I enjoyed his company and his confidence. Now the change was personal and vindictive. Some incidents were so petty as to be almost laughable.

When I was present at a National Security Council or Special Group meeting on Vietnam, it was always at the President's invitation, never at the State Department's behest. Either Robert Kennedy or General Clifton would call to say that the President wanted me to attend a particular meeting. Once, after receiving an invitation on short notice, I tried to get a ride to the White House with Rusk and Harriman. Going down to the basement where the official cars were parked, I waited with the chauffeur, whom I knew from years before. When Rusk and Harriman arrived, Harriman said, "What are you doing here?" "I'm going to the White House meeting," I said, "if you'll give me a ride." "Well, nobody's asked you." Yes, I informed them, the President had. So they indicated the front seat and promptly put up the glass partition between the front and back seats. The only difference this made was that the chauffeur and I had a more pleasant conversation than I would have had otherwise."⁷⁷

At a State Department meeting, held on August 30, 1963, Nolting continued the difficult process of defending Nhu - as the South Vietnamese President's brother was being vilified at a rate that was increasing exponentially in scope and vindictiveness. This malice against Nhu had taken on a vehemence well beyond what was required to have him perceived as an individual who could not continue to serve in a GVN which received US funding and support. The concern was raised whether or not Nhu was going to 'sell-out' to North Vietnam. Nolting addressed this critical issue by stating that, while Nhu was 'shifty', he was committed to an anti-Communist course and, if anything, would probably bring the US into even harder confrontation with the Communists in North Vietnam and China. Nhu, regardless of the State Department and David

Footnotes

⁷⁷ *ibid.* pp. 128 - 129.

Halberstam's desires to assassinate his character by attacking his anti-Communist credentials, was no 'Comm-Symp.'⁷⁸

During the above noted meeting, when the discussion turned to coup-plotting, the Secretary of Defense, Robert McNamara, came to Nolting's aid. The Secretary held the Vietnamese generals in contempt and he told all present as much when he stated "...that in his opinion the Generals [i.e., the coup-plotters] didn't have a plan and never did, contrary to their assurances."⁷⁹ A day later, in yet another high-level State Department meeting concerned with the fate of Diem and Nhu, McNamara argued yet again in defence of the Nolting position when he stressed that the US had to find a way to help Diem against the Viet Cong. As such, he was recorded stating: "We need to reopen communications with Diem to get his ideas about what comes next. He said that part of the problem was the press..."⁸⁰ Further on in this same meeting, when Mr. Kattenburg [Department of State] tried to condemn Diem as a petty tyrant who was alienating the people of South Vietnam, Nolting corrected him by pointing out that political discontent, directed against Diem, was confined to the cities which accommodated only 15 percent of South Vietnam's population.⁸¹ Oddly enough, at this point in the meeting, Secretary

Footnotes

⁷⁸ Drafted by Hilsman. 26. "Memorandum of a Conversation, Department of State, Washington, August 30, 1963, 2:30 p.m.," [Kennedy Library, Hilsman Papers, Countries Series - Vietnam, White House Meetings, State memcons. Top Secret; Eyes only; No Distribution.] In FRUS: Vietnam, August - December 1963, Vol. IV, p. 54.

⁷⁹ Ibid. p. 55.

⁸⁰ Drafted by Hilsman. 37. "Memorandum of a Conversation, Department of State, Washington, August 31, 1963, 11:00 a.m.," [Kennedy Library, Hilsman Papers, White House Meetings, State memcons. Top Secret; Eyes only; No Distribution. Krulak's memorandum of this meeting is printed in United States - Vietnam Relations, 1945 - 1967, Book 12, pp. 540 - 544.] In FRUS: Vietnam, August - December 1963, Vol. IV, p. 73.

⁸¹ Ibid. p. 74.

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Rusk swung his support behind Nolting, taking exception with Kattenburg, in front of Roger Hilsman, over the fact that he (Kattenburg) was speculating about the people being against Diem. Rusk stated that during the first six months of the year steady progress had been made and that the attempt should be made to recover this position.⁸² At this juncture, Vice President Johnson came rounding in with his support for Diem:

The Vice President stated that he had not known of U.S. actions taken last Saturday (i.e., Hilsman's cable to Lodge endorsing coup proceedings) until the following Tuesday meeting. He had never been sympathetic with our proposal to produce a change of governments in Vietnam by means of plotting with Vietnamese generals...he thought we ought to re-establish ties to the Diem government as quickly as possible and get forward with the war against the Viet Cong.⁸³

The Vice President could not resist the opportunity to express his famous Texas humour at this point and thus he stated: "...certainly there were bad situations in South Viet-Nam. However, there were bad situations in the U.S. It was difficult to live with Otto Passman, but we couldn't pull a coup on him."⁸⁴

Footnotes

⁸² ibid.

⁸³ Footnote # 7 attached to Hilsman's. 37. "Memorandum of a Conversation, Department of State, Washington, August 31, 1963, 11:00 a.m.," [Kennedy Library, Hilsman Papers, White House Meetings, State memcons. Top Secret; Eyes only; No Distribution. Krulak's memorandum of this meeting is printed in United States – Vietnam Relations, 1945 – 1967, Book 12, pp. 540 – 544.] In FRUS: Vietnam, August - December 1963, Vol. IV, p. 74.

⁸⁴ Drafted by Hilsman. 37. "Memorandum of a Conversation, Department of State, Washington, August 31, 1963, 11:00 a.m.," [Kennedy Library, Hilsman Papers, White House Meetings, State memcons. Top Secret; Eyes only; No Distribution. Krulak's memorandum of this meeting is printed in United States – Vietnam Relations, 1945 – 1967, Book 12, pp. 540 – 544.] In FRUS: Vietnam, August - December 1963, Vol. IV, p. 74.

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In another last-ditch effort to salvage what was left of a positive US policy toward Diem, Nolting told the President, at a meeting at the White House on September 6, 1963, not to use any more pressure tactics on Diem as they would most likely trigger an “unfortunate reaction.” The President then asked him if the American minimum requirement should be the removal of Nhu to which Nolting replied that, for the sake of US public opinion, Nhu would have to go. Having stated this, Nolting was quick to point out that the removal of Nhu would be a loss for Vietnam, a loss that was difficult to justify even if there was a corresponding gain in US public opinion for the administration.⁸⁵ On September 10, 1963, another White House meeting took place wherein General Krulak (USMC) and Mr. Mendenhall gave their two reports on their recent visits to Vietnam;⁸⁶ Ambassador Nolting was in attendance. The two vastly different reports, Mendenhall’s focusing on political intrigue in Saigon as opposed to Krulak’s focus on the overall national picture and counter-insurgent efforts, prompted Kennedy to ask: “The two of you did visit the same country, didn’t you?”⁸⁷ Mendenhall’s report, amongst other things, was strongly anti-Diem while Krulak’s report stated that progress in defeating the Viet Cong was tangible. General Krulak noted that, while there was still a lot of war left to fight, “...the Viet Cong war

Footnotes

⁸⁵ Bromley Smith, 66. “Memorandum of a Conference With the President, White House, Washington, September 6, 1963, 10:30 a.m.,” [Kennedy Library, National Security Files Meetings and Memoranda. Secret.] In FRUS: Vietnam, August - December 1963, Vol. IV, p. 120.

⁸⁶ Joseph A. Mendenhall was Counsellor for Political Affairs in Vietnam and Chairman of the Country Team Staff Committee. In June of 1963 Mendenhall became the State Department’s United Nations Adviser in the Bureau of Far Eastern Affairs. John P. Glennon, editor in chief, “List of Persons,” in FRUS: Vietnam, August - December 1963, Vol. IV, p. XXIII.

⁸⁷ Roger Hilsman, 83. “Memorandum of a Conversation, White House, Washington, September 10, 1963, 10:30 a.m.,” [Kennedy Library, Hilsman Papers, Countries Series - Vietnam, White House Meetings, State memcons. Top Secret; Eyes Only. Drafted by Hilsman.] In FRUS: Vietnam, August - December 1963, Vol. IV, p. 162.

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will be won if the current U.S. military and sociological programs are pursued...”⁸⁸ Again, his message to the President was unmistakable: i.e., stay the course. Nolting liked what he heard from Krulak and he only interrupted the meeting after a certain Mr. Rufus Phillips of the CIA,⁸⁹ put forward various scenarios and intrigues through which Nhu and Colonel Tung of the Special Forces could be discredited and removed from power.⁹⁰ Nolting interjected at this point with a query as to just what the results would be from Phillips’ intrigues if they were allowed to be put into effect: “...military action against the Nhus? Military action against the government? ...Civil war?”⁹¹ Dissuaded from pursuing this line by Nolting, Phillips tried another avenue to criticise the Diem government at this crucial meeting; he claimed that the strategic hamlets were “...being chewed to pieces by the Viet Cong [in the Delta region].”⁹² Hilsman, who was duly taking notes of this meeting, recalled that it was at this point that General Krulak took Phillips to task. Krulak told the President that Phillips was staking his judgement against General Harkins and that he, Krulak, would place greater weight with Harkins’ professional military analysis which stated that the war was not being lost. In Footnote # 6, attached to the minutes of the record from this

Footnotes

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ This writer has met Rufus Phillips at a conference given at the LBJ Library in 1993 and can attest to Phillips’ penchant for intrigues.

⁹⁰ It was odd that Phillips was so ready to discredit and abandon Colonel Tung, a man for whom William Colby had the utmost respect. This, of course, would lead one to make the educated guess that the CIA was as divided as the State Department over the whole issue of how to deal with the GVN.

⁹¹ Roger Hilsman, 83. “Memorandum of a Conversation, White House, Washington, September 10, 1963, 10:30 a.m.,” [Kennedy Library, Hilsman Papers, Countries Series - Vietnam, White House Meetings, State memcons. Top Secret; Eyes Only. Drafted by Hilsman.] In FRUS: Vietnam, August - December 1963, Vol. IV, pp. 163 - 164.

⁹² *Ibid.* p. 165.

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meeting (kept by Roger Hilsman), Krulak's personal account was given; he was very straightforward with the President over this issue:

"Mr. Bell then introduced Mr. Rufus Phillips, who gave a gloomy picture, stating that we were indeed losing the war, that in the Delta things were in a tragic state, that in Long An province, for example, 60% of the strategic hamlets had been overrun and that, contrary to what I had said, the military campaign was not going forward satisfactorily.

*The President asked if I cared to make a comment regarding Mr. Phillips' statement that we were losing the war militarily. I told him that my statement respecting military progress had its origins in a reservoir of many advisors who were doing nothing other than observe the prosecution of the war; that their view was shared and expressed officially by General Harkins and, as between General Harkins and Mr. Phillips, I would take General Harkins' assessment."*⁹³

By this time, owing to his continual defence of Ngo Dinh Diem and the original US policy, which promised not to interfere in the internal politics of South Vietnam, Nolting was making himself 'persona non grata' within the administration of President Kennedy regardless of his well-mannered approach.⁹⁴ As such, he was invited to fewer and fewer meetings, particularly in his home department, the Department of State. In this context it is important for the reader to

Footnotes

⁹³ General Krulak's personal recollection of this meeting with the President is attached as Footnote # 6 to Roger Hilsman's, 83. "Memorandum of a Conversation, White House, Washington, September 10, 1963, 10:30 a.m.," [Kennedy Library, Hilsman Papers, Countries Series - Vietnam, White House Meetings, State memcons. Top Secret; Eyes Only. Drafted by Hilsman.] In FRUS: Vietnam, August - December 1963, Vol. IV, p. 165.

⁹⁴ The very persuasive and powerful Senator Frank Church took Hilsman to task over why the US had not made an international public statement condemning Diem for religious persecution to which Hilsman replied: "...that Nolting and Maggie Higgins have insisted that there is no religious persecution. But, however, he [Hilsman] said that he could assist Senator Church with the language." Drafted by Roger Hilsman, 84. "Memorandum of a Telephone Conversation Between the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs (Hilsman) and Senator Frank Church, Washington, September 10, 1963, 11:55 a.m.," [Kennedy Library, Hilsman Papers, Memoranda of Conversations.] In FRUS: Vietnam, August - December 1963, Vol. IV, p. 168.

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note that a meeting of some substance took place at the State Department on September 10, 1963, to which Nolting was not invited. Secretary McNamara, Attorney General Robert Kennedy, CIA Director John McCone, Under Secretary Harriman, Director Bell, Director Murrow, General Taylor, General Krulak, Deputy Secretary Gilpatric, Assistant Secretary Hilsman, Mr. Colby, Mr. Phillips (AID), Mr. Janow (AID), Mr. Bundy, Mr. Sorensen, Mr. Forrestal, Mr. Bromley Smith were all in attendance while Nolting was conspicuously absent.⁹⁵

This meeting revealed the depth of antagonism that had grown between the supporters of Diem and the Harriman faction within Kennedy's Administration. Of particular relevance to what Nolting had always drawn attention was the fact that the debate stormed around the issue of just what US policy had become toward South Vietnam. The problems really became apparent when Robert Kennedy stated that they all agreed that the war would go better without Nhu and Diem. Secretary McNamara immediately responded by stating that he believed the current redirection of US policy (i.e., Harriman's redirection) was not viable.⁹⁶ This stance of McNamara's caused Harriman to defend his redirection of policy in a very blunt fashion and actually claim it as the President's policy which, considering the explicit statement of policy Kennedy had given to Nolting to pass on to assure Diem, was not accurate. If Harriman had been more forthright he would have declared that the policy he had been advocating, the removal of Diem, was being acquiesced in by the President by virtue of the fact that all other considerations were being destroyed by himself, Hilsman, and Lodge.

Footnotes

⁹⁵ Drafted by Bromley Smith. 85. "Memorandum of a Conversation, Department of State, Washington, September 10, 1963, 5:45 p.m.," [Kennedy Library, National Security Files, Meetings and Memoranda Series, Meetings on Vietnam. Top Secret.] In Foreign Relations of The United States, Vietnam: August - December 1963, Vol. IV, p. 169.

⁹⁶ Ibid. pp. 169 - 170.

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Secretary McNamara thought we ought to try to change Diem's policies. He believed our present policy was not viable [i.e., the Harriman inspired policy]. He thought that we had been trying to overthrow Diem, but we had no alternative to Diem that we knew about. Therefore, we were making it impossible to continue to work with Diem on the one hand and, on the other, not developing an alternative solution. He felt that we should go back to what we were doing three weeks ago.

Under Secretary Harriman stated his flat disagreement. He said Diem had created a situation where we cannot back him...Mr. Harriman reminded the group that the policy of the U.S. was as stated by the President and that he agreed with it fully. He did not believe we should discuss changing the policy.

Secretary McNamara and Mr. Bundy disagreed and felt that the group had an obligation to the President to review the policy in the light of the developing situation. Mr. Harriman and Secretary McNamara disagreed as to whether we could or could not achieve our objectives in Vietnam with Diem in control.⁹⁷

The best weapon in Harriman's arsenal for counter-attacking any assault on his redirection of US policy was the whole Buddhist issue. With some posturing and with a sanctimony that was startling considering his worldly reputation, Harriman argued that Diem's removal was necessary because "...Diem had gravely offended the world community" when he persecuted the Buddhists.⁹⁸ Of course, this smokescreen was known to be a lot of nonsense not only by Colby, Hammer, Higgins and Nolting but also by the military men. The full revelation of how the military viewed the Buddhist crisis was made manifest in a telegram that Paul Harkins sent to Krulak. The military men, quite accurately, had drawn the conclusions that because the Communists had benefited by the Buddhist assault on Diem's GVN, then the whole Buddhist

Footnotes

⁹⁷ *Ibid.* pp. 170 - 171.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.* p. 170.

