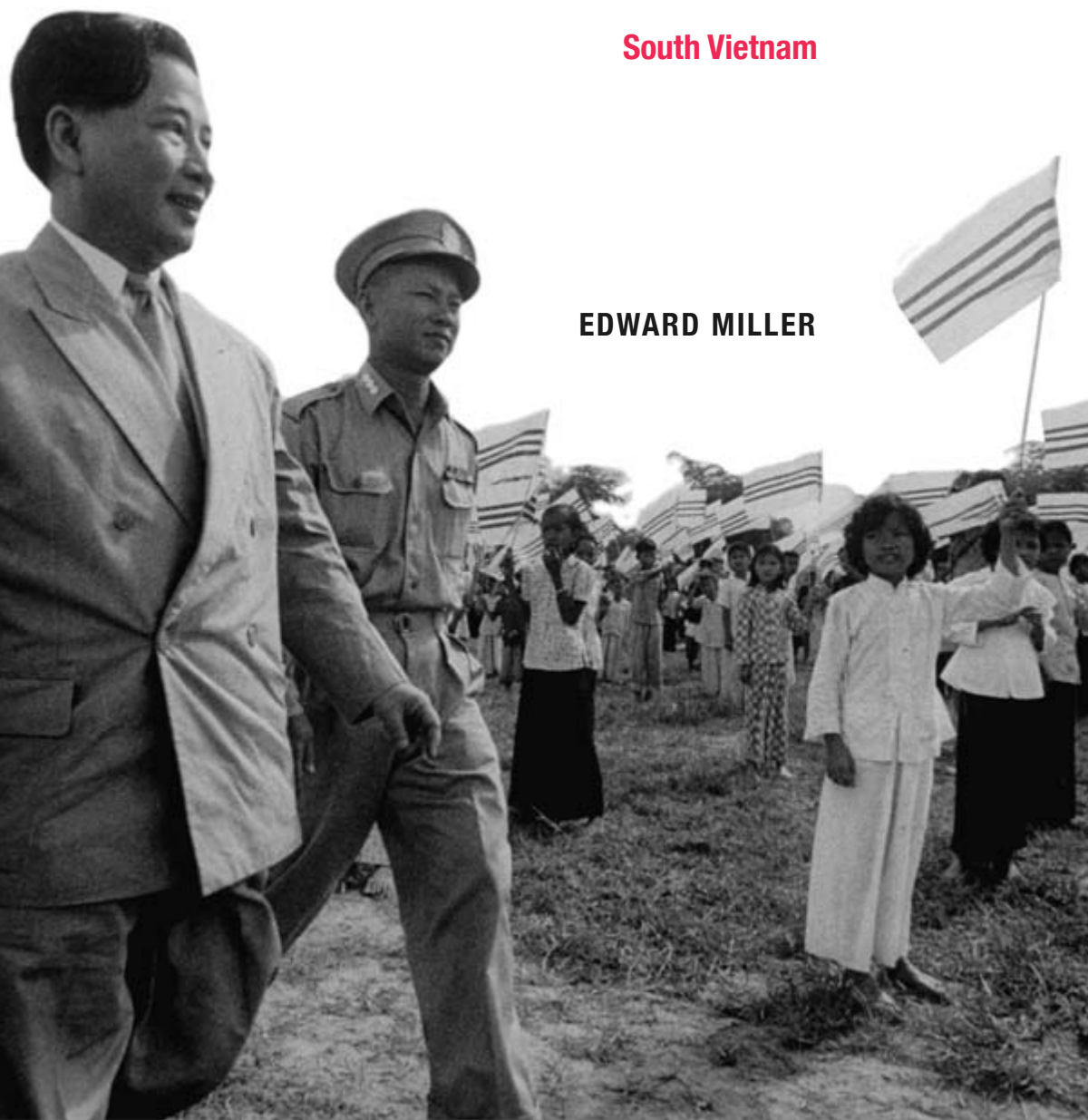


MISALLIANCE

Ngo Dinh Diem,
the United States,
and the Fate of
South Vietnam

EDWARD MILLER



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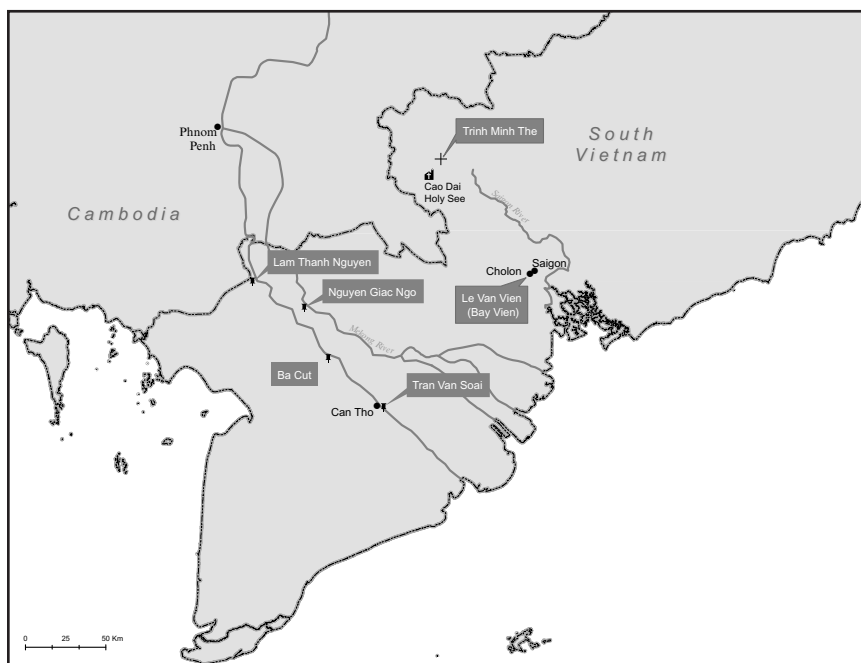
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Indochina after the Geneva Conference of 1954.



The headquarters of militia commanders in southern Vietnam, 1954–1955.

INTRODUCTION

By all accounts, the welcome ceremony that took place at Tan Son Nhut airport in the late afternoon of June 25, 1954, was a subdued affair. It was witnessed by a crowd of several hundred people gathered on the airport tarmac, beneath the silver fuselage of a French commercial airliner. The plane had arrived just minutes earlier, completing the last leg of its long journey from Paris to Saigon. As the crowd watched, a short figure in a white suit descended the staircase that had been rolled up to the rear door of the aircraft.

On the ground, Ngo Dinh Diem solemnly shook hands with the officials and political leaders who were waiting for him. His greeters included some of the most powerful men in Indochina. The first was a senior general of the French colonial army, who was attending on behalf of the French high commissioner. As an official of the colonial state, the general was a symbol of France's determination to maintain a measure of control over the Indochinese empire it had ruled for nearly a century. Next to welcome Diem was Prince Buu Loc, a member of Vietnam's royal family. Buu Loc was attending the ceremony in his capacity as the caretaker prime minister of the State of Vietnam (SVN), the anticommunist Vietnamese government that had been established under French auspices five years earlier. Though Diem had come to Saigon to replace Buu Loc as premier of the SVN, protocol obliged the prince to welcome his successor.

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Standing behind Buu Loc were several other high-ranking government officials, including the senior commanders of the SVN's armed forces. Also in attendance were leading members of the foreign diplomatic corps, including the U.S. ambassador to Vietnam, Donald Heath. Although he did not command any armies or assert any claims of sovereignty over Vietnamese territory, Heath was an influential figure in Saigon politics. As the official with responsibility for a massive program of military and economic aid for French forces and the SVN, the head of the U.S. mission was not a man to be taken lightly.

Despite the presence of so many of Indochina's most prominent personalities, the welcome ceremony for Diem was surprisingly brief and low-key. After exchanging pleasantries with the new arrival, the French general and the Vietnamese prince delivered short speeches of welcome. Observers noted that Diem seemed ill at ease as they spoke, and that he did not address the crowd after they had finished. As soon as the ceremony concluded, he climbed into a waiting limousine and sped away.

Diem's desire to leave the airport as quickly as possible was understandable. As the prime minister-designate of the SVN, the situation in which he now found himself appeared to be a daunting mix of both opportunity and danger. Diem's arrival in Saigon marked the end of nearly four years of self-imposed exile in the United States and Europe. For much of that time, it appeared unlikely that Diem would ever realize his ambition to become the leader of an independent, postcolonial Vietnamese state. He had defied expectations and returned to take the helm of the SVN—but he had done so at a moment when Vietnam's national destiny appeared to be hanging in the balance. Just seven weeks earlier, French army forces had been dealt a devastating defeat on a battlefield far to the north, in a remote mountain valley known as Dien Bien Phu. That defeat came at the hands of the Viet Minh, the communist-led movement that had been fighting for independence from France for over a decade. For Ho Chi Minh, the founder and leader of the Viet Minh, the timing of the victory was exquisite: it took place exactly one day before international peace negotiations to end the Indochina War were scheduled to begin in Geneva. When Diem landed at Tan Son Nhut on June 25, the terms of the Geneva peace had not yet been written, but it seemed certain that they would be disadvantageous to him and to the state he would soon be leading.

With the possibility of diplomatic disaster at Geneva looming, Diem knew that his political survival would hinge on his ability to rally support

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for his new government. But his prospects for success in this area seemed even dimmer than the chances of getting a favorable outcome at the peace conference. With the French war effort in disarray, the authority of the SVN was tenuous in some parts of Vietnam, nonexistent in others. In the northern provinces, the region the French referred to as Tonkin, the Viet Minh controlled vast areas of the countryside. The fiat of the SVN regime did not extend beyond a small, heavily garrisoned swath of the Red River delta. The central region of the country, known to the French as Annam, was also largely in Viet Minh hands. The Viet Minh were comparatively weaker in the southern region of Cochinchina, where they controlled less territory and fielded smaller and fewer military units. But the relative weakness of the revolutionaries in the south did not mean that SVN power was correspondingly greater there. In the Mekong delta, French and SVN leaders deferred to an assortment of local warlords affiliated with two heterodox religious groups, the Cao Dai and the Hoa Hao. These warlords exercised *de facto* control over much of the delta's population and territory. Even in Saigon, the SVN capital, French and Vietnamese officials had recently turned over parts of the city to a criminal syndicate run by a former river pirate. Although most of these satraps were nominally allied with the SVN—some even sent representatives to the welcome ceremony for Diem at the airport—all of them maintained their own private armies. These men would not look kindly on encroachments on their personal fiefdoms. Diem was thus stepping into a situation in which he appeared to face suspicion and danger in every quarter.

Almost all of the journalists and historians who have written about Diem's arrival in Saigon in June 1954 have portrayed it as an inauspicious event. According to some authors, the small size of the crowd proved that Diem was isolated and virtually unknown among his compatriots. Others argue that Diem's wooden demeanor during the ceremony showed that he was politically inexperienced and ill suited to handle the challenges facing him. In all of these accounts, Diem appears as a leader who was in over his head and who was poorly equipped to grapple with the challenges he faced.¹

Ironically, many of the authors who have portrayed Diem as helpless and naïve in 1954 have based their conclusions on information provided by one of the Vietnamese leader's staunchest supporters. Colonel Edward Lansdale was himself a new arrival in Saigon in late June 1954, having landed there only three weeks before. Ostensibly, Lansdale had come to

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Vietnam to serve as Air Force attaché at the U.S. embassy. In reality, however, that assignment was merely cover for Lansdale's position as a senior operative of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). Lansdale had never heard of Diem and was curious to learn about the man who had been named SVN prime minister at such a critical moment. En route to the airport to attend the welcome ceremony, he noticed that the road was lined by city residents hoping to catch a glimpse of the Vietnamese leader as he rode into town. Lansdale decided to stop and wait with the crowd to gauge their response to Diem. When the official motorcade finally appeared, Diem's car hurtled past at high speed with the windows closed. "The 'let down' feeling [among the crowd] was something tangible, obvious," Lansdale later wrote.² The experience persuaded Lansdale that Diem and his advisors were making "errors of judgment" and that the new premier "had no instincts at all of politics and the people he was going to lead."³

Lansdale's story about the speeding limousine would eventually become part of the American lore about Diem. In the days after the new premier's arrival, Lansdale undertook to provide the political counsel that he believed Diem needed. By his own account—related in exciting and compelling fashion in his 1972 memoir—Lansdale quickly won Diem's trust and became one of his closest American friends and advisors. Scholars and other authors have differed sharply over whether Lansdale deserves praise or condemnation for his actions on Diem's behalf. However, most have accepted Lansdale's representation of Diem as a political naïf who was ill prepared to deal with the daunting challenges he faced.⁴

Was Diem really as hapless and unaware of his political surroundings as Lansdale suggested? As would so often be the case in Vietnam during the 1950s and afterward, the version of events related by Americans did not tell the whole story. In reality, Diem's return to Saigon was much more carefully choreographed than Lansdale realized. The homecoming was supervised by Ngo Dinh Nhu, Diem's younger brother and his most trusted advisor. During Diem's exile, Nhu had remained in Indochina and labored tirelessly to promote his brother's political fortunes. Even before Diem's appointment had been announced, Nhu was already making preparations for his return. Some of these preparations were detailed in letters submitted to SVN authorities on behalf of a "Welcome Organizing Committee" established by Nhu. As the letters show, Nhu did not expect that the ceremony at the airport would be attended by the general

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public. But he was hardly oblivious to the importance of building popular support for Diem. Instead of staging a mass rally at the airport, Nhu's committee proposed to hold a public reception in downtown Saigon, on the street in front of Gia Long Palace, the prime minister's official residence. It was there that Diem would address the public and appeal for support. The meticulousness of Nhu's preparations was reflected in his detailed instructions to SVN officials, which covered everything from crowd control to the positioning of loudspeakers.⁵

The downtown reception at the palace came off according to Nhu's plans. As anticipated, the crowd was several times larger than the one at the airport. It included many SVN civil servants who had been dismissed early from work so they could attend the gathering. There was also a large delegation of trade unionists, led by a prominent labor activist who was allied with Nhu. Letters of welcome from leaders of several ethnic minority groups were read to the crowd. A well-organized contingent of Saigon's Chinese residents carried banners proclaiming support for Diem. According to a French intelligence report, Diem emerged from his limousine to a "vibrant ovation." Pictures published in Saigon newspapers showed Diem smiling as he moved among the crowd, talking with people and shaking hands. The highlight of the event was Diem's speech, in which he spoke resolutely of his plans to pursue revolutionary change:

In this critical situation, I will act decisively. I will move with determination to open a path to national salvation. A total revolution [*mot cuoc cach-mang toan dien*] will be implemented in every facet of the organization and life of the nation.⁶

As several observers noted, the reaction to Diem's speech was strongly positive, especially among the young anticommunist militants in attendance. On the whole, therefore, the reception appeared to have accomplished precisely what Nhu intended. As subsequent events would demonstrate, the Ngo brothers' judgment about political affairs was far from infallible. But this does not mean that they were naïve or helpless when Diem returned to Saigon to take the reins of power. On the contrary, Diem, Nhu, and their closest supporters had been planning for years for just this moment and the opportunities it offered. They were anything but unprepared.⁷

The cordial atmosphere that prevailed during the reception at Gia Long palace did not last long. In the months following his arrival in Saigon,

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Diem endured a daunting series of diplomatic and political setbacks. On July 21, 1954, just two weeks after Diem had been formally installed in office, word arrived from Geneva that French and Viet Minh leaders had bisected Vietnam by drawing a “provisional military demarcation line” through the middle of the country at the 17th parallel. The Viet Minh were to take control of all territory north of the line; Diem’s government would administer everything to the south. Among other things, this arrangement obliged the SVN to abandon the city of Hanoi and the other parts of the Red River delta that had been held by French forces during the war. The Geneva agreements also called for the holding of nationwide elections within two years to create a single Vietnamese government—elections that Ho and the Viet Minh seemed certain to win.

As dismaying as the news from Geneva was for Diem, he soon discovered that he faced several even more pressing problems. During the fall of 1954, the premier narrowly fended off a series of coup attempts by the commander of the SVN army. Diem’s position became even more precarious during the winter and spring of 1955, as several warlords and militia commanders joined forces against him. The tide turned in his favor only in May, after he had rallied the army to him and provoked a military showdown with his rivals. After three days of pitched fighting in the streets of Saigon, Diem’s troops prevailed. Over the next several months, Diem expanded and consolidated this triumph through various military and political maneuvers. By October 1955, he was strong enough to proclaim the creation of a new state, known as the Republic of Vietnam (RVN), with himself as president.

Prior to his unexpected victory in the Battle of Saigon, Diem’s relations with the United States seemed as tenuous as his grip on power. Although the U.S. government officially backed Diem during his first year in office, many U.S. officials were critical of his leadership abilities and pessimistic about his prospects for success. On the eve of Diem’s showdown with his enemies, President Dwight D. Eisenhower actually approved a plan to withdraw U.S. backing from the Vietnamese leader. But after Diem turned the tables on his opponents, the White House revoked this decision, and Washington quickly swung into a position of strong support for him and his government. Between 1955 and 1961, Diem’s government received more than \$2 billion worth of military and economic assistance from Washington, making South Vietnam (as the RVN was

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unofficially called) one of the largest recipients of U.S. aid in the world.⁸ This material support was accompanied by effusive U.S. public backing for Diem and the steps he took to consolidate his rule, including his refusal to participate in the Geneva-mandated elections. In May 1957, just two years after he had endorsed Diem's ouster, Eisenhower conferred a rare honor on the RVN president by personally meeting him at the Washington airport when he arrived on a state visit. During his stay in the United States, Diem delivered an address to a joint session of Congress. Crowds cheered as he rode in an open car down Broadway in New York City.

The political and diplomatic turnaround Diem had achieved was remarkable, but it was far from the last reversal of fortune he would experience. In the late 1950s, communist operatives in South Vietnam began a new campaign of armed resistance against Diem's government. By 1961, the insurgents—now operating under the banner of the National Liberation Front (NLF), a communist-controlled organization backed by North Vietnam—had dealt South Vietnamese security forces a series of battlefield setbacks. As the war went badly for Diem, his alliance with Washington became strained. Although many U.S. officials remained supportive of him, he faced rising criticism for his reliance on authoritarian tactics and for his failure to follow American prescriptions for political, administrative, and military reform.

During 1962, American complaints about Diem were temporarily quelled by a sudden improvement in the battlefield performance of the South Vietnamese army. This upturn seemed to validate the strategy of Eisenhower's successor, John F. Kennedy, who had decided to demonstrate support for Diem by increasing both the amount of U.S. aid and the number of military advisors sent to the RVN. By 1963, however, South Vietnam was once again in upheaval following the eruption of an anti-Diem protest movement led by Buddhist monks. As tensions between the regime and the demonstrators intensified, Diem's American critics renewed their calls for his ouster. These demands became even more pointed after Diem disregarded U.S. admonitions and ordered his security forces to crush the Buddhists by force. When the Diem government was finally toppled in a coup led by South Vietnamese Army commanders on November 1, 1963, no one in Saigon doubted that the U.S. government had encouraged the putsch.

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What explains the spectacular early triumphs and the equally spectacular demise of the Ngo Dinh Diem government? And what accounts for the tumultuous course of his relationship with the United States between 1954 and 1963? The historians who have sought to answer these intertwined questions have long focused on the American side of the U.S.-Diem alliance. For many scholars, Washington's dealings with Diem were driven by the same convictions and motives that first led U.S. leaders to intervene in Indochinese affairs in the late 1940s and continued to shape U.S. decisions until the end of the Vietnam War in 1975. Although they differ over why and how the U.S. chose to align itself with Diem, these authors have mostly emphasized American perceptions, ambitions, and attitudes.

The most common interpretation of the U.S.-Diem alliance depicts it as a product of American Cold War geostrategic calculations. According to this argument, the deepening U.S. involvement in Indochina was dictated by concerns about Soviet expansionism. Support for Diem merely continued the containment strategy that Washington had pursued in Indochina since 1950, when it began providing money, arms, and advice in support of France's war effort against the Viet Minh. Following the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu, U.S. leaders needed a new client in Vietnam, and they found Diem's staunch anticommunism irresistible.⁹

A second interpretation of the U.S. alliance with Diem sees it as a function of American economic objectives. Although Southeast Asia was neither a major supplier of raw materials to American industries nor a large market for American products, U.S. leaders still treated the region as important to the success of their larger goal of establishing an international liberal economic order. They were particularly interested in using trade links to Southeast Asian countries to promote the recovery of key U.S. Cold War allies such as Britain and Japan. An alliance with Diem, these leaders hoped, would promote these global economic objectives.¹⁰

Another interpretive approach seeks to understand the U.S.-Diem alliance by reference to certain American ideological and cultural currents. Scholars in this school readily acknowledge the importance of geopolitical and economic considerations in the minds of U.S. leaders; however, they assign more causal weight to matters such as race and religion. Borrowing methodologies from cultural and literary studies, these scholars argue that the key U.S. decisions about Diem were profoundly shaped by racist and Orientalist assumptions about Asian people and their

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“need” for authoritarian government. They also argue that Diem’s identity as a Catholic appealed to the religious proclivities of U.S. leaders, many of whom were devout Christians.¹¹

All of these interpretations are valid and useful ways of thinking about the history of the U.S.-Diem alliance. A wealth of evidence shows that Washington’s decisions about Diem and South Vietnam between 1954 and 1963 were heavily affected by American strategic considerations, economic interests, and racial and cultural prejudices. Nevertheless, none of these interpretations is satisfactory or convincing, either alone or in combination with the others. Like other historical accounts that seek to explain particular U.S. foreign policy decisions by reference to overarching geopolitical, material, or cultural impulses, these interpretations often obscure a key problem in the study of international politics: the problem of contingency. As Fredrik Logevall has observed, such “structural” explanations frequently make it seem as if Washington’s actions in Vietnam were foregone conclusions. But as Logevall and other scholars have demonstrated, many of the key choices U.S. leaders made about Vietnam were far from inevitable. Many American decisions about Diem and South Vietnam—including the most momentous and consequential ones—were fiercely contested within the U.S. government and its foreign policy bureaucracy. To formulate persuasive explanations of these decisions, historians must leaven their arguments about politics, economics, and culture with attention to leaders’ personalities, experiences, and habits of mind. They must also give due consideration to the particular and contingent qualities of the historical moments in which political leaders lived and operated.¹²

In addition to revisiting the contingency and the context of U.S. decisions about South Vietnam, scholars also need to broaden the scope of their inquiries beyond the conventional focus on American actions, actors, and sources. Since the 1990s, the study of the Vietnam War has taken on a more international quality, as historians have undertaken archival research in Russia, China, France, Britain, and other countries.¹³ Among other things, this work has shown that “Washington . . . was merely one participant in a complicated, decidedly international dynamic in which other governments usually held the initiative and set the agenda.”¹⁴ At the same time, experts in Southeast Asian history and Vietnamese studies have produced new analyses of the war that incorporate Vietnamese perspectives and Vietnamese-language sources. This recent work includes

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several studies of the Vietnamese Communist Party (known officially during the war as the Vietnam Workers' Party, or VWP) and the state it ruled, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV).¹⁵ With some important exceptions, however, the political, social, and cultural history of South Vietnam during the RVN period remains unexplored. In the past decade, a few historians have begun to examine South Vietnam's republican era using research agendas that incorporate RVN archival documents and other Vietnamese sources. Several of these valuable studies address key aspects of the history of the Diem government and state-society relations during the period of the "First Republic" (1954–1963).¹⁶ Nevertheless, this work has offered only glancing suggestions about the possibilities for broader reconceptualizations of the history of the U.S.-Diem alliance or the history of the Vietnam War in general. In the meantime, much of the rest of the recent scholarship on U.S.-South Vietnam relations continues as before, with little or no attention to Vietnamese perspectives or sources.¹⁷

This book contends that neither the formation nor the undoing of the U.S.-Diem alliance was foreordained by the larger political, economic or cultural circumstances in which it was created. I also contend that the history of the alliance cannot be satisfactorily explained only—or even primarily—by reference to U.S. perspectives, attitudes, and actions. Instead, I examine the nearly decade-long history of the alliance by focusing on the interplay between American and Vietnamese personalities, ideas, and decisions. Thus, this book argues that both the rise and the fall of the U.S.-Diem relationship turned on the agency of particular American and Vietnamese individuals. While some of the key decisions in the history of the alliance were made in Washington, I find that many of the most momentous and consequential actions were undertaken in South Vietnam.

In arguing that the U.S.-Diem alliance was something made and not begotten, I am not seeking to lionize or rehabilitate any particular leader, group, or government. In my view, the record of the 1954–1963 period is replete with miscalculations and mistakes by all of the parties and leaders involved in South Vietnamese affairs. Insofar as there is blame to be assigned in these pages, it will fall on the heads of American and Vietnamese leaders alike. Ultimately, however, my inquiry is driven by a desire to explain why events turned out as they did—and why they did not turn out as most Americans and Vietnamese at the time imagined they

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would. With respect to both causality and moral responsibility, my conclusions about U.S.-RVN relations during the Diem era are more qualified and less black-and-white than the conclusions drawn by some other historians.