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campaign was suspect. Statements by Thich Tri Quang, i.e., that he had always wanted to remove Diem from power, even from before the Buddhist Crisis which began with the riot in Hue on May 8, 1963, gave their argument considerable weight. Accordingly, General Paul Harkins was able to argue the following:

The battle here is not lost by any manner of means. In fact it's being won. I think we must all realize we are fighting a ruthless, crude, brutal enemy who is using every known trick in the Communist bag. In 1960 he saw he was losing the initial round so he openly flexed his biceps. Our tremendous effort of the past year and one half began to pay off early this year and he saw he was losing the military battle. In seeking a new approach he seized the religious one. Bonze Quang, the culprit we now are giving asylum to in our Embassy, has admitted in conversations since he entered his safe haven that he had been planning to go full out against the Diem regime prior to May 8th. [my emphasis] He seized upon this episode as his opportunity. Though the government made concessions, Quang and his cohorts refused to accept them, always demanding more. He remained unable to unseat Diem. The 21st of August crackdown stopped the outward religious effort, and now the school children. This of course is another well organized covertly led Communist trick.⁹⁹

Harkins also recognised that what the United States government could not do was take council of their collective and individual fears. Unfortunately for all concerned, other than the Communists, impatience, indecision and fear combined to sway President Kennedy to give in to the Harriman re-direction of US policy which, in turn, permitted the overthrow and murder of Diem.¹⁰⁰

Footnotes

⁹⁹ General Paul Harkins, 96. "MAC 1675. Telegram From the Commander, Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (Harkins) to the Joint Chiefs of Staff's Special Assistant for Counter-insurgency and Special Activities (Krulak)," Saigon, September 12, 1963 - 11:55 a.m., [Kennedy Library, National Security Files, Vietnam Country Series. Defense Cables. Secret; Eyes Only.] In FRUS: Vietnam, August - December 1963, Vol. IV, p. 194.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid. p. 195.

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One of the great ironies which emerged during these White House and State Department conferences was that the military men, such as General Krulak, General Taylor,¹⁰¹ General Harkins and even Secretary McNamara were all telling the President the same thing as Nolting: stay the course with Ngo Dinh Diem and the insurgency can be overcome. In other words, the soldiers were more concerned about engaging in a potentially violent coup than were the diplomats. Likewise, these military men seemed to be more worried about unnecessarily expanding the war in South Vietnam, via the means of a new and unstable government, than were their State Department peers.

Harriman and Hilsman were not the only individuals who managed to encourage Kennedy's worries over the GVN and Diem because David Halberstam succeeded in making his direction and arguments felt all the way up through the Kennedy Administration. Kennedy had asked Secretary McNamara to determine the accuracy of Halberstam's reports in The New York Times, which had been attacking the counter-insurgency program in an all out effort to bring about the final break between Washington and the GVN. Kennedy was, quite obviously, giving council to his fears if he felt it so necessary to have his Secretary of Defense respond to the skewed journalism of a twenty-eight year old reporter who openly admitted his bias against Diem. McNamara informed the President that Halberstam, for reasons known only to himself and his editors, chose to underestimate the effectiveness of the ARVN and overemphasise the

Footnotes

¹⁰¹ On September 3, 1963, Maxwell D. Taylor hand-carried a memorandum to President Kennedy which stated that, regardless of Saigon's preoccupation with the unstable political situation, the whole month of August 1963 displayed favourable military trends - in all areas of activity. In other words, the GVN was successfully prosecuting the counter-insurgent war in spite of Saigon's intrigues. Maxwell D. Taylor, 53. "CM-882-63 Memorandum From the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (Taylor) to the President," Washington, undated, [National Defense University, Taylor Papers, Vietnam, chap. XXIII. Secret.] In FRUS: Vietnam, August - December 1963, Vol. IV, pp. 98 - 99.

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success of the Viet Cong. In addition to this, he completely failed to mention the highly favourable kill-ratio that ARVN operations against the VC were beginning to turn in, i.e., that of 4 to 1.¹⁰² The CIA prepared a memorandum, for Director McCone to make available to the President, which brought Halberstam's objectivity under close scrutiny:

A review of all the articles written by Mr. Halberstam since June indicates that he is by and large accurate in terms of the facts that he includes in his articles. The conclusions he draws from his facts, plus, the emphasis of his reporting, however, tend to call his objectivity into question. Since June, the great majority of Halberstam's articles have dealt with the Buddhist crisis in South Vietnam and the injurious effects of the crisis on the struggle against the Viet Cong.

In his almost invariably pessimistic reports, Halberstam makes liberal use of phrases 'some Americans,' 'informed Vietnamese,' or 'lower (or higher) ranking Americans,' etc. Such sourcing is impossible to refute.¹⁰³ However, other observers writing from South Vietnam indicate that large segments of the American military community have been and still remain optimistic about the course of the war. Such optimistic sources are never quoted by Mr. Halberstam.¹⁰⁴

Another fear of the Kennedy administration, mentioned by author Seymour Hersh as one of the main reasons why Diem was overthrown and murdered, was that Diem and Nhu might conclude a neutrality deal with the North which would stop the war and have American advisors removed. This problem was addressed by a CIA report in late September of 1963. Essentially,

Footnotes

¹⁰² This information is found in the **Editorial Note 141** in FRUS: Vietnam, August - December 1963, Vol. IV, pp. 277 - 278.

¹⁰³ Having diligently read through most of The New York Times articles concerned with the GVN and the Buddhist Crisis, etc., this writer can attest to the fact that all of Halberstam's articles utilised these kinds of vague sources, which could never be 'pinned down.' His bias was always negative and he studiously ignored anything worthwhile that Diem and the GVN had accomplished. Nevertheless, Halberstam could not have been acting alone on this negative bias as his editors at The New York Times always printed what he wrote.

¹⁰⁴ This information is found in the **Editorial Note 141** in FRUS: Vietnam, August - December 1963, Vol. IV, p. 278.

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the report told Washington everything Nolting had already assured them of about just how far Nhu would go in making a deal with the North.

Ngo Dinh Nhu. Nhu is brilliant, shrewd and ambitious man, with a consummate interest in maintaining his political power and all the accoutrements necessary to its exercise. He has a deep antipathy toward the Hanoi regime, reinforced by the fact that the Viet Minh probably tortured and killed his oldest brother. Nevertheless, it would be quite in character for Nhu - and Diem - to seek some measure of manoeuvrability vis-à-vis the US to avoid being boxed between two unacceptable alternatives: abject surrender to US demands or a loss of all political power. It is within this context that the likelihood of Ngo family dealings with North Vietnam should be assessed. We believe that if Nhu and Diem feel themselves soon to be faced with such extreme alternatives, they might well be moved to cast about for some sort of agreement with Hanoi. Diem would be less likely to accept an arrangement with Hanoi than his brother, but circumstances are now more propitious than before for Nhu to argue this course. Nhu's acute appreciation of Communist tactics and untrustworthiness would probably set limits to the nature of any agreements with the DRV to which he would be a willing party. Nhu would not be likely to consider reunification an acceptable alternative. ¹⁰⁵

Regardless of reports like this, which essentially coincided with what Nolting had told Washington, the alarm factors continued to escalate and Nolting was effectively squeezed out of having any influence whatsoever on the final choices made for US policy toward Diem's GVN.¹⁰⁶ As late as October 28, 1963, a visit to South Vietnam by Representative Zablocki, who

Footnotes

¹⁰⁵ Prepared by Ray S. Cline, Deputy Director (Intelligence), 151. "Memorandum Prepared for the Director of Central Intelligence (McCone), Subject: Possible Rapprochement Between North and South Vietnam," Washington, September 26, 1963, [Washington National Records Center, RG 306, USIA/IOP Files: FRC 67 A 222, IAF-1963. Secret.] In FRUS: Vietnam, August - December 1963, Vol. IV, p. 297.

¹⁰⁶ Frederick Nolting was excluded from all of the October 1963 White House conferences. Later, in 1964, Nolting informed the editor of The New York Times that he had no voice in any matter of policy concerning Viet Nam since August 27th of 1963. Frederick E. Nolting, Jr., "Letter to the Editor of The New York Times," March 19, 1964, p. 1 of 1 in R621/102.921, Box No.: 12, Editor, New York Times, The Nolting Papers.

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was on a Congressional fact-finding mission, demonstrated, yet again, that the best course for US policy was to stay with Diem and that the US Press was, almost, entirely out of control:

He began by saying that his group included several members who left the US with a preconception that the Diem regime must be liquidated, while others went to Vietnam with an open mind. All returned, after 3 1/2 days in-country, with about the same convictions; specifically that:

a. Diem, with all his faults, his autocracy, his tolerance of venality and brutality, is durable, and has been winning.

b. There is no visible substitute for Diem - at least none which guarantees improvement; thus, actions by US representatives to join with coup plotters, as was apparently true in August, is harmful.

c. The conduct of the US press is a grave reflection upon their entire profession. They are arrogant, emotional, un-objective and ill informed. The case against them is best expressed by their having been repudiated by much of the responsible US press.¹⁰⁷

Of course, by October 28, 1963, to change the course of US policy from its rendezvous with tragedy was as likely as the law of gravity being repealed.

Nolting had fought a courageous fight but he too was running up against the inevitability of power politics, something that both Averell Harriman and Henry Cabot Lodge were well schooled in. Indeed, Nolting's assessment, many years later, included the fact that his efforts to stave-off the destruction of Diem's GVN by arguing so strongly in Washington were made vain by Hilsman and Harriman, who plainly had the President's ear. In addition to this, Nolting recognised the 'end run' that Harriman had accomplished on the former policy and that it had already been completed in Saigon because of Lodge's appointment.

Footnotes

¹⁰⁷ Major General V.H. Krulak (USMC), 222. "Memorandum for the Record by the Joint Chiefs of Staff's Special Assistant for Counter-insurgency and Special Activities (Krulak)," Washington, October 28, 1963, [National Defense University, Taylor Papers. Secret.] In FRUS: Vietnam, August - December 1963, Vol. IV, p. 446.

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Another factor was that President Kennedy had appointed Henry Cabot Lodge as the new ambassador to Saigon. Lodge and Harriman had, I think, agreed beforehand that the only thing to do was to encourage the dissident generals to revolt, to take over. Lodge was pulling from the Saigon end for this while Harriman was pushing from the Washington end. Some of the rest of us were trying to stand in the way to hold the fort, so to speak, but to no avail. Again, politics came into it very strongly for the reason that there were two very distinguished pillars of both parties - Lodge, whom I thought of as a piece of Republican asbestos to keep the heat off of Kennedy, and Harriman, who still had a lot of the political force of the Roosevelt heritage [my emphasis].¹⁰⁸

There were, of course, more subtle reasons why Lodge was appointed to replace Nolting. Not least was the fact that Henry Cabot Lodge represented a 'thick piece of Republican leather' between the Democrat administration of Kennedy's and possible disaster in Vietnam. This aspect for the Kennedy Administration had particular relevance given the fact that 1964 was an election year.¹⁰⁹

Averell Harriman made it plain in his very partisan and self-serving interviews with the JFK Library that Lodge was the appropriate person to lay the blame on for the coup that ousted and murdered Diem. Harriman was no fool though, and he set Lodge up in, almost, a comradely way by stressing his 'loyalty' and, very cleverly, by attesting to Lodge's 'independence' from Washington by the 'fact' that he "...took action by himself."¹¹⁰ The implications of what

Footnotes

¹⁰⁸ Nolting, "Kennedy, NATO, and Southeast Asia," in Diplomacy, Administration, and Policy, Thompson, ed., p. 25.

¹⁰⁹ "Kennedy welcomed Rusk's nomination of Lodge. Lodge, he thought, would serve admirably as Republican asbestos against the heat of possible future criticism of his foreign policy.... As history was to show, the Lodge appointment did achieve the goal of deflecting criticism from Kennedy's involvement in Vietnam, although ultimately with great cost to America's reputation in the foreign relations field. As William Safire wrote in 1977, Kennedy's appointment of Lodge to Saigon 'foreclosed...Republican opposition to the way the war was conducted until 1967.'" Blair, Lodge In Vietnam, p. 13.

¹¹⁰ Harriman's interviews with the JFK Library, in this context, were almost completely self-serving with many glaring misrepresentations of what had actually taken place during the year of 1963. And considering the fact that these interviews took place in 1964 and 1965, it would be very difficult to

Footnote continued on next page:...

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Harriman was doing were very clear, while praising Lodge he distanced the Kennedy Administration from what went on in Saigon, claiming that these were Lodge's actions. The irony of Harriman condemning Nolting for being disloyal, even though he had been steadfast in pursuing his mission instructions and official US policy, while praising Lodge for 'loyalty' to his own program (i.e., Lodge's) needs no underscoring.¹¹¹ Further along in his interview with the JFK Library, Harriman, again, attempted to subtly shift the blame on to Lodge's shoulders while, at the same time, claiming that no one had forewarned Washington about the chaos the coup would create in Vietnam. This latter claim of Harriman's, of course, is clearly false and misleading. The documentary record has made manifest the fact that Harriman and the whole Kennedy cabinet had been warned. Colby, Nolting and Thompson had not ceased to din in the

...footnote continued from previous page:

believe that Harriman had simply forgotten what happened in late 1963. The fact that Harriman had Michael Forrestal and Arthur Schlesinger Jr. conduct the interviews clearly displayed a man determined to cover his tracks in the most amicable of interview circumstances. The reader should recall the fact that both interviewers were Kennedy Administration cronies and Forrestal actually was one of the junior members of Harriman's group. Given the seriousness of what had transpired in South Vietnam, this manifest partisan attempt to record history in a light favourable to Harriman was crude and transparent to any student familiar with Kennedy Administration - GVN relations. Accordingly, Harriman's revelations about Lodge need to be considered with the aforementioned caveats and, also, with an eye to the bitter feelings he had held for Nolting. "Now I didn't oppose it, and I think Lodge had some values, because he did take control. He was quite an independent fellow, as you know, and took action by himself. He [Lodge] had very little contact with Diem. He didn't like Diem, and relations between him and Diem broke down, and he was the beginning of what I think people say was our bringing Diem down. That isn't true. I don't think Diem was bringing himself down, but I think perhaps it did create a situation in which those who were opposed to him acted somewhat sooner than they otherwise would.

Now Lodge dealt with Diem, but wouldn't seek him out. Diem had to call upon him. It would be interesting to talk to Lodge about this. I hope you get the chance. I thought that Lodge, whether he was wise or unwise, was quite dedicated about the work he did. He has been very loyal in his support of what was done in the interval. He hasn't blamed anybody else. And whether he was right or whether he was wrong, in this particular aspect of his political life, I think he should be commended for his spirit that he put into it and his loyalties. He didn't do a 'Nolting' in other words, and he has behaved entirely correctly." W. Averell Harriman, "Second Oral History Interview with W. Averell Harriman." Recorded interview by Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., January 17th 1965 (3038 N. Street, NW, Washington, [DC]) pp. 113 - 114, John F. Kennedy Library, Oral History Program.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.* p. 114.

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ears of anyone who would listen, in the Kennedy Administration or elsewhere, their analysis that the outcome of a successful coup against Diem would submerge South Vietnam in political chaos. It was this precise warning which had so infuriated Harriman against Nolting toward the end of his tenure as United States Ambassador to South Vietnam:

Well, I never thought a great deal of Nolting. He was captivated by Diem...¹¹² Anyway, it was too bad. But I think it is fair to say that no one foresaw the kind of instability that would take place afterwards. John McCone [John A. McCone - CIA Director] feels that we could have prevented Diem's overthrow. I don't think we could have. Now it is true at the end there Lodge did not try to stop it. You would have to try to stop it. There was nothing we did that I know of that encouraged the coup.¹¹³

President Kennedy had another, more personal reason for permitting Lodge to get himself into 'hot-water' in Saigon. Apparently, the Lodge appointment delighted Kennedy's sense of vengeance. For the fact was that the American President viewed Lodge as 'pompous' and in need of a lesson in humility, and Vietnam, he quite astutely realised, was the ideal school for the teaching of such a lesson to a member of a family which had slighted the Kennedy's.¹¹⁴

In the final analysis, however, and regardless of the Harriman group's intrigue and manipulation of power, President Kennedy was responsible for the decision to overthrow Ngo Dinh Diem. Certainly the President was faced with some very difficult decisions and some very tough options. But there is no way to avoid the fact that he did, indeed, have all the opinions of

Footnotes

¹¹² *ibid.* p. 105.

¹¹³ *ibid.* p. 117.

¹¹⁴ "But Kennedy had an additional private motive for sending Lodge to Vietnam. Kenneth O'Donnell remembered that 'the President told us that when Rusk suggested sending Lodge to Saigon, he decided to approve the appointment because the idea of getting Lodge mixed up in such a hopeless mess as Vietnam was irresistible.' He was amused, O'Donnell went on, at the thought of deflating what he saw as Lodge's pomposity. Perhaps he wished also to destroy, once and for all, his old political rival and remembered the grandfather's slighting of his own father." Blair, Lodge In Vietnam, p. 13.

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all the experts before him, from the British, the French, the Australians, the Filipinos, and even the CIA. These expert opinions, including that of his own Ambassador, whom he had appointed to make amends with the Diem government and who had carried out his instructions faithfully and within the professional discipline of the best diplomatic traditions of the Department of State, had been very, very clear: to move against Diem would bring disaster. Kennedy opted, instead, to do what he believed was politically expedient instead of what was required of a Statesman: he bowed to the rancour of the day. One of the last public comments that Ambassador Nolting made about Kennedy's decision illustrates the long-term strategic costs of the President's short-term tactical gains:

Now the young president was caught in a dilemma; there was no question about it. There were several things he could have done, but the worst alternative was what he opted to do. Even worse than the practical consequences of the coup were the moral effects. I will not go into the sequence of events here because I believe it is now clear that after the revolution things went from bad to worse, regardless of the number of troops that we put in and regardless of the fact that the cost went up dramatically: 57,000 American lives, eight years of dissension in our country, huge increases in public debt, and the inflation that afflicted us throughout the 1970s. The actions of the Kennedy administration set the stage for all this [my emphasis].¹¹⁵

In correspondence between themselves written after the coup and murder of Diem and Nhu, General Harkins and Ambassador Nolting tended to be harder on Hilsman, Harriman and the American Press than on the President vis-à-vis responsibility for what went wrong in South Vietnam. For example, on March 27, 1964, Harkins wrote a letter to Nolting expressing his sorrow over the fact that the former Ambassador to South Vietnam had resigned from the State Department. Harkins claimed that the removal of Diem had set the whole counter-insurgency

Footnotes

¹¹⁵ Nolting, "Kennedy, NATO, and Southeast Asia," in Diplomacy, Administration, and Policy, Thompson, ed., p. 25.

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program back about ten months and he apportioned a good deal of blame to the press: "As you know, the press took the sails out of Diem starting last June and July to make him practically ineffective."¹¹⁶ Nolting replied to Harkins on April 7, 1964, and informed him that he and his wife, Lindsay, had gone over the tragedy of what had happened to Diem and Nhu so many times that it was driving them crazy. He told Harkins that he wished that he had been allowed to stay on in Saigon but, in the final analysis, he had come to believe that the destruction of Diem's GVN was inevitable:

"I too wish we could have stayed on there, but I doubt that would have done any good in the light of what I now know. The deliberate undercutting last summer of our Government's and our Country Team's position by certain elements of the State Department is now crystal clear to me.¹¹⁷ Among other things, these people were feeding to the press the very line that you and I were instructed to counteract -- i.e., the 'can't win with Diem' line. As a result, our efforts have been set back by many months, as you say.

This is a most unsavoury story, but some day the facts will be publicly known. They already are known around Washington, but not admitted, and the press doesn't like to eat crow.

Under these circumstances, it has restored my feeling of integrity to have resigned from the Department of State."¹¹⁸

In another letter, hand-written to Nolting in 1971, Harkins enumerated the people and actions which alienated President Diem and resulted in his murder and the destruction of a sober US

Footnotes

¹¹⁶ Paul D. Harkins, "Letter to Fritz Nolting," March 27, 1964, pp. 1 – 2 in R621/102.921, Box No.: 12, Selected Correspondence: Harkins, Paul D., The Nolting Papers.

¹¹⁷ Indeed Nolting's suspicions about the Country Team being undermined were founded on reality as would later be proved in the contents of the secret annex to the Hilsman-Forrestal Report. The reader may peruse this secret annex in Appendix A.

¹¹⁸ Frederick E. Nolting, Jr., "Letter to General Paul D. Harkins - COMUSMACV," April 7, 1964, p. 1 of 2 in R621/102.921, Box No.: 12, Selected Correspondence: Harkins, Paul D., The Nolting Papers.

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policy in Southeast Asia. Harkins placed Harriman, Hilsman, Senator Mansfield and the American Press corps in this descending order of those he believed were most responsible for this destruction:

"I will always think we had something going - until Harriman, Hilsman, Mansfield and the Press stepped in.

I think Mansfield's report of "No Change in Seven Years" in December '62 was the beginning of Diem's demise.

Walter Lipmann quoted it practically daily from...How much "per Diem" for SVN etc. Then the 8th. May Hue riots then the group of young news reporters led by "Halberstam" (...from N.Y. Times) who even loaned their mimeo-machine to the Buddhists. (Got a Pulitzer Prize too!). "119

In 1981, the editor of the Wall Street Journal, in a section entitled "Review & Outlook: The First Lesson of Vietnam," summed up what had happened in Vietnam during the Kennedy years. The editor singled-out the coup and murder of Diem as the central pivot upon which massive US involvement had hinged. Quite accurately, the editor placed the responsibility for what had occurred upon the same individuals that Nolting and Harkins had identified back in 1964:

There was no slippery slope; we drove over a cliff [my emphasis]. Once we had implicated ourselves in overthrowing the head of an allied government in the name of winning the war, no American president could turn and walk away...As Vice President, Mr. Johnson had strenuously opposed American involvement in any attempt to unseat Diem.

That the coup followed a massive struggle within the U.S. government is the first of a number of things to understand about the events of 20 years ago. Averell Harriman and Roger Hilsman at the State Department and incoming

Footnotes

¹¹⁹ Paul D. Harkins, "Hand-Written Letter to Fritz Nolting," 22nd., July, 1971, pp. 1 – 2 in R621/102.921, Box No.: 12, Selected Correspondence: Harkins, Paul D., The Nolting Papers.

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*Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge led the Diem-must-go faction, arguing that Diem was losing the war by not pressing internal reforms to win the hearts and minds of the people. Gen. Paul Harkins, the American commander in Saigon, outgoing Ambassador Frederick Nolting and Gen. Victor Krulak, the Pentagon's counter-insurgency expert, warned that toppling an ally was no way to help the war effort. Mr. Hilsman pushed through the decisive cable over a weekend with most officials out of town.... The anti-Diem faction dominated the press through the efforts of three young men in Saigon - David Halberstam of the New York Times, Neil Sheehan of UPI and Malcolm Browne of APP. The pro-Diem faction was represented by Marguerite Higgins of the New York Herald Tribune, who had already covered two other wars. **The significance of this is that those who championed the coup have written the popular histories of its aftermath [my emphasis].***

What is the lesson of Vietnam? No doubt there are many, but somehow the clearest also seems the hardest for the U.S. to digest. We can always see the imperfections of our friends...And of course it is easier and in the short run a good deal safer to put pressure on friends than on adversaries. We will have learned very little from the pain of Vietnam if we do not learn to beware of that temptation. Too often American policy remains, as Miss Higgins described it, "friendly to the neutrals, neutral to its enemies, and hostile to its friends."¹²⁰

In March of 1967, The Wheeling Register published an article entitled: "Ex-Ambassador Nolting Speaks: Refusal to Admit Blunder Trapped LBJ in Vietnam." In this article Nolting identified the destruction of Ngo Dinh Diem as having been the number one tactical objective of the Viet Cong and that the State Department, unwittingly, collaborated with dissenting generals and radical Buddhist Bonzes to hand this objective over to the Communists.¹²¹ Nolting warned that, while he was not defeatist, it would take a very long time to build back what had been thrown away in the 1963 coup and then he gave another very clear warning about those who had

Footnotes

¹²⁰ The Editor, "Review & Outlook: The First Lesson of Vietnam," in The Wall Street Journal, November 2, 1983, p. 1 in R621/102.921, Box Number: 23, Professional Papers, Newsclippings 2 of 2, The Nolting Papers.

¹²¹ Frederick E. Nolting, "Ex-Ambassador Nolting Speaks: Refusal to Admit Blunder Trapped LBJ in Vietnam," in The Wheeling Register, March 1967, p. 1 in R621/102.921, Box Number: 23, Professional Papers, Newsclippings 1 of 2, The Nolting Papers.

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directed the coup: "The facts speak for themselves, I think concerning the judgement of those who encouraged the revolution in Vietnam in the fall of 1963 - some of whom are still in key positions in our government."¹²²

When Frederick Nolting started to go public with his views on what had happened in Vietnam, he maintained that the ultimate responsibility for America's blundering policy lay with Kennedy and Rusk. During a public address in Lynchburg (Va.), Nolting stated that the "fatal error" which had led America into so much trouble in Vietnam was the consequence of the decision to undermine Ngo Dinh Diem and this decision had been taken by the Secretary of State, Dean Rusk, and President Kennedy.¹²³ Nolting recalled how Rusk had remonstrated with him over the Buddhist burnings: "We can't stand any more burnings,..." and, now, Nolting publicly displayed his contempt for Rusk's hand-wringing by stating: "Behind this laconic statement there lay an abysmal lack of understanding and judgement."¹²⁴

Sometime during the morning of November 2, 1963, General "Big" Minh, the leader of the coup, ordered his own personal 'fix it' man to murder Ngo Dinh Diem and Ngo Dinh Nhu. The order was carried out immediately and in a very repulsive fashion. This was the same coup that Harriman and Hilsman had been pushing for and that President Kennedy and Secretary of State Rusk, had acquiesced to because of the pressures of American domestic politics and opinion. What seemed as expedient policy in Washington translated into something horrific in South Vietnam. For, according to General Nguyen Khanh, the manner in which Diem and Nhu

Footnotes

¹²² *ibid.*

¹²³ *ibid.* p. 2.

¹²⁴ "Nolting Finally Speaks Out," in *The Danville Register*, Danville, Va., April 4, 1968, p. 1 in R621/102.921, Box Number: 23, Professional Papers, Newsclippings 2 of 2, The Nolting Papers.

were murdered was sinister and disturbing: Minh's executioner, Captain Nguyen Van Nhung, cut out Diem' and Nhu's gall bladders while they were still alive. Visibly and emotionally distraught at recalling the details of this murderous climax of a policy in disarray Khanh told this writer:

Nhu was alive when they put the knife in to take out some of the organs, what they refer to in Chinese medicine...the gall bladder. And in the Orient when you are a big soldier, big man - this thing is very important...they do it against Nhu when Nhu was alive.... And Diem had this happen to him and later on they kill him by pistol and rifle. This is murder. A real murder in the fashion that you ... it's very savage!¹²⁵

Khanh maintained that it was not the American expectation that Diem and Nhu would be killed but he also stated that the Americans had no idea what they were allying themselves with when they accepted General Duong Van Minh as the leader of the coup. Khanh indicates that had the Americans a single clue of the jealousies and intrigues of power that Minh was caught up in, then they would not have allied themselves with him as murder was very much a part of the Minh agenda.¹²⁶ Given the fact that the Kennedy Administration had been warned that the calibre of the enemies of the Diem government was low, the question still remains why did the Kennedy Administration ignore the best advice coming from the field?

William Colby in his Foreword to Frederick Nolting's memoirs rendered the best overall analysis, which sums up the Nolting era in American policy toward South Vietnam:

Nolting's task was to support the Southern government and to understand its need to assert its nationalist credentials even against the United States, on whom it depended. He did a superb job. He developed the closest of relations with the

Footnotes

¹²⁵ Geoffrey DT Shaw, "Interview With General Nguyen Khanh," June 16, 1994, at the United States Special Operations School, Hurlburt Field, Florida, [this interview transcript is available through the Vietnam Center's Archives, Texas Tech University], pp. 46 - 48.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.* pp. 48 - 50.

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leadership of the new nation and influenced it by persuasion as a friend, not pressure by an adversary.

But Nolting had to contend with another constituency - the Kennedy administration that had sent him to Vietnam and its natural sensitivity to American public opinion. This constituency found flaws in the Mandarin regime Diem exemplified as failing to match the democratic standards the United States held up for itself and insisted on for its clients and dependents.... The eventual result, against Ambassador Nolting's advice, was American complicity in the overthrow and murder of Diem, and a period of political chaos and confusion in Vietnam that President Lyndon Johnson felt compelled to respond to by the commitment of a massive American expeditionary force.

As the drama unfolded, Nolting retained a clear and persistent view that the United States should support the constituted authority in Vietnam which Diem represented and that it should persevere in the strategy of helping the Diem government to win its own struggle against the Viet Cong, through such programs as the strategic hamlets. He fought for his policies from Saigon to Washington and against some of the towering figures of the Kennedy administration. In the end he lost the battle, but his story of it is a necessary piece of American history. It is made more important because in retrospect it is clear that the policies he fought against proved to be massively mistaken and engulfed America in a war which shook it internally and which it lost...this account by a far-sighted Virginia gentleman of our early Vietnam experience deserves particular attention.¹²⁷

What makes Nolting's testimony, policy direction and, indeed, his entire Ambassadorship so compelling and worthy to be considered as truthful and worthy of careful study is the fact that he was right. His entire argument was consistent and straightforward down through the years. From his early letters and cables sent from the embassy in Saigon to the State Department to his very last arguments at White House meetings, from his early private letters to friends and associates, immediately after the fact, in 1964, to his late 1980's interviews, the

Footnotes

¹²⁷ William E. Colby, "Foreword," in Frederick Nolting's, From Trust To Tragedy: The Political Memoirs of Frederick Nolting, Kennedy's Ambassador to Diem's Vietnam, (New York, [NY]: Praeger Publishers, 1988), pp. xi - xii.