In order to better understand the interactions between American and Vietnamese actors and attitudes, I have conducted extensive research in non-U.S. sources, including RVN official documents and other Vietnamese-language sources.¹⁸ In addition, I have sought to combine the methods and techniques of two fields of inquiry that have traditionally had little to do with each other: U.S. foreign relations and Vietnamese studies. By drawing on the recent work and insights generated by scholars in these two subfields, I hope to contribute to both. In this respect, this book is more than just another entry in what one scholar has dubbed the “Why Vietnam sweepstakes”—the long-running argument among American historians over why the U.S. government embarked on what became one of the worst foreign policy disasters in the nation’s history.¹⁹ While I aim to shed new light on America’s calamitous intervention in South Vietnam, I seek to do this by situating the U.S. involvement within the context of modern Vietnamese history. Such an approach holds out the possibility of new answers to some of the most enduring and contentious questions in Vietnam War historiography.²⁰

The results of my research have led me to question some of the key tenets of the received wisdom about U.S.-South Vietnam relations after 1954. Chief among these is the notion that the history of Washington’s alliance with Diem can be explained mainly by the strategic imperatives and cultural circumstances of the Cold War. To be sure, there is no denying that the Cold War deeply affected the thinking of both U.S. and South Vietnamese leaders during the 1950s and 1960s. Indeed, the anti-communist convictions that Diem shared with U.S. officials were part of the ideological bedrock on which the alliance was constructed. Yet the fact that both sides were so firmly committed to anticommunist principles is precisely why the arc of the alliance cannot be satisfactorily explained as merely the product of Cold War exigencies. Their agreement on the paramount importance of containing communism did not prevent the U.S. and Diem governments from disagreeing (and frequently clashing) over a host of other questions and issues. The Cold War is necessary but insufficient to explain how and why the alliance unfolded and then unraveled as it did.²¹

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Rather than focusing on overarching Cold War imperatives, this book gives greater weight to the activities and processes that both Americans and Vietnamese referred to as nation building. Specialists in the history of U.S. foreign relations have long noted that Americans frequently proclaimed their desire to transform South Vietnam into a strong, stable, and prosperous society. Until recently, however, most Vietnam War scholars treated U.S. nation-building activities in South Vietnam as a mere side-show to America's pursuit of its geostrategic objectives in Southeast Asia. This book, in contrast, argues that nation-building ideas and agendas played central roles in the formation, evolution, and eventual undoing of Washington's relationship with Diem.²²

Recent scholarship on post-1945 U.S. nation-building ventures has situated these activities within the larger and longer history of American development. Several historians have explored the ways U.S. nation-building initiatives during the 1950s and 1960s continued older American traditions of mission and uplift. According to these scholars, Americans' interest in the "Third World" was not born of the Cold War; instead, the Cold War lent new momentum to preexisting American efforts to promote the transformation of Asian, African, and Latin American societies.²³ A related body of work examines the evolution of U.S.-sponsored development efforts in particular countries.²⁴ Other studies focus on the efforts of U.S. social scientists, government officials, and aid experts to elaborate new theories and doctrines of development.²⁵ A recurring theme in this scholarship is the propensity of American nation builders to hold up both U.S. history and contemporary U.S. postwar society as a source of models and practices that other nations ought to emulate. This propensity also shaped U.S. collaborations with the Diem government on nation building in South Vietnam.

Since nation building was something that was supposed to take place in South Vietnam, this book focuses on those Americans—diplomats, soldiers, intelligence officers, social scientists, and aid experts—who actually went to Indochina during the 1950s and early 1960s in the hopes of pursuing development projects there. My "on the ground" approach affords greater insight into the ways Americans tried to put their ideas about nation building into practice. It also illuminates these Americans' interactions with their South Vietnamese counterparts and demonstrates how ideas about nation building crucially affected the day-to-day func-

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tioning of the alliance. Some of these would-be nation builders (such as Edward Lansdale) will already be well known to readers of other histories of the Diem era; others may be less familiar. But even the most famous American members of my cast have new roles here, insofar as I use them to show the central importance of ideas about nation building and development in both the making and unmaking of the U.S.-Diem relationship.

In part, then, this is a book about U.S. developmentalist ambitions and about the efforts to realize those ambitions in South Vietnam. But American actors and ideas are not the whole story. It may well be the case, as some have suggested, that U.S. nation-building efforts in South Vietnam during the Diem years were part and parcel of a broader American effort to seek “dominance by design” in Southeast Asia during the Cold War era.²⁶ But even if this is true, it does not follow that nation building in South Vietnam was an exclusively American enterprise. On the contrary, the Americans who went to South Vietnam after 1954 all too frequently found themselves adjusting, adapting, or discarding the nation-building plans and theories they had brought with them. In many cases, they were obliged to do so because they found that Vietnamese social and political realities did not conform to their expectations. Indeed, U.S. nation-building ventures were frequently disrupted by the very South Vietnamese leaders and groups with whom the Americans had hoped to collaborate.²⁷ These disruptions cannot be explained by Vietnamese ideological inertia or by the reactionary instincts that supposedly defined the thinking of RVN leaders and officials. South Vietnamese often resisted U.S. designs because they had their own ideas about how nation building should proceed. The history of nation building in South Vietnam during 1954–1963 was therefore much more than merely a U.S. attempt to manufacture a client state out of whole cloth. Instead, nation building was a field of contest involving multiple American and Vietnamese agendas. Examining these contests requires attention to Vietnamese actors and their ideas, aspirations, and objectives—starting with those of Diem himself.

In the historiography of the Vietnam War, no figure is more desperately in need of revision than Ngo Dinh Diem. In 1963, journalist Bernard Fall observed that nearly everything written about Diem consisted either “of

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totally uncritical eulogy or of equally partisan condemnation.”²⁸ Fall’s statement is still largely true today. With a few important exceptions, even recent writings about Diem have continued to depict him in flat and simplistic terms. Most of the existing literature about him can be sorted according to each author’s preference for one or the other of a few standard caricatures. By continuing to rely on these clichés, Diem’s admirers and critics have failed to give him his due as a historical actor.

The oldest caricature of Diem represents him as a U.S. puppet. This view was most succinctly expressed in the term “My-Diem” (America-Diem), a derisive slogan coined by Vietnamese communist propagandists to refer to Diem’s government. The validity of the My-Diem formulation was undermined by the circumstances of Diem’s 1963 ouster—if he was a puppet, why did the United States want him removed?—and by subsequent releases of documentary evidence showing that Diem disregarded U.S. advice much more often than he followed it. Despite this, the caricature endures, albeit in attenuated form. The latter-day version of this thesis holds that Diem, despite refusing to follow U.S. directives after taking office, was still beholden to Washington for having installed him in power in the first place. Although the authors who subscribe to this view differ over who was responsible for securing Diem’s appointment, they are agreed that Diem himself played no more than a minor role. They further maintain that Diem’s intransigence in his dealings with Washington does not disprove their contention that his regime was a U.S. creation. Diem may have been “a puppet who pulled his own strings,” but he was still a puppet.²⁹

Another well-worn caricature represents Diem as a product of “tradition.” According to this line of thinking, Diem’s actions and policies were determined not by his dependence on Washington but by his slavish devotion to hopelessly backward ideas. Many writers have resorted to this portrayal when discussing Diem’s attempts to reconcile his identity as a Catholic with his intense interest in Confucianism. In these accounts, Diem is said to have endorsed a “medieval” brand of Catholicism; alternatively, he was bent on restoring ancient Confucian norms about governance and the deference of subjects to their rulers. Such formulations display the hallmarks of what historians and other scholars refer to as Orientalism—the representation of Asian people and Asian societies as mired in a sort of cultural stasis. By Orientalizing Diem, the authors of these accounts explain his demise as the inevitable by-product of the larger process in

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which “traditional” norms and values were swept away by an onrushing “modernity.”³⁰

Not all of the authors who have depicted Diem as a creature of tradition have cast him in a negative light. Indeed, some Diem enthusiasts have celebrated his “traditional” (or “mandarin”) qualities as his greatest assets. According to this view, Diem understood that Vietnam was a tradition-bound society, and therefore grasped that Washington’s plans for South Vietnam were inappropriate and unworkable. Instead of following U.S. advice, he sagely attempted to rule South Vietnam with a kind of benevolent authoritarianism. By upholding ancient Vietnamese ideals of governance and leadership, Diem was supposedly well on his way to victory over his communist enemies—and indeed would have claimed this victory, if his fickle U.S. allies had not betrayed and killed him in 1963. While such a representation might at first seem to grant Diem a larger measure of historical agency, it quickly becomes clear that these celebrations of Diem’s “traditional” qualities are as Orientalist as the more critical depictions.³¹

All of these caricatures of Diem are based on false assumptions, and many of the conclusions drawn from them are wrong. Contrary to what the puppet thesis suggests, Diem obtained power in 1954 through his own efforts and those of his brothers, not because of a U.S. pressure campaign. His subsequent success in consolidating his power in South Vietnam was also mainly the result of his own maneuvers. The representation of Diem as a creature of “tradition” is also undermined by a wealth of contrary evidence. Diem’s ideas about Confucianism and Catholicism had little to do with restoring the practices of past centuries. He was much more interested in how he might use particular Catholic and Confucian principles to craft what he believed was a distinctively Vietnamese vision of development for Vietnam. Finally, those who have idolized Diem as a betrayed sage have given short shrift to the many ways that his modernizing ambitions contributed to his downfall. Diem’s fatal mistakes in 1963 did not derive from his determination to uphold ancient Asian norms about wise rulership. Rather, they stemmed from his erroneous belief that his nation-building plans were succeeding brilliantly and that he was on the verge of spectacular new triumphs.

In representing Diem as an aspiring modernizer and nation builder, this book seeks a more historical understanding of the man and his thinking. Such an approach requires greater attention to the colonial and

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postcolonial contexts in which he formulated his ideas and goals. On the one hand, Diem was among a host of “nativist” leaders who came to power in Asia and Africa during the early Cold War era. Like many of his counterparts in other Southeast Asian countries, Diem explicitly rejected both liberal and communist models of development. As an alternative, he expounded a nation-building vision which he portrayed as homegrown and authentically Vietnamese.³² Yet Diem was also very much a product of the Indochinese colonial milieu in which he came of age. His ideas about governance, politics and society were not holdovers from Vietnam’s ancient past; rather, they were formed in his encounters with interwar European and Vietnamese discourses about modernity, progress, and revolution. Diem was especially interested in the work of philosophers and other intellectuals who argued for the enduring relevance and adaptability of certain “traditional” ideals in a modern era. In this regard, his thinking resembled the views of many other Vietnamese political leaders of the time—including Ho Chi Minh, who, for all his obvious differences with Diem, shared his rival’s belief that Confucianism and other traditions could have modern and even revolutionary applications.³³

By treating ideas about nation building and development as central problems in the making and unmaking of the U.S.-Diem alliance, this book offers an alternative way of thinking about the early history of South Vietnam’s republican era. It also suggests a different approach to the study of the origins of the U.S. intervention in the Vietnam War. For both Americans and South Vietnamese, the alliance was more than a joint effort to check the expansionist designs of North Vietnam and international communism. It was also an opportunity to promote their respective visions of how Vietnam could and should be made into a modern nation. In the heady early days of Diem’s rule, especially after his stunning triumph in the Battle of Saigon, officials in both governments were optimistic that the alliance would serve their respective nation-building objectives. For nearly a decade, Diem and his U.S. counterparts invested great resources and fervent hopes in numerous nation-building projects in South Vietnam. But collaboration on nation building proved more difficult than either side expected, especially after the VWP-led insurgency exploded across the South Vietnamese countryside during 1959–1960. By the early 1960s, even some of Diem’s most ardent U.S. supporters had begun to doubt the prospects for continued cooperation with the regime. Such

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doubts were intensified by the untimely emergence in 1963 of the Buddhist rebellion—a movement that was sparked not merely by fears of religious persecution but also by growing South Vietnamese anxieties about Diem's nation-building agenda. In these and other ways, the contests and clashes that I call the *politics of nation building* shaped the entire history of the U.S.-Diem alliance, from its creation to its demise.

Vietnam War scholars and other commentators have long treated Americans and South Vietnamese as “peoples quite apart.” According to this view, the differences of culture and historical experience that divided the allies inevitably gave rise to mutual feelings of frustration, exasperation, and alienation. In the long run (the argument goes) such differences made successful collaboration impossible.³⁴ At first glance, this interpretation seems compelling. The political, cultural, and intellectual reference points that structured the Ngo brothers' approach to development and nation building were quite different from those that defined Americans' views of such matters. As a result, the two sides often did not see eye to eye when they tried to collaborate on nation building; they also frequently attributed their difficulties in dealing with each other to unbridgeable cultural and historical differences. The journalist David Halberstam—one of Diem's fiercest American critics—concluded that the “psychology and outlook of the Ngo family were completely alien” to those of U.S. officials.³⁵ Ngo Dinh Nhu, despite his disdain for Halberstam, seemed to agree with him on this point. Nhu once described the many disputes between Washington and Saigon as the product of a “clash of civilizations”—a remark that seems to resonate with later arguments about the inherent incompatibility of different traditions and cultural practices.³⁶

Contra both Halberstam and Nhu, this book argues that the gaps between the Americans and the Diem regime—though real and significant—were not as absolute as they seemed at the time. The U.S.-Diem alliance was undone not by a clash of civilizations but by clashes between different kinds of civilizing missions. For all their differences, Americans and their South Vietnamese counterparts actually had more in common than they sometimes cared to admit. Both before and after 1963, the Americans would often resemble Diem in their reluctance to acknowledge the flaws within their grand designs for South Vietnam. And like Diem, they underestimated the complexity and the sheer intractability of the politics of nation building, as well as their ability to win South Vietnamese support for their nation-building plans. Although they took different paths to their

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respective destinies, Diem and his American allies were bound by a common failing: an unwillingness to accommodate South Vietnam's myriad and diverse revolutionary aspirations. This, then, is not only a book about the early phases of the "American tragedy" in Vietnam.³⁷ It is also a book about some of the Vietnamese tragedies with which the American failure in Vietnam became so intimately and so disastrously intertwined.

1

MAN OF FAITH

The grave of Ngo Dinh Diem lies in a cemetery in the town of Lai Thieu in Binh Duong province, on the northern outskirts of Ho Chi Minh City. Little distinguishes his cement tomb from the hundreds of others in the crowded graveyard, which abuts a busy highway. Indeed, Diem's Vietnamese name does not even appear on the marble tablet that serves as the tomb's headstone. Instead, the occupant of the grave is identified only by his Catholic baptismal name—"Gioan Baotixita," a Vietnamized form of "Jean Baptiste"—and by the generic term "Huynh," which means "elder brother." Diem's grave attracts numerous visitors each year, including many overseas Vietnamese who come to pay their respects. Pilgrims express their veneration by placing burning joss sticks in the small pot positioned at the foot of the grave. In 2005, some of these admirers arranged for the cryptic headstone to be replaced by another that explicitly identified the grave as Ngo Dinh Diem's. But local authorities ordered it removed.¹

Who was Ngo Dinh Diem? And what accounts for his continuing ability to generate attention, sympathy, and controversy today, half a century after his death? Despite persistent claims to the contrary, Diem has not been forgotten in the country of his birth.² However, there is no consensus—either in Vietnam or elsewhere—about how he should be remembered. Some maintain that Diem is best understood as a creature of U.S. Cold War policy; according to this view, Diem was able to gain office in 1954

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The grave of Ngo Dinh Diem (foreground), Lai Thieu, Vietnam, 2006. The other two tombs in the same style are those of Diem's mother, Pham Thi Than, and his younger brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu. (Photo by author)

and retain it thereafter because he was Washington's chosen instrument. Others argue that Diem was beholden not to the United States but to "traditional" Vietnamese ways of thinking; for these authors, Diem was either a latter-day sage who ruled according to age-old Confucian precepts or a latter-day despot who clung to outmoded beliefs.

The account presented here does not conform to any of these interpretations. Instead of portraying Diem as a tool of U.S. policymakers or as an avatar of Vietnamese tradition, I aim to understand him by placing him within the era and circumstances in which he was born and lived. Such an approach necessarily begins with Diem's pre-1954 life and career—a topic which has received surprisingly little attention from scholars. Examining this neglected part of Diem's biography reveals two key facts about his path to power. First, contrary to what many authors have suggested, Diem was neither plucked from obscurity nor installed in office by the United

States in 1954. Rather, he was a prominent and active figure in Indochinese politics who successfully engineered his own appointment as premier of the SVN. Second, Diem's thinking about politics and society was defined above all by his determination to fashion a new vision of how Vietnam might become a modern nation. This vision was an ambitious attempt to synthesize certain contemporary ideas and discourses about Catholic Christianity, Confucianism, and Vietnamese national identity. Diem's efforts to win popular support for this vision proved unsuccessful in the long run. But it is precisely in the failure of his vision of national development that his historical significance lies. To make sense of what Diem said and did after he became leader of South Vietnam, we must first locate him in the time and place in which he came of age.

Religion, Culture, and Nation in Colonial Indochina

Almost everyone who has written about Ngo Dinh Diem's life and career has noted his twin identity as a Catholic and a Confucian. As president of South Vietnam, Diem displayed Christian piety in everything from his devotional practices to his habit of inserting references to the Bible into his speeches. He was also a self-proclaimed Confucianist who made Confucius's birthday a state holiday and who liked to show off his knowledge of classical Chinese texts. That Diem's thinking about government, politics, society, and history was deeply influenced by both Catholicism and Confucianism seems undeniable.

But what was the nature of these influences, exactly? During the 1950s and 1960s, some of Diem's critics portrayed his Catholicism and Confucianism as proof that he was trapped in a premodern cast of mind. For these critics, Diem's Christian faith was "made less of the kindness of the apostles than of the ruthless militancy of the Grand Inquisitor" and his thinking about governance "was made less of the constitutional strength of a President of the republic than of the petty tyranny of a tradition-bound mandarin."³ According to this view, Diem's blind allegiance to the past prevented him from comprehending the political and social realities of the present.

This way of representing Diem and his worldview does not stand up to scrutiny. Although Diem was both a Catholic and a mandarin, those who have described him as a "Catholic mandarin" have often misunderstood the historically specific meanings that he ascribed to his Christian and Confucian heritages. Catholicism and Confucianism both have ancient pedigrees, but neither has been uniform across space or time. In early

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twentieth-century Vietnam, as in other eras and places, to be a Catholic or a Confucian was to lay claim to a complex and dynamic set of traditions. These traditions affected Diem's thinking about the past, but his understanding of their contemporary relevance was forged in the cultural and social context in which he spent his youth and young adulthood.

Diem was born in the Vietnamese imperial capital of Hue on January 3, 1901, to a family that was both well known and well-to-do.⁴ Members of the Ngo household marked Diem's delivery according to the Vietnamese lunar calendar, and noted that it took place during the Hour of the Buffalo on a day near the end of the Year of the Rat. That the baby had been "born under two signs" was deemed auspicious.⁵ Yet Diem's arrival also appeared full of significance when reckoned by the Euro-Christian calendar, which indicated that he had arrived not at year's end but at its beginning—in fact, on the third day of a new century. Auspices aside, the fact that Diem was born into a family literate in both Vietnamese and European calendrical practices points up the futility of trying to distinguish between "Eastern" and "Western" elements in his upbringing. In fact, members of the Ngo family routinely and easily drew on multiple cultural and ideological traditions in their daily lives. From an early age, Diem learned to navigate these various traditions, and to look for points of connection among them. In this way, his upbringing inclined him toward eclecticism and helped turn him into something of an intellectual magpie. As an adult, he would attempt to weave new theories and doctrines out of the conceptual strands he had collected from diverse religious and philosophical sources. The results were often bewildering to others, but for Diem they were a natural and logical extension of the syncretic thinking he had learned in his youth.

During Diem's childhood, the Ngo home in Hue was dominated by his father. Ngo Dinh Kha embodied all of the religious, cultural, and political currents that defined Diem's early life. In addition to being a devout Catholic, Kha had a successful career in the Vietnamese imperial bureaucracy and eventually became a high-ranking official at the Nguyen royal court. An accomplished student of both Latin and classical Chinese, he made sure that his sons were well schooled in both the Christian scriptures and the Confucian classics. But Kha was no rigidly traditionalist "Catholic mandarin." Although he had been born in the province of Quang Binh in central Vietnam, Kha had been educated at a Catholic school in Malaya where he learned English and studied a European-style curriculum. He

returned to Vietnam in the late 1870s with plans to become a priest. However, his facility with languages attracted the attention of the newly established French colonial state. During the 1880s, Kha worked for French military commanders as an interpreter and participated in campaigns against anticolonial rebels in the mountains of Tonkin. This service, in tandem with his multicultural educational background, helped him win an appointment as the first headmaster of the National Academy in Hue. Founded in 1896, the academy was a showcase for the colonial state's "Franco-Annamite" schools. Classes at the academy featured a mix of European and Vietnamese subjects and included instruction in French, Chinese, and Vietnamese. Among Kha's pupils at the academy was the young Nguyen emperor, Thanh Thai, who came to view his erudite headmaster as a mentor and adviser. The bond between the two became even stronger after Kha was elevated to the post of grand chamberlain at the court.⁶

Kha's support for French military and educational ventures, in addition to his service at the French-dominated imperial court, led some to view him as a collaborator and an apologist for colonialism. The fact of his collaboration is indisputable, but he was motivated less by Francophilia than by certain reformist ambitions. Like many other Vietnamese political leaders of his generation, Kha believed that independence from France could come only after sweeping changes in Vietnamese politics, society, and culture. His interest in education reflected this belief, as did his criticisms of Vietnam's contemporary political culture. In this respect, Kha's views were similar to those of some of the leading anticolonialists of the day, such as the scholar-activist Phan Chau Trinh and the organizers of the Eastern Capital Free School, a reform movement launched in 1906 in Hanoi.⁷

Like many of his compatriots, Kha was skeptical of French claims about the benevolent nature of colonial rule. Although he initially refrained from voicing these doubts, his frustration finally boiled over in 1907, when French officials schemed to remove Thanh Thai from the throne and forced him into exile. The emperor's ouster was a bitter setback for Kha, who had hoped that his protégé would reclaim some of the royal rights and honors previously surrendered to the French. Furious that his reformist plans had been wrecked, Kha resigned as grand chamberlain and withdrew from the royal court. As the news of Kha's actions spread, anticolonialists across Indochina hailed him as a patriot. Among those who

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expressed admiration for Kha was the young man who would later become known to the world as Ho Chi Minh. Decades later, Ho could still recall how the old mandarin's protest had been celebrated in a popular Vietnamese proverb: "To deport the King, you must get rid of Kha."⁸

Ngo Dinh Kha was a demanding father, and his impact on young Diem was profound. As a boy, Diem developed an allergy to fish. Unfortunately for him, the Catholic practice of dining on fish on Fridays was strictly observed in the Ngo household, and Kha insisted that Diem eat what was served—even though he often vomited afterward.⁹ In addition to enforcing the family dietary regime, Kha had high expectations for his son's education. At Kha's insistence, Diem enrolled at the Pellerin School, a Catholic primary school in Hue. Like the National Academy, Pellerin featured a Franco-Annamite curriculum and instruction in French, Latin, and classical Chinese. Diem quickly gained facility in all three languages, and he was later said to have pursued his studies with an assiduousness that bordered on obsession. His drive was fueled in part by fierce sibling rivalries with his two older brothers, Ngo Dinh Khoi and Ngo Dinh Thuc. Khoi, who was ten years senior to Diem, chose to emulate Kha and studied administration in preparation for entering the mandarinates. Thuc, four years older than Diem, opted for the career path Kha had abandoned and became a seminarian.¹⁰

Diem at first seemed inclined to follow Thuc into the priesthood. Even as a teenager, the strength of his devotion to his faith was evident; members of his family later recalled the boy's habit of spending long hours in prayer and reflection. He reportedly swore himself to celibacy—a vow he apparently kept even after he decided not to become a man of the cloth. Some observers would later cite Diem's religiosity, along with his lifelong bachelor status, as evidence that he was "a kind of lay monk." This interpretation is not entirely wrong—at one point, young Diem briefly entered the novitiate at a Catholic seminary at Quang Tri—but it overlooks the depth of his professional and personal ambition.¹¹

In 1918, having decided not to pursue a clerical career, Diem entered the prestigious School of Administration, which trained Vietnamese for service in the imperial bureaucracy. This proved an inspired decision. Diem graduated first in his class and in 1921 became a junior official in Thua Thien, the province in which Hue is located. Over the next decade, he rose quickly through the ranks of the colonial bureaucracy, serving as a district chief in both Thua Thien and nearby Quang Tri province. In