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consistency of his testimony is remarkable. For those historians who still consider the seeking of truth to be the heart and soul of their discipline, Nolting's account of his mission to South Vietnam is of particular value. This value, which is based upon the truthfulness of Nolting's account - as revealed through its extraordinary consistency, is enhanced in its legitimacy, ironically, by the inconsistencies of those who railed against him in the Department of State. The inconsistencies of the testimonies and recollections of the Harriman faction have been made manifest in this work and they form a stark contrast to that which Nolting stood for. From Halberstam et al. in the news media, who attempted to hide behind a veneer of journalistic objectivity, but then openly admitted to wanting to bring down the Diem government, the contradictions are clear. From Harriman and Hilsman, publicly declaring, after the fact, that they had no intention of seeing Diem destroyed, to the transparent coup-plotting machinations of their cables and instructions to both Nolting and Lodge, a distinct picture of arrogance, deceit and duplicity is driven home. Indeed, this direction of the Harriman group becomes so unmistakable as to undermine any claim to the truth that they may have had. From Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge we even have an incredible and blatantly inconsistent testimony. He was the diplomat who, after the fact, stated that the cable sent from Washington, which had called for a coup, was a terrible mistake. In his own words (again - after the fact), he stated that these instructions had left him "thunderstruck," but his cables at the time told the Kennedy administration, with compelling urgency, that they had better not back down from overthrowing Diem.

Rather than leave this account on a negative tone, there are many positive things that can be said, which are supported in the body of this study, which indicate that the American government had, in Frederick Nolting, placed the right man for a very difficult task in Vietnam. For one has to consider that, quite apart from his work as a diplomat, Nolting had to have the imagination and mental dexterity to discern that the war America was facing in Vietnam was

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something new. He recognised that the fight against the Communists was not so much that of guns and bombs as it was one of political legitimacy. Nolting, judiciously, discerned that Ngo Dinh Diem had a true political legitimacy that spoke to something much deeper in the Vietnamese soul than mere democracy. Democracy was an Occidental political construct that held little meaning, and had virtually no historical tradition, in the centuries-old customs of the Confucian Orient. Accordingly, Nolting intuited that the most valuable gifts America could give the struggling GVN under Diem were patience and time. In this sense then, Nolting was not only a great American diplomat but a military strategist of some substance as well.

A gifted military mind is naturally drawn to a strategy wherein appropriate weapons and tactics, which best suit the needs demanded by the terrain (i.e., political and/or otherwise), bring about the defeat of the enemy. In this regard, Frederick Nolting, unlike many in the Kennedy administration, never lost sight of what the fight was about and where the real fight lay. His clear-sightedness and steadiness of purpose betrayed a very fine and tough moral character beneath the self-effacing Virginian manner that was known as his public demeanour. Given that the Kennedy years and U.S. policy were replete with ironies and contradictions it is fitting that the final irony of this study should be an article written in The New York Times, no less. For this was an article which sang praises to Nolting's steadfast moral qualities back at the beginning of his mission to South Vietnam in 1962:

Spirits are noticeably higher in Washington about the fate of Southeast Asia, especially the still-precarious struggle for South Vietnam. One reason for the lift is what someone today described as the country-doctor manner of Fritz Nolting: gentle but firm, a bit of old Virginia mixed with broad colloquialisms, lyrical and hard-headed - just about what you would expect of a brilliant philosophy student and a member of a musical, old-line Virginia family...When President Ngo Dinh Diem's associates went into fits over what they thought was excessive United States pressure to reform their government, their economy and their war, Mr. Nolting spent long patient hours explaining that Washington wanted for them only what they wanted for themselves.

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His first pleas everywhere in Washington have been against fits of temper over the besieged Vietnamese. These are good but troubled people, he says in effect...Sniping from Washington, he suggests, will not kill one additional guerrilla for them. That, associates here say, is typical of the Ambassador's steady performance in Saigon...Of all Nolting's traits, his associates emphasize his courage.

The New York Times, (January 13, 1962)¹²⁸

Postscript

Frederick Nolting proved to be as resilient as he was courageous as he rebounded from his lonely fight in the State Department to a prestigious position in private business. After having served in the Department of State for eighteen years,¹²⁹ he resigned in protest over the destruction of Ngo Dinh Diem and Ngo Dinh Nhu.¹³⁰ Nolting went to work for Morgan

Footnotes

¹²⁸ Special to The New York Times, "Courageous Envoy: Frederick Ernest Nolting, Jr.," (January 13, 1962), p. 1 in R621/102.92; Box Number: 23, Folder Dates and Heading: Professional Papers, News Clippings 1 of 2, The Nolting Papers.

¹²⁹ Thompson, editor, Diplomacy, Administration, and Policy, p. xi.

¹³⁰ Ambassador Nolting's official letter of resignation was sent to President Lyndon Baines Johnson on February 25, 1964 and it read as follows:

"Dear Mr. President,

I am sorry to have been unable to get an appointment to see you, for I have wanted for several months to talk with you about Vietnam and related matters. I believe you and I have seen the issues in Vietnam in much the same light from the time of your visit there in May, 1961; at least, I have that impression from talks we have had in the past. I know, therefore, how heavily this problem must now weigh on your mind, as indeed it does on mine also, and I earnestly hope that, despite certain irrevocable errors that I think have been made, a way can yet be found to fulfill our national interests there with honor.

I take the liberty of sending this letter, Mr. President, because I feel an obligation as well as a desire to tell you frankly and directly about my future course of action, which is likely to be interpreted in the press and elsewhere as being related to my tour of duty in Vietnam.

Footnote continued on next page:...

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Guaranty Trust in Paris as their Vice-President.¹³¹ He worked at this post in Paris from 1964 until 1969 when he became Assistant to the Chairman in New York City. In 1973 he became a consultant to the company and he was able to maintain this position until 1976. All along and simultaneous to his business career, since 1971, Nolting had been re-establishing his academic contacts.¹³²

From 1971 to 1973 Nolting served at the University of Virginia as Diplomat-in-Residence. He then went on to hold teaching and administrative posts as Olsson Professor of Business Administration in the Darden School of Business (from 1973 to 1976).¹³³ He also became Professor in the Woodrow Wilson Department of Government and Foreign Affairs and he then helped found the Miller Center of Public Affairs of which he became the first

...footnote continued from previous page:

I have today sent to the Secretary of State a request to be granted retirement from the Foreign Service, in order to accept an offer in private business. That my decision has been influenced by my strong disapproval of certain actions which were taken last fall in relation to Vietnam, with predictable adverse consequences, I do not deny. Nor do I deny that I have been uncomfortable in my association with the Department of State since returning from Vietnam six months ago.

Under these circumstances it seems sensible for me to accept a position in private business. As a private citizen, I shall continue to do my best to contribute to our country's success.

I solicit your understanding, Mr. President, and I wish you, as you know, personal happiness and all success in looking after the affairs of our nation.

Sincerely and respectfully yours,
Frederick E. Nolting

Nolting, From Trust To Tragedy, pp. 134 – 135.

¹³¹ Mrs. Nolting informed this writer that her husband had no special contacts within Morgan Guaranty Trust and that he secured the position through a combination of luck, experience in the family banking business, and through his manifest intellectual capabilities. This telephone interview was conducted with Mrs. Nolting on Thursday, February 4th, 1999 at 4:10 PM Winnipeg, time.

¹³² Pardee, ed., "Biographical Sketch," p. 1, in rg-21/102.921, The Nolting Papers.

¹³³ ibid.

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Director.¹³⁴ Not content with these accomplishments, Nolting went on to serve as Chairman of the Board of Trustees of the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation and as a member of the Center for Advanced Studies and the International Management and Development Institute.¹³⁵

Frederick Nolting retired from his full-time academic commitments at the University of Virginia in 1982 and he began the painstaking process of compiling documents for his critical analysis of the Kennedy administration's blunders in Vietnam.¹³⁶ This work produced his political memoirs, From Trust To Tragedy, a work that devastates many of the popularly held myths about the Kennedy – Diem period. Because of its unrelenting precision, his work will always stand as a testament to his gentlemanly yet bold role in American diplomatic and military policy toward Diem's GVN.

Frederick Nolting died on December 14, 1989, at the age of 78, and only a year after From Trust To Tragedy was first published.¹³⁷ His wife, Mrs. Lindsay Nolting, and four daughters Mary, Lindsay, Jane, and Francis survived him (although Francis died in 1995).¹³⁸ Mrs. Nolting, to this day, has a very sharp recollection of the years and events that form up the backbone of her late husband's memoirs. Her testimony, as confidant and wife to Frederick Nolting, and her own eye-witness to the events of those most salient years in Vietnam, are invaluable to any serious student of American involvement in Vietnam.

Footnotes

¹³⁴ Thompson, ed., Diplomacy, Administration, and Policy, p. xi.

¹³⁵ Pardee, ed., "Biographical Sketch," p. 1, in rg-21/102.921, The Nolting Papers.

¹³⁶ Ibid. pp. 1 – 2.

¹³⁷ Ibid. p. 2.

¹³⁸ Telephone interview conducted with Mrs. Nolting on Thursday, February 4, 1999 at 4:10 PM Winnipeg, time.

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APPENDIX A

Eyes Only for the President Annex: Performance of U.S. Mission

(Annex to Memorandum From the Director of the Bureau of Intelligence and Research [Hilsman] and Michael V. Forrestal of the National Security Council Staff to the President)

Washington, January 25, 1963.

Many of the individuals and agencies in the U.S. Mission are doing an outstanding job. But some of the criticisms of the Vietnamese also apply to the Americans, the following in particular:

- 1. There is no overall planning effort that effectively ties together the civilian and military efforts.*
- 2. There is little or no long-range thinking about the kind of country that should come out of victory and about what we do now to contribute to this longer-range goal.*
- 3. Among both civilians and military there is still some confusion over the way to conduct a counter-guerrilla war. Many of the lower-ranking people out in the field in actual contact with the problems seem fully conscious of the importance of the civil and political aspects, but in the middle and higher levels understanding is far from perfect [my emphasis]. The American military mission must share some of the blame for the excessive emphasis on large-scale operations and air interdiction which have the bad political and useless military effects described in our report.*
- 4. In general, we don't use all the leverage we have to persuade Diem to adopt policies we espouse. On foreign policy matters the U.S. mission has failed to press U.S. interests sufficiently hard, possibly because it is easier to concentrate on in-country operations. In domestic politics, we have virtually no contact with meaningful opposition elements and we have made no attempt to maintain a U.S. position independent of Diem. There should be a more outspoken U.S. attitude on public policies we disapprove of, more*

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U.S. support of people like Buu, the head of the major labor organization, and less of Madame Nhu [my emphasis]. We should push harder for a gradual liberlization of the authoritarian political structure and for the other programs discussed in the body of our report.

The real trouble, however, is that the rather large U.S. effort in South Vietnam is managed by a multitude of independent U.S. agencies and people with little or no overall direction. No one man is in charge. What co-ordination there is results mainly from the sort of treaty arrangements that are arrived at in the Country Team meetings and from an inter-agency committee chaired by the Deputy Chief of Mission, which limits itself to provincial rehabilitation. The result is that the U.S. effort, although massive, is fragmented and duplicative. An example is the chronic shortage of weapons for strategic hamlet defenders. There are more than enough weapons in the country, but they get lost in Vietnamese government depots. The full effort of the American community is rarely concentrated on breaking such bottlenecks.

What is needed, ideally, is to give authority to a single, strong executive, a man perhaps with a military background but who understands that this war is essentially a struggle to build a nation out of the chaos of revolution. One possibility would be to appoint as Ambassador a civilian public figure whose character and reputation would permit him to dominate the representatives of all other departments and agencies [my emphasis].

There are, of course, some formidable political and bureaucratic problems in taking either of these steps. What is more, we cannot say that the matter is urgent or that disaster will inevitably or immediately follow if things remain as they are. Progress toward winning the war is being made under the present set-up – although, as we have said, it will take longer than expected, cost more, and prolong the period in which a dramatic event could wipe out the gains already made. On balance, our recommendation would be not to make any sudden and dramatic change, but to keep the problem in mind when changes are made in the normal course.

Certain specific problems concerning the U.S. Mission are dealt with in the numbered paragraphs below.

- (1) A continuing problem is air support of ground operations and of reinforcement for strategic hamlets and other static defense forces under attack. There is an inter-service argument over who should do this sort of thing, whether the Army controlled*

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HUIB armed helicopters and Mohawks, or the Air Force controlled Farm Gate fighters and bombers. The result is an insufficient effort in certain circumstances.

- (2) There are also insufficient liaison type aircraft for support of U.S. AID and Special Forces especially. Here again there is an inter-service argument over who should do this sort of thing, resulting in an insufficient effort.*
- (3) Concerning air support and the outstanding request for another increase in "Farm Gate" (the U.S. flown bombers and fighters), we would suggest delaying approval until we could be sure that progress had been made on the problems of emphasis between "clear and hold" operations on the one hand and "hit and withdraw" and "interdiction" operations on the other. Any such request should also be reviewed from the standpoint of whether adequate close support and liaison air capability is being provided.*
- (4) The U.S. military has still not solved the communications problem in South Vietnam, especially ground-to-air communications, but including ground-to-ground communications. When the Special Forces at Plei Mrong were attacked, it was several hours before air support could be brought to bear. Despite the program to equip strategic hamlets with radios of which over 2,000 have already been distributed, the strategic hamlets still have trouble obtaining reinforcements, and especially air support. Partly this is a problem of peculiar electromagnetic conditions in South Vietnam, which should yield to research and development efforts. In the main, however, it results from inadequate procedures for calling in air power and directing it by local people who know the terrain and targets.*
- (5) In U.S. AID, the effort seems to be divided between the Deputy in charge of Rural Development, Rufus Phillips, and the more conventional AID activities. Phillips is coming close to running a practical program, but so far is operating meaningfully in only half the provinces. This rural development program, which is essentially the civic side of the strategic hamlet program, is the cutting edge of the U.S. effort at the village level. It needs to be expanded and given more flexibility and quicker support than the AID agency normally can give under present circumstances. The remainder of the AID activities seem confined to administering the commodity import program and the vestiges of earlier projects. What is most lacking here is an economic program for Vietnam designed both to support the present war effort and lay the basis for future development of the country when peace is restored.*

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(6) *A decision has been reached to transfer from CIA to the Army the training of certain paramilitary groups including the Montagnards. This is known as "Operation Switchback". The Agency is making a sincere effort to carry out this decision, but serious difficulties are arising from the Army's rather inflexible budgetary and personnel procedures. These programs require unconventional disbursements of local currency, rapid air delivery of specialized equipment and rapid construction of storage facilities. The Army may eventually work these problems out; but in the meantime the program should not be allowed to slacken at this critical point. "Operation Switchback" should be extended, if necessary.*

*Michael V. Forrestal
Roger Hilsman¹*

Footnotes

¹ Roger Hilsman & Michael V. Forrestal, "Annex To Memorandum From The Director of The Bureau of Intelligence and Research (Hilsman) and Michael V. Forrestal of the National Security Council Staff to the President," "A Report On South Vietnam," Washington, January 25, 1963, [Source: Kennedy Library, Hilsman Papers, Country Series – Vietnam. Secret. Eyes Only for the President.] In Foreign Relations of The United States, 1961 – 1963, Vietnam: January – August, 1963, Volume III, Editor In Chief – John P. Glennon, (Washington [DC]: United States Government Printing Office, 1991), pages: 60 – 62.