1930, shortly before his thirtieth birthday, Diem became chief of province (*Tuan phu*) in Ninh Thuan, a coastal province in the southern part of Annam. His most notable accomplishment in Ninh Thuan was his suppression of a plot to launch an antigovernment uprising in the provincial seat of Phan Rang. Since the conspiracy was directed by agents of the newly formed Indochinese Communist Party (ICP), this episode demonstrated the depth of Diem's anticommunist convictions and foreshadowed some of his later actions as leader of South Vietnam. It also helped secure his promotion to the post of chief of Binh Thuan province, a larger and more populous territory in the same region.¹²

In official biographies published in South Vietnam after 1954, Diem's supporters attributed his rapid rise through the imperial bureaucracy to his extraordinary ability to work long hours and his refusal to use his authority for personal profit.¹³ Diem's reputation for workaholicism and incorruptibility undoubtedly helped him, but his ascent was also boosted by developments in Vietnamese Catholic politics during the 1920s, and especially by the emergence of a new nationalist sensibility in the Vietnamese Church. In the years following World War I, senior Catholic leaders in Rome undertook to "indigenize" church hierarchies in colonized territories. These efforts led eventually to the appointments of the first Vietnamese bishops during the 1930s. For Vietnamese Catholics, the unprecedented elevation of Vietnamese prelates to high offices presented a means to challenge the common perception of the Church as a foreign institution. Indigenization could also be a way for Vietnamese Catholic elites to distance themselves from the colonial regime and from the taint of collaboration with French authorities.¹⁴

The leading proponent of the new Catholic nationalism was Nguyen Huu Bai (1863–1935), a high-ranking mandarin at the Hue court. Like Diem's father, Bai was a onetime colonial collaborator who had grown resentful over French refusals to grant greater autonomy to the court. He was also a Catholic who strongly supported the indigenization of the Vietnamese Church. Throughout the 1920s, Bai waged a public campaign in favor of ordaining Vietnamese bishops. At the same time, in his capacity as prime minister of the court, he also badgered the French to restore some of the monarchy's administrative powers. French officials became thoroughly exasperated with Bai, whom they derided privately as "an Asiatic Tallyrand."¹⁵

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From the moment Diem entered the imperial bureaucracy, his political fortunes were firmly tied to Bai and the Catholic nationalism he espoused. After Ngo Dinh Kha died in 1923, Bai took a special interest in promoting Diem's career.¹⁶ This association with Bai proved crucial to Diem's efforts to secure his reputation as an anti-French nationalist. In May 1933, French officials dramatically ousted Bai from the post of prime minister and overhauled both the structure and the roster of the Imperial Cabinet. Although French officials designed this coup to reduce Bai's influence over court affairs, they sought to mollify the old mandarin by elevating his protégé Diem to the position of interior minister. Bai and Diem lost no time in turning the new situation to their advantage. Scarcely two months after receiving his promotion to the cabinet, Diem resigned. In a letter to the Nguyen king—a teenager named Bao Dai, who would have many more dealings with Diem in later years—Diem cited the same complaints about French encroachments on Vietnamese sovereignty that Bai had lodged earlier. Significantly, Diem couched some of these complaints in the language of republicanism; he was especially incensed that the French had blocked proposals to allow an elected body of Vietnamese “people's representatives” to have limited deliberative powers. Diem's charges and the story of his resignation from the government were covered sympathetically by pro-Bai newspapers in both Hanoi and Saigon. Vietnamese Catholics and non-Catholics alike quickly grasped the similarities between Diem's actions and those of Ngo Dinh Kha more than two decades earlier. Diem's career as a colonial administrator was over, but his reputation as both a Catholic leader and a nationalist had been greatly enhanced.¹⁷

Despite critics' later assertions to the contrary, Diem did not lapse into inactivity or obscurity in the years following his resignation from the cabinet. He continued to live in Hue and remained involved in court politics as a member of Bai's faction. His opposition to the proposals backed by French officials and their Vietnamese allies remained so vigorous that the court briefly stripped him of the official status he retained as a former mandarin. He was also under surveillance by the colonial police. Yet Diem still found ways to keep himself in the public eye and to maintain his reputation among Catholics and anticolonialists. His efforts in this regard were helped enormously by his older brother Ngo Dinh Thuc. During the early 1920s, while Diem had been rising through the colonial bureaucracy, Thuc had been studying for the priesthood in Rome, where he forged friendships with other Catholics from all over the world. Thuc

also became a strong advocate for strengthened Vatican authority and the indigenization of the Vietnamese clergy. His efforts in this regard led eventually to his ordination as bishop of the diocese of Vinh Long in the Mekong delta on May 4, 1938. Thuc was just the third Vietnamese to become a bishop, and his postordination tour of Indochina's Catholic communities attracted huge crowds and fawning coverage in the Vietnamese Catholic press. Thuc was accompanied on this tour by Diem and other members of the Ngo family, and his public addresses invariably included reverential references to the deceased Ngo Dinh Kha and his patriotic convictions. In this way, Diem's family ties helped to burnish his dual image as a devout Catholic and a dedicated defender of the Vietnamese nation.¹⁸

If Diem's public image during the 1930s was defined largely by the politics and culture of Catholic nationalism, his private life was marked by encounters with new ways of thinking about Confucianism. He was especially affected by his friendship in these years with Phan Boi Chau (1862–1940), one of Vietnam's most revered anticolonial activists. Phan had first gained fame in 1905 for his efforts to send Vietnamese youths to Japan so they could acquire the skills needed to lead a revolution against French rule. In 1925, colonial police arrested Phan in China and brought him back to Vietnam for trial. Although Phan was convicted of sedition and sentenced to death, French officials dared not execute him, lest he become a martyr. Instead, they dispatched him to Hue, where he lived the last fifteen years of his life under house arrest.¹⁹

Diem idolized Phan for his accomplishments as a revolutionary, so it is not surprising that the two men became friendly in the years between Diem's 1933 resignation and Phan's death in 1940. Yet Diem also greatly respected Phan for his knowledge of Confucianism, and especially for the erudite commentaries on classical Confucian texts that Phan produced during these twilight years. In long sessions at Phan's house and aboard sampans on the Perfume River, the old anticolonialist and the aspiring nationalist discussed the applicability of Confucian ideas to contemporary political and social issues. Diem's admiration was returned by Phan, who wrote a poem in which he celebrated his young friend as a "truly great man."²⁰

Phan Boi Chau's thinking about Confucianism reflected contemporary intellectual trends in Vietnam and elsewhere in Asia. He embraced the

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New Text School of Confucianism, whose adherents believed that the original teachings of Confucius had become distorted in the centuries after the great sage's death. Phan also participated in debates among Vietnamese intellectuals over the relevance of Confucianism in the modern era. He insisted that Confucianism, when distilled to its core content, was highly versatile and applicable to a broad range of current issues and problems. This position put him at odds with those Vietnamese cultural critics who portrayed Confucianism as outdated and incompatible with modernity. It also distinguished him from other conservative Vietnamese intellectuals who tried to defend Confucianism on narrow grounds by arguing that it should be viewed only as a standard of personal moral conduct. Diem fully endorsed Phan's understanding of Confucianism as a kind of social philosophy that was flexible and adaptable to Vietnam's contemporary problems. After 1954, the echoes of Phan's ideas would be heard in Diem's views on democracy and in his attempts to incorporate Confucianist language and concepts into his nation-building programs.²¹

Diem's association with Phan Boi Chau, like his familial ties to Ngo Dinh Kha, served to reinforce his reputation as an uncompromising critic of French rule. In the late 1930s, however, it was not clear whether or how this reputation could help him regain political power. Anticolonial sentiment ran strong in Depression-era Indochina, but the demise of the French colonial regime seemed far from imminent. If Diem was ever going to find his way back into political office, he needed more than a nationalist image and the courage of his convictions. He would also have to build a following among his compatriots, and find allies who believed he could succeed where other anticolonial activists had failed. Diem would eventually gain the backing he sought, but his path through the political wilderness proved much longer and more arduous than he ever anticipated.

The Japanese, the Viet Minh, and Diem's Search for a Third Force

The decade of the 1930s was a time of revolution and retrenchment in French Indochina. During 1930–1931, French officials faced a wave of strikes, demonstrations, and armed uprisings led by various anticolonial groups, including the recently formed ICP. The French response to this resistance was brutally efficient. Colonial security forces killed thousands of rebels and demonstrators; thousands more were arrested and sentenced to long prison terms. Those activists who remained at large were subject to police surveillance and harassment. In the long run, the harsh tactics

used to suppress dissent proved counterproductive, since they undermined French claims about the benevolent nature of colonial rule. But the short-term impact of these tactics was devastating to many anticolonial groups. Although French policy moderated somewhat following the establishment of the left-leaning Popular Front government in Paris in 1936, this proved only a brief respite. In 1939, the impending outbreak of World War II in Europe prompted hardline colonial officials to launch a new crack-down. By the end of the decade, the edifice of French colonialism seemed more impregnable than ever.²²

The political situation inside Indochina changed dramatically following the expansion of the Pacific War into Southeast Asia. In July 1940, the leaders of Imperial Japan demanded the use of northern Indochina as a staging area in their ongoing war against Nationalist China. French officials were dismayed by Tokyo's ultimatum but concluded they had no choice but to comply. Just weeks earlier, metropolitan France had been overrun by Adolf Hitler's armies, leaving Indochina and most of the rest of the French empire under the direction of the pro-Nazi government established in the provincial town of Vichy. Since the Vichy regime had neither the means nor the resolve to fight Japan in Indochina, colonial officials reluctantly agreed to furnish Japanese forces with provisions and military bases in Tonkin and Laos. In return, the Japanese permitted the French colonial administration to remain in place. This peculiar arrangement, which was extended to cover the rest of Indochina in 1941, lasted nearly five years.²³

For Diem and many other Vietnamese nationalists, the arrival of the Japanese in Indochina presented new opportunities to challenge French power. Tokyo's decision to preserve French rule did not sit well with those Japanese who objected on principle to European colonialism in Asia. Many of these self-described "idealists" hoped that the French colonial state would soon be replaced by a new Vietnamese government that would rule under Japanese aegis. They therefore offered encouragement and material aid to those Vietnamese nationalists who were willing to make common cause with them. The idealists aimed in particular to build Vietnamese support for Prince Cuong De, a longtime anticolonial activist and pretender to the Nguyen throne who had lived in Japan for decades. Once Cuong De had gained a measure of nationalist support, his Japanese boosters argued, he could return to Indochina and depose the reigning emperor, Bao Dai, thus paving the way for Vietnam's "liberation" from French rule.²⁴

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Diem had few qualms about colluding with the Japanese against the French. Like many other Vietnamese nationalists, including his friend and hero Phan Boi Chau, Diem had long viewed Japan as a model for Vietnam and other Asian nations that aspired to throw off European colonial rule.²⁵ Diem also recognized that the Japanese idealists' goals meshed well with his political ambitions. He therefore did not hesitate to establish working relationships with those Japanese diplomats, army officers, and intelligence operatives who offered their protection and support. These new allies included Kiyoshi Komatsu, a prominent idealist writer and scholar. In 1943, Komatsu and Diem's other Japanese backers helped him send a personal emissary to visit Prince Cuong De in Japan; they also arranged for Diem to be named to a pro-Cuong De group known as the "Committee of National Reconstruction" (Uy Ban Kien Quoc). Although Diem had never met Cuong De, he knew that the prince had first gone to Japan in 1906 with Phan Boi Chau, and he was delighted to associate himself with a living link to the earlier generation of Confucian scholar-gentry revolutionaries whom he so admired.²⁶

While Diem was intriguing with the Japanese idealists and Cuong De, he also worked to expand the base of his support inside Vietnam. By early 1943, Diem was telling associates that he aimed to unify "all the nationalist parties in Indochina" under his leadership. As a step to this goal, he established a new clandestine political party known as the "Association for the Revitalization of Greater Vietnam" (Dai Viet Phuc Hung Hoi). Diem planned to build the Association into a broad-based organization that would be open to any group or individual willing to join him in the struggle against French rule. However, the party seems to have operated only in Diem's native region of central Vietnam, and its ranks were filled almost entirely by his fellow Catholics. Unfortunately for Diem, the French police learned of the Association from informers and began arresting its members in mid-1944. Diem himself eluded capture with the help of the Japanese consul in Hue, who smuggled him out of the city by dressing him in the uniform of an imperial army officer. Diem flew to Saigon, where he lived for several months under Japanese military protection.²⁷

Not long after his escape from Hue, Diem very nearly succeeded in parlaying his Japanese connections into a return to high political office. In late 1944, as U.S. military forces advanced toward the Japanese home islands, leaders in Tokyo prepared to end their marriage of convenience with the French by carrying out a coup against the colonial regime. Dur-

ing the planning for the putsch, idealist Japanese officers proposed making Cuong De emperor and installing Diem as premier of a new Vietnamese government. But the idealists were overruled by the senior Japanese commander in Indochina. When the Japanese coup took place on March 9, 1945, the French were ousted, but Cuong De remained in Japan, and Bao Dai retained his throne.

Bao Dai probably knew that Diem had aligned himself with Cuong De. Nevertheless, Diem's unimpeachable reputation as a nationalist still made him the best choice to lead the new Vietnamese government that Bao Dai now needed to create. The emperor therefore sent word for Diem to return to Hue as soon as possible. In what turned out to be a colossal miscalculation, Diem refused. He came to regret this decision almost immediately and tried to reverse it, but it was too late; Bao Dai had already offered the post to a prominent intellectual named Tran Trong Kim. Diem had missed exactly the kind of opportunity he had worked so hard to gain.²⁸

If Diem failed to take advantage of the events of 1945, the same cannot be said of Ho Chi Minh and the ICP. Since 1941, the party had been building its popular support and its military capabilities through a front organization known as the Viet Minh (a contraction of Viet Nam Doc Lap Dong Minh Hoi: League for Vietnamese Independence). Under Ho's direction, the Viet Minh became the largest and most powerful anti-French organization in Indochina. The front was especially strong in northern Indochina, where its forces established a large "liberated zone" in the mountains of Tonkin. Rejecting the possibility of collaboration with Japan, Ho and the other leaders of the ICP opted to wait until they were able to take power by the force of their own arms. This strategy paid off in mid-August 1945, after the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki resulted in the unexpectedly early surrender of Japan to the Allies. On August 19, shortly after Tokyo's capitulation, Viet Minh operatives seized power in Hanoi. Within days, large parts of Indochina were in the hands of Viet Minh-controlled "revolutionary people's committees." On September 2, in a stirring address before a huge crowd in Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh proclaimed Vietnam independent and announced the formation of a new state known as the Democratic Republic of Vietnam.²⁹

The emergence of Ho and the Viet Minh as the preeminent champions of Vietnamese independence put them on a collision course with French leaders, who were determined to restore colonial rule in Indochina. During

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1946, the two sides held talks aimed at heading off the impending conflict, but French officials rebuffed Ho's efforts to find a compromise agreement. As Indochina girded for war, Diem and many other noncommunist nationalists found themselves caught in a dilemma: they did not want to rally around a restored colonial regime, but neither did they wish to support the communist-dominated Viet Minh, whose leaders they both feared and mistrusted.³⁰ Faced with such unpalatable options, many of these nationalists opted to wait for the emergence of a "Third Force"—that is, an independent movement that would be both anticolonialist and anticommunist. In the meantime, they adopted an uneasy neutrality in the looming Franco-Viet Minh struggle. The French disparaged these would-be Third Forcers as "fence-sitters" (*attentistes*), while the Viet Minh derided them for "hiding under a blanket" (*trum chan*).

During the Indochina War of 1945–1954, Diem was among the most prominent of Vietnam's *attentistes*. Diem's supporters would later portray his fence-sitting as a courageous refusal to compromise his principles for the sake of power. His critics, in contrast, accused him of stubbornness and a penchant for self-imposed isolation.³¹ In reality, Diem's refusal to take sides was a tactical move to buy time and prepare for the moment when he would be able to make an independent bid for power. By proclaiming his neutrality, he hoped to be able to manipulate the French and the Viet Minh via secret contacts with leaders in both camps. He also aimed to lay the foundation for a credible Third Force movement under his direction.

Throughout the late 1940s, Diem made several attempts to raise a Third Force, mostly through clandestine means. In 1947, Diem was identified by French intelligence as the founder and chief of the National Union Bloc (Khoi Quoc Gia Lien Hiep), a shadowy organization that sought the support of anticommunist nationalists in both Annam and Tonkin. The Bloc was deemed "very powerful" in both regions. In early 1948, Diem arranged for it to be folded into another group known as the Vietnam National Rally (Viet Nam Quoc Gia Lien Hiep), which had been set up the previous year by anti-Viet Minh elements in Cochinchina. Like the Bloc, the Rally was intended to be an umbrella organization under which all noncommunist nationalist groups and parties—regardless of sectarian, ideological, or regional affiliation—could come together. By aligning himself with the Rally, Diem established working relationships with several other leading Vietnamese anticommunists. His new collaborators included Nguyen Ton Hoan, a fellow Catholic and political activist with good con-

nections in southern Vietnam. Though Hoan and Diem would later become bitter enemies, in 1948 they made a formidable team, and for a brief time it seemed that the Rally might succeed where other Third Force ventures had failed.³²

To preserve the secrecy of his Third Force organizing initiatives, Diem did not hold any formal position in either the Bloc or the Rally. Instead, he wielded influence through a network of trusted supporters, mostly Vietnamese Catholics from Hue or nearby provinces. In what would become a recurring pattern, Diem would continue to rely heavily on these Catholic backers from his home region, even as he tried to forge alliances with non-Catholic leaders and groups. As he would later demonstrate, he was quite capable of reaching across sectarian, political, and regional lines when it suited him to do so. With few exceptions, however, his inner circle of allies and advisors continued to be dominated by Catholics and especially by members and longtime friends of the Ngo family.³³

Diem's covert attempts to organize a "Third Force" during the late 1940s did not preclude him from maintaining contacts with both French and Viet Minh leaders. His dealings with the Viet Minh commenced in dramatic fashion, with his first and only face-to-face meeting with Ho Chi Minh. During the chaotic days of the August Revolution, Diem was detained by Viet Minh fighters while traveling from Saigon to Hue. After being held for several months in a remote mountain location, in early 1946 he was brought to Hanoi to meet with Ho, who offered him a position in a Viet Minh unity government.³⁴ In later years, Diem insisted that he had spurned this offer out of hand. He also claimed to have gained his release by fixing Ho with his gaze and asking, "Am I a man who fears oppression or death?" There is no reason to doubt Diem's claim that he spoke sharply and bitterly to Ho, because he knew that Viet Minh operatives had captured and executed his eldest brother, Khoi, a few months before. However, Viet Minh sources indicate—more plausibly—that Ho decided to let Diem go because of his reputation as an opponent of French rule.³⁵

Diem's refusal to cooperate with Ho was actually less categorical than his retrospective accounts of the meeting suggested. As Diem later admitted, he would have been willing to serve in a Viet Minh government if Ho had granted him authority over internal security policy.³⁶ Moreover, Diem's meeting with Ho was only the beginning of his dealings with the Viet Minh. Following his release from detention in early 1946, Diem remained

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in Hanoi and established working relationships with several of the prominent noncommunist political figures who had chosen to join Ho's unity government. He maintained these connections throughout the tense year of 1946.³⁷ Even after the outbreak of general hostilities between French and Viet Minh forces in December 1946, Diem stayed in touch with DRV officials, including some high-ranking ICP leaders. French intelligence reports of the period suggest that Diem continued these contacts with hopes of persuading some Viet Minh commanders to abandon Ho and join him. According to French informants, these exchanges stirred considerable interest within Viet Minh ranks in Cochinchina during 1947 and 1948. There were even whispers that Diem might secure the defection of Nguyen Binh, the top Viet Minh military commander in the south.³⁸

At the same time Diem was communicating with Viet Minh leaders, he was also lobbying French colonial officials to grant "true independence" to Vietnam. But French leaders were in no mood to make the concessions Diem sought. Throughout the Indochina War, colonial authorities maintained that Vietnamese independence would be achieved only within the framework of an organization known as the French Union. Billed as a successor to the French empire, the Union was supposed to transform the old ties between the metropole and its colonies into a new and mutually beneficial postcolonial "association." Most Vietnamese nationalists viewed the Union with suspicion, and many denounced it as nothing more than colonialism under a different name. Diem shared these suspicions, and he told the French that he would endorse the Union only if it were restructured to permit Vietnam to attain the same status that India and Pakistan had gained within the British Commonwealth. "France is France, Vietnam is Vietnam," he remarked to an associate in 1948. "Why complicate matters by having Vietnam in the French Union?"³⁹

To gain leverage with the French, Diem sought help from an unlikely ally: Bao Dai, the emperor under whom he had twice previously refused to serve. Although Bao Dai had survived the Japanese coup of March 1945, his reign ended a few months thereafter with his abdication to the Viet Minh during the August Revolution. Following a brief stint as an advisor to Ho's DRV government, the deposed monarch opted to go into foreign exile in Hong Kong. But his exit from Indochinese politics was short-lived. Although there were few Vietnamese in the late 1940s who regarded Bao Dai as a model of kingly virtue, some conservative Vietnamese nationalists imagined that he might be able to leverage residual feel-

ings of respect for the monarchy as a national institution. Beginning in 1947, the ex-emperor met with a series of Vietnamese political leaders who implored him to present himself as a symbol around which Vietnam's non-communist parties and sects could rally.⁴⁰

Diem was among the nationalists who traveled to Hong Kong to offer his counsel to Bao Dai. He warned the former king that most Vietnamese would accept nothing less than the "true independence" Diem advocated. Although Bao Dai seemed receptive to these arguments, Diem worried that he remained susceptible to the blandishments of the French, who were trying to persuade him to take on the role of a "mediator" between French colonialism and Vietnamese nationalism.⁴¹ In February 1948, Diem and other nationalist leaders met in Saigon to define a framework for negotiations with the French on the matter of Vietnamese independence. Diem subsequently returned to Hong Kong in March to persuade Bao Dai to support this scheme. He also pressed French officials for additional concessions on the scope of Vietnamese sovereignty.⁴²

Unfortunately for Diem, his efforts were in vain. In June 1948, Bao Dai signed an agreement with colonial officials that purported to grant Vietnam its independence as an "associated state" within the French Union. After additional negotiations, the details of the new Franco-Vietnamese relationship were spelled out in the Elysée Accords of March 8, 1949. The Accords established limited administrative autonomy for Vietnam but allowed France to retain overall control of diplomatic, economic, and military policy. Shortly after signing the Accords, Bao Dai returned to Indochina and proclaimed himself head of the SVN, the ostensibly independent government the French had established.

The implementation of the "Bao Dai solution" during 1948–1949 was deeply disappointing for Diem. Some anticommunist nationalists—including his ally Nguyen Ton Hoan—opted to back Bao Dai and the SVN in the hope that the new state might serve as a vehicle for the gradual achievement of Vietnamese independence. Diem, however, was disgusted with what he viewed as the ex-emperor's capitulation to French demands. On June 16, 1949, Diem published a statement in which he implicitly denounced the Elysée Accords by repeating his demand for dominion status for Vietnam. At the same time, he also served notice that he had no intention of collaborating with the Viet Minh. In sharp contrast to his earlier willingness to parley with the leaders of the Front, Diem now called for a new anticolonial movement led by "those elements who have rendered

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meritorious service to the Fatherland,” including “resistance fighters”—an unequivocal signal that Diem intended to challenge the Viet Minh by luring away any revolutionary who was willing to defect to his side.⁴³

Diem’s statement of June 1949 signaled an important shift in his strategy. In addition to breaking publicly with both Bao Dai and the Viet Minh, Diem claimed to be offering an alternative vision for the transformation of Vietnamese life and society. This vision, Diem insisted, was at least as revolutionary as the proposals offered by his rivals:

it should be known that the present struggle is not only a battle for the political independence of the Fatherland but also a social revolution [*cach mang xa hoi*] to restore independence to the peasants and workers of Vietnam. In order that each and every person in Vietnam can have sufficient means to live in a matter befitting the dignity of a man who is truly free, I advocate social reforms that are sweeping and bold, with the condition that the dignity of man will always be respected and will be free to flourish.⁴⁴

Diem did not elaborate on the meaning of the “social revolution” he proposed, nor did he offer any indication of how it might be realized in policy and practice. Still, he had taken an important step toward the elucidation of a distinctive vision of Vietnam’s political and social transformation. In the years after 1949, this vision would become a defining feature of Diem’s thinking; it would also become increasingly elaborate and grandiose.

Diem hoped that the publication of his June 16 statement would serve to rally public opinion in his favor. But although the statement was widely read in Vietnam, it did not produce a new upsurge of popularity for Diem or derail the “Bao Dai solution.” Instead, its main effect was to convince both the French and the Viet Minh that Diem was an unreliable and possibly dangerous rival. As a result, he was soon forced to consider new strategies and seek out new allies. The idea of a Third Force retained its appeal for Diem, but its realization seemed to be farther off than ever.

Diem’s U.S. Exile

By early 1950, Diem’s room for political maneuver had been drastically reduced by developments within Indochina and abroad. In February, the Viet Minh achieved a diplomatic breakthrough when both China and the Soviet Union extended official recognition and support to Ho and the

DRV. Meanwhile, the ratification of the Elysée Accords led to formal U.S. and British backing for the SVN and Bao Dai. These international shifts presaged a general hardening of political positions within Indochina. With the DRV now tilting decisively toward the communist bloc, Ho and his colleagues were less willing to make concessions to secure the cooperation of noncommunist Vietnamese nationalists.⁴⁵ At the same time, Bao Dai and the French hoped that a new influx of U.S. military and economic aid would allow their forces to gain the upper hand on the battlefield. These changes sharply diminished the leverage Diem had previously enjoyed as an ostensibly neutral party in the war. In early 1950, he learned that the Viet Minh had issued orders for his assassination.⁴⁶ With his political fortunes clearly on the wane, Diem departed Indochina in August 1950 on an overseas trip that he expected to last a few months. He would remain abroad for nearly four years.

At the time of his departure, Diem intended to explore various options for garnering support from different foreign groups and governments. Accompanied by his older brother, Bishop Thuc, Diem set out first for Japan. In Tokyo, Diem had his first face-to-face meeting with his old ally, Prince Cuong De. The session was an emotional one for both men. Diem addressed the prince as “your majesty” (*ngai*) and told him that he deserved to be king, a remark that moved the elderly royal exile to tears. The men also discussed Cuong De’s continuing efforts to return to Vietnam, and even spoke of the possibility that he might yet play some role in the politics of his homeland. Unfortunately for Cuong De, this aspiration would remain unfulfilled: the old prince died in Tokyo a few months after meeting Diem, having spent the last thirty-six years of his life in exile.⁴⁷

Although Diem did not know it at the time, his most consequential encounter during his brief stay in Japan was his introduction to Wesley Fishel, a young American political scientist. An expert in East Asian comparative politics, Fishel was immediately interested in Diem, whom he deemed an “extremely keen person.” Fishel’s interest may not have been purely academic; in addition to conducting research in Japan, he was also working for the military intelligence section of the U.S. Far East Command and may have sought Diem out on the orders of his superiors. Diem readily agreed to stay in contact with Fishel, apparently because he correctly surmised that the professor might be able to help him gain entry into U.S. government and academic circles. Fishel subsequently became one of Diem’s most enthusiastic American supporters, and Diem

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made good use of his new friend's connections during his exile and afterward.⁴⁸

Even before they met Fishel, Diem and Thuc had already determined that the next stop on their itinerary would be the United States. After a flight across the Pacific and a brief stop in California, the brothers arrived in Washington for meetings at the State Department. The U.S. officials who met them seemed intrigued by their proposal to use Catholic militia fighters as the core of a new anticommunist Vietnamese army. But the Americans were mostly underwhelmed by Diem and his potential as a leader. One concluded that Diem was more concerned "with furthering his own personal ambitions than solving [the] complex problems facing his country today."⁴⁹

Having failed to win any promises of U.S. support, Diem and Thuc continued on to Europe. In Rome, Diem had an audience with Pope Pius XII at the Vatican. He also traveled briefly to Paris, where he met with French and Vietnamese officials and arranged for a message to be delivered to Bao Dai. The message indicated that Diem was now willing to accept the post of prime minister of the SVN, provided that he was granted the authority to curb the power of Vietnam's regional governors. This offer was a climb-down from Diem's earlier demand that Vietnam be granted dominion status before he would consent to serve as SVN premier. But Bao Dai, who had not forgotten Diem's earlier criticisms of him, was not impressed with this new-found flexibility and declined to meet with Diem.⁵⁰

By December 1950, Diem's political fortunes had reached a nadir. Having failed to rally support for a Third Force within Vietnam, his initial attempts to find foreign allies had also sputtered. But to return to Vietnam now would mean political isolation and possible assassination. Diem therefore decided to change course, both strategically and geographically. Taking his leave of Thuc, who was due to return to Vietnam, Diem headed back across the Atlantic to the United States. Over the next two and a half years, he worked quietly to build support among sympathetic Americans while waiting for the political winds in Indochina to shift in his favor.⁵¹

The Americans who met Diem in the U.S. during the early 1950s varied widely in their assessments of him. While officials in the State and Defense departments were mostly unimpressed, other U.S. leaders were more enthusiastic about Diem and his political prospects.⁵² The list of the Americans who met and professed their admiration for Diem in this period in-

cluded a Roman Catholic cardinal, a justice of the U.S. Supreme Court, at least half a dozen members of Congress, numerous journalists, several prominent academics, and William J. Donovan, the legendary spy chief who had played a key role in the founding of the CIA.⁵³

In the eyes of his American boosters, Diem had several attractive qualities. Perhaps the most obvious of these was his staunch anticommunism. Diem's stint in the United States coincided with the high tide of McCarthyism, a period when anticommunist credentials were de rigueur for any foreign leader who hoped to win U.S. support. At the same time, Diem effectively connected his anticommunism to his identity as a Catholic. In his dealings with clergymen and prominent lay Catholics, he invariably portrayed Vietnamese Catholics as the most reliably anticommunist group in Indochina.⁵⁴ Amid a postwar surge of Christian religious fervor in the United States, some Americans found Diem's mixture of anticommunist conviction and piety irresistible.⁵⁵

Nevertheless, Diem could not hope to win Washington's official backing merely because he was a Catholic who hated communism. The fact of his anticommunism did not distinguish Diem from Bao Dai and the other SVN leaders who were already enjoying U.S. material aid and diplomatic support. And while some Americans admired Diem for his Christian devotion, several U.S. officials—including some serving in the U.S. mission in Saigon—worried that Diem's Catholicism would inhibit his ability to build support in a country where sectarian divisions ran deep and where most of the population was non-Catholic.⁵⁶ Diem himself seemed to recognize that his Catholic identity could hurt his efforts to gain U.S. backing as easily as it could help him. During the period of his exile, he almost always framed his appeals to non-Catholic audiences in secular terms and refrained from casting the U.S.-Vietnam relationship as a Christian alliance.⁵⁷

Instead of seeking U.S. support solely on anticommunist or religious grounds, Diem tried to tap another key vein in postwar American thinking: ideas about development. Diem arrived in the United States at a moment when foreign aid budgets were expanding and Washington's interest in overseas development was on the rise. Indeed, the expansion of U.S. aid programs to decolonizing nations during the early 1950s went hand in hand with Americans' growing faith in their abilities to use technology and expert knowledge to transform and uplift foreign societies. Diem was shrewd enough to recognize that any future alliance between Vietnam

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and the United States would not be founded on geopolitics alone. He therefore made a point of presenting himself as a progressive reformer who believed that U.S. aid and expertise would figure prominently in Vietnam's postcolonial future.

To gain an official hearing for his views about U.S. aid for Vietnam, Diem sought the help of Wesley Fishel, who was happy to oblige his new friend. In 1951, Fishel joined the faculty of Michigan State College (soon to be renamed Michigan State University). Michigan State was one of several American universities that became involved in U.S. government-sponsored foreign aid programs during the 1950s; over the course of the decade, school officials set up programs to provide technical assistance to several countries in Latin America and Asia.⁵⁸ Intrigued by the possibility of such a program for Vietnam, Fishel arranged for Diem to work at Michigan State as a consultant. In 1952, Fishel sent a letter to the U.S. Mutual Security Administration in which he outlined what he and Diem had in mind. Some elements of Fishel's proposal were obviously authored by Diem, for example, the stipulation that the program should be based in Diem's hometown, Hue. The letter also indicated that Vietnam needed technical assistance in areas as diverse as "police science," "foreign trade problems," and even "studies for the adoption of democratic institutions."⁵⁹ Although this proposal did not generate much interest in Washington when it was drafted, it would take on new significance after Diem's return to Vietnam in 1954.

Though Diem failed to gain official approval for his ideas about technical assistance during his exile, his personal interactions with certain American political leaders provided hope that he could one day win more substantive U.S. support. He was especially heartened by a luncheon held in his honor in Washington on May 8, 1953. The event was hosted by William O. Douglas, a U.S. supreme court justice who had become a believer in the idea of a Third Force for Vietnam during a visit to Indochina the year before.⁶⁰ Douglas arranged the lunch to introduce Diem to other like-minded Americans; the guests included the U.S. senators Mike Mansfield and John F. Kennedy, both of whom had also traveled recently to Indochina and would play key roles in Diem's future relations with the United States.⁶¹ The senators and their fellow diners were all impressed with Diem, who spoke forcefully against Bao Dai and the prospects for independence within the French Union. Diem also regaled his listeners with an account of his 1946 encounter with Ho Chi Minh.⁶² As Mansfield

later recalled, he left the lunch “with the feeling that if anyone could hold South Vietnam, it was somebody like Ngo Dinh Diem.”⁶³

As many historians have observed, Diem’s ability to connect with Americans such as Fishel, Mansfield, and Kennedy during his exile would eventually pay off. Especially after 1954, the personal relationships Diem had established during his U.S. exile helped ratify and reinforce Washington’s official support for him and his government. But in May 1953, Diem was not yet in a position to reap these political dividends, and his American friends had so far offered him little more than encouragement and moral support. He would have to do more than win the sympathies of a few famous Americans if he was to find his way back into political office. By the time of the Douglas luncheon, Diem had concluded that the time had come for him to leave the United States for Europe, where he would seek to reestablish contact with Bao Dai. Although his exile was not yet at an end, he was already laying plans for his political comeback. Over the next year, the critical impetus for this comeback would be provided not by Diem’s new admirers in the United States but by the loyal supporters he had left behind in Vietnam.

*Ngo Dinh Nhu, Personalism, and the Origins of the
Can Lao Party*

It has long been assumed that Diem was out of touch with events and sentiments in Vietnam during the period of his overseas exile. He spent much of his time in the United States and Europe living in Catholic seminaries and monasteries; many who met him during this period assumed that he was seeking a retreat from world affairs in general and from Indochinese politics in particular. Even before Diem’s exile ended, some U.S. officials derided him as “a Yogi-like mystic” who had “just emerged from a religious retreat into the cold world” and who was therefore ill prepared for the daunting political tasks ahead of him.⁶⁴ The historians who accept this representation of Diem have usually depicted him as floating helplessly on a sea of intrigue after he finally returned to Saigon in the early summer of 1954.

In reality, Diem’s residences at Catholic institutions in the United States and Belgium provided him with an easy means to stay abreast of important developments in Indochina. By connecting him to international networks of priests and lay Catholics who could safely carry messages without fear of interception by the French police, the monasteries and seminaries that hosted him actually facilitated his efforts to stay in touch with his allies

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and supporters in Vietnam. His Catholic connections were especially critical to his efforts to communicate with the most ardent and important of these supporters: the members of his own family.⁶⁵

After Diem came to power, his critics often denounced him for practicing “family rule” (*gia dinh tri*)—that is, for running his regime as a Ngo family dictatorship. Historians have noted this aspect of Diem’s rule after 1954, but they have mostly overlooked the crucial assistance that his family members provided him before he became leader of South Vietnam. In addition to making use of Bishop Thuc’s connections to Catholics in North America and Europe, Diem benefited greatly from the help provided by his three younger brothers: Ngo Dinh Nhu, Ngo Dinh Can, and Ngo Dinh Luyen. Although close in age, Nhu, Can, and Luyen had sharply different personalities. The rivalries among them were even fiercer than the earlier fraternal contests between Diem and his older brothers. While Can and Luyen played important roles in Diem’s rise to power, the most crucial contributions of all were made by Nhu.

Ngo Dinh Can (1913–1964) and Ngo Dinh Luyen (1914–1990) were a study in contrasts. The least educated of the brothers, Can was reclusive and cantankerous and spent virtually all of his time in Hue, the family’s hometown. In contrast, Luyen was a cosmopolitan and personable engineer who had studied in Europe and spoke several languages. Not surprisingly, Can and Luyen lent support to Diem in different ways. In the early 1950s, Can began to build a clandestine network of supporters in central Vietnam; he later used this organization to build and consolidate support for Diem there.⁶⁶ Meanwhile, Luyen worked on Diem’s behalf in Europe. After Diem moved from the United States to France in May 1953, Luyen became his main advisor and his personal representative in discussions with Bao Dai, who was a former classmate of Luyen.⁶⁷

If Can and Luyen were each other’s alter egos, then Ngo Dinh Nhu (1910–1963) was the odd man out in the Ngo family. The fourth of the six brothers, Nhu was said to be studious, thoughtful, and reserved as a young man. He was neither provincial like Can nor polished like Luyen; nor did he follow his older brothers in their participation in the politics of the Vietnamese imperial court. He spent much of the 1930s studying in France, first taking a degree in literature and then studying paleography and librarianship at the famous *École des Chartes* in Paris. In the late 1930s, Nhu returned to Vietnam and embarked on a career as an archivist. By 1945, he had attained a senior post at the National Library in Hanoi.⁶⁸

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After the August Revolution, Nhu became more involved in politics, and especially in the Ngo family's efforts to mobilize Vietnamese Catholics in support of Diem.⁶⁹ During 1947–1948, Nhu assisted Diem in his unsuccessful attempt to turn the “Bao Dai solution” to his advantage. When Bao Dai traveled from Hong Kong to Europe, Nhu followed him and continued Diem's efforts to lobby the ex-emperor on the independence issue. Nhu also tried to rally support for Diem among Vietnamese students and workers living in France.⁷⁰ Despite such activities, Nhu remained an obscure figure throughout the 1940s, especially in comparison to his famous older brothers. After his return to Indochina from Europe, Nhu and his young wife, Tran Le Xuan—later to gain international fame and infamy as “Madame Nhu”—moved to the town of Dalat in Vietnam's southern highlands, where he indulged in his hobby of raising orchids.⁷¹

More than his brothers, Nhu considered himself an intellectual. He was particularly interested in the writings of Emmanuel Mounier, an influential French Catholic philosopher. During the early 1930s, the Great Depression provoked Mounier to fashion a critique of liberal capitalism. He focused especially on the liberal emphasis on individualism, arguing that it led to isolation, alienation, and exploitation. But Mounier was equally critical of Marxism and its emphasis on the collective, which he believed also lent itself to oppression and to the suppression of personal identity. Having denounced both liberalism and communism, Mounier undertook to split the difference between them; he predicted the emergence of a postcapitalist social order in which both individual needs and communal prosperity would receive their due, without either becoming the exclusive focus of social policy.⁷² This new order, Mounier argued, would be organized around a concept that he referred to as “the person” (*la personne*)—a term deliberately chosen to distinguish it from the liberal notion of the individual. Instead of defining human existence exclusively in economic terms, Mounier argued for social policies and practices that balanced human material needs with what he called “spiritual” considerations. Because of his emphasis on “the person” as an antidote to the materialist excesses of both liberalism and communism, Mounier's ideas became known as personalism.⁷³

By the time Nhu returned to Indochina from France in the late 1930s, he had become an enthusiastic personalist.⁷⁴ He began to consider how Mounier's concept of the person—which other Catholics had rendered

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into Vietnamese as *nhân vi*, a Sino-Vietnamese term that can be transliterated as “the position of man”—could serve as a guide to social policy in Vietnam.⁷⁵ The notion that personalism offered a “third path” to social development that was neither liberal nor communist seemed especially appealing. Nhu hoped that Mounier’s approach might prove useful to Diem’s efforts to build a Third Force distinct both from French colonialism and from the communism of the Viet Minh.

In his exploration of Mounier’s ideas, Nhu enlisted the help of another Frenchman: Father Fernand Parrel, a Catholic priest and missionary of the Society of Foreign Missions of Paris. In the late 1940s, Parrel became curé of Dalat, where Nhu was a parishoner. Although Parrel initially found Nhu “rather cold” in demeanor, he also discovered that the former archivist was possessed of an “exceptional intelligence” and a serious interest in social philosophy. In 1949, Nhu and Parrel established a seminar dedicated to the study of personalism and other topics in Catholic social thought. The group was exclusively male and initially had only about twenty members, all Catholics. Meetings were held in a house in Dalat and featured more didacticism than discussion; as one participant later recalled, “few spoke but many listened” at these sessions.⁷⁶

Neither Nhu nor Parrel viewed the Dalat seminar simply as an intellectual exercise. Instead, they saw it as an initial step toward a broader effort to disseminate social doctrines and theories to both Catholic and non-Catholic audiences within Indochina. To this end, the two men launched a Vietnamese-language journal, the inaugural issue of which included an article on personalism authored by Nhu. In addition to putting their ideas into print, Parrel and Nhu also sought to expand participation in the seminar itself. Father Parrel conceived of the seminar as an Indochinese version of France’s *Semaines Sociales*, an association of Catholic intellectuals interested in social thought. By 1952, thanks to funding provided by church leaders and by officials in the Bao Dai government, the seminar had expanded into a Vietnam-wide enterprise. Events organized in Dalat, Hue, Hanoi, and Saigon were attended by prominent Vietnamese intellectuals and political figures, including many non-Catholics. Parrel even arranged for some participants to be ferried to these events by airplane.⁷⁷

Nhu’s efforts to promote personalism as a guide to Vietnam’s social and political development can be glimpsed in the text of a talk he delivered in Dalat in April 1952. In the address, Nhu acknowledged that *nhân vi* was a

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The Dalat seminar organized by Ngo Dinh Nhu and Father Fernand Parrell, c. 1949. Nhu stands second from the right with his arms crossed; Parrell stands next to him, holding a pipe. On the far left is Huynh Van Lang, a young Catholic student who later became a key figure in Nhu's Can Lao Party. (Courtesy of Huynh Van Lang)

Catholic idea but insisted that it had universal relevance, particularly in war-torn Vietnam. Addressing the non-Catholics in his audience, Nhu declared that “the anxieties of Catholics are like an echo answering the worries that are roiling your own hearts and souls.” Vietnamese of all political and religious backgrounds, Nhu argued, must join together in “a sudden and fierce unanimity” in order to “preserve the person” against the forces that threatened to crush it. These forces included liberalism and communism, both of which offered only “false liberation” and perpetual war.⁷⁸

In arguing for the utility and applicability of personalism, Nhu did not portray it as a conservative doctrine. Personalism, he argued, was a form of revolution. As such, it called for new ways of thinking about Vietnamese politics, society, and culture. Invoking a metaphor his audience would have found familiar, Nhu cast his thinking in explicitly radical terms:

These are great undertakings, and they can be summarized as a politico-economic revolution [*mot cuoc cach mang chinh tri*

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kinh te], aimed at making the Person the focus of concern. I say “revolution” because it will be a great waste if we try to patch over the fissures in a creaky house, when what is needed is to transform the entire internal structure of the house.⁷⁹

Nhu would eventually come to describe himself as an advocate for the “personalist revolution,” a process he claimed would be even more sweeping and transformative than Marxist socialism. But while it was obvious that Nhu intended this revolution to be far-reaching as well as antiliberal and anticommunist, the actual substance of his revolutionary agenda would remain maddeningly opaque. In this regard, Nhu’s talents as an ideologue and a communicator left a great deal to be desired—especially in comparison to Ho Chi Minh and other communist leaders.

As many of his contemporaries pointed out, Nhu’s most formidable leadership skills lay in the realm not of ideology but of clandestine political activities. Of the many political ventures Nhu undertook prior to 1954, the most consequential was his founding of a political party known as the “Revolutionary Personalist Workers Party” (Can Lao Nhan Vi Cach Mang Dang). This organization, known simply as the Can Lao, would eventually become one of the cornerstones of Ngo family power in South Vietnam. Because the Can Lao was established in secret and operated mostly in the shadows, its origins have long been shrouded in mystery. Nevertheless, the story of the party’s establishment and expansion can still be glimpsed in retrospective accounts written by former Can Lao insiders and in the recently declassified records of French and U.S. intelligence agencies. These sources reveal crucial details about Nhu’s plans to build support for Diem among Vietnamese anticommunists.

The organization that became the Can Lao emerged out of the Dalat seminar and Nhu’s other political activities during the early 1950s. Not surprisingly, many of the groups and leaders enlisted by Nhu already had ties to Diem. In northern Vietnam, Nhu’s most important collaborator was Tran Trung Dung, a Catholic activist who had been associated with Diem since the late 1940s and who would later serve as South Vietnam’s deputy minister of defense. In the south, Nhu forged ties to a group of intellectuals linked to a journal entitled *Tinh Than* (Spirit). He also worked with Tran Chanh Thanh, a lawyer and former Viet Minh official from the north who moved to Saigon in the early 1950s. Thanh would subse-

quently become minister of information in the Diem government. In central Vietnam, Nhu relied on his younger brother Ngo Dinh Can, who was already building his own network of loyalists in the region. Nhu later described the Can Lao as resulting from the “fusion” of all these figures and their respective groups under his direction in 1953, although the Can Lao name was apparently not adopted until the following year. Not all of these early Can Lao recruits were unreservedly loyal to Nhu, and some would later become deeply disenchanted with him and the party he led. But they all lent valuable support to the Ngos during the crucial months leading up to Diem’s return from exile in the summer of 1954.⁸⁰

After Nhu himself, the best known of the Can Lao’s early members was Tran Quoc Buu, Indochina’s leading labor organizer. Buu was a veteran political activist who had once been affiliated with the Viet Minh. In the late 1940s, after becoming disillusioned with communism, Buu fell in with a French labor advocate who educated him in the ideas and tactics of the Christian Democratic trade union movement. Following a brief stint in Europe, Buu returned to Indochina in 1949 and began illegally unionizing urban and rural workers. During 1952, changes in the SVN’s labor laws permitted Buu to legalize his confederation of unions under the moniker of the “Vietnamese Confederation of Labor” and to affiliate with the Brussels-based International Federation of Christian Trade Unions.⁸¹ Around this time he was introduced to Nhu by Father Parrell.⁸² In 1953, Buu became one of the founding members of the Can Lao. Meanwhile, Nhu and his allies began publishing a new journal in Saigon entitled *Xa Hoi* (Society), which strongly backed Buu and his Confederation.⁸³

Buu seems to have entered into his alliance with Nhu with some misgivings, and he would eventually come to regret his association with the Ngo brothers.⁸⁴ Nhu, however, was excited to be collaborating with the head of a labor organization with tens of thousands of members.⁸⁵ During his student days, Nhu had embraced the views of French syndicalists who argued that workers and farmers should be organized into unions or cooperatives to ensure that their interests would not be subordinated to those of capital. This emphasis on creating social organizations with mass memberships would become a hallmark of Nhu’s post-1954 efforts to reconfigure state-society relations in South Vietnam.⁸⁶ The syndicalist dimensions of Nhu’s thinking were especially apparent in the pages of *Xa Hoi*, which advocated the creation of workers’ and farmers’ cooperatives, as well as unionization rights for industrial laborers.⁸⁷

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In addition to his outreach to Buu and organized labor in Vietnam, Nhu sought the support of another important constituency: soldiers and military officers. Following the implementation of the “Bao Dai solution” in 1949, French authorities took steps to provide the fledgling SVN with its own military force, the VNA. Although most senior VNA commanders were reliably pro-French in their political sympathies, the junior officer corps included many younger Vietnamese who were more critical of French colonialism. Some of these junior officers were intrigued by Nhu’s ardent brand of nationalism and his advocacy of personalism as a revolutionary alternative to communism. During the early 1950s, in speeches and meetings at the newly established Vietnamese military academy in Dalat, Nhu began to build a following within the ranks of the VNA.⁸⁸

In central Vietnam, the Can Lao’s recruitment of military officers and other Vietnamese was overseen not by Nhu but by Ngo Dinh Can, who quickly became the party’s dominant figure in that region. By early 1954, Can’s cronies had established several Can Lao cells within VNA units and among the civil servants working for the Bao Dai government. Each cell consisted of a handful of men, none of whom knew the identities of any members of other cells.⁸⁹ The creation of a core group of supporters inside the VNA and the SVN civil service would eventually pay great dividends, following Diem’s return from exile.

In retrospect, Nhu’s record as a political organizer during the late 1940s and early 1950s was decidedly mixed. His efforts to promote personalism as an alternative to both liberalism and communism met with little success; there is no evidence that the seminars he organized with Father Parrell or the disquisitions he published in the pages of *Xa Hoi* generated anything more than mild curiosity about the doctrine. But the founding of the Can Lao Party and the political alliances Nhu forged with leaders such as Tran Quoc Buu proved much more consequential. In the factionalized and fragmented world of Indochinese politics during the 1950s, Nhu’s ability to wield power through both mass organizations and clandestine networks was a potent tool. Diem understood this, and he counted heavily on Nhu to lay the political groundwork for his return. In this regard, Diem’s faith in Nhu was well placed. By the summer of 1953, Nhu had built a formidable network of allies and supporters across Indochina. He had also begun to plot the political maneuvers that would soon carry Diem to power in Saigon.