Appendix A

Eyes Only for the President Annex: Performance of U.S. Mission

(Annex to Memorandum From the Director of the Bureau of Intelligence and Research [Hilsman] and Michael V. Forrestal of the National Security Council Staff to the President)

APPENDIX B

"Memorandum For Deputy Secretary Gilpatric - Subject: Ngo Dinh Diem,"

25 April 1961

"Few people outside Vietnam really know the man who was re-elected President of the Republic of Vietnam earlier this month. With your new responsibilities towards Vietnam for President Kennedy, you might find it useful to have an insight about this dedicated man drawn from my close association with him. Also, you might like to pass this along to Vice President Johnson prior to his trip..."

It takes a perceptive eye to see Diem's true character when meeting him. He is short and round and "mild-spoken." Many people miss his "snapping" black eyes by noting, instead, that his feet seem barely to reach the floor when he is seated. However, he is not defensive about his short stature and is at ease around tall Americans. He has a very positive approach to Westerners, not the least bit concerned about differences such as Asian-Caucasian background. When the Vice President sees him, he will find him as interested in cattle as any Texan and as interested in freedom as Sam Houston.

At the table, he shows that he enjoys eating (and usually a good appetite). His smile is shy and infrequent. Usually he is serious and becomes passionately so when he talks about his true love, Vietnam. Age lines show around his eyes, particularly on those mornings when he has stayed up most of the night reading, which is often. He reads in English, French, and Vietnamese. While he speaks and understands English rather well, he is embarrassed over his pronunciation and is reluctant to use it. In his official contacts with Americans, he uses French.

Diem was born in Hue, the ancient capital in central Vietnam. His 60 years have been full of sharp tests of his moral courage, of devotion to a highly-principled ideal of patriotism. This is worth understanding, particularly since his bitterest enemies, the Communists and the French colonialists have hid the truth by decades of "Character assassination". Much false information has stuck, by sheer repetition. The truth is even more interesting.

For example, in the Spring of 1955 the Presidential Palace was under artillery fire from the Binh Xuyen forces, who opened up on his bedroom wing with 81-mm. mortars at midnight. The French colons in the Saigon bars told a story with great glee of how Diem had hidden under his bed quivering in fear.

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What he actually did was typically different. He went out in his night-shirt into the Palace grounds where some of the Guard Battalion had abandoned their artillery to take cover, and drove them back to their guns with a tongue-lashing while paddling around the yard in a pair of old slippers.

When someone describes him as an aloof mandarin, I recall how he cried on my shoulder when our close friend, Trinh Minh The, was killed, his anguish over the loss of Phat Diem province in the North to the Communists, and the agony he went through in his final break with Chief of State Bao Dai. He simply doesn't parade his feelings for everyone to see, particularly when things are going wrong.

President Diem has been criticised for his "family," meaning primarily the influence of his younger brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu (pronounced as "No Din New"), and Madame Nhu. This younger brother handles many of the more sensitive political party and intelligence "special operations" for President Diem, as well as helping him privately with speeches, planning and family affairs. Some Americans have been strongly critical of brother Nhu, seeing in him a continuing influence towards a Diem dictatorial regime, with control of the Press, arrests of political dissenters, etc. Actually, brother Nhu is a whole complex subject in himself, as is Madame Nhu in herself. Both have been defamed maliciously. There is a grain of truth in some of the stories about them. But, the reality is that Diem trusts Nhu for certain activities that he cannot entrust to anyone else, and needs him. We will hardly help Diem be the strong leader we desire by insisting that he get rid of his trusted right-hand man; we would do better to influence the right-hand man more effectively....

At 25, he [Diem] was appointed as a Province Chief, and served from 1926 to 1932 as such, governing Phan Rieng and Phan Thiet in central Vietnam. At the time, these provinces had large French plantations, which were practically feudal worlds in themselves. Diem, making use of tribal laws, opened lands for Vietnamese settlers. When workers started leaving plantations for land of their own, Diem became a hero among his people -- and earned some French hatred which still has remnants today....

As the leader of a modern nation which has just been governing itself for 5 years, Diem has worked extremely long hours daily. For a long time, he was really the only competent executive in the government and had to check on infinite details of administration. He has a phenomenal memory for details, dates, places, and personal biographies -- and is short-tempered with Ministers who know less about the current work in their Departments than he does. (U Nu of Burma shocked him once by not knowing the strength of the Burmese Army; Diem not only knows the strength and location of Vietnamese Armed Forces units, but also the names and family background of practically all the officers). He now is

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starting to get a few competent executives. As he gets them, he gives them all the responsibility and authority needed to do the work. Few can stand the burden.

So, here is our toughest ally against Communism in Southeast Asia. A 60-year-old bachelor who gave up romance with his childhood sweetheart (she remains a spinster in Hue) to devote his life to his country. He is a person of immense moral courage and of demonstrated physical courage. He is intensely honest. And, despite seeing hundreds of people daily and visiting frequently all over the country, he is essentially a lonely man. He is hungry for the understanding friendship of responsible Americans."¹

Footnotes

¹ Congress, House, Committee on Armed Services, Brigadier-General Edward Geary Lansdale, "Memorandum For Deputy Secretary Gilpatric - Subject: Ngo Dinh Diem," (25 April 1961), V.B.4. U.S. Involvement in The War - Internal Documents, The Kennedy Administration: January 1961 - November 1963, in United States - Vietnam Relations, 1945 -1967, Book I within Book 11 of 12, Study Prepared by the Department of Defense, Leslie H. Gelb, Chairman OSD Task Force, 92nd Cong., 1st sess., (Washington [D.C.]: United States Government Printing Office, 1971), pages: 36 - 41.

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APPENDIX C

Contingency Plan Re: Ngo Dinh Diem

Because of the plan's close relationship with American diplomacy toward South Vietnam and the CIP, during Nolting's mission, it is well worth reciting at least part of it here:

"Dear Fritz: In view of the recent rumours about changes at the Palace...I thought it might be useful to bring up to date the memo entitled "Suggested Contingency Plan" which John Steeves sent to Durby under cover of his letter of April 13, 1961.

The present memorandum is intended to replace the earlier one so that you will only have one file for easy (and possibly urgent) reference. Naturally the suggestions which follow are subject to your comment which we would very much value.

I would like to take this opportunity to tell you how pleased we are by the sensible, steady and conscientious embassy which you are carrying on in Saigon under the most difficult circumstances. I think the quality of steadiness is particularly important in our relations with the Vietnamese at this time.... Very sincerely, Walter."

"PS - Some of the statements in the enclosed memorandum will be obvious to you, but will provide clarification to high level persons in Washington who may wish to read it."

Walter McConaughy, 181. "Letter From the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs to the Ambassador in Vietnam," Washington, October 20, 1961, [Washington National Records Center, RG 84, Saigon Embassy Files: FRC 68 A 5159, New Command Arrangements 1962. Top Secret;] in Foreign Relations of The United States, 1961 - 1963: Vietnam, 1961, Volume I, John P. Glennon, editor in chief, (Washington [DC]: United States Government Printing Office, 1988), page: 407.

Appendix C

Contingency Plan Re: Ngo Dinh Diem

Washington, October 20, 1961 Memorandum prepared in the Department of State:
Suggested Contingency Plan

The knowledge of the existence of this memorandum is to be restricted to the smallest possible number of persons. It is not an Instruction. It is designed for reference by the Chief of Mission, but is not binding on him.... During a possible coup the American Embassy should continue to support Diem fully until a decision is reached by the Chief of Mission that the time for change has arrived.

If in the best judgement of the Chief of Mission the situation arises where Diem has lost effective control, the United States should be prepared to quickly support the non-communist person or group who then appears most capable of establishing effective control over the GVN. The nature of US support in such a situation should be strong enough to achieve rapid results but not so blatant as to make such a person or group appear as a US puppet. This will require the most careful handling.... 7. Another possibility, which might be preferable... would be a military caretaker government under General Duong van Minh.

8. The strength of the Communist challenge in Viet Nam would appear to rule out a Government of anti-Communist oppositionists. These men are disunited, inexperienced, and do not have a wide following. It would seem almost impossible for them to organize an effective government before the Communists took over.... 10. Meanwhile we face the very difficult problem of Diem's leadership. Most of those close to him do not now appear to think he is sufficiently effective. Diem seems unwilling to listen to advice on this subject. The U.S. is committed to support the Government of Viet-Nam of which Diem is President. It should be assumed that any U.S. initiative to remove Diem would become known and would be resisted ferociously by Diem and his family. But if it is clear that he can no longer obtain the effective collaboration of the members of his own government, we shall have to consider what we should and can do. ...The best U.S. approach would thus appear to be to support Diem so long as the Chief of Mission believes his control is effective. In this connection the Embassy might propose a draft of a letter from President Kennedy to President Diem based on General Taylor's recommendations. Such a draft could state that in the interest of the defense of Viet-Nam and of our heavy commitment there the U.S. considers it essential for President Diem to create an effective Internal Security Council with real executive responsibilities headed by a person of stature who would be loyal to Diem and respected by his colleagues. All government business would have to pass through the Internal Security Council. We should also request him to confirm to us the name of his successor. Other recommendations could include a real unification of intelligence functions. To obtain Diem's real concurrence it would have to be made clear that these moves were essential parts of the Counterinsurgency Plan (CIP) which Diem agreed to

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Contingency Plan Re: Ngo Dinh Diem

carry out. It would also have to be implied quite understandably that if he did not, we would have to reconsider our policy towards Viet-Nam. Such a letter would require a prior decision that we would be prepared if necessary to run the risk of suddenly withdrawing our support from Diem and of almost simultaneously throwing our weight behind the most likely replacement. Such a move would require preparation, secrecy, surprise, and toughness."

John P. Glennon, editor in chief, (attached as an enclosure to 181) "Memorandum Prepared in the Department of State: Suggested Contingency Plan," in Foreign Relations of The United States, 1961 - 1963: Vietnam, 1961, Volume 1, (Washington [DC]: United States Government Printing Office, 1988), pages: 408 - 411.

It is important to note that the suggestions within this plan, for the most part, were indeed carried out later - verbatim, during Ambassador Lodge's mission, in late 1963.

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Contingency Plan Re: Ngo Dinh Diem

APPENDIX D

Nolting's Telegram To Washington concerned with Thompson's Counter Insurgency Proposals given to President Diem

Saigon, November 30, 1961 - 8 p.m.

737. Task Force VN. Regret report that Thompson Mission is badly off rails from standpoint US-UK co-ordination and that Thompson recommendations to GVN, whatever may be their intrinsic merit, are bound to complicate our task of bringing about essential reforms in GVN military and administrative structure. Position may be retrievable (and we are working at it). But as of now British initiative has introduced knotty problem in our discussions with GVN.

Difficulties with Thompson Mission have been procedural and substantive. Procedurally, problem has been that Thompson has submitted his recommendations to President Diem without prior consultation with US and without real effort to ascertain thrust of our plans or programs for counterinsurgency. This has occurred despite what I considered most precise prior understanding with Ambassador Hohler that advance consultation was essential if two pitfalls were to be avoided: (1) That we should present alternative recommendations to Diem between which he would vacillate without acting on either; and (2) That British would present recommendations which we for one reason or another could not or would not support and which would therefore be sterile (given the fact that UK not contributing substantially to anti-VC effort beyond Thompson recommendations). Second procedural point fully agreed with Hohler was that Thompson would strictly limit himself to intelligence and civil aspects of counterinsurgency effort.

Although Hohler does not deny that there was clear understanding on above points - and I have had occasion to remind him of them several times recently - fact is that Thompson has disregarded them. Only defense offered is that General Taylor specifically requested Thompson's views without limitation as to subject matter (I have this only from Hohler) and that as Thompson Mission is accredited to Diem he must respond to latter's requests.

Although British performance is procedurally incorrect, substantively it is far more serious. Thompson has submitted to Diem so-called "outline plan" for

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clearing delta (Embes 205, Nov.20). This paper deals with whole range of anti-guerrilla measures, including all aspects of military. It is an admirable paper from standpoint of presentation and as a statement of concepts of anti-guerrilla operations. We can easily agree with ninety per cent of it and have in fact been pressing same or similar concepts on GVN for many months.

Problem arises in unexpected way. We have been pressing Diem to set up a proper military command structure headed by field command and to delegate authority to it. Diem accepted this most reluctantly six months ago, but has never fully carried through on it, and recently there have been several instances of direct orders from palace to ARVN units without field command's knowledge. Thompson proposal for delta provides that control of operations in that area bypass field command (since chain of command would be from NISC to Combined Third Corps HQ) and operational control would thus in effect be exercised by Diem. This point has obviously not escaped President. Thuan has already informed McGarr that Diem has "accepted" Thompson plan and inquired whether MAAG has any comments on it. Diem has also asked Thompson to submit plan for clearing area north of Saigon.

I do not wish to suggest by above that I consider Diem's reaction to Thompson plan is motivated solely by desire avoid delegation of authority which we have been pressing on him, although this is without doubt a major factor. Another is very likely a reaction to our approach in current negotiations. Nor do I wish to suggest that we are being doctrinaire in our reaction, which I think is not the case. Fundamentally, problem is that we are convinced that unless we can bring Diem to delegate authority we shall never get effective counterinsurgency effort in this country, no matter what sort of paper plans we may have. Thompson proposal, particularly coming at this juncture, strikes a hard blow at this effort.

A second major substantive difficulty with Thompson plan is proposal that clearance of delta provinces have first priority. In MAAG view first priority is area north of Saigon - which Thompson had not surveyed at time he submitted his delta plan to Diem.

At meeting with Hohler and Thompson November 29, at which McGarr and Trueheart present, I spoke along above lines very frankly and even bluntly, emphasizing that I feared Thompson plan would be distinct handicap in discussions which I am now carrying on with GVN. I also warned them that if, as I expected, Diem raised Thompson plan in these discussions, I would have to tell him that we did not agree with command arrangements proposed.

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Frederick Nolting, 299. "(737. Task Force VN.) Telegram From Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State - Saigon, November 30, 1961 - 8 p.m.;" [Department of State, Central Files, 751K.00/11-3061. Secret; Limit Distribution.] in Foreign Relations of The United States, 1961 - 1963: Vietnam 1961, Volume 1; Editor-in-Chief John P. Glennon, (Washington [D.C.]: United States Government Printing Office, 1988), pages: 698 - 700.

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APPENDIX E

Task Force in Vietnam: Outline Plan of Counterinsurgency Operations

1. Overall Concept of Operations: The concept of counterinsurgency operations envisions combined use of political, economic, psychological, military and paramilitary efforts to maintain security and government control and support where they still largely exist (white areas) and to restore them in areas where they have broken down to a greater or lesser extent (red and pink areas).

For purposes of definition a red area is considered one where the VC operate with virtual impunity, enjoy the support, voluntary or not, of the populace, and are susceptible of expulsion only through a major military effort. A pink area is one in which the VC and the GVN are competing for dominance and in which, for example, the VC may control by night and the GVN by day. In white areas the GVN by and large exercises "normal control and VC activities are mostly harassments rather than more significant actions.