Diem's Campaign for the SVN Premiership

Diem's decision to leave the United States for Europe in May 1953 was the opening move in a new political gambit. Though the war in Indochina appeared stalemated, the Ngo brothers had detected a political shift they hoped to exploit. From his vantage point in Saigon, Nhu noted that many noncommunist nationalists had become impatient with Bao Dai's strategy of seeking independence within the French Union. In the four years since the signing of the Elysée Accords, France had made few concessions to Vietnamese nationalism, and the SVN remained only nominally independent from Paris. Vietnamese anticommunists were also fed up with the SVN premier, Nguyen Van Tam, who was widely disdained for his pro-French stance and autocratic policies. In May 1953, nationalist sentiment was further piqued by a unilateral French decision to devalue the Indochinese piaster—a move that violated earlier agreements with the Associated States and greatly exacerbated economic hardship in Indochina.⁹⁰ As dissatisfaction with France and Bao Dai mounted, the Ngo brothers sensed that the time had come to make a new bid for power.

Diem and Nhu knew that they would have to tread carefully. They needed to discredit Bao Dai's piecemeal approach to the independence issue; yet they also had to refrain from personal attacks on the ex-emperor, lest he take offense and refuse even to consider Diem for the premiership. Fortunately for the Ngos, events in the summer of 1953 provided just the opportunity they needed. In early July, the French government proposed a new round of talks with the Associated States aimed at "perfecting" their independence within the French Union. Four years earlier, this offer might have been viewed as a validation of Bao Dai's gradualist approach to national liberation. But by 1953 the prospect of more negotiations only fueled the nationalists' anxieties about French sincerity. In a series of meetings with other leaders during July and August, Nhu adroitly exploited these anxieties. Working in tandem with Nguyen Ton Hoan—the activist who had collaborated during 1947–1948 with Diem—Nhu floated the idea of convening a "Unity Congress" of anticommunist groups in Saigon. Many of the political leaders who had previously backed Bao Dai quickly agreed to participate. In addition to Hoan, these included the key leaders of various religious groups, as well as Le Van Vien of the Binh Xuyen cartel, a powerful criminal syndicate that controlled the Saigon vice trades. Nhu's proposal also attracted the support of several anticommunist groups that

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had so far refused to back Bao Dai's government. Le Van Vien offered to host the event at Binh Xuyen headquarters.⁹¹

From the moment it opened on September 5, 1953, the Unity Congress was a chaotic affair. The fifty-five delegates in attendance quickly endorsed a statement that fiercely denounced Bao Dai's gradualist policies. As soon as the statement was signed, however, the delegates began to bicker about its implications. Vien, who had apparently hoped to use the Congress to boost his own political fortunes, realized that he had miscalculated and decided to bring the event to a premature close after just two days of meetings. Some of the participating leaders, worried that the criticisms of Bao Dai had gone too far, sent a joint telegram proclaiming their loyalty to the ex-emperor and the SVN. Meanwhile, Nhu announced that the Congress had launched a new political organization known as the "Movement for National Union and Peace." He took care to distance himself from some of the harshest of the anti-Bao Dai statements by denying that the Congress had adopted an official political stance.⁹²

The main impact of the Unity Congress was to provoke Bao Dai into responding to the criticisms that had been leveled against him. From his residence in France, he announced that a government-sponsored "National Congress" would take place in Saigon. The leaders of the Binh Xuyen and several other nationalist groups immediately agreed to participate. However, when the event convened on October 12, 1953, Nhu and his allies were conspicuously absent. At first, the participants seemed likely to deliver the expected affirmation of support for Bao Dai and his policies. But on October 16, the gathering unexpectedly endorsed a resolution that rejected participation in the French Union in favor of "total independence." Bao Dai's loyalists were subsequently able to qualify the offending statement with an amendment that an independent Vietnam would not remain in the Union "in its present form." But the political damage had been done. Intended as a show of nationalist support for Bao Dai, the Congress had instead revealed the extent of the dissatisfaction with him and his policies.⁹³

Diem and Nhu had disassociated themselves from the October Congress, no doubt because they feared that it would serve to shore up support for Bao Dai.⁹⁴ They soon discovered, however, that the unanticipated outcome of the event prompted Bao Dai to take a friendlier approach to Diem and to reconsider the possibility of appointing him premier of the SVN. Even before the National Congress had opened, Bao Dai agreed to confer with Diem in Paris; it was their first face-to-face meeting in four

years.⁹⁵ After the Congress's adoption of the "total independence" resolution, Bao Dai became even more conciliatory. In a second meeting with Diem in Cannes on October 26, Bao Dai broached the possibility of Diem's appointment to the premiership with a "hypothetical" inquiry about his willingness to serve.⁹⁶ Although the former monarch would put off making a decision about Diem for several more months, it was already clear that the Ngo brothers' stratagem was paying off. Bao Dai's standing with his subjects had been shown to be miserably low. In contrast, Diem's strong anti-French stance appeared perfectly in tune with the general tenor of nationalist sentiment in Saigon.

In the months following the October Congress, the pressure on Bao Dai continued to mount, and Diem and Nhu continued to press their advantage. In December 1953, the ex-emperor bowed to nationalist complaints and dismissed the autocratic Nguyen Van Tam from the SVN premiership. By replacing Tam's government with a caretaker cabinet headed by Prince Buu Loc, a member of the royal household, Bao Dai apparently hoped to buy time while he looked for a way to shore up his faltering support. But time was now at a premium, and the Ngo brothers were unrelenting. In early March 1954, after Bao Dai assented in principle to the creation of a new SVN National Assembly, Nhu and his allies published an article in Saigon in which they claimed victory and demanded further concessions. This move provoked schisms within the ranks of various nationalist groups; although some leaders rallied to Bao Dai, several others publicly backed Nhu and his "revolutionary nationalist" demands.⁹⁷

In mid-March, as the political infighting in Saigon intensified, word arrived from the north that the Viet Minh had laid siege to the French garrison at the remote highlands town of Dien Bien Phu. This news, combined with the French government's plans to hold talks with the Viet Minh at an upcoming Great Power conference in Geneva, made the possibility of a French withdrawal from Vietnam seem more likely than ever before. In Paris, Bao Dai realized that he was running out of options. As the French position on the battlefield became more precarious, the ex-emperor reestablished contact with Diem. Dien Bien Phu fell on May 7; a few days later, Bao Dai summoned Diem from his retreat in Belgium. According to Bao Dai's account of the meeting, Diem was so coy that he initially pretended to have no interest in the premiership. Bao Dai was obliged to ask him a second time to take the job, imploring him that "the salvation of Vietnam depends on it."⁹⁸

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Journalists, historians, and others have long speculated about the role that U.S. government officials or other Americans might have played in pressuring Bao Dai to select Diem for the SVN premiership. Sensationalistic reports published during the 1960s suggested that Diem had won the job thanks to the backing of a shadowy “Vietnam lobby” headed by Francis Cardinal Spellman, the powerful prelate of New York.⁹⁹ Others asserted that Diem owed his appointment to secret maneuvers carried out by the CIA. Yet another theory held that State Department officials—perhaps even Secretary of State John Foster Dulles himself—had lobbied Bao Dai to choose Diem.¹⁰⁰

The most obvious problem with all of these theories is the lack of documentary evidence to support them. CIA Historians have searched for such proof in the agency’s still-classified records from the period but have been unable to find it.¹⁰¹ Declassified State Department records have also failed to substantiate the existence of the alleged U.S. pressure campaign. As one historian has noted, the available materials suggest that Dulles and other senior Eisenhower administration officials were at most only “vaguely aware” of Diem prior to May 1954.¹⁰² Despite this, the notion that Diem became premier because of behind-the-scenes U.S. maneuvers on his behalf has remained an article of faith in Vietnam War historiography.¹⁰³

The lack of evidence aside, those who insist that Diem’s appointment could only have been engineered by the U.S. government have overlooked a crucial fact: by the spring of 1954, Bao Dai already had compelling reasons of his own to make Diem the next premier of the SVN. In part, Bao Dai hoped that Diem would be able to leverage his U.S. contacts to gain increased aid for the Saigon government in the event of a French withdrawal from Indochina. But Bao Dai’s decision was also conditioned by domestic political developments in Vietnam—developments that the Ngo brothers had both shaped and exploited. Even before the fall of Dien Bien Phu, it was clear that Diem’s calls for “true independence” were resonating strongly with his fellow anticommunists. It was also clear that the Ngos wielded considerable political clout in Vietnam via the networks and organizations they had built. As Bao Dai himself later acknowledged in his memoirs, the prestige and credibility that Diem and Nhu had gained in nationalist circles was a crucial factor in his decision to appoint Diem:

From my earlier experience with him, I knew that Diem had a difficult character. I was also aware of his fanaticism and his

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messianic tendencies. But, in the present situation, there was no better choice. He was well known to the Americans, who appreciated his intransigence. In their eyes, he was the man best suited for the job, and Washington would not be sparing in its support of him. Because of [Diem's] past and because of the presence of his brother at the head of the "Movement for National Union," he would have the cooperation of the fiercest nationalists, those who had brought down Tam and then Buu Loc. Finally, because of his intransigence and his fanaticism, he could be counted on to resist communism. Yes, he was truly the right man for the situation.¹⁰⁴

To date, no persuasive evidence of a secret U.S. plot to install Diem as SVN premier has surfaced. But even if the Americans had sought to pressure Bao Dai to appoint Diem, they would only have been encouraging him to do what he had already decided to do. By May 1954, Bao Dai had been overtaken by events and outmaneuvered by Diem and Nhu. He was left with little choice but to offer Diem the premiership on the terms Diem had long demanded: "full powers" over all aspects of the SVN government, military, and economy.

On June 16, 1954—exactly five years to the day after he had issued his manifesto for an alternative approach to "social revolution"—Ngo Dinh Diem officially agreed to Bao Dai's request to form a cabinet. For Diem, the moment was replete with vindication. Of course, he was too experienced in the vicissitudes of Indochinese politics to believe that his triumph was complete or that his long-term success was assured. He knew that his appointment offered him nothing more than the opportunity to grapple with the enormously daunting problems that confronted the SVN. Still, Diem had finally gained the political opening he had sought for so long, and he relished the accomplishment. "The hour of decision has arrived," he declared immediately after his appointment was announced. "I am determined to lead the Vietnamese nation on its path, no matter what obstacles we may face."¹⁰⁵ As events would demonstrate, the decisions made in 1954 would indeed have profound consequences for Vietnam. By dint of patience, perseverance, planning, opportunism, and no small amount of luck, Diem had secured a chance to shape many of those decisions. It was the role of a lifetime for Diem, and he intended to play it to the hilt.

2

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In November 1951, when Ngo Dinh Diem was in the midst of his U.S. exile, an American aid official named R. Allen Griffin stopped in Indochina during a tour of Southeast Asia. Eighteen months earlier, Griffin had headed a special State Department mission to Vietnam and the other countries of the region. The information gathered by Griffin's team had been used to set up U.S. economic aid programs to several governments, including the French-backed "Associated States" of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. Griffin was now returning to see how the newly established programs—all operating under the auspices of the U.S. government's Economic Cooperation Administration (ECA)—were coming along.

What Griffin found in Vietnam gave him cause for concern. While the new U.S. aid mission in Saigon was "basically on [the] right track," he observed, its personnel were gravely worried about the SVN and its current prime minister, Tran Van Huu. The Huu government, Griffin complained in a cable to the State Department, suffered from a "lack of vitality and public leadership" and a general indifference to "progressive progress that would improve the general welfare of peasants." It had "no grass roots" and it possessed "no popular support because it has no popular program." Griffin predicted that Ho Chi Minh would retain his appeal among ordinary Vietnamese "so long as 'independence' leaders with French support are simply native mandarins who are succeeding foreign mandarins." The

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primary problem in Vietnam, Griffin declared, was an “old Asian issue”: the “insecurity, hunger and wretchedness of [the] masses of people to whom their government has failed to make an effective appeal.” For American aid to be effective, U.S. leaders needed to figure out how to persuade both French and Vietnamese leaders to come to grips with these problems. “The period of mandarin and functionaire government in Asia is over,” he warned.¹

In his complaints about corruption, class tensions, poverty, and the SVN government’s lack of popular support, Griffin raised some of the key social and political issues that would bedevil U.S. officials and aid experts in Vietnam throughout the 1950s and afterward. But not all of his colleagues saw these issues in the same way he did. Donald Heath, the diplomat in charge of the U.S. mission in Saigon, wrote a spirited response to Griffin’s cable. Although Heath did not dispute that the Huu regime lacked popular support, he suggested that the establishment of an SVN government with “grass roots” support was out of the question, at least for the time being. Even if popular leaders could be found and persuaded to join the government, Heath warned, their participation might lead to “Asiatic neutralism or Viet Minh infiltration.” For Heath, better government in Vietnam would begin not with grassroots initiatives but with what he described as “pacification” operations conducted by French and SVN security forces. By using military force to establish its administrative authority at the village level, the SVN would “accustom [the] masses to central government hegemony”; such military and administrative measures would eventually pave the way for the election of a democratic government.²

The 1951 disagreement between Griffin and Heath reflected broader divisions in U.S. official thinking about Vietnam and foreign aid. From the outset of Washington’s intervention in Indochina, Americans frequently clashed over the means and ends of U.S. assistance for Vietnam. Griffin, Heath, and virtually all of their colleagues in Saigon and Washington were united in their conviction that the United States should seek to contain communism in Southeast Asia. But they were often sharply at odds with each other over how U.S. aid should be used in pursuit of that goal. These disputes were not merely squabbles over tactics and techniques. Instead, they were rooted in contrasting ways of thinking about development and social change in Asia and the rest of the Third World.

By the early 1950s, a surprisingly large number of Americans already had years or even decades of experience with development projects across Asia.³

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American officials and technical experts could also draw on the recent history of nation building within their own country as a source of ideas and models. Thus, while the Cold War may have provided a new strategic rationale for U.S. foreign aid efforts in Southeast Asian countries, the actual aid programs and practices that Washington pursued were often derived from pre-Cold War templates and experiences. But the lessons drawn from this earlier history were diverse; U.S. development thought and practice during the mid-twentieth century was not defined by a single theory, doctrine, or ideology. Both at home and abroad, American development efforts before and during World War II had been accompanied by pitched debates over the merits of various models and approaches. These debates would continue in Washington and in many U.S. embassies across the world as the Cold War unfolded. In the case of Vietnam, U.S. aid policy and strategy was a contentious subject from the outset. Well before Ngo Dinh Diem's emergence as the new leader of the SVN in mid-1954, Americans were already divided over Vietnam and its prospects for social and political transformation.

Americans, Development, and the New Deal

For many of the U.S. aid officials and technical experts who arrived in Southeast Asia during the early 1950s, the most salient historical lessons about development were those they associated with Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal reform movement. Roosevelt himself believed strongly that the New Deal's liberal reform ethos could and should be transposed from the domestic realm into the international arena. In his "Four Freedoms" address and in the Atlantic Charter—both issued in the watershed year 1941—the president explicitly linked his domestic reform agenda to a vision of international order based on liberal principles. In part, this new postwar liberal order was to be constituted via the creation of new multilateral institutions, including the United Nations, the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, the Bretton Woods currency regime, the International Monetary Fund, and the Nuremberg Tribunals.⁴ However, the legacies of the New Deal went beyond postwar U.S. efforts to transform international relations *between* countries; they also were evident in Washington's attempts to bring about change *within* other nations. For many of the Americans who aspired to build nations overseas after 1945, the New Deal would serve as a touchstone of developmentalist ideas and models

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even after most of FDR's domestic agencies and programs had been dismantled.

One strand of ideological continuity that linked the New Deal to post-war U.S. overseas development ventures was the cluster of ideas known as *high modernism*. James Scott describes high modernism as “a particularly sweeping vision of how the benefits of technical and scientific progress might be applied—usually through the state—in every field of human activity.” From this perspective, Roosevelt's New Deal was just one of many instances in which governments and experts sought to use science in the service of massive, top-down development projects. In each of these cases, leaders and states proposed to use central planning as a means to improve the lives of their citizens. According to Scott and other scholars, the results of these “big plan” projects almost always fell short of their designers' hopes and expectations. Too often, the high modernists' obsession with the production and dissemination of new kinds of scientific knowledge caused them to denigrate local and traditional practices and beliefs—a crucial error that undermined their success in the long run.⁵

The high modernist qualities of the New Deal were famously evident in the history of the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), the massive hydroelectricity project that became one of FDR's signature programs. The designers of the TVA predicted that the electrical power furnished by its network of dams would catalyze far-reaching changes in the material conditions of life in the southeastern United States. Transportation, communication, and settlement patterns would be revolutionized, along with foodways, recreation, and education. But the changes that TVA planners envisioned went well beyond the improvement of infrastructure and the introduction of new technologies. They also expected the dams to catalyze a broader process of social, political, and ideological transformation. The director of the TVA, David Lilienthal, declared that the program would nurture what he described as a new “grass roots” form of democracy. For Lilienthal, electrical power would lead to social empowerment; electrons would not only elevate living standards but also open up new avenues for ordinary people to participate in the civic life of their communities. But Lilienthal never successfully articulated exactly how the TVA and other huge, hierarchically administered public works projects would actually promote egalitarianism and decentralization. The result, recent research suggests, was that these ventures mostly failed to realize

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their architects' democratizing ambitions. The TVA thus appears to confirm Scott's interpretation of the New Deal era as a time in which high modernism—with all its conceptual shortcomings—was the defining feature of U.S. development thought and practice.⁶

Not all New Dealers were high modernists, however. Indeed, Scott's argument is far too sweeping in its suggestion that the history of development in the twentieth century can be reduced to a single mode of thinking.⁷ Many New Deal officials and experts strongly resisted the top-down, highly centralized style of planning favored by Lilienthal and the TVA. Some of these New Dealers promoted what can be thought of as *low modernism*—that is, an approach that sought to promote social change via small-scale, locally based initiatives aimed at particular groups and communities. Low modernist thinking was especially apparent in many of the agrarian reform programs implemented by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) during the late 1930s and early 1940s. The USDA's interest in promoting citizen involvement in reform at the local level was reflected in its sponsorship of "Group Discussion" meetings where rural residents were invited to air their views on the government's agrarian policies. Farmers were also recruited to join USDA-sponsored county planning committees charged with implementing land-use policies at the local level. The USDA's emphasis on localism and mass participation was perhaps best reflected in its organization of special "Schools of Philosophy." These week-long conferences provided USDA experts and local staff with training on the "philosophical aspects of economic democracy in agriculture."⁸

The New Dealers who organized the USDA's agrarian programs were just as enthusiastic as their high modernist counterparts were about the application of scientific and technical expertise to problems of social reform. Unlike the architects of the TVA, however, the designers of the agrarian New Deal did not propose to begin with the reconfiguration of physical landscapes; instead, they envisioned reform as a process that would start with changes to the mental terrain on which rural residents operated. The first objective of USDA leaders was "to recreate American farmers in their own image"—that is, to make them into "tolerant and civic-minded students of society oriented towards reform." According to this view, farmers would have to embrace new scientific and democratic ways of thinking before any significant changes in U.S. rural society or agricultural practices could be realized.⁹

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At first glance, the most significant point of difference between high and low modernism appears to lie in their contrasting notions of scale. High modernists, for example, unabashedly celebrated their “big plans” to transform entire cities, regions, and nations.¹⁰ Yet they did not advocate big plans merely for the sake of bigness, or even for the sake of efficiency. Instead, they insisted that the creation of new infrastructures and landscapes was the best way to provide ordinary people with tangible benefits such as electricity, better housing, healthier work conditions, improved educational opportunities, and a higher standard of living. These material benefits, in turn, were supposed to provide the conditions in which modern beliefs, attitudes, and practices (such as Lilienthal’s “grass roots democracy”) could take hold and flourish. Thus, high modernism’s preoccupation with large-scale projects and programs was rooted in the conviction that development would necessarily begin with the transformation of environments and institutions—that is, with engineered changes to the physical and social worlds in which people lived and worked. Once these environmental and institutional changes had been implemented, new patterns of thought and behavior were sure to follow.

In contrast, low modernists disdained “big plans” in favor of the view that “small is beautiful.” To succeed, development ventures would have to take account of the local and the particular. Thus, the TVA approach had it exactly backward: instead of beginning with the transformation of physical and social landscapes, the low modernists argued that development would commence in the psychological realm, with the learning of new rational and democratic habits of mind. According to this formula, changes in thinking would drive changes in institutions and social patterns. The low modernist outlook treated development as less akin to engineering than to proselytization—that is, as a process that would begin in the minds of individual men and women and would unfold one convert at a time.

The differences between high and low modernist styles of thinking in the United States during the New Deal era have important implications for the study of U.S. foreign aid in the post–World War II period. As the New Deal unfolded during the late 1930s and early 1940s, different Americans drew different lessons about which experiences and models might be applicable to development efforts in foreign lands. As a result, the rivalries among particular New Deal programs and leaders spilled into debates over foreign aid and technical assistance. While these debates would

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shape U.S. aid practices around the world, they were particularly pointed in East and Southeast Asia. In China and other Asian countries, the proliferation of American-sponsored aid projects fueled intense arguments over what the United States' development goals should be and how best to achieve them.

In parts of Asia, some Americans' penchant for large-scale development projects was apparent well before World War II. In China, a consortium of mostly American missionary groups known as the China International Famine Relief Commission (CIFRC) sponsored several ambitious public engineering projects during the 1920s and 1930s. These included the repair and improvement of roads, the digging of irrigation ditches and wells, the construction of dams and dikes, and the building of a forty-two-mile canal in Suiyuan province.¹¹ According to the CIFRC's chief engineer, Oliver J. Todd, the benefits of such projects transcended the infrastructural improvements they would bring. In addition to preventing future floods and famines and facilitating trade and travel, Todd argued, the CIFRC's work would also promote the transfer of technical knowledge to the Chinese.¹² In some cases, the CIFRC's ambition exceeded its capabilities; the Suiyuan canal, for example, filled with silt shortly after it was completed.¹³ Such setbacks did not dampen the CIFRC's faith in the transformative potential of civil engineering, however. In 1935, Todd visited the TVA and found it "the ideal representation of the transformation he and the CIFRC sought."¹⁴ Although the CIFRC had to suspend its plans for a TVA-like complex of dams in the Yangtze River valley following Japan's invasion of China in 1937, those plans were revived after the war by the United Nations Rehabilitation and Reconstruction Administration (UNRRA), which hired Todd to oversee the project. Ostensibly a multilateral organization, UNRRA's China operations were funded primarily by the United States and staffed mostly by Americans, including many veterans of prewar development initiatives.¹⁵

Still, Americans did not think about China's development solely in high modernist terms. Despite—or because of—the country's vast size, some U.S. reformers pushed for community-based development projects and programs. The CIFRC, for example, supplemented its support for large-scale civil engineering projects with locally focused efforts to build rural credit cooperatives in northern China. These efforts were inspired by the success of the Raiffeisen societies, a type of farmer's cooperative invented

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in the Rhineland in the mid-nineteenth century and copied extensively in the United States. In addition to providing Chinese farmers with access to affordable credit, the CIFRC cooperatives also furnished members with training in new agricultural techniques, as well as other forms of education. One prominent Raiffeisen enthusiast was J. Lossing Buck, an agricultural economist who sought to show how U.S. farm management principles could be used to increase the productivity of rural Chinese households.¹⁶

Many of the CIFRC's prewar community-based reform measures were continued after 1945 by the ECA, the agency with responsibility for most of Washington's foreign economic aid programs. The ECA was best known for its administration of the Marshall Plan, the massive U.S. initiative to rebuild western Europe's war-ravaged industrial economies. In contrast to its European operations, however, the ECA's China activities were more agrarian and low modernist in emphasis. This was especially true of the ECA's Joint Commission for Rural Reconstruction (JCRR), which began operations on the Chinese mainland in 1948. In addition to community-level projects to promote agricultural extension, rural health, and small-scale rural industry, the JCRR also involved itself in problems of land tenure and in efforts to protect farmers from oppressive rents and taxation. Americans who worked for the JCRR espoused what they described as the "village approach" to development. This approach aimed to "bring the village into meaningful cooperation with the national program and direct that program toward meeting the felt needs of the villagers." The emphasis on the village and the "felt needs" of its residents would be a recurring theme in American low modernist discourse throughout the 1950s and beyond.¹⁷

Although ECA and other U.S. aid agencies were forced to withdraw from mainland China following the victory of Mao Zedong's communist movement in 1949, U.S. development experts remained active elsewhere in the region. The leaders of the JCRR moved their operations to the Guomindang redoubt on Taiwan, where they continued to advocate the "village approach." In addition to organizing farmers' associations and cooperatives and carrying out agricultural extension work, the JCRR was also heavily involved in the design and implementation of a land reform program on the island. Although the Guomindang government resisted some of the more radical elements of the JCRR plan, the program substantially reduced rents and raised land ownership rates in rural areas. Remarkably, the JCRR's

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efforts to transform village life in Taiwan unfolded alongside a rather more high modernist program of U.S. aid for Taiwan's industrial sector. The latter program reflected a "New Deal synthesis"—an attempt to combine Keynesian fiscal strategies with public-private collaboration in the management of large-scale industrial ventures. In the case of Taiwan, these ventures included the construction of dams and other infrastructure projects, as well as various manufacturing enterprises.¹⁸

A similar pairing of a high modernist industrial policy and a low modernist approach to rural reconstruction can be discerned in post-1945 U.S. policy for Japan. Because of Japan's utter defeat in the Pacific War, U.S. commanders and officials were able to implement reforms by fiat during the American occupation of the country from 1945 to 1952. But as the historian John Dower has demonstrated, many Japanese "embraced defeat" and became zealous reformers themselves, a turn that often led to unexpected outcomes. Having set out to dismantle the huge state-sheltered conglomerates that had long dominated Japanese manufacturing, occupation authorities ended up preserving and even reinforcing these conglomerates' power over the country's industrial sector. At the same time, U.S. officials also implemented a far-reaching program of land reform. Designed by USDA experts, this program called for individual holdings of arable land to be capped at just three hectares; poor tenant farmers were offered low-interest long-term loans to allow them to purchase the land they worked. Between 1946 and 1949, some two million hectares of land were reallocated, and land ownership rates rose sharply. Ironically, the land reform redounded to the political benefit of Japanese conservatives, who used agricultural subsidies to win the votes of the new freeholders. But such outcomes hardly dimmed the luster of the program in the minds of U.S. officials and experts, many of whom celebrated it as a model that could be applied in other Asian countries.¹⁹

The U.S.-sponsored projects in China and Japan during the late 1940s can be viewed as precursors to the Point IV program, a major development initiative launched by President Harry Truman. In his January 1949 inaugural address, Truman called for "a bold new program for making the benefits of our scientific advances and industrial progress available for the improvement and growth of underdeveloped areas." While Truman conceived of Point IV as a way to take a hard line in the intensifying Cold War against the Soviet Union, his speech also affirmed his faith in the transformative power of U.S. science and technology, as well as his determination

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to see development as a policy end in itself. But because he did not specify the actual methods and practices that the new program would use, Truman's remarks touched off a debate within the administration over the means and ends of U.S. development policies. As this debate unfolded, the conceptual distinctions between the high and low modernist approaches to foreign aid became more sharply drawn.²⁰

The administration's internal battle over Point IV pitted the State Department, which claimed authority over all nonmilitary forms of foreign aid, against Truman's White House advisors, who wanted the new program to be run as an independent agency. But the fight was not simply a clash over bureaucratic turf. It also reflected the contrasting lessons the participants had drawn from previous U.S. foreign aid activities, as well as different understandings of the problems to which foreign aid could and should be applied. On one side were State Department officials and experts who argued that Point IV should resemble the Marshall Plan in its focus on capital-intensive industrial and infrastructure projects. But several of Truman's economic advisors pushed for an emphasis on community-based agrarian reform. These advisors had been reading up on new research on comparative national incomes that showed that huge numbers of people in Asia, Africa and Latin America were living at or below subsistence levels. If the United States hoped to address the "revolution of rising expectations" in these predominantly agrarian societies, they concluded, Washington needed aid programs that would provide assistance directly to the rural communities in which most of the world's poor lived.²¹ Truman himself had justified the creation of Point IV on the grounds that "more than half the people in the world are living in conditions approaching misery." This concern about global poverty was shared by Henry Bennett, an agricultural expert from Oklahoma State University whom Truman tapped to serve as the first director of Point IV. In a 1950 meeting with Truman and other senior administration figures in the White House cabinet room, Bennett argued eloquently for community-focused aid projects aimed at improving access to food, health care, and education for the poorer half of humanity. "These people," he declared, "must have a chance to at least glance into the door of the Twentieth Century." "That's the kind of program I was talking about," Truman responded enthusiastically.²²

Under the guidance of Bennett and his successors, Point IV sponsored numerous aid initiatives designed to produce immediate and direct impacts on local communities and their residents. These ranged from the

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digging of wells in rural villages in Africa and the Middle East to programs that distributed new varieties of rice to farmers in Southeast Asia. Yet Point IV also sponsored several “big plan” projects that conformed to the State Department’s emphasis on industry and infrastructure. One project involved the design of a regional hydrological plan for the Jordan River basin; the engineering firm hired for this project was the same one that had drafted the original plans for the TVA. Point IV officials also participated in the early planning for the construction of the Aswan Dam in Egypt. The involvement of Point IV in both community-focused and large-scale aid ventures reflected the enduring philosophical differences between the partisans of low and high modernist approaches to foreign aid—differences that became even more pronounced during the later 1950s.²³

Although the Point IV program existed for only four years and never administered more than a tiny fraction of the overall U.S. foreign aid budget, the ideas and debates that defined its brief existence persisted long after it was dismantled. If Point IV was not an entirely new beginning in the longer history of U.S. foreign development ventures, it was still an important landmark in that history. For the first time, the U.S. government had made the idea of uplifting the entire world an explicit objective of U.S. foreign policy. To set such a goal, however, was to invite a host of questions about the nature and meaning of development. What was development, exactly? Was it the same in all social and historical contexts? Could it be tracked, managed, and controlled? And how was development connected to race, culture, and other markers of human difference? Such questions were not the exclusive province of U.S. government aid officials and technical experts. In American universities, colleges, and research institutes, social scientists were increasingly interested in the study of development as a social process that could be objectively described and measured; they were also interested in how development could be shaped, directed, or guided to produce particular social outcomes. As U.S. foreign aid programs expanded across the Third World during the 1950s, such theoretical endeavors would take on much more than academic significance.

Modernization Theory and Community Development

In their efforts to devise foreign aid programs and projects for the Third World during the late 1940s and early 1950s, U.S. government officials had many willing collaborators in American universities and colleges. The

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rise of the U.S. “National Security State” after 1945 presaged a dramatic expansion of federal government funding for research and training in fields deemed to be strategically important. While much of this funding was funneled toward scientific research on defense-related issues, government officials also showed growing interest in the work of social scientists, especially those who claimed expertise in the study of development. At the same time, many U.S. social scientists were eager to apply their knowledge in ways that would further Washington’s foreign policy goals. During the 1950s, for example, dozens of American academics participated in U.S. “technical assistance” projects to provide advice and aid to particular foreign countries. In many cases, these projects were administered by American universities, even though they were funded by the U.S. government.

This does not mean, however, that the post-1945 boom in American social scientific research on development was nothing more than a response to the political and cultural exigencies of the Cold War. As recent scholarship has demonstrated, the efforts to study and theorize development and modernization should not be dismissed as “just another cold war–driven anti-Communist screed.”²⁴ American social scientists did not formulate their hypotheses and research agendas based solely on geopolitical concerns, nor were they merely bowing to the demands of an all-powerful military-industrial complex. Like their U.S. government counterparts, social scientists framed their views of development by reference to preexisting notions, practices, and models. As a result, the arguments and theories they elaborated during the early Cold War period often harkened back to the discourses and debates of the previous decades. Even as American social scientists took on new roles in development ventures in Third World nations, they continued to work from scripts that featured many familiar themes.

The most famous—and most controversial—strand of post-1945 American intellectual work on development had to do with the quest for a new theoretical synthesis. Known as *modernization theory*, this synthesis attracted the attention and participation of social scientists in many different fields. Some of the most important early work on modernization theory was undertaken in American sociology, which underwent a revolution of sorts in the late 1930s and early 1940s with the elaboration of a new conceptual model known as structural-functionalism. As presented by scholars such as Talcott Parsons of Harvard University and Edward Shils

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of the University of Chicago, this model focused on the relationships between individuals and larger “social structures”—a category that included not only institutions and organizations but also social norms, values, and practices. According to the theorists, these social structures existed to fulfill basic human needs for equilibrium, stability, and consensus. Because Parsons and Shils believed that these needs were broadly similar across times and cultures, they posited that it was possible to plot the evolution of particular societies along a single linear scale of progress. Over time, as a given society’s structures became more flexible and efficient, it would move from the “primitive” end of the scale to a “transition” stage and then eventually to the “modern.”²⁵

Parsons hoped eventually to expand structural-functionalism beyond sociology to encompass the study of politics, economics, and psychology. He never realized this ambition, but scholars in other disciplines borrowed from his work in their depictions of modernization as a universal process that was carrying all human societies toward the same endpoint. For example, political scientist Lucian Pye described modernization as the diffusion of a “world culture” that would gradually displace traditional cultural beliefs and practices. Among other things, this world culture included the embrace of “advanced technology and the spirit of science,” a “rational view of life,” a “secular approach to social relations,” and agreement that “the prime unit of the polity should be the nation-state.” A similar model was put forward by Daniel Lerner, who argued that modernization was akin to westernization and that the spread of mass media was hastening “the passing of traditional society.” Some of the most influential work on modernization was undertaken by economists such as Eugene Staley, a key figure in the emerging subfield of development economics. In a 1954 book, Staley outlined a universalist schema based on the idea that all societies were traveling a common path toward modernity. Staley’s ideas were famously elaborated by his colleague Walt W. Rostow, who spent much of the 1950s crafting a kind of anticommunist version of Marxism. In Rostow’s model, economic growth propelled societies through a series of distinct “stages,” culminating eventually in American-style consumer capitalism.²⁶

In addition to their conviction that all humanity was converging on a common future, many modernization theorists also shared a propensity to think about development in high modernist terms. In some cases, they explicitly endorsed the kind of top-down, centrally planned, technologi-

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cally driven approach to social policy that was the hallmark of high modernist ways of thinking. Even when these scholars did not speak specifically about policy, their affinity for high modernism was reflected in their portrayal of modernization as a *systemic* process. Parsons elaborated the concept of a “social system,” which he defined as “a plurality of individual actors interacting with each other in a situation which has at least a physical or environmental aspect.” This concept of a social system was intertwined with Parsons’s understanding of culture; in his view, human social behavior was mediated, constrained, and even determined by culture. As some critics of modernization theory would later point out, this insistence on treating society and culture as coherent, uniform systems seemed to imply that individuals were mostly powerless in the face of the massive macro-level transformations that modernity would bring in its wake. For these theorists, modernization was a flood-tide of change that swept away traditional beliefs and practices as it washed over societies and populations.²⁷

Modernization theory would eventually have far-reaching effects on U.S. policies in many Third World countries, including Vietnam. This would be particularly true during the 1960s, when presidents John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson appointed prominent modernization theorists such as Rostow to key policy-making and advisory positions. In the 1950s, however, the influence of modernization theory in Washington and in U.S. embassies around the world had not yet reached its peak. In part, this relative lack of influence was due to the ambivalence of President Eisenhower, who was skeptical about the proposed expansion of foreign aid programs and some of the other advice the modernization theorists offered.²⁸ But another factor was also in play: throughout the 1950s, many U.S. aid officials and some academic experts were sharply critical of the high modernist approaches that the modernization theorists favored. The currency of these low modernist critiques within the U.S. government bureaucracy and among some American academics during the 1950s suggests that postwar U.S. aid policies cannot be explained merely as the product of a single ideological impulse.

American interest in low modernist approaches to foreign aid during the 1950s can be seen in the growing attention to a concept known as *community development*. During the early years of the decade, this term—first used by U.S. urban planners during the 1930s—came to specify a particular

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strategy for Third World social progress. While it had diverse meanings and applications, the term typically referred to an outlook in which “small-scale works, local knowledge and customs, grassroots participation, and communal solidarity were the keys to development.”²⁹ For its proponents, community development was everything a centrally planned approach to modernization was not. In addition to superior efficiency and cost savings, community development seemed to offer a nonbureaucratic, nontechnocratic, communitarian, and democratic vision of social change in which the ordinary people of the Third World would actively participate in the development of their societies. A 1960 conference on community development in Manila declared that the “chief aim” of such programs was not “wells, roads, schools and new crops” but “stable, self-reliant communities with an assured sense of social and political responsibility.”³⁰ Many government officials and community leaders in Asia and Africa would find such ideas appealing during the 1950s and afterward, not least because they seemed to offer newly independent countries a chance to chart their own path to modernity. Many Americans embraced community development on the same grounds, arguing that Washington would get much more for its aid dollars once it recognized that decentralization, local aid, and communal self-reliance offered the surest path to social transformation.

While community development activists mostly steered clear of the high modernist formulas offered by Rostow and other modernization experts, they found the development ideas espoused by certain other U.S. social scientists more to their liking. One such scholar was Robert Redfield, a University of Chicago anthropologist, whose prewar studies of village life in Mexico heavily influenced later work in cultural anthropology and ethnology. Unlike the modernization theorists, Redfield did not understand modernity as a tsunami of sweeping cultural, economic, and technological change. Instead, he sought to explain development in cognitive terms, as a process in which tradition and modernity mingled and interacted in the minds of individuals. In an influential 1930 book, Redfield presented his fieldwork on the Mexican village of Tepoztlán, a community he described as “intermediate between the primitive tribe and the modern city.” He found that the mentalities of village residents were in flux; when encountering the cultural practices of the city, each inhabitant began to develop “a correspondingly new organ, a new mind.” In his later work, Redfield argued that this process of mental transformation did not necessarily result in the abandonment of local traditions and

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values. It was possible, he maintained, to use the “little traditions” of pre-modern village life to fashion an urban-based “Great Tradition”; this process would allow a society to preserve and cultivate what he referred to as its “core culture” even as it was becoming modern and progressive.³¹

Redfield’s ideas resonated with many community development enthusiasts in the United States and around the world. His arguments seemed particularly relevant in India, which launched the world’s first nationwide community development program in 1952. The initial impetus for this program came not from social scientists but from Indian leaders who were eager to find ways to draw on their country’s own human, material, and ideological resources; among other things, they invoked Mohandas K. Gandhi’s ideas about communitarianism and “villagism.” Yet the Indian program also received substantial support from the U.S. government and private American philanthropic organizations such as the Ford Foundation. This support included material aid and expert assistance from American academics—Redfield among them—who saw India as a golden opportunity to demonstrate the viability of a bottom-up approach to rural development.³²

Spurred by the perceived success of India’s program, community development spread rapidly across the Third World during the latter half of the 1950s. While much of the movement’s enthusiasm and energy came directly from the rural societies it aimed to uplift, some U.S. government officials and aid experts argued that community development was worthy of support on both strategic and ethical grounds. In 1954, the State Department’s International Cooperation Administration established its Community Development Division. By 1956, the division was providing assistance to programs in forty-seven countries.³³ In the early 1960s, the establishment of the Peace Corps opened a new chapter in U.S. sponsorship of community development programs in Asia, Africa, and Latin America.³⁴ By that time, the U.S. mission in Saigon had already been promoting community development in South Vietnam for several years—though as we shall see, the ideas proffered by U.S. officials proved to be rather different from Ngo Dinh Diem’s understanding of what community development should be.

The appeal of community development as a foreign aid strategy can be seen in the public reception of the 1958 novel *The Ugly American*, by the American authors William Lederer and Eugene Burdick. The novel critiqued current U.S. foreign aid practices in a series of chapter-length vignettes, each relating the experience of an American working in a diplomatic or

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foreign aid capacity in Southeast Asia. Readers could easily sort these characters into villains and heroes. The “bad” Americans were racist, boorish, and ignorant of Asian social and cultural realities; in addition to damaging America’s reputation by their offensive behavior, they also promoted hugely wasteful and expensive aid projects that failed to address the needs of ordinary Southeast Asians. In contrast, the “good” characters were self-sacrificing Americans who were determined to treat Asians as equals. These paragons of cultural sensitivity preferred to live in rural villages, so they could interact directly with the Asian masses they had come to uplift. They also advocated aid projects that focused on the “little things”—that is, on simple changes that brought immediate, tangible improvements in the lives of ordinary village residents.³⁵

Lederer and Burdick’s message was crystal clear: if America was going to win the Cold War in Southeast Asia, it needed to embrace bottom-up, community-focused aid strategies. *The Ugly American* received mixed responses from literary critics but was a popular success, eventually selling over six million copies. President Eisenhower read it and was inspired to order a review of U.S. foreign aid practices. John F. Kennedy sent copies to all of his colleagues in the U.S. Senate.³⁶

The response to *The Ugly American* and the rise of the community development movement belie the notion that American thinking about the Third World during the 1950s was defined solely by modernization theory and its high modernist conceits. For U.S. social scientists and government officials, the decade was a time during which both old and new ideas about development were in play. Although visions of TVA-style social transformations were well entrenched in some corners of the American academy and the U.S. foreign policy bureaucracy, many experts and agencies continued to advocate locally focused alternatives that recalled the agrarian New Deal and the ECA’s “village approach.”

This diversity of views often carried over to U.S. embassies and foreign aid missions in Third World countries. For some Americans in Vietnam, the June 1954 appointment of Ngo Dinh Diem as the new leader of the SVN appeared to offer exciting opportunities to field-test the particular development theories and models they favored. Other Americans, however, were more skeptical of Diem; in their view, the profound weakness of the SVN state and the new premier’s reputation for intransigence did not offer much hope that any U.S.-sponsored nation-building effort could work. From the outset, then, Americans disagreed about Diem and the kind of

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aid and advice the United States ought to supply to his government. The notion that Vietnam needed U.S. development expertise seemed indisputable, but the idea of partnering with Diem in such a venture was very much up for debate.

American Views of the “Diem Experiment” in 1954

In early July 1954, a few days before Ngo Dinh Diem’s formal installation as prime minister of the SVN, an American diplomat in Saigon made a troubling discovery. In a conversation with a British colleague, Robert McClintock learned that Diem was widely considered to be “in the American pocket.” McClintock, anxious to dispel this perception, replied forcefully—if also a bit obliquely—that the U.S. pocket was “much too small for such a requirement.” For good measure, he added that Diem seemed to have no overall political strategy for his new government.³⁷ In denying that Diem was Washington’s chosen candidate to lead the SVN, McClintock was not merely following the official embassy line. The confidential reports he submitted to Washington revealed his deep pessimism about Diem and his abilities as a leader. “Diem is a messiah without a message,” he cabled to the State Department. “His only formulated policy is to ask immediate American assistance in every form.”³⁸

While McClintock’s “messiah without a message” remark has often been cited by historians, few have considered its implications for the received wisdom about the history of the United States’ dealings with the Diem government.³⁹ As the scornful epithet suggested, not all U.S. officials were predisposed to back Diem in 1954 simply because he was an anticommunist. The doubts expressed by McClintock and some of his colleagues were reflected in their habit of referring to the new government as the “Diem experiment”—a term intended to underscore the uncertainty and fragility of the situation in which the new premier now found himself. Other members of the U.S. mission, however, took a less pessimistic view of the “experiment” and its prospects for success. Although this group of Americans acknowledged that the odds appeared to be stacked against Diem, they remained hopeful that the right combination of U.S. aid and advice would turn the situation to his advantage. They were also optimistic that they could persuade Diem to listen to them, his reputation for stubbornness notwithstanding.

The sharp divisions among Americans about the “Diem experiment” would persist for the entire period of Diem’s tenure in power. The endurance

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of these divisions suggests that U.S. perceptions of Diem cannot be explained simply by concerns about the Cold War and the containment of communism. Although geopolitical concerns were never far from the minds of U.S. leaders, their assessments of Diem and his plans for South Vietnam were also critically affected by their thinking about race, culture, and development. Many of Diem's critics in 1954 viewed racial and cultural traits as particularistic phenomena that were deeply rooted in human psyches and therefore as things that changed only slowly, if at all. These critics tended to see Vietnam as a backward society that would continue to require European or U.S. tutelage for the foreseeable future. Most of Diem's American supporters, in contrast, preferred to view Vietnam through a more universalist lens. While these supporters agreed that Vietnam was politically, socially, and even psychologically backward, they rejected the notion that this backwardness stemmed from enduring racial or cultural differences. With the right combination of U.S. guidance and Vietnamese leadership, they insisted, nation building in Vietnam could proceed in relatively short order. During 1954 and afterward, these contrasting notions of the relationship between development and human difference would fuel American debates about whether and how cooperation with Diem could serve U.S. strategic objectives.

The basic ambivalence in American attitudes toward Diem in 1954 can be glimpsed in the attitudes and actions of President Eisenhower. Although he had run for the White House in 1952 on a platform that promised the "roll-back" of recent communist advances around the world, Eisenhower was an instinctively cautious leader. He spent much of his first term in office trying to strike the right balance between firmness and flexibility in foreign affairs. This balance seemed especially elusive in Indochina. In April 1954, French officials asked Eisenhower to use U.S. airpower to relieve the besieged French garrison at Dien Bien Phu. The request presented the president with a highly unpalatable choice: direct U.S. military intervention on behalf of a fading colonial power or inaction in the face of another communist advance in Asia. In the end, Eisenhower decided not to try to save the French garrison. But this did not mean he had given up on Indochina. On the contrary, his interest in Indochinese affairs intensified in the months after the fall of Dien Bien Phu, as he sought to salvage some advantage from the wreckage of the French defeat.

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Accounts of Eisenhower's nonintervention at Dien Bien Phu have mostly focused on his cold warrior persona and on congressional opposition to the proposed air strikes.⁴⁰ However, his approach to Indochina policy in 1954 and afterward was also shaped by concerns that had little to do per se with the Cold War or U.S. domestic politics. As the historian Matthew Connelly has demonstrated, Eisenhower's thinking about the Third World reflected his anxiety about the danger of North-South conflict—the possibility of racial and religious conflict between the United States and European nations on the one hand and Asians, Africans, and Latin Americans on the other.⁴¹ The salience of these concerns for Eisenhower are suggested by his opposition to the possible use of tactical nuclear weapons at Dien Bien Phu—a position reminiscent of his opposition to the atomic bombings of Japan in 1945. “You boys must be crazy,” Eisenhower told his advisors when they raised the nuclear option during the crisis. “We can’t use those awful things against Asians for the second time in less than ten years. My God.”⁴² Eisenhower was unsure about what course to take in Indochina, but his thinking was defined by more than just anticommunism and a determination to “hold the line” in Southeast Asia.

Eisenhower's uncertainty about what to do in Vietnam in 1954 was intensified by sharp differences of opinion among his top foreign policy advisors. The most determined proponent of aggressive U.S. intervention in Indochina was Secretary of State John Foster Dulles. During the Dien Bien Phu crisis, Dulles argued for meeting the French request for air strikes. After the garrison surrendered, Dulles set about trying to find another way to contain communism within Indochina. He became particularly interested in the idea of creating a Southeast Asian regional security pact modeled on the North Atlantic Treaty Organization in Europe. During the summer and fall of 1954, Dulles worked with U.S. allies in Asia and the Pacific to create the Southeast Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO). Although South Vietnam was not a member of SEATO, the pact was explicitly predicated on the idea that Saigon would ask the signatory nations for assistance in the event of a communist attack. To Dulles, Diem appeared to be exactly the kind of anticommunist stalwart who could be counted on to make such an appeal for help, should it become necessary to do so.⁴³

But not all of Eisenhower's senior advisors agreed with Dulles's views of Diem and South Vietnam. Indeed, some of his cabinet colleagues argued that the time had come for the United States to extricate itself from

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Indochina. The most insistent proponent of this view was Defense Secretary Charles Wilson. After Dien Bien Phu, Wilson concluded that the situation in Indochina was beyond salvage. As far as he could tell, neither Diem nor any other anticommunist Vietnamese leader was likely to be able to overcome the enormous political and military advantages that Ho Chi Minh and the DRV now seemed to enjoy. The United States ought therefore to cut its losses and withdraw. Wilson's views were supported by senior U.S. army commanders who, in the wake of the just-concluded war in Korea, strongly opposed any venture that might involve the United States in another shooting war on the Asian mainland. Even though Wilson's arguments did not prevail in the long run, the fact that he voiced them shows that the strategic logic of containment did not necessarily point to the forms of intervention that Dulles advocated.⁴⁴

In his efforts to keep Wilson's withdrawal proposal from gaining traction in Washington, Dulles worked closely with Kenneth T. Young, the head of the State Department's Office of Southeast Asian Affairs. Like Dulles, Young was a dedicated cold warrior and an uncompromising proponent of containment. But Young's views on Vietnam were also inflected by his personal experience with French colonialism. In the late 1930s, Young had visited Indochina on a bicycle trip across Southeast Asia. One night in Hanoi, he found himself being chased back to his hotel by colonial police officers whom, he believed, had placed him under surveillance. This encounter helped him to sympathize with what he later described as Southeast Asia's "authentic nationalisms"—that is, the movements and leaders in the region who were both anticolonialist and anticommunist. He hoped that Diem might be able to undertake "the reconstruction of a nationalist Vietnam with the traditional shape of its culture but with modern institutions of administration and technology."⁴⁵

Another of Dulles's key allies on Indochina issues was Senator Mike Mansfield, Democrat of Montana. Mansfield, considered the Senate's resident expert on Asian affairs, had developed a particular interest in Indochina during a 1953 official visit to the region. Shortly after his return, he made Diem's acquaintance at the luncheon hosted by Justice Douglas in Washington. While some assumed that the senator's admiration for Diem stemmed from their shared identity as Catholics, Mansfield insisted that "his religion meant nothing. It was the man who impressed me." Mansfield's positive impression of Diem was reinforced during a September 1954 return visit to Saigon. Although he was aware of the complaints

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about the premier's stubbornness and other shortcomings, Mansfield concluded that Diem was the only realistic hope for preserving an anticommunist state in Vietnam. He therefore announced that he would consider Diem's ouster to be grounds for a cutoff of U.S. aid for South Vietnam. Years later, Mansfield came to doubt the wisdom of all-out support for Diem. But even then, he continued to admire the Vietnamese leader. "I was for Ngo Dinh Diem *all the way*," he recalled.⁴⁶

With the president uncertain and other senior U.S. leaders at odds over whether and how to proceed in Vietnam during mid-1954, many officials in Washington looked to the U.S. embassy in Saigon for ideas about policy and strategy. But the embassy's personnel were in some respects even more divided than their counterparts in Washington. Starting in 1950, the mission had expanded rapidly, due to the huge influx of U.S. aid for the French war effort in Indochina. As American diplomats, military advisors, technical experts, and intelligence officers poured into Vietnam, they brought divergent views about how U.S. material, technical, and intellectual resources should be deployed to achieve U.S. goals in Indochina. Thus, the arguments over policy that took place inside the mission after June 1954 were a continuation of earlier debates over aid and development, even though they were framed around the "Diem experiment" and its merits.

On one side of these internal debates was the U.S. ambassador, Donald Heath, who had served in Saigon since 1950. A veteran diplomat with extensive experience in Europe, Heath had no doubts about where U.S. priorities ought to lie. "Our primary objective in Indochina at present time, our first consideration," he declared in a July 1951 cable to the State Department, "is real estate." It was imperative that Southeast Asia and its strategic resources "shall be denied, as long as is possible, to the Commie world." In Heath's view, this left the United States with no choice but "to maintain and perfect our understanding and cooperation with Fr[ance]." Although Heath encouraged French officials to make good on their promises of independence for the SVN, he was adamant that this objective should not hinder U.S.-French collaboration. Throughout his tenure as ambassador, Heath strongly supported France's demands that U.S. aid to the SVN be delivered under French auspices rather than directly to the Bao Dai government. This was particularly important, Heath argued, in the case of the VNA. While Heath hoped that anticommunist nationalists would rally around the VNA, he maintained that it would have to remain under French direction and

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control for the foreseeable future. In this regard, Heath agreed with those of his State Department colleagues who saw France's colonial tenure in Indochina continuing for years, if not decades.⁴⁷

Given Heath's determination to accommodate French interests in Indochina, he was not inclined to see Ngo Dinh Diem as the savior Vietnam needed in 1954. The ambassador had made Diem's acquaintance in 1950, shortly before he departed into exile. Although Heath considered Diem the secondmost respected political leader in Vietnam (after Ho Chi Minh), Heath agreed with French complaints about Diem's "personal intransigence" and suggested that he lacked the requisite political skills needed to govern Vietnam. This assessment reflected the low regard in which Heath held Vietnamese political leaders in general. In his official reports, he described those SVN officials who voiced complaints about French policies as "childlike" and as embracing an "irresponsible, rabid nationalism." Despite his professed opposition to colonialism, Heath continued to employ the same kind of infantilizing and animalistic metaphors that had long been a fixture of European and American discourse about nonwhite peoples and countries.⁴⁸

But Heath did not speak for all of his subordinates. From early in his tenure as ambassador, other members of the mission took sharp exception to his views on aid policy and Vietnam's readiness for independence. One particularly outspoken critic was Robert Blum, the head of the mission's economic aid arm during 1950–1951. Blum had previously worked for the ECA in China, where he became a believer in the merits of the "village approach" to foreign aid. As Blum later recalled, he and his team were "determined that our emphasis would be on types of aid that would appeal to the masses of the population and not on aid that, while economically more sophisticated, would be less readily understood." French officials objected strongly to Blum's 1951 proposal to furnish aid directly to villages, fearing that it would undermine their authority. (The French high commissioner sardonically told Blum that he was "the most dangerous man in Indochina.") As the diplomatic squabble intensified, Heath came down squarely on the side of the French, admonishing Blum to adopt a "more consultative approach" and to avoid any "improper criticism" of French policy. Although Blum's views had substantial support in the mission and in Washington—one State Department official memorably accused Heath of behaving like the proverbial "Hear No Evil monkey"—the ambas-

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sador's arguments prevailed. In 1951, Blum was transferred out of Indochina after just a year and a half on the job.⁴⁹

Blum's departure was a setback for the advocates of the "village approach" within the U.S. mission, but it hardly put an end to the internal arguments over aid practices and the merits of collaboration with the French. Although the United States continued to channel its aid deliveries through the colonial administration for the duration of the Indochina War, many members of the mission were convinced that this approach was both ineffective and unwise. Following Diem's appointment in mid-1954, the debate over aid became intertwined with the issue of whether and how the U.S. ought to support the new premier. During Diem's first months in office, Heath would find little reason to revise his earlier skepticism about the SVN leader. However, other members of the mission were more optimistic about Diem and his willingness to listen to U.S. advice on various policy issues such as military strategy, administrative reform, and rural reconstruction. This group included several recently arrived Americans who, despite a lack of prior knowledge about Vietnam, had extensive experience with various U.S. aid and development programs in other East and Southeast Asian countries. These new arrivals would end up playing key roles in the mission's relations with Diem during 1954 and beyond.

One of the Americans landing in Saigon for the first time in the summer of 1954 was Wesley Fishel, the political science professor who had met Diem in Japan in 1950 and then arranged for him to work at Michigan State University during his U.S. exile. By the time of Diem's appointment by Bao Dai, Fishel had become one of his closest and most trusted American friends. In late July, Diem submitted an "urgent request" for Fishel to come to Saigon to provide advice on "governmental reconstruction." Fishel arrived in Saigon in mid-August and immediately began working in Diem's palace. In addition to acting as an unofficial liaison between the palace and the U.S. embassy, Fishel was assigned the somewhat vague task of "reorganizing" the office of the prime minister. He was also busy laying the groundwork for the Michigan State-sponsored technical assistance project that he and Diem had first proposed more than two years earlier.⁵⁰

Because of his previous experience with Diem, Fishel was well aware of his friend's notorious stubbornness and inflexibility. Diem had come to power "with his eyes opened and closed at the same time," Fishel observed

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in September 1954. The premier “knew the difficult situation confronting him but somehow believed his own unimpeachable honesty and integrity, his moral rectitude would triumph.” Nevertheless, Fishel believed that Diem’s shortcomings could be overcome, given enough time and American patience.⁵¹

Fishel’s optimism about Diem did not rest only on his personal ties to the Vietnamese premier. It was also derived from his views of international politics and his understanding of the history of the United States’ recent relations with Asia. As a graduate student at the University of Chicago in the late 1940s, Fishel had studied with Quincy Wright, a leading figure in the emerging field of international relations. Like his mentor, Fishel was an enthusiastic advocate for international cooperation. He was particularly interested in the emergence of new states and in the possibilities for new forms of collaboration with formerly colonized nations in Asia and elsewhere. His doctoral dissertation examined U.S. policy toward China in the years after World War I; in the thesis, Fishel praised Washington’s decision to abandon the practice of extraterritoriality and the other quasi-colonial privileges Americans had previously enjoyed in China. For Fishel, this decision showed that U.S. leaders had opted to treat their Chinese counterparts as equals and to forge a relationship based on mutual respect and shared interests.⁵²

Fishel’s interest in U.S. relations with Asian nations led him to focus much of his research on the study of Asian political elites. In Fishel’s view, the success of America’s foreign policies in Asia would hinge on the ability of U.S. leaders to identify and work with those of their Asian counterparts who shared their commitment to a liberal world order. But Fishel’s interest in elites was not purely academic; in addition to studying Asian leaders, he also hoped to use his expert knowledge to advise and encourage them to embrace the particular forms of cooperation that he advocated. His ambitions in this regard were reflected in his efforts to form friendships with Asian political leaders whom he deemed likely to acquire power in the future. Although Diem would become the most famous of the men he cultivated, Fishel also boasted of his friendships with political leaders in countries such as Japan, Thailand, and Korea.⁵³

While Fishel seemed uniquely well-positioned to influence Diem’s thinking about questions of aid and reform, he was not the only American who hoped to gain such influence. Another was Wolf Ladejinsky, who came to Saigon in early 1955 as the embassy’s senior advisor on agrarian affairs.

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Over the preceding decade, Ladejinsky had gained fame as the preeminent U.S. authority on land reform in Asia. He was also an ardent anticommunist and a committed proponent of the agrarian New Deal. Born in 1899 in a Jewish shtetl in Ukraine, Ladejinsky experienced the ravages of the Russian Revolution firsthand and eventually fled the Soviet Union after the victorious Bolsheviks expropriated his family's flour mill. He made his way to New York, where he earned a bachelor's degree at Columbia University and then began graduate study in history and economics. His academic plans were put on hold in 1933, when his advisor recruited him to work for the USDA. Over the next decade, Ladejinsky became the department's top expert on problems of land tenure in the Soviet Union, Japan, and several other Asian countries. In late 1945, he went to Tokyo to present his ideas on land reform to General Douglas MacArthur, the commander of the postwar U.S. occupation. After meeting with Ladejinsky, MacArthur launched a massive redistribution of farmland that transformed Japanese rural society, thus securing Ladejinsky's reputation as "Mr. Land Reform." In addition to his work in Japan, he consulted on U.S.-sponsored land reform programs in Taiwan and South Korea and advised governments and leaders throughout the region.⁵⁴

In his many popular and scholarly articles on land reform, Ladejinsky challenged some of the conventional American stereotypes about Asian agrarian society, even as he reinforced other myths. In Asia, Ladejinsky asserted, the rich landlords who owned vast amounts of farmland were the reactionary "feudal classes"; in contrast, the Asian farmers who made up the bulk of the population were a force for revolutionary change. "An overworked and overexploited peasantry that for centuries was inertly miserable is now alertly miserable," he warned in 1950. Instead of dismissing land reform as a communist device to foment class warfare, Americans ought to embrace it as a way to channel the peasants' revolutionary impulses in the right direction. In addition to stealing the communists' thunder, Ladejinsky argued, U.S. support for land reform in Asia actually harkened back to America's own origins as a nation of freeholding yeoman farmers. By drawing on its own agrarian traditions, America could help Asia "to create the beginnings from which a democratic society may evolve."⁵⁵

Ladejinsky also accepted the idea that land reform in Asia could become what some commentators described as an "Oriental new deal."⁵⁶ Although the domestic New Deal had not included any land redistribution measures, many of Ladejinsky's specific recommendations recalled the low modernist principles that USDA experts had espoused during the

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1930s and 1940s. To be effective, he argued, agrarian reform had to be carried out “at the village level” and with the active participation of the farmers who were its beneficiaries. Ladejinsky also believed that the material and technical aspects of agrarian aid programs were less important than the “new mental outlook” that those programs were supposed to promote. “The real test of technical assistance is what happens to men’s minds,” he declared. Ladejinsky’s emphasis on farmer psychology and local detail was reflected in his habit of taking field trips to rural areas and in the long reports he wrote up afterward about his encounters with village residents.⁵⁷

At first glance, Ladejinsky’s conception of land reform as a farmer-focused, “village-level” activity might appear to conflict with Fishel’s understanding of reform as a process driven by political elites. In practice, however, their approaches were complementary. As Ladejinsky observed, “politicians, and only politicians, make good or poor reforms or do not make them at all.”⁵⁸ He therefore deemed it essential for the United States to forge relationships with progressive-minded Asian leaders who could be persuaded to take on reactionary landlords and overturn the rural status quo. Like Fishel, Ladejinsky prided himself on his ability to connect with such leaders. To persuade them to follow his reform prescriptions, he practiced what he referred to as “indirection,” a strategy for “dealing with proud, sensitive, and suspicious individuals, shot through with nationalistic proclivities.” According to Ladejinsky, “indirection” required an advisor to present his ideas to government officials in an unobtrusive and inoffensive manner; if this could be done, “the ideas then are adopted by the recipient country as if they were of its own origin, and their ultimate application is assured.” Ladejinsky clearly hoped that Diem was the kind of Asian leader who would be susceptible to this technique.⁵⁹

Other Americans in Saigon who hoped to practice the art of persuasion in their dealings with the incoming Diem government included several who worked for the CIA. This agency, which had secretly established a small station in Saigon in 1950, seemed especially well-positioned to forge a close working relationship with the new regime. The station’s dealings with the Ngo brothers began in 1951, when one of its officers was introduced to Ngo Dinh Nhu. Because Nhu was already seeking to build his reputation and support among Vietnamese anticommunists, the station deemed him a valuable source of political intelligence. This arrangement was still in place in the spring of 1954, when Diem’s elevation to the pre-

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miership prompted the station to approach Nhu about the possibility of more substantial forms of cooperation. The task of transforming Nhu into an operational asset fell to Paul Harwood, the newly arrived head of the station's covert action arm.⁶⁰

Harwood and the other CIA operatives who worked with Nhu in 1954 recognized that the Ngo brothers did not have any significant mass following in Vietnam. Nonetheless, Harwood believed that Nhu was animated by "liberal impulses" that would make him amenable to CIA guidance. Even before Diem's return to Vietnam in late June, Harwood had already raised with Nhu the possibility of CIA funding for efforts to build a base of popular support for the new government. Among other things, Harwood wanted to reorganize the Can Lao Party into a kind of campaign vehicle for Diem. Nhu was willing to accept the aid, provided that it was furnished without CIA "controls." Thus began a close—if not always happy or successful—collaboration between Nhu and the station. Although Harwood and his colleagues would encounter no small amount of frustration in their efforts to get the Ngos to follow their advice, the station quickly became a staunch advocate of maintaining U.S. support for Diem. In August 1954, when senior CIA leaders in Washington expressed doubts about Diem's ability to govern South Vietnam, the chief of the Saigon station defended Diem as a "nationalist symbol and single-minded and courageous leader" and argued that continued backing for his regime was the only realistic option available.⁶¹

In addition to the support it received from the CIA's Saigon station, the Diem regime also garnered the backing of Colonel Edward Lansdale, the man who would eventually become the most famous U.S. intelligence operative of the Vietnam War era. Although Lansdale operated in Vietnam under CIA auspices, he was not an officer of the Saigon station; in fact, he was technically not even a CIA employee, having been on loan from the U.S. Air Force since 1950. Lansdale was therefore in the CIA without being of it—a status that reinforced his sense of himself as a maverick and a bureaucratic outsider. During the early 1950s, Lansdale had made his reputation in the Philippines, where he assisted the Manila government in its war against a rural insurgency led by the left-wing Hukbalahap movement (the "Huks"). Lansdale's main collaborator in the Philippines was Defense Minister Ramon Magsaysay, whom he had befriended shortly after arriving in the islands. By gaining Magsaysay's trust, Lansdale claimed, he was able to persuade him to adopt the counterinsurgency strategies that eventually defeated the Huks. Lansdale was also

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widely credited with having engineered Magsaysay's victory in the Philippines presidential election of 1952; the outcome of the vote prompted some in Manila to refer to him as "Colonel Landslide." In this way, Lansdale gained a reputation in both Washington and Southeast Asia for an uncanny ability to promote and direct the careers of Asian anticommunist leaders. In early 1954, John Foster Dulles informed Lansdale that he would soon be sent to Vietnam "to do what you did in the Philippines." While he had never heard of Diem before his return to Saigon in June 1954, Lansdale lost no time in making the new premier a major focus of his attention.⁶²

Although he was known as an expert on counterinsurgency and psychological warfare, Lansdale framed his thinking about those topics within a broader set of beliefs about development and social change in Third World countries. For Lansdale, counterinsurgency and psywar were not simply the means by which a government could inflict battlefield defeats on its enemies; they were part and parcel of the larger process of transforming postcolonial societies into modern nations. Like Ladejinsky, Lansdale was a low modernist who believed that the primary locus of development in Asia was the rural village. Thus, one of his first recommendations for improving anticommunist psywar programs in Vietnam was to target "the leaders of small discussion groups which are indigenous to rural and village life in the less developed countries."⁶³ Lansdale also argued that the government's counterinsurgency operations in the countryside must include what he referred to as "military support for community development programs." By having its soldiers dig wells, build schools, and deliver basic medical care, a government would demonstrate its commitment to including village residents in the political life of the nation. "The community finds itself becoming linked up closely to the nation, a real part of something bigger," Lansdale explained. "As it does so, the political life of the community grows also, demanding more meaning in answers to the question: what is worth risking a man's life to defend?"⁶⁴

In his efforts to influence Diem, Lansdale often cast his advice in the language of American exceptionalism. "I took my American beliefs with me into these struggles, as Tom Paine would have done," he later recalled.⁶⁵ Although Lansdale insisted that he never advocated the wholesale adoption of U.S. models and practices by other countries, he nevertheless held up American history as a kind of template that Asian nations could use to chart their own political development. Lansdale especially liked to cite the American Revolution as a source of historical lessons for Vietnam.

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In his telling, Ho Chi Minh was the Vietnamese version of Benedict Arnold, and South Vietnam's provincial and city councils resembled the Committees of Correspondence that had helped to spark the American rebellion against Britain. Lansdale strongly opposed the CIA station's collaboration with the Can Lao Party; instead of catering to Nhu's antidemocratic impulses, he argued, the embassy ought to encourage the formation of a U.S.-style two-party system in Vietnam. At the same time, Lansdale's enthusiasm for democratization in Vietnam was circumscribed by his conviction that the Saigon government needed a strong and determined leader—one who could be prodded into becoming the George Washington of Vietnam. Lansdale made no secret of his hope that Diem would prove to be just this sort of leader and that Lansdale himself would guide his transformation into the "father of his country."⁶⁶

The Americans who came to Vietnam to lend assistance to Diem during his first year in power had more in common than a shared desire to see him succeed. Fishel, Ladejinsky, Harwood, and Lansdale were all cold warriors who arrived in Saigon with prior experience in government and politics in other Asian capitals. Moreover, despite the diversity of particular expertises that they claimed—elite politics, land reform, mass mobilization, and counterinsurgency—they drew from a similar set of ideas about development and social change. All of them were low modernists in the sense that they tended to see psychological transformation as a leading, rather than a trailing, indicator of social progress. Finally, they were united in their belief that U.S. policy goals in Asia were best advanced through partnering with a particular kind of Asian leader—one who would be receptive and susceptible to what Ladejinsky referred to as "indirection."

The presence of these Americans in Saigon during 1954 and 1955 ensured that there would be strong voices of support for Diem inside the U.S. embassy during his first critical months in office. But these men did not speak for the U.S. mission as a whole, let alone the rest of the U.S. government. Other Americans in Saigon were far more skeptical about collaboration with Diem, "indirect" or otherwise. Given the doubts about Diem expressed by Ambassador Heath and by many other U.S. officials in both Saigon and Washington, the course of U.S. policy in South Vietnam was anything but certain. The basic ambivalence in U.S. official thinking was compounded by the extraordinarily confusing and chaotic political situation in South Vietnam. Even if Diem could be persuaded to follow American

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advice about governance, agrarian reform, and political change, what realistic chances did he have for success where other SVN leaders had failed? As it turned out, Diem would achieve more during his first year in power than even his most ardent supporters had dared to hope. While Americans such as Fishel and Lansdale lent valuable assistance to Diem during 1954 and 1955, his unexpected success cannot be explained only—or even mainly—by reference to their actions or those of Diem’s other American boosters. Instead, it was Diem himself who emerged as the key figure in the efforts to establish the authority and power of the SVN. As the United States redoubled its efforts in Southeast Asia, Americans would discover that their new ally had his own ideas about how to undertake the tricky task of building a nation in the southern half of Vietnam.

3

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Ngo Dinh Diem needed help, and Edward Lansdale was determined to provide it. After watching Diem's limousine speed past him on the street from the Saigon airport, Lansdale immediately undertook to offer his friendship and advice to the newly arrived premier. Returning to his hotel, Lansdale stayed up all night drafting a memorandum for Diem that he later described as "some notes on how to be a Prime Minister of Vietnam."¹ The paper covered topics as diverse as agrarian reform, health care, and military strategy; it also detailed methods for winning the "willing support" of the South Vietnamese population. The next morning, though bleary-eyed from lack of sleep, Lansdale asked an American colleague who spoke French to accompany him to Gia Long Palace. Finding no security at the gates, the two men wandered inside. They found Diem sitting at a desk in an upstairs office, surrounded by documents. Lansdale later recalled that the Vietnamese leader was a "roly-poly figure" who behaved like "the alert and eldest of the seven dwarves deciding what to do about Snow White." Lansdale introduced himself and asked Diem to listen as his colleague sight-translated the memorandum into French. According to Lansdale, Diem watched the presentation "intently." He then thanked the Americans, asked for the paper, and tucked it into his pocket. According to Lansdale, the encounter marked the beginning of "a friendship of considerable depth, trust and candor."²

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Lansdale's relationship with Diem figures prominently in almost all accounts of Diem's first year in office. Lansdale himself is largely responsible for this. In later interviews and in his memoirs, Lansdale suggested that he had not only advised Diem during 1954–1955 but also contributed greatly to the unexpected success the SVN premier enjoyed in his efforts to consolidate his power in South Vietnam. Journalists and historians who wrote about Lansdale's exploits during the 1970s and 1980s mostly accepted his claims about his extraordinary influence. One reporter who covered the war and knew Lansdale well aptly expressed the prevailing view: "South Vietnam, it can truly be said, was the creation of Edward Lansdale."³ More recent assessments by scholars have been less categorical but have continued to portray Lansdale as an extraordinarily influential figure who possessed an uncanny ability to steer people and events in South Vietnam in the direction he wanted them to go.⁴

The persistence of Lansdale's narrative has obscured key aspects of the formation of the U.S.-Diem alliance during 1954–1955. First, not all U.S. government officials shared Lansdale's enthusiasm for cooperation with Diem. On the contrary, many U.S. leaders in both Saigon and Washington were deeply skeptical of the "Diem experiment" when it began. At one point, these skeptics actually won presidential approval for a plan to withdraw U.S. backing from Diem and to promote his replacement by another leader. Although the Eisenhower administration subsequently reversed this decision and provided all-out backing to Diem starting in May 1955, that outcome was far from inevitable.

A second problem with a too-exclusive focus on Lansdale and other Americans has to do with the lack of attention to Vietnamese actors—including Diem. While U.S. officials were divided and unsure about what to do in South Vietnam during 1954–1955, Diem and his closest supporters were not. By the time Lansdale saw the premier's limousine careening through the streets of Saigon, Diem and his brothers had already sketched out a strategy to expand their authority in South Vietnam by pitting their various rivals against one another. In pursuing this divide-and-conquer strategy, Diem was happy to accept the assistance proffered by Lansdale and other sympathetic U.S. officials. But he was careful to do so only on his own terms, in ways that furthered his designs.⁵ Far from being politically adrift during his first year in power, Diem was a man with a plan—a plan that turned out to be remarkably successful in the short run, even as it also sowed the seeds of later failures.

Legacies of a “Disorderly War”

At the time of Diem’s return to Saigon, the only thing that seemed certain about his tenure in office was that it would be brief. Even his most enthusiastic supporters admitted that his chances for political survival appeared vanishingly small. The difficulties Diem faced did not lie only in the fact that he had inherited a government that was weak, inefficient, and tainted by its association with French colonialism. As severe as the SVN’s bureaucratic shortcomings were, they paled in comparison to a deeper problem: the seemingly impossible task of establishing the government’s power and legitimacy over a land in which central authority had all but ceased to exist. During the First Indochina War, Vietnam’s southern half—a place of great ethnic and cultural diversity with a long tradition of resistance to rule by outsiders⁶—had fragmented into a patchwork of competing parties, factions, and armies. To remain in office for any length of time, Diem needed to figure out how to extend the writ of his government beyond downtown Saigon and the handful of other towns and outposts currently under SVN control. Moreover, he would have to do this while fending off the various rivals who hoped to unseat him. Given that all previous SVN premiers had been undone by these problems, it was not surprising that almost everyone in Saigon was skeptical about Diem’s prospects from the outset.