It is clear that in each and every province the gamut for security runs from white (at least in the area of the provincial capital) through pink to red. It is also clear that the type of counterinsurgency operations conducted will differ substantially, depending upon the degree of security in a given area.

The main considerations which should govern the priority of counterinsurgency operations are the following:

1. Every effort should be made to keep existing white areas white through appropriate political, economic, psychological and paramilitary measures. Military forces should not be diverted for use in white areas, but effective paramilitary forces are essential for maintaining security in those areas.

2. Simultaneously, to extend security control from white to pink and red areas in application of the amoeba principle, combined political, economic, psychological, military and paramilitary efforts should be mounted on a carefully co-ordinated, phased basis in successive selected geographical areas. Flexibility is necessary in the choice of these areas.

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3. *At the same time constant pressure should be maintained (essentially by military means) on the Viet Cong in other pink and red areas in order to keep them off balance, and psychological/civic action efforts should be carried out to convince the populace in these other areas that the Government is still aware of their existence. Gradually these areas would become the targets for major co-ordinated, phased actions of the type outlined in 2, above....*

6. Geographical Phasing of Counterinsurgency Operations

It is essential to preserve as white areas those areas which are still relatively white, and simultaneous action should be taken in all such areas. This should include, as a minimum, all areas adjacent to provincial capitals, most district seats, and the lowlands area of Central Viet-Nam.

Concomitantly major actions aimed at the restoration of security in red and pink areas through the application of the amoeba concept should be initiated on a selected, successive basis (see Annex E). First priority for such actions should be given to those areas which are essential to the continued existence of the Government of Viet-Nam. To preserve the national entity it may be necessary to give priority to areas which by themselves do not contribute materially to the over-all strength of Viet-Nam, but which are controlled by the VC as potential areas from which to attack. In determining geographical priorities for preserving the base of government and eliminating the threat to security through application of the amoeba concept, several factors will need to be considered (population density, economic importance, area strength of the Viet Cong, suitability to isolation from Viet Cong, etc.). It is believed that on balance first priority should be given to the provinces which surround Saigon to assure a secure primary base for further GVN operations. The second priority should be given to the remaining Southern provinces because of their population, their importance as the rice basket of Viet-Nam and the greater difficulty confronting the VC in that area in reinforcing their strength through large scale infiltration from North Viet-Nam. The red and pink areas in the coastal lowlands north of Saigon to the 17th parallel should also be given simultaneous second priority since this area includes a large segment of the population and controls the major route of land communications to the North.

This does not mean that other areas are to be neglected. Simultaneous action will continue toward the establishment of a border force aimed at reducing infiltration. Concurrently, major military actions will be taken in other areas against Viet Cong targets of opportunity as they arise, since it is necessary to keep the Viet Cong from consolidating their hold in any area. However, phased across-the-board military,

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political, socio-economic, and psychological action would be concentrated in the first instance on the area surrounding Saigon."

Joseph Mendenhall, (United States Embassy Counsellor for Political Affairs), 11. "Paper Prepared by the Task Force in Vietnam: Outline Plan of Counterinsurgency Operations," [Washington National Records Center, RG 84, Saigon Embassy Files: FRC 65 F 115, Counterinsurgency Plan. Secret. Saigon, January 10, 1962], in Foreign Relations of The United States: Vietnam, 1962, Volume II, John P. Glennon, editor in chief, (Washington [DC]: United States Government Printing Office, 1990), pages: 18 & 20, 21.

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APPENDIX F

19. Memorandum From the Director of the Bureau of Intelligence and Research (Hilsman) and Michael V. Forrestal of the National Security Council Staff to the President.

Washington, January 25, 1963.

A REPORT ON SOUTH VIETNAM

The war in South Vietnam is clearly going better than it was a year ago [my emphasis]. The government claims to have built more than 4,000 Strategic Hamlets, and although many of these are nothing more than a bamboo fence, a certain proportion have enough weapons to keep out at least small Viet Cong patrols and the rudiments of the kind of social and political program needed to enlist the villagers' support.

The program to arm and train the Montagnards, which should go far toward choking off the infiltration routes, has also made progress. There are 29 U.S. Special Forces teams training Montagnards (as well as certain minority groups in the Delta), with eleven more teams on the way. By mid-autumn training camps had been set up in all the provinces bordering Laos, and a system of regular patrolling started that hopefully will one day cover the entire network of trails in the mountain regions. Under this program over 35,000 Montagnards have been trained, armed, and assisted in setting up their village defences, the eventual goal being one hundred thousand.

In both the mountain regions and the heavily populated lowlands, the areas through which one can travel without escort have been enlarged. In contested areas, the government is beginning to probe out, gradually repairing the roads and bridges cut by the Viet Cong as they go. In some of the moderately populated areas fringing the Delta and the coastal plain, as for example Binh Duong province, isolated villages have been bodily moved to positions along the roads where they can be more easily defended [my emphasis].

As of December 1, the Vietnamese government controlled 951 villages containing about 51% of the rural population – a gain of 92 villages and

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500,000 people in six months. The Viet Cong control 445 villages with 8% of the rural population – a loss of 9 villages and 231,000 people in six months [my emphasis].

The impact of previously authorized U.S. aid programs is also beginning to be felt. On the military side, U.S. advisors, helicopters, air support, and arms have given the Vietnamese military new confidence which they are showing by increased aggressiveness. For the first time since the war began in 1959, for example, the government forces began in September to capture more weapons than they lost. From January to August, government forces captured 2,728 weapons but lost 3,661. But in September and October, they captured 908 weapons and lost only 765 [my emphasis].

On the Strategic Hamlet and civilian programs, U.S. aid is just coming in. Strategic Hamlet "kits" are now arriving, a U.S. military advisor has been stationed with each province chief, and twenty of the forty-one provinces will soon have a U.S. Rural Development advisor as well. Finally there is considerably more optimism among Vietnamese officials than there was a year ago, although it is probably based more on the visible flow of U.S. aid than on objective analysis of actual progress.

The Viet Cong, in sum, are being hurt – they have somewhat less freedom than they had a year ago, they apparently suffer acutely from lack of medicines, and in some very isolated areas they seem to be having trouble getting food [my emphasis].

Qualifications

Even so, the negative side of the ledger is still awesome. The Viet Cong continue to be aggressive and are extremely effective. In the last few weeks, for example, they fought stubbornly and with telling results at Ap Bac, near My Tho. They completely escaped an elaborate trap in Tay Ninh province. They fought their way inside the perimeter of a U.S. Special Forces training camp at Plei Mrong, killing 39 of the trainee defenders and capturing 114 weapons. And they completely overran a strategic hamlet in Phu Yen province that was defended by a civil guard company in addition to the village militia, killing 24 of the defenders and capturing 35 weapons.

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Probably even more significant are the figures on Viet Cong strength. Intelligence estimates credit the Viet Cong with actually increasing their regular forces from 18,000 to 23,000 over this past year in spite of having suffered what the government claims were losses of 20,000 killed in action and 4,000 wounded. Part of this increase may result from nothing more than better intelligence, but even so it is ominous that in the face of greatly increased government pressure and U.S. support the Viet Cong can still field 23,000 regular forces and 100,000 militia, supported by unknown thousands of sympathizers.

What these figures suggest is that the Viet Cong are still able to obtain an adequate supply of recruits and the large quantities of food and other supplies they need from the villagers of South Vietnam itself. Infiltration by sea has been effectively blocked since early in 1962. As for infiltration by land, captured documents, POW interrogation, evidence gathered by patrolling, and other intelligence indicates that 3,000 to 4,000 Viet Cong at the most have come over the so-called Ho Chi Minh trails since January, 1962. As to supplies, there seems to be no doubt that the trails have so far been used only for specialized equipment, such as radios; for medicines; and perhaps for a few automatic weapons, although no weapons have yet been captured which could be proved to have been brought in after 1954. Thus the conclusion seems inescapable that the Viet Cong could continue the war effort at the present level, or perhaps increase it, even if the infiltration routes were completely closed.

Villagers' Attitudes

The question that this conclusion raises – and the basic question of the whole war – is again the attitude of the villagers. It is difficult, if not impossible, to assess how the villagers really feel and the only straws in the wind point in different directions. The village defenders in many of the strategic hamlets that have been attacked have resisted bravely. But in an unknown, but probably large number of strategic hamlets, the villagers have merely let the Viet Cong in or supplied what they wanted without reporting the incident to the authorities. There is apparently some resentment against the Viet Cong about the "taxes" they collect and suspicion directed towards the government. No one really knows, for example, how many of the 20,000 "Viet Cong" killed last year were only innocent, or at least persuadable villagers, whether the Strategic Hamlet program is providing enough government services to counteract the sacrifices it requires, or how the mute mass of villagers react to the charges against Diem of dictatorship and nepotism. At the very least, the figures on Viet Cong strength imply a continuing flow of recruits and supplies from these same villages and indicate that a substantial proportion of the population is still co-operating with

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the enemy, although it is impossible to tell how much of this co-operation stems from fear and how much from conviction. Thus on the vital question of villagers' attitudes, the net impression is one of some encouragement at the progress in building strategic hamlets and the number that resist when attacked, but encouragement overlaid by a shadow of uneasiness.

Conclusion

Our overall judgement, in sum, is that we are probably winning but certainly more slowly than we had hoped. At the rate it is now going the war will last longer than we would like, cost more in terms of both lives and money than we anticipated, and prolong the period in which a sudden and dramatic event would upset the gains already made [my emphasis].

The question is where improvements can be made – whether in our basic approach to fighting a guerrilla war, or in the implementation of that approach.

The Strategic Concept

We feel that the basic strategic concept developed last year is still valid. As mentioned above, the Viet Cong have gotten trained cadre and specialized equipment from the North, but the vast bulk of both recruits and supplies come from inside South Vietnam itself. Thus the strategic objectives of the war in South Vietnam, as in most guerrilla wars, are basically political – not simply to kill Viet Cong, but to win the people. Although the strategic concept has never been spelled out in any one document, the consensus seems to be that it consists of the following objectives: (1) to create the incentive for resistance in the basic population by providing for a flow upward of information on villagers' needs and a flow downward of government services, and by knitting them into the fabric of community decision-making; (2) to provide the basic population with the means and training for resistance; and (3) to cut the guerrillas' access to the villagers, their true line of communications, by essentially police-type measures for controlling the movement of goods and people [my emphasis]. In this context, the military objectives are also threefold: (1) to protect installations vital to the economy and government; (2) to provide rapid reinforcement for villages under heavy attack; and (3) to keep the regular guerrilla units off balance and prevent them from concentrating by aggressive but highly discriminating and selective offensive military operations [my emphasis].

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This combination of civilian and military measures is designed to reduce the guerrillas to their die-hard nucleus and isolate them in areas remote from the basic population. Only when this is done does the task finally become one of killing Viet Cong, of simple elimination.

As we say, this concept seems sound. For, even though it is difficult to assess the attitudes of the villager, two assumptions seem reasonable. The first is that the villagers will be prudently co-operative with the Viet Cong if they are not given physical security, both in the military sense of security from attacks on their village and in the police sense of security from the individual acts of terror and retaliation. The second is that if the villagers are in fact politically apathetic, as they seem to be, they are likely to remain so or even become pro-Communist if the government does not show concern for their welfare in the way it conducts the war and in the effort it makes to provide at least simple government services. It may be that these measures will not be enough to create popular support for the government and the incentive to resist, but it seems obvious that support could neither be created nor long maintained without them.

Implementing the Concept

Thus it is in the implementation of the strategic concept that there seems to be the greatest room for improvement. Success requires, first, full understanding of the strategy at all levels of the government and armed forces, and, second, the skills and organization for effective co-ordination of military activities with civilian activities. Some parts of the Vietnamese government do understand the strategy, but in other parts the understanding is imperfect at best. The same is true of the necessary skills and organization. Specific areas in particular need of improvement are listed in the paragraphs below, which discuss both programs and continuing issues and conclude with a proposal as to how the United States might increase its leverage on the Vietnamese government so as to bring the improvements about [my emphasis].

Lack of an Overall Plan

The most serious lack in South Vietnam is that of an overall plan, keyed to the strategic concept described above, through which priorities can be set and the co-ordination of military and civilian activities accomplished. In spite of U.S. urgings there is still no single country-wide plan worthy of the name but only a variety of regional and provincial plans, some good and some not so good. There are, for example, a number of special plans – the Delta Plan, Operation Sunrise,

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Operation Sea Swallow, Wave of Love -; several plans developed by the commanders of the Corps and Divisional areas; and an unknown number of plans developed by each of the forty-one province chiefs. Regional and provincial plans are, of course necessary, but they should be elements of a country-wide plan rather than a substitute for it. As it is, the impression is strong that many of these plans are both inconsistent and competitive.

Strategic Hamlets

One result of the lack of an overall plan is the proliferation of strategic hamlets that are inadequately equipped and defended, or that are built prematurely in exposed areas.

Gaps: The Police Program

The second result is that essential aspects of the strategy are neglected. The police program is an example. An effective police system is vital to guard against Communists remaining inside strategic hamlets, and to man the checkpoints and patrols that are essential in controlling the movements of goods and people. The present police system is clearly inadequate, and although the Public Safety Division of U.S. AID has put forward a proposal for expansion, no action has yet been taken.

Multiple Armies

A third result is what appears to be an extremely uneconomic use of manpower. There is in South Vietnam a confusing multiplicity of separate armies. In addition to the regular force (ARVN), there are under arms the Civil Guard, the Self Defense Corps, the Civilian Irregular Defense Groups (CIDG), the Hamlet Militia, the Montagnard Commandos, the Force Populaire, the Republican Youth, the Catholic Youth, several independent groups under parish priests, such as Father Hoa's Sea Swallows, and even one small army trained, armed, and commanded by a private businessman to protect his properties in Cap St. Jaques. All these forces add up to almost half a million men under arms, a number which if so organized would come to the astounding total of 51 divisions.

This multiplicity of separate armies results not only in an uneconomic use of manpower, but also difficulties in co-ordination and confusion as to function.

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One also suspects that it is a misallocation of manpower as well, with too much emphasis on military activities and not enough on civilian such as government services to the villages and police work. So many armed men with different loyalties will also create problems in the transition to a peace-time economy if victory is in fact won, as well as the obvious danger that one or another chief will use the forces under his command for political purposes. South Vietnam does not need any more armed men, but it does need to reorganize what it has.

Co-ordination of Military and Civilian Activities.

Still another result of the lack of an overall plan are the difficulties in co-ordinating military and civilian activities. One example is the proportion of "clear and hold" as opposed to "hit and withdraw" operations. There are no statistics available, but a number of American military advisors feel that the proportion of "clear and hold" operations, in which troops clear an area and then remain to protect the civic action teams and villagers while they build strategic hamlets, is too low in proportion to the "hit and withdraw" operations designed to destroy regular Viet Cong units. The latter type of operation is essential to keep the Viet Cong off balance and to prevent their concentrating for large-scale attacks, but it should be subordinate to the systematic expansion of secure areas.

Amnesty Program

A final result of the lack of an overall plan, or perhaps of imperfect understanding of an effective counter-guerrilla strategy, is the Vietnamese reluctance to embark on a meaningful amnesty program. After much U.S. urging, the Vietnamese have finally developed a plan, but it is far from satisfactory. The basic trouble is revealed by the Vietnamese insistence that what they want is not an "amnesty" policy but a "surrender" policy.

Civil Programs

The inadequacies in the police program, the tendency to build strategic hamlets in exposed places with inadequate arms and equipment, and the reluctance to develop a meaningful amnesty program have already been discussed. Other inadequacies in civilian programs are discussed below.

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One continuing problem is the failure of the Vietnamese government to organize its economy on an emergency basis. A resistance to deficit spending and stricter controls has permitted too large a part of the country's internal and external resources to go to nonessential purposes, especially in the Saigon area.

There should be more planning for what the Vietnamese economy will be like after the shooting has ended. There is almost none of this kind of planning now, and some of the things being done today might make sensible planning in the future very difficult. An obvious example is the rise of consumption levels, especially in non-essential imports which Vietnam could not buy without U.S. aid. At some point, and probably soon, the U.S. should undertake a long-range economic study of the country's future development.

Military Operations with Political Aspects

The opinion of some American military advisors that the proportion of "clear and hold" offensive operations is too low in relation to "hit and withdraw" operations designed to keep the Viet Cong off balance has already been mentioned. Another aspect of military operations that may have political consequences is the tactics used in the offensive operations needed to keep the Viet Cong off balance. Some American military advisors feel that the Vietnamese have a bias toward elaborate, set-piece operations. These large-scale operations provide insurance against defeat, but they are expensive, cumbersome, and difficult to keep secret. From the political point of view they have the additional disadvantages for the Vietnamese of maximizing the chances of killing civilians and from the American point of view of requiring a very heavy use of helicopters.

An alternative, and apparently effective way of keeping the regular Viet Cong off balance is long-range patrolling by small units, such as Ranger companies. In this tactic, the patrols, resupplied by air, stay out in the field for extended periods of time, never sleeping two nights in the same place, ambushing, and in general using guerrilla tactics to fight the guerrilla. The remaining forces are kept in reserve for rapid reinforcement and sealing off an area when the patrol encounters resistance. Although American military advisors in South Vietnam have worked hard to overcome Vietnamese reluctance to operate for extended periods in the field and at night, which would permit greater use of this tactic, they have had only partial success. (Paradoxically, President Diem spent a substantial part of his four and a half hour lecture to us praising a province chief who has used the long-range patrol tactic to very good effect recently in Zone D).

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Use of Air Power

On use of air power, and the danger of adverse political effects, our impression is that the controls over air strikes and the procedures for checking intelligence against all possible sources are excellent. In spite of this, however, it is difficult to be sure that air power is being used in a way that minimizes the adverse political effects. U.S. Air Force advisors tell us that the demand for air strikes from the South Vietnamese has gone up enormously. There are now 1,000 strikes per month, and there would be considerably more if the air power were available. During November, thirty-two per cent of these 1,000 strikes were so-called "interdiction" – that is, attacks on installations located in air photos and identified as Viet Cong by intelligence. Fifty-three per cent of the air strikes during November were in direct support – that is, bombing and strafing in advance of an attack on a location intelligence indicated as being occupied by Viet Cong or in response to a request by a ground unit in contact with the enemy. Fifteen per cent were other kinds of mission, such as reconnaissance. There is no doubt that the Viet Cong fear air attacks and that some interdiction is necessary and useful. On the other hand, it is impossible to assess how much resentment among persuadable villagers is engendered by the inevitable accidents. In general, the final judgment probably lies in the answer to the questions raised above about the relative emphasis on "clear and hold" and long-range patrolling versus "hit and withdraw" of the more elaborate type. If the proportion is correct between extending control and the necessary offensive operations to keep the Viet Cong off balance, then the killing of civilians is probably at an unavoidable minimum. If the proportion of "hit and withdraw" is too high in relation to "clear and hold", on the other hand, then air power, too, is probably being overused in ways that have adverse political consequences.

Reinforcement of Strategic Hamlets

One final point on the political aspects of military operations concerns quicker reinforcement for strategic hamlets under attack. Some American military advisors feel that more attention should be paid to ways of providing quicker reinforcement for the hamlets, including air support, although in the case of air support there are formidable problems of communications and in providing airfields close enough to threatened villages.

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Foreign Policy

In its complete concentration on the civil war and on the means and ideology for winning it, the government of South Vietnam has a naivete in foreign affairs which is dangerous for both Vietnam and for the U.S. There has been massive resistance to U.S. suggestions on policies for co-operation in other problems in the area, i.e. Laos and Cambodia. To some extent this is unavoidable in view of Diem's rather simple view of the Communist threat, but U.S. interests are so heavily involved in the country that our voice should carry more weight [my emphasis].

Vietnamese Domestic Politics

The Diem government is frequently criticized for being a dictatorship. This is true, but we doubt that the lack of parliamentary democracy bothers the villagers of Vietnam or much affects their attitudes toward the war. The real question is whether the concentration of power in the hands of Diem and his family, especially brother Nhu and his wife, and Diem's reluctance to delegate is alienating the middle and higher level officials on whom the government must depend to carry out its policies. Our judgment is that the United States does not really have as much information on this subject as it should. All that can be said at the moment is that it is the feeling of Americans in contact with these officials that they are encouraged by U.S. aid and apparently getting on with the job. Both the American and British missions, for example, feel that Brother Nhu's energetic support for the Strategic Hamlet program has given it an important push. The only evidence to contradict these judgments that we found was in a conversation with Buu, the head of the Vietnamese labor movement and, paradoxically, one of the co-founders with Diem and Nhu of Diem's political party.

Diem's Press Relations

The American press in South Vietnam now has pretty good relations with Embassy and MACV and generally are grateful for the help they have received. But their attitude toward Diem and the government of South Vietnam is the

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complete opposite, and with much justice. Diem wants only adulation and is completely insensitive to the desires of the foreign press for factual information. He is equally insensitive to his own image, the political consequences of the activities of Madame Nhu and the other members of his family, and his own tendencies of arbitrariness, failure to delegate, and general pettiness. After much effort, Ambassador Nolting persuaded Diem to let the Defense Ministry give regular military briefings. True to form, however, the content of the briefings is deplorable. One of these briefings, for example, the transcript of which we examined, contained little more than a saccharine eulogy of President Diem.

It would be nice if we could say that Diem's image in the foreign press was only his affair, but [it] seriously affects the U.S. and its ability to help South Vietnam. The American press representatives are bitter and will seize on anything that goes wrong and blow it up as much as possible. The My Tho [Ap Bac] operation, for example, contained some mistakes, but it was not nearly the botched up disaster that the press made it appear to be [my emphasis].

Action for the United States

By the way of summary, then, we feel that the United States should push the Diem government harder on the need for an overall plan, on a reduction in the number of different military organizations, on foreign policy questions in which the United States has an interest, on an effective police program, for a greater emphasis on military operations in extending and securing government control as opposed to large-scale offensives and air interdiction, on a meaningful amnesty program, on planning for the post-war economy, and on a realistic effort to get a more favorable press.

On many of these issues, of course, the United States has already been pressing. Thus in one sense the question is how to increase our leverage in the face of Diem's biases and general resistance to advice.

Actually, the United States is in a much better position to see that its advice is taken than it was a year ago. At that time Diem and officials at the national level were practically the only point of contact the U.S. had with either civil or military programs. Today, however, the U.S. has military advisors not only at the lower levels of the Army but with each province chief and steps are being taken to put U.S. AID advisors in at least 20 of the 41 provinces. It therefore is becoming possible to accomplish much of what we want at the local level without going through the vastly inefficient national bureaucracy. An

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example is the work of the special forces teams. They work at the village level, and at a number of places have done wonders not only in training and supervising the erection of village defenses but also in medical aid, school construction, and even in agriculture and marketing.

In general, it is our judgment that an effort should be made to increase this influence at the local level even more by putting additional U.S. AID people with province chiefs and, where is indicated, even at selected places further down in the civilian hierarchy.

In addition, having gotten past the first year of increased U.S. support and demonstrated our sincerity, the time has probably come when we can press our view on Diem more vigorously and occasionally even publicly [my emphasis].

One final recommendation for U.S. action concerns our dealings with the press here in Washington. In our judgment a systematic campaign to get more of the facts into the press and T.V. should be mounted. Although our report, for example, is not rosily optimistic, it certainly contains the factual basis (e.g., the first few paragraphs) for a much more hopeful view than the pessimistic (and factually inaccurate) picture conveyed in the press.¹

Footnotes

¹ Roger Hilsman and Michael V. Forrestal, 19. "Memorandum From the Director of the Bureau of Intelligence and Research (Hilsman) and Michael V. Forrestal of the National Security Council Staff to the President: A Report on South Vietnam," (Washington, January 25, 1963), [Source: Kennedy Library, Hilsman Papers, Country Series - Vietnam. Secret.] in Foreign Relations of the United States 1961 - 1963: Vietnam, January - August 1963, Volume III, (Washington [DC]: United States Government Printing Office, 1991), pages: 49 - 59.

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APPENDIX G

330. Report by the Senate Majority Leader (Mansfield)

Washington, December 18, 1962

SOUTHEAST ASIA – VIETNAM

We have problems of varying complexity with all of the nations in Southeast Asia. Clearly, the critical focus is south Viet Nam. Developments there in the next two or three years may well influence greatly the trends in the whole region for the following ten or twenty.

*And at this point it is far from certain what will develop in Viet Nam. One thing is reasonably clear: **From somewhere about 1956 or '57, the unusual combination of factors which had resulted in the establishment of the Republic under Ngo Dinh Diem began to lose its impulse [my emphasis].** A drift set in at about that time, responsibility for which is only partially ascribable to the shortcomings of the Vietnamese government. Our aid programs, military and non-military, after all, were one of the principal sources of the origin and the continuance of that government's power and these were properly open to charges of being ill conceived and badly administered. They did little with the time which was bought at Geneva in the sense of stimulating the growth of indigenous roots for the political structure in Saigon. That structure is, today, far more dependent on us for its existence than it was five years ago. If Vietnam is the cork in the Southeast Asian bottle then American aid is more than ever the cork in the Vietnamese bottle.*

*We have now had for some month's new concepts and a new American approach in Viet Nam. But the purpose of both remains, in essentials, what the purpose of other approaches has been from the outset. **Indeed, it was distressing on this visit to hear the situation described in much the same terms as on my last visit although it is seven years and billions of dollars later. Viet Nam, outside the cities, is still an insecure place which is run at least at night largely by the Vietcong. The government in Saigon is still seeking acceptance by the ordinary people in large areas of the countryside. Out of fear or indifference or hostility the peasants still withhold acquiescence, let alone approval of that government. In short, it would be well to face the fact that we are once again at the beginning of the beginning [my emphasis].***

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But as noted there are now new concepts and a new American approach. The new concepts, as undoubtedly you are aware, center on the strategic hamlets. The new approach involves the re-oriented and expanded economic aid program and the use of many thousands of supporting American military personnel as well as the Special Forces which are concentrating their efforts on the tribal people, the Montagnards.

Although the first results have scarcely been registered, the evaluations of the new approach – Vietnamese and American – in Saigon are extremely optimistic. Those bearing responsibility – Vietnamese and American – speak of success in the solution of the problem in terms of a year or two.

Having heard optimistic predictions of this kind, with the introduction of other "new concepts," beginning with French General Navarre in Hanoi in 1953, certain reservations seem to me to be in order. It is true that Vietminh casualty counts have been rising but the accuracy of these accounts is open to question. Moreover, it should be noted that the estimates of Vietcong core strength have also been rising. The total of 20,000 which is now calculated at CINCPAC is the highest which I have ever encountered since the Geneva accords of 1954.

Responsible Americans in Saigon believe that exceptional progress has been made in winning over the Montagnards by the Special Forces. This is an important achievement because the location of these tribal people has considerable strategic significance in terms of north-south supply trails. But it should also be recognized that in terms of the major struggle the Montagnards are peripheral. In the last analysis, the Saigon government will stand or fall on the basis not of several hundred thousand primitive Montagnards, but the millions of Vietnamese in the villages, towns and cities.

Apart from these two tangibles – higher Vietminh casualties and progress in winning over the Montagnards – there are also reports of improvements in the security of road travel and in the movement of rice and other commodities out of the countryside into the cities. These are excellent indicators of progress but the reports are not yet conclusive as trends.

At this point, therefore, the optimistic predictions of success must be regarded as deriving primarily from the development of the theory of the strategic hamlets by Mr. Ngo Dinh Nhu and by the injection of new energy which has been provided by additional American aid and personnel. The real tests are yet to come.

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Reservations are in order because in the first place, the rapid success of the concept of the strategic hamlet would seem to depend on the assumption that the Vietminh will remain wedded to their present tactics and will be unable to devise significant and effective revisions to meet the new concepts and the new highly mobile firepower of the American-trained forces. That may be the case but it would be unwise to underestimate the resourcefulness of any group which has managed to survive years of the most rugged kind of warfare. In the second place, rapid success of the new concepts depends upon the assumption that the great bulk of the people in the countryside sustain the Vietminh merely out of fear or, at best, indifference. There is really no effective measure of the accuracy of this assumption. It may indeed contain a good deal of truth but the critical question is how much truth. The temptation to extrapolate out own reactions on to the Vietnamese peasant in this kind of a situation is as obvious as it is dangerous.

The fact is that only experience and the most acute observation and objective reporting will throw real light on the accuracy of this assumption. To date we have not had enough of any of those essential ingredients of sound judgement. If experience should prove that there is less rather than more truth in the assumption that fear or indifference are the keystones of the Vietcong hold over the countryside, the target date for success will be delayed indefinitely beyond the year or two of the present predictions.

This is not to say that even a serious error in this assumption renders success impossible. If we are prepared to increase the commitment of men and military aid to compensate for the error it is not impossible that the concept of the strategic hamlet could still be brought into existence, in time, despite widespread support of the peasants for the Vietcong. And if the Vietnamese government, with more aid, could then turn the secured hamlets into a significantly more satisfactory way of life than the peasants have known, then it is conceivable that a deep disaffection towards the Vietcong could be induced. But it would be well to recognize that any such reorientation involves an immense job of social engineering, dependent on great outlays of aid on our part for many years and a most responsive, alert and enlightened leadership in the government of Vietnam.

Even assuming that aid over a prolonged period would be available, the question still remains as to the capacity of the present Saigon government to carry out the task of social engineering. Ngo Dinh Diem remains a dedicated, sincere, hardworking, incorruptible and patriotic leader. But he is older and the problems which confront him are more complex than those which he faced when he pitted his genuine nationalism against, first, the French and Bao Dai and then against the sects with such effectiveness. The energizing role which he played in the past appears to be passing to other members of his family,

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particularly to Ngo Dinh Nhu. The latter is a person of great energy and intellect who is fascinated by the operations of political power and has consummate eagerness and ability in organizing and manipulating it. But it is Ngo Dinh Diem, not Ngo Dinh Nhu, who has such popular mandate to exercise power as there is in south Vietnam. In a situation of this kind there is a great danger of the corruption of unbridled power. This has implications far beyond the persistent reports and rumors of fiscal and similar irregularities which are, in any event, undocumented [my emphasis]. More important is its effect on the organization of the machinery for carrying out the new concepts. The difficulties in Vietnam are not likely to be overcome by a handful of paid retainers and sycophants. The success of the new approach in Vietnam presupposes a great contribution of initiative and self-sacrifice from a substantial body of Vietnamese with capacities for leadership at all levels. Whether that contribution can be obtained remains to be seen. For in the last analysis it depends upon a diffusion of political power, essentially in a democratic pattern. The trends in the political life of Vietnam have not been until now in that direction despite lip service to the theory of developing democratic and popular institutions "from the bottom up" through the strategic hamlet program.