The 1945–1954 war between the French colonial state and the Viet Minh affected all parts of Indochina, but the trajectory and local impact of the conflict varied from region to region. In the northern half of Indochina—especially in Tonkin and Laos—the war evolved into a conventional struggle between large, well-equipped French and Viet Minh armies. In the south, in contrast, both the French and the Viet Minh were comparatively weaker, at least in their military capabilities. The relative weakness of both parties in the south gave rise to what the communist leader Truong Chinh referred to as a “disorderly war”: a conflict fought mostly with unconventional tactics, and without the clearly defined fronts and zones of control that had been established in the north. The disorderly quality of the war in the south was reinforced by the fact that the French and the Viet Minh were contending not only with each other but also with various other groups, including several that wielded significant military clout and controlled substantial amounts of territory. As a result, the war in the south was a multisided, complex struggle in which state authority seemed to become more ephemeral as the conflict dragged on.⁷

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The sheer complexity of the war in the south can be seen in the up-and-down fortunes of the Viet Minh in the region. When viewed on a nationwide scale, the accomplishments of the Viet Minh during the long war against France were nothing short of stunning. The victory at Dien Bien Phu in May 1954 was the culmination of a truly impressive war effort that involved the mobilization of massive amounts of manpower and material resources. By war's end, the revolutionaries' "liberated zones" had expanded to include huge portions of Vietnam's territory and population. Although their most impressive gains were in Tonkin and northern Annam, they also controlled significant swaths of territory in the south by mid-1954, including several provinces of the Mekong Delta. As the only Vietnamese group that had demonstrated its ability to muster military force and popular support on an Indochina-wide basis, Viet Minh supporters seemed justified in predicting that their movement would soon be in control of all of Vietnam—the south as well as the north.⁸

Nevertheless, the Viet Minh's wartime achievements in the south were far more limited and tenuous than their accomplishments in the north. From the outset of the war, the revolutionaries were hampered in the south by the lingering effects of the disastrous "southern uprising" of 1940. That premature rebellion, which had been launched by the Cochinchina branch of the ICP without authorization from senior party leaders in the north, provoked a French crackdown that decimated the party's apparatus in the region.⁹ Although the ICP subsequently rebuilt its southern networks and established the Viet Minh as a political and military force in Cochinchina, its organizational and battlefield capabilities in the south lagged behind its more formidable northern operations. In Tonkin and Annam, the commanders of the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) eventually equipped and deployed a total of six army divisions against the French; they also mobilized hundreds of thousands of civilian laborers to provide logistical support to these forces. In Cochinchina, in contrast, the revolutionaries never fielded any units larger than battalions.¹⁰ They also spent much of the war on the strategic defensive. During 1950–1953, the territory controlled by Viet Minh forces in the eastern Mekong Delta was sharply reduced by a French-led pacification campaign. Only in the closing months of the war were the Viet Minh able to seize the initiative and recover much of what they had lost. In general, then, the history of the communists' revolution in the south prior to 1954 was one in which

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remarkable advances had been punctuated by severe reverses—a pattern that would persist throughout the entire Vietnam War era.¹¹

When he returned to Vietnam in 1954, Diem knew that the Viet Minh and its communist leadership were potent long-term threats to the survival of his government. For the moment, however, he was much more concerned about the lingering presence of French colonial power in Indochina. Although the war had turned sharply against France with the fall of Dien Bien Phu, French resources were far from exhausted. The loss of the garrison, though psychologically devastating, had little immediate impact on the overall balance of military forces within Indochina, since French commanders in Indochina still had hundreds of thousands of men under arms. And while public opinion in metropolitan France now seemed reconciled to the idea of giving up the country's Southeast Asian empire, many colonial officials in Paris and Saigon were determined to preserve at least a measure of informal influence in the region.

The equivocal quality of France's objectives in Indochina after Dien Bien Phu was apparent in the contradictory policies pursued by Pierre Mendès-France, the country's newly installed prime minister. When he took office in June 1954, Mendès-France vowed to make peace at Geneva within thirty days. Yet he also sought an agreement with DRV leaders to preserve French economic and cultural interests in northern Vietnam; moreover, he hoped to keep French troops in Saigon and other parts of southern Indochina for an indefinite period. This meant that his backing for Diem was far from unconditional—especially if he perceived an opportunity to replace the new SVN premier with someone more pliable.¹²

For Diem, the difficulty of dealing with hostile French leaders was exacerbated by the ambiguous status of the Vietnam National Army, the main component of the SVN's armed forces. According to the terms of Diem's appointment, the "full powers" granted to him by Bao Dai were supposed to include authority over the VNA. But it was unclear whether the army or its commanders would actually obey the new premier's orders. As an institution established under French aegis during the early 1950s, the VNA suffered from many of the same contradictions and conflicting loyalties that afflicted the other parts of the "Bao Dai solution." Although the VNA's first units had been created in 1950, its general staff was not formed until January 1952. Even after that date, the VNA remained utterly dependent on the French military, which administered its supplies, equipment, logistics, and training. French commanders also retained effective control over the VNA

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officer corps, which was staffed partly by Frenchmen of European descent. The extent of French dominance was reflected in the absurdly small number of Vietnamese officers who obtained senior rank in the VNA during its early years of existence. Among the nearly two hundred thousand Vietnamese men serving in the VNA in June 1954, there were only three generals, seven colonels, and eleven lieutenant colonels.¹³ Given the army's dearth of senior officers, Diem hoped to win the support of the VNA's newly commissioned captains and lieutenants, most of whom were enthusiastic Vietnamese nationalists and anticommunists. But even these younger officers balanced their nationalist convictions with their personal ties to their French mentors. Given Diem's anti-French reputation, the loyalty of the VNA officer corps to him seemed uncertain at best.

In his dealings with the VNA, Diem would have to reckon with its top commander, General Nguyen Van Hinh. A talented tactician, Hinh was well regarded by many of his fellow officers. But he was remarkably young for his rank—just thirty-eight—and even his admirers considered him brash and impetuous. He was also an avowed supporter of continued close ties to France. A French citizen who held a commission in the French air force, Hinh was the son of the former SVN premier Nguyen Van Tam, a notorious Francophile. “For those of us who—like me—were French nationals, it was unthinkable that we would betray the far-off motherland to which we were attached by inalienable bonds,” Hinh later recalled.¹⁴ Such thinking was anathema to Diem, who had decided even before his return to Vietnam that he would remove Hinh from his post at the earliest opportunity. Hinh, for his part, made no secret of his desire to make Diem's tenure in office as short as possible.¹⁵

Communists, die-hard colonialists, and seditious army generals were not the only opponents who awaited Diem in Saigon. A remarkable array of other groups and leaders hoped to preserve or expand their power in South Vietnam during the post-Geneva period. Although these other competitors had sometimes aligned themselves with either the Viet Minh or the French in the past, they were generally distrustful of both. During the war, some of these groups had gained a measure of autonomy by carving out small territorial enclaves in the Mekong Delta and elsewhere; others tried to exert influence within the framework of the SVN state. Diem could hardly afford to ignore the danger these rivals might pose to his new regime—especially if they combined their forces against him.

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In the Mekong Delta, Diem had to contend with the power and popularity of the heterodox religious faith known as Cao Dai. Founded by a Vietnamese civil servant in 1919, Cao Dai combined elements of the “three teachings” of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism with beliefs and practices borrowed from Catholicism and European spiritism. This syncretic mix of traditions gained a wide following in the Delta during the 1920s. By the mid-1930s, the ranks of the faithful had swelled to an estimated half million people, and a baroque “Holy See” had been erected in the main Cao Dai stronghold in Tay Ninh province west of Saigon.¹⁶

The most prominent Cao Dai leader was Pham Cong Tac, who was frequently—if also misleadingly—described by European and American observers as the “pope” of his faith. Although he claimed authority on spiritual grounds, Tac was an ardent nationalist and anticolonialist. Like Diem, he had intrigued with the Japanese during World War II in hopes of obtaining support for his anti-French activities. Although these schemes prompted colonial officials to exile him to the Comoros Islands, his followers continued his efforts in his absence. By 1945, they organized the first units of an independent Cao Dai army. In the aftermath of the August Revolution, Cao Dai forces briefly fought alongside the Viet Minh against the restoration of colonial rule in the south. But in 1946, Cao Dai commanders halted their attacks on French forces; in exchange, colonial officials provided military aid and allowed Tac to return to Vietnam. This infuriated the Viet Minh, who attacked Cao Dai villages and military outposts in retaliation. The Cao Dai army replied in kind and gradually expanded the territory under its control. By the early 1950s, Tac presided over a Cao Dai *imperium in imperio* headquartered in Tay Ninh. Although he depended on individual Cao Dai army commanders to enforce his edicts, he was an influential figure who wielded considerable clout in the western Mekong Delta.¹⁷

The rise of the Cao Dai was paralleled by the spectacular emergence of the Hoa Hao, another heterodox religious group with broad popular appeal in Cochinchina. Hoa Hao was established in 1939 by Huynh Phu So, a teenager and self-styled prophet who lived near Vietnam’s border with Cambodia. So claimed to be the reincarnation of a nineteenth-century Buddhist seer; he was also a nationalist who predicted that the demise of French colonialism was imminent. Although he was just one of many self-styled prophets in the western Mekong Delta, he was extraordinarily charismatic and quickly attracted a huge following. In the early 1940s,

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Hoa Hao leaders used Japanese-supplied aid to establish armed militias in the Delta. Like their Cao Dai counterparts, Hoa Hao commanders initially cooperated with the Viet Minh during the August Revolution but soon found themselves fighting against the revolutionaries. Any chance for reconciliation between the two groups was destroyed in 1947, when Viet Minh commanders arranged for So to be captured, tried, and executed. The murder of their prophet convinced Hoa Hao leaders to align themselves with the French in exchange for promises of local autonomy, just as Tac and the Cao Dai had done. But So's death also touched off an internal power struggle among rival Hoa Hao militia commanders. The infighting lasted until the early 1950s, when a French-brokered agreement allowed the four most powerful chiefs to maintain themselves in separate fiefdoms covering much of the western Mekong Delta. By June 1954, these four leaders collectively controlled several provinces and commanded thousands of fighters.¹⁸

For Diem, the most menacing of the Hoa Hao militia leaders was Tran Van Soai, a bus driver turned warlord whose volatile temper had earned him the nickname "Fiery Number Five" (Nam Lua). Soai's strategically placed headquarters near the Mekong Delta city of Can Tho gave him the ability to cut off the supply of rice to Saigon, should he choose to do so. Even if Diem could find a way to accommodate or neutralize Soai, he would still have to contend with Ba Cut, another powerful Hoa Hao chieftain who operated nearby. Unlike Soai, Ba Cut had refused to cooperate with the SVN, preferring instead to bill himself as a genuine Third Force leader. His name meant "severed number three"—a nom de guerre he adopted after lopping off one of his own fingers to show his men the depth of his anticolonial convictions.¹⁹

In Saigon, Diem confronted a different kind of warlord. Much of the SVN capital was under the control of a criminal syndicate known as the Binh Xuyen. From its origins as a gang of river pirates, the Binh Xuyen had evolved into a cartel that dominated the city's underworld. The cabal was led by Le Van Vien, whom Saigon residents called "Bay Vien," and who had a well-deserved reputation for venality and cruelty. Yet Vien was also a Vietnamese nationalist and an aspiring political leader. During the early stages of the Indochina War, he had aligned the Binh Xuyen with the Viet Minh and waged a campaign of extortion and terrorism against French forces in Saigon. Although this campaign scored some notable successes, Viet Minh leaders had concluded by 1948 that Vien was too independent and moved to

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eliminate him. He retaliated by striking a deal with French officials: the gangsters would expose all of the Viet Minh operatives working in Saigon in exchange for the creation of a Binh Xuyen-controlled “nationalist zone” in the district of Cholon. This arrangement proved advantageous to both parties. “Since we had spent time in the *maquis* and fought there,” one of Vien’s subordinates later boasted, “we also knew how to organize the counter *maquis*.” By the early 1950s, Viet Minh attacks in Saigon had fallen off sharply, and the Binh Xuyen had taken over the city’s vice rackets.²⁰

Bay Vien’s business empire in Saigon included several hugely profitable casinos and a brothel known as the Hall of Mirrors that employed hundreds of prostitutes. The Binh Xuyen also cooperated with French military intelligence officers in Operation X, an opium-trafficking scheme in which poppies harvested in Tonkin and Laos were delivered to the gangsters for refining and distribution via the city’s many smoking dens. These enterprises made Vien one of the richest men in Indochina. In the spring of 1954, he leveraged this wealth to secure what appeared to be the ultimate concession: in exchange for a large payment to Bao Dai, the Binh Xuyen took over both the Saigon-Cholon municipal police force and the Cochinchinese Public Security Service (still widely referred to as “la Sûreté”). When Diem returned to Saigon, Vien ruled large portions of the city from his Cholon headquarters, protected by his legions of loyal fighters and his connections to French intelligence.²¹

Diem also had to contend with the Dai Viet Party (Dai Viet Quoc Dan Dang), which had been a key player in anticommunist politics in Indochina since its founding in 1939. After a disastrous attempt to collaborate with the Viet Minh during the mid-1940s, some Dai Viet leaders opted to support the “Bao Dai solution” with the hope that they would be able to take over the SVN regime from within. The most prominent Dai Viet member to serve under Bao Dai during the early 1950s was Phan Huy Quat, a medical doctor from Tonkin who became SVN defense minister. Quat arranged for Dai Viet cadres to become involved in some of the SVN-sponsored pacification programs carried out in Tonkin during the last years of the war. However, not all Dai Viet members supported Quat or his decision to collaborate with Bao Dai; by 1954, the party had fractured along regional lines, with only Quat’s northern “mandarin” faction continuing to back Bao Dai. Despite these schisms, the Dai Viet was still a force to be reckoned with in Saigon and in the other parts of Vietnam still under SVN control. One historian estimates that the party

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had as many as ten thousand members and sympathizers, many of whom held key positions in the SVN bureaucracy.²²

Another prominent organization in Saigon political circles was the Tinh Than (Spirit) group, a loose collection of anticommunist intellectuals and professionals. The acknowledged leader of Tinh Than was Tran Van Do, a member of a wealthy Mekong Delta landowning family. He also happened to be the uncle of Ngo Dinh Nhu's wife, Madame Nhu, and was an early participant in the activities of the Can Lao Party. Because of these connections, Diem tapped Do to be SVN foreign minister in his first cabinet; he also named three other Tinh Than members to high-level posts. This did not mean, however, that Diem could take the loyalty of Do and the rest of his faction for granted. Like his friend Phan Huy Quat of the Dai Viet, Tran Van Do doubted that Diem intended to build a broad-based anticommunist coalition in South Vietnam. In private conversations with U.S. officials and others, Do criticized Diem and complained of his reluctance to share power. Some Americans would eventually come to see Do as a possible replacement for Diem—an idea that Do did little to discourage.²³

As Diem prepared to face this daunting collection of opponents and political rivals, he was well aware that most observers were discounting his chances for remaining in power for more than a few weeks. Despite this, he remained remarkably upbeat about his prospects for success. In part, his optimism rested on his confidence in his ability to build support for his new government among certain key constituencies within South Vietnam. As a prominent Vietnamese Catholic, Diem expected his coreligionists to provide strong backing for his government. He also anticipated that his appointment would be welcomed in central Vietnam, where both Catholics and non-Catholics admired him as a native son who had made good. In addition, Diem planned to leverage his preexisting ties to the anticommunist figures with whom he had collaborated in the past. Last and most important, he was counting on the members of his own family, and especially his four brothers, each of whom was already working on his behalf. Bishop Ngo Dinh Thuc's leadership of Vietnamese Catholics, Ngo Dinh Nhu's Can Lao Party and his ties to labor leaders and intellectuals, Ngo Dinh Can's clandestine network of supporters in central Vietnam, and Ngo Dinh Luyen's personal friendship with Bao Dai—all of these political assets would be in play during Diem's first months in power.

Besides his Vietnamese backers, there was one other key actor in Indochinese affairs that might help to tilt the political scales in Diem's favor:

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the U.S. government. As the prime minister-designate of the SVN, Diem was about to become the leader of a state that was officially allied to the United States and appeared to be in line to receive large amounts of American aid. Nevertheless, U.S. official assessments of Diem and his prospects in the summer of 1954 were anything but uniformly positive. In Washington, some Eisenhower administration officials questioned the very feasibility of preserving South Vietnam as an anticommunist state. Other Americans favored a continuation of aid to the SVN for the time being but doubted that Diem would be able to use it effectively. Many of the U.S. officials who had dealt with Diem previously—notably Heath, the U.S. ambassador—were skeptical that Diem possessed the leadership acumen needed to survive in South Vietnam’s fractious political environment. And even Diem’s U.S. admirers admitted that he seemed to be facing unbeatable odds. It was hard to see how Diem would be able to succeed where previous SVN prime ministers had failed—if anything, his chances appeared far worse than theirs had. For Diem, therefore, the backing of the United States for his fledgling regime was anything but a sure thing. If he wanted Washington’s support, he would have to figure out how to get it.

The Geneva Accords and the Hinh Crisis

On July 7, less than two weeks after his return from exile, Diem and the members of his cabinet were formally installed in office. In later years, South Vietnamese propagandists would portray 1954’s “Double Seven” (the seventh day of the seventh month) as a turning point in Vietnam’s modern history. At the time, however, there was little reason to believe that the moment augured well for Diem or the SVN. Because French officials had not yet vacated Norodom Palace—the majestic colonial structure Diem would later rechristen Independence Palace—the investiture ceremony took place in the palace of Gia Long, the comparatively drab building Diem was using as a temporary headquarters. The proceedings were brief and the atmosphere heavy with a sense of impending crisis. In his address to the small group of dignitaries in attendance, Diem noted the many daunting challenges he and his ministers faced. Alluding to the ongoing negotiations at Geneva, he proclaimed his desire for a cease-fire in the war with the Viet Minh but warned that any effort to divide Vietnam’s territory would be disastrous. He also spoke of his determination to make the SVN independent from France and noted that the VNA soldier “was not yet a true soldier of the nation.” Diem concluded by promising to

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carry out a “national revolution” (*cach mang quoc gia*) that would be both “moderate and far-reaching.” But he provided no details about what this revolution would entail. Instead, he simply called on his compatriots to cooperate and to make sacrifices as the government pursued its “program to build the nation” (*chuong trinh hung quoc*).²⁴

If judged solely by the objectives laid out in his July 7 speech, Diem’s record during his first months in power was an unrelenting series of failures. In mid-July, French and DRV representatives agreed that French and SVN forces would have to withdraw from all of the territory they controlled in the northern half of Vietnam, including the city of Hanoi. Meanwhile, Diem’s government faced grave dangers in the south, where French officials and General Hinh of the VNA plotted to force him from office. Not surprisingly, Diem found it difficult to build popular support for his government under these conditions. By the end of 1954, he appeared to have made little progress toward the realization of the “national revolution” he had promised.

Yet Diem’s position was not actually as hopeless as it appeared to be. Despite the onslaught of disappointments and bad news, he still found ways to turn the highly complex and fluid situation in South Vietnam to his advantage. His actions during this period included efforts to encourage a mass movement of refugees from northern Vietnam to the south—a migration that would pay large propaganda dividends for his government. At the same time, Diem and his brothers worked quietly behind the scenes to win the support of key leaders and groups in South Vietnam. The Ngos’ selective outreach to key players was part of their larger strategy to isolate and neutralize their most dangerous rivals in the south. During September and October 1954, this strategy appeared to backfire, as General Hinh openly declared his intent to overthrow the government. But by November, Diem had gained the upper hand over Hinh and forced him to leave the country. These and other apparent successes persuaded the Ngos that their backroom maneuvers were working and they would soon be in position to defeat their remaining rivals. By the end of Diem’s first six months in office, he and his brothers were convinced that they were on a path to victory, even though South Vietnam’s political and social divisions seemed deeper and more intractable than ever.

The most immediate problems Diem faced after taking office had to do with France’s deteriorating military position in northern Indochina. Shortly

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after his arrival in Saigon in late June, Diem learned that French forces were withdrawing from several key provinces south of Hanoi. The abandoned territory included the large Catholic dioceses of Phat Diem and Bui Chu, whose populations were strongly anticommunist. Since Diem had hoped to use these Catholic communities as a bulwark against further Viet Minh expansion in the north, the surprise pullout was cause for dismay. Although he flew to Hanoi and remonstrated strongly with French commanders to reverse the withdrawal, his pleas fell on deaf ears.²⁵

The military setbacks in the north were soon eclipsed by even worse news. On July 21, French and DRV representatives in Geneva announced the terms of the peace agreement they had negotiated. Vietnam was to be bisected into northern and southern “military regroupment areas”; Viet Minh forces would take control of all of Vietnam’s territory above the 17th parallel (all of Tonkin and the northern half of Annam) while the SVN would administer the provinces lying below that line (Cochinchina and southern Annam). Negotiators also agreed that each side’s military forces would withdraw in stages from the territory that they controlled inside the other’s zone. This arrangement was supposed to last for no more than two years, pending the organization of nationwide elections to create a single all-Vietnam government.

In the long run, the division of Vietnam into DRV- and SVN-controlled areas redounded to Diem’s benefit. At the time, however, Diem viewed the “loss” of the north as a disaster. Although he had expected that the Geneva agreement would include a division of territory for the purpose of military disengagement and regroupment, he hoped to retain the heavily populated corridor between Hanoi and the port city of Haiphong as an SVN-controlled enclave. In a public statement, Diem bitterly denounced the accords and declared that his government had disassociated itself from them.²⁶

The Geneva agreements contained one provision that was potentially of great benefit to Diem: the establishment of a three-hundred-day period of unrestricted travel between the northern and southern zones. Although intended primarily as a way of facilitating the military regroupment process, this provision also covered civilians. French and Viet Minh leaders expected that those who moved from north to south would consist mainly of SVN officials, soldiers, and their families; one senior French official guessed that around two hundred thousand people would relocate to the south. But Diem believed that the number could be a million or more. Such a large transfer, he knew, would constitute a significant propaganda

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victory for his government in its competition with Ho's DRV. It might also augment the ranks of Diem's supporters in the south—especially if the migrants included the thousands of anticommunist Catholics who were already on the move, due to the Viet Minh takeover of the Phat Diem and Bui Chu dioceses.²⁷

Diem's prediction about the overall size of the north-to-south migration proved more accurate than the lower estimates by French officials and others. Between August 1954 and mid-1955, a total of nearly nine hundred thousand people, most of them civilians from Tonkin, made the journey to the south. While Catholics accounted for about three-quarters of the refugees, a sizable minority of the migrants were non-Christians, including around two hundred thousand Buddhists.²⁸ This massive movement of people across the 17th parallel would have a deep and lasting impact on the political, cultural, and social life of South Vietnam. It also became one of the most heavily mythologized episodes in modern Vietnamese history.

To a remarkable extent, both contemporary and retrospective accounts of the exodus of refugees to the south have represented it as an event orchestrated by the U.S. government. American propagandists highlighted the actions of the U.S. navy, which transported hundreds of thousands of northerners to the south on a flotilla of warships. Dubbed Operation Passage to Freedom, the navy's efforts were represented both as a shining example of American humanitarianism and as a powerful blow against international communism.²⁹ More recent accounts by U.S. historians have challenged some aspects of this self-serving narrative; however, they have continued to explain the migration mainly by reference to the actions of the navy and other U.S. government agencies.³⁰

Communist propaganda also portrayed the movement of northern refugees to the south as a U.S.-planned scheme—though they cast American motives in far more sinister terms. Starting in 1955, senior DRV leaders asserted that many of those who fled south had been tricked by a U.S. psychological warfare campaign.³¹ These allegations were later elaborated by foreign journalists and historians, many of whom fingered the CIA's Edward Lansdale as the mastermind behind the exodus. Lansdale's men purportedly urged northern Catholics to flee with the slogan “the Blessed Virgin Mary is going south” and by intimating that the U.S. military planned to drop a nuclear bomb on Hanoi.³² Lansdale later acknowledged that his team had used disinformation and deception to encourage north-

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erners to flee to the SVN-administered zone. Among other things, his operatives commissioned a custom-written astrological almanac that predicted dire fates for those who remained in the north—a maneuver very much in keeping with Lansdale’s conviction that Asian people could be manipulated by anyone with knowledge of local cultural practices.³³

Whether they have lionized the U.S. navy or condemned the Lansdale team, almost all accounts of the north-to-south migration after Geneva have overlooked the most important actors in the episode: the refugees themselves. As recent research demonstrates, the refugees’ decisions about leaving the north had little to do with rumors about the Virgin Mary or fears