To summarize, our policies and activities are designed to meet an existing set of internal problems in south Vietnam. North Vietnam infiltrates some supplies and cadres into the south; together with the Vietnamese we are trying to shut off this flow. The Vietcong has had the offensive in guerrilla warfare in the countryside; we are attempting to aid the Vietnamese military in putting them on the defensive with the hope of eventually reducing them at least to ineffectiveness. Finally, the Vietnamese peasants have sustained the Vietcong guerrillas out of fear, indifference or blandishment and we are helping the Vietnamese in an effort to win the peasants away by offering them the security and other benefits which may be provided in the strategic hamlets.

That, in brief, is the present situation. As noted, there is optimism that success will be achieved quickly. My own view is that the problems can be made to yield to present remedies, provided the problems and their magnitude do not change significantly and provided that the remedies are pursued by both Vietnamese and Americans (and particularly the former) with great vigor and self-dedication.

Certainly, if these remedies do not work, it is difficult to conceive of alternatives, with the possible exception of a truly massive commitment of American military personnel and other resources – in short going to war fully ourselves against the guerrillas – and the establishment of some form of neo-colonial rule in south Vietnam. That is an alternative which I most emphatically do not recommend. On the contrary, it seems to me most essential that we make

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crystal clear to the Vietnamese government and to our own people that while we will go to great lengths to help, the primary responsibility rests with the Vietnamese. Our role is and must remain secondary in present circumstances. It is their country, their future which is most at stake, not ours.

To ignore that reality will not only be immensely costly in terms of American lives and resources but it may also draw us inexorably into some variation of the unenviable position in Vietnam which was formerly occupied by the French. We are not, of course, at that point at this time. But the great increase in American military commitment this year has tended to point us in that general direction and we may well begin to slide rapidly toward it if any of the present remedies begin to falter in practice.

As indicated, our planning appears to be predicated on the assumption that existing internal problems in south Vietnam will remain about the same and can be overcome by greater effort and better techniques. But what if the problems do not remain the same? To all outward appearances, little if any thought has been given in Saigon, at least, to the possibilities of a change in the nature of the problems themselves. Nevertheless, they are very real possibilities and the initiative for instituting change rests in enemy hands largely because of the weakness of the Saigon government [my emphasis]. The range of possible change includes a step-up in the infiltration of cadres and supplies by land or sea. It includes the use of part or all of the regular armed forces of north Vietnam, reported to be about 300,000 strong, under Vo Nguyen Giap. It includes, in the last analysis, the possibility of a major increase in any of many possible forms of Chinese Communist support for the Vietcong.¹

Footnotes

¹ Senator Michael Mansfield, 330. "Report by the Senate Majority Leader (Mansfield)," Washington, December 18, 1962, [Source: Senate Document 93-11. Printed in U.S. Senate 93rd Congress, 1st session, "Two Reports on Vietnam and Southeast Asia to the President of the United States by Senator Mike Mansfield (Washington, April 1973)," pp. 7 - 14.] in Foreign Relations of the United States 1961-1963: Vietnam 1962, Volume II, (Washington [DC]: United States Government Printing Office, 1990), pages: 779 - 783.

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APPENDIX H

"81. Telegram From The Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State."

Saigon, April 5, 1963 - 7 p.m.

In writing this, I am gravely concerned and perplexed. I believe I used all the ammunition and personal persuasion I had, without apparent result. He seemed stoically relaxed and rather philosophical throughout, and gave the impression of one who would rather be right, according to his lights, than President. He was evidently braced for this session, well prepared on details, courteous but immovable....

I shall try to give essence of long discussion with Diem as accurately as possible, since I believe situation now confronting us represents another perplexing turn in GVN policy and far reaching implications for American policy. I have considered possibility of his having misunderstood either proposal itself or consequences of his refusal, and I do not believe he is under any misapprehension or misunderstanding. He is apparently sincerely convinced (though erroneously in my judgement) that Americans, particularly at lower levels and in all branches of GVN activity, are, by their very number and zeal, creating within the governmental structure of the GVN and among the population the impression of assuming an American "protectorate" over SVN. He recognized repeatedly that this is neither our aim nor our desire and expressed great gratitude for American generosity and intentions, but stuck to his conviction that having so many Americans here is creating the impression of an U.S. protectorate. Relating this to our present proposal for counter-insurgency fund, he insisted that our proposal would perpetuate too close a relationship in financial and procedural matters, particularly on the civil side, would undermine the authority of his government and its ability to make unimpeded decisions, and thus play into the hands of the Communists....

Before leaving, I told the President, as a friend and a supporter of his, I was bound to say that his decision, in my opinion, would result in a downward spiral of Vietnam-American confidence, would result in a curtailment of U.S. aid, and really threaten to wash out the gains made over the last year and a half. I asked him to reconsider. He said that he had thought hard about this matter, that he knew our policy was well motivated, but he could not accept this proposal. His reasons were in a nutshell that it would be considered by the Vietnamese people, both in form and execution, as proof of the establishment of an U.S. "protectorate". I repeated that I could not accept his reasons and that, in my

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opinion, he was by this decision forcing a change in the policy of the U.S. Government towards Vietnam. Nolting¹

Footnotes

¹Frederick Nolting, 81. "Telegram From The Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State," Saigon, April 5, 1963 - 7 p.m., [Department of State, Central Files, POL 26-1 S VIET. Secret; Priority:] in Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963: Vietnam January - August 1963, Volume III, John P. Glennon - Editor-in-Chief, (Washington [D.C.]: United States Government Printing Office, 1991), pages: 208, 212 & 213.

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APPENDIX I

"169. Telegram From the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State."

Saigon, June 12, 1963 – 8 p.m.

1168. Deptel 1207. I opened meeting with President Diem by saying that I had sought during recent days, in conversations with him and with Thuan (who was also present), to emphasize gravity with which my government regarded Buddhist situation. I had now received new instructions which sent somewhat further than what I had been saying. I then handed him a paper, unsigned and headed "Memorandum," which contained a paraphrase of most of refiel. In handing paper over I emphasized that I had not discussed it with anyone.

President read paper carefully, and without any comment except to ask for translation of word "reluctantly". When he had finished reading, he handed paper to Thuan and sat in silence until Thuan had finished.

Diem then began an exchange with Thuan in Vietnamese, at the end of which Thuan said that the President wanted to point out that any statement by the United States at this juncture would be disastrous for the negotiations with the Buddhists which he expected would begin this evening or tomorrow morning. I pointed out that this was well understood in Washington and I gave him a copy of yesterday's statement by Department Spokesman, to effect that US did not want to comment with negotiations in the offing.

Referring to point in suggested communiqué about banning of public processions by any religious group, Diem pointed out that tomorrow, June 13, is Fete de Dieu (Corpus Christi), that Catholic processions were scheduled and indeed this was only day in religious calendar on which Catholic liturgy prescribes processions. If he banned them tomorrow, resentment of Catholics would be strong. I explained to president that burden of my demarche was in first three paragraphs of memorandum; remainder was argumentation and a suggestion for a communiqué. I doubted that Washington had considered the Fete de Dieu angle, but in any case the sentence to which he referred was put in, I was sure, to provide a rationale for temporary banning of Buddhist processions and demonstrations. With regard to tomorrow, he would have to decide whether to permit the Catholic processions, taking into account the expected effect on public order and on the negotiations with the Buddhists. I noted that, although Catholics would doubtless resent the banning of their processions, the gesture might be all the more appreciated by the Buddhists.

There was, rather surprisingly, no further discussion of substance of memorandum. Diem said [he] would have to reflect on it and would not, in any case, wish to take a decision until discussion with Buddhists had begun. I said

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that I had not expected an immediate reply but asked if I could expect that he or Thuan would keep me informed as discussions with Buddhists proceeded. He agreed.

Before leaving, I mentioned three items of information which I said had given me some concern: (1) A report that arrests were continuing June 11 in Danang and Hue. I thought it would be most regrettable if the authorities were retaliating against people involved in recent demonstrations. Diem did not reply but Thuan later told me that he would personally look into report. (2) I understood that some Vietnamese authorities (actually Minister of Interior, as I later told Thuan) were considering prosecuting for murder persons who had assisted honze set fire to himself but, whatever the facts, any action against others involved would be a grave mistake. Thuan later said he would see to it that this idea was killed. (3) I had heard that entry to Saigon from the provinces had been barred to all monks. President and Thuan acknowledged that this was so and said that they considered it dangerous to public safety to permit bonzes to converge on Saigon at this particular time. I said that the public safety was of course his responsibility and I did not press the point.

Meeting with Diem lasted less than an hour.

Later, in Thuan's office, he told me he had had a very serious (he called it climactic) conversation with President at mid-day, in which he had pressed President very hard to face facts and adopt conciliatory posture. He thought he had had some success. He said that he had emphasized to President that many people were afraid to tell him the truth but that he, Thuan, considered that it was his duty to tell the President "everything" and he had proceeded to do so.

Comment: Department's instructions could not have been more timely, coming just before negotiations begin. They are of course very strong medicine and will be very hard for Diem to take. I would not care to predict outcome, but I believe we can be satisfied that we have done everything reasonably possible to get President Diem to save himself.

It is obviously vital that there be no leaks about this latest move and I am taking strictest precautions at this end.

Trueheart¹

Footnotes

¹ William Trueheart, 169. "Telegram From the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State," #1168. Embtel 1207. Saigon, June 12, 1963 - 8 p.m., [Department of State, Central Files, SOC 14-1 S VIET. Secret; Operational Immediate; Limit Distribution.] In Foreign Relations of the United States: Vietnam January-August, 1963, 1961-1963 Volume III, (Washington [DC]: United States Government Printing Office, 1991), pages: 385 - 387.

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&
167. Telegram From the Department of State to the Embassy in Vietnam

The following document comprises the contents of the memorandum that Trueheart was instructed to convey to Diem and, indeed, which he did do as noted in the previous cable to Washington:

"167. Telegram From the Department of State to the Embassy in Vietnam"

Washington, June 11, 1963 – 11:03 p.m.

1207. In our judgement the Buddhist situation is dangerously near the breaking point. Accordingly, you authorized to tell Diem that in the United States view it is essential for the GVN promptly to take dramatic action to regain confidence of Buddhists and that the GVN must fully and unequivocally meet Buddhist demands as set forth in Embtel 1038. Furthermore, we believe that meeting these demands must be done in a public and dramatic fashion if confidence is to be restored.

You further authorized to tell Diem that unless GVN is willing to take effective action along the above lines within the next few days the US will find it necessary publicly to state that it cannot associate itself with the GVN's unwillingness to meet the reasonable demands of the Vietnamese Buddhist leaders.

There follows various argumentation which you authorized to use in whole or part at your discretion.

The US understands that a public statement may have political repercussions inside South Vietnam and would make such a statement most reluctantly since it continues to support President Diem. However, the international repercussions of the Buddhist troubles in South Vietnam cannot help but affect US world-wide responsibilities. In addition, US support of Vietnamese Government requires full support of Congress and American people and question as to our attitude towards and our involvement in Buddhist problem must be effectively dealt with if satisfactory solution is not arrived at very quickly. Furthermore, it is also in the interests of the Government of South Vietnam to take action to regain confidence of Buddhists. No government in Vietnam can survive without their support.

We realize that meeting Buddhist demands as set forth in Embtel 1038 run risk of engendering further Buddhist demands and that GVN must be prepared to face and very likely accede to such further demands unless they are so substantive as to endanger GVN defense effort. Nevertheless fact is that Buddhist demands so far have been reasonable/or insubstantial. In fact GVN has already gone most of the way to meet them. What is necessary is that GVN so state clearly and that it abide by such decision firmly before it is too late.

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Risk of GVN yielding now far less than pursuing continued stand-off position when, actually, there is very little substance separating GVN and responsible Buddhists. At present we believe situation has gone so far that to regain public confidence a joint statement by GVN and Buddhist leaders is needed to restore public confidence.

At same time we recognize risks to public order and safety if public gatherings are permitted at this time and importance to GVN of demonstrating that it is still in control of situation.

We therefore recommend that GVN seek work out joint communiqué to be issued with General Association making following points:

- 1. The five points suggested by Buddhists are considered as reasonable and proper rights which they and any other religious group may exercise in Vietnam.*
- 2. In order to avoid any further incidents which could endanger innocent persons Buddhist leaders in their capacity as representatives of a religion which is opposed to violence and the GVN as the guardian of public safety ask that all loyal and virtuous citizens of Vietnam refrain from any actions in public places which could harm innocent persons. Until the situation is judged to be calmer Association leaders and the GVN join in requesting that there be no further public processions or demonstrations by any religious group in Vietnam. The right to worship privately according to one's beliefs in pagodas, temples, or churches, and to own property, fly flags, enjoy freedom from unjustified arrest and to propagate religion will not be interfered with. All discriminatory laws and regulations will be promptly rescinded (the nicety of having this done by National Assembly seems brushed aside by Diem's statement that Buddhists can count on Constitution, i.e., on him.) Finally, as soon as the tensions caused by recent events have relaxed, the privilege of conducting orderly religious processions which do not endanger public safety may be freely exercised. It is recognized that religious processions constitute an outward manifestation of faith which should be permitted so long as they do not endanger the welfare of the community or damage the essential unity of the Vietnamese people which has enabled them to survive throughout history.*
- 3. It has been agreed between the GVN and Association that a permanent National Religious Council will be established which will have the right and duty of consulting with the Government on all matters affecting religious freedom as defined under the Constitution. This Council will have as members representatives of all established sects, churches and denominations which exist in Vietnam.*

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FYI – If Diem does not take prompt and effective steps to reestablish Buddhist confidence in him we will have to re-examine our entire relationship with his regime. End FYI.

Rusk².

Footnotes

² Drafted by Wood and Hilsman and cleared in draft by Harriman, 167. "Telegram From the Department of State to the Embassy in Vietnam," (Washington, June 11, 1963 – 11:03 p.m.), [Source: Department of State, Central Files, SOC 14-1 S VIET. Secret; Operational Immediate; Limit Distribution.] In Foreign Relations of the United States: Vietnam January-August, 1963, 1961-1963 Volume III, (Washington [DC]: United States Government Printing Office, 1991), pages: 381 – 383.

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**BIBLIOGRAPHY FOR AMBASSADOR FREDERICK NOLTING'S ROLE IN
AMERICAN DIPLOMATIC & MILITARY POLICY TOWARD THE GOVERNMENT
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- 4.) United States Air-Force Special Operations School:***
- 5.) Autobiographical Material: Includes Memoirs, Diaries & Letters***
- 6.) Biographical Material***
- 7.) Field Experience & Expertise: this Includes Pamphlets and Contemporary Writing and
later writings based on the author's own interviewing and expertise.***
- 8.) Published & Unpublished Documents: this includes personal papers and oral histories.***
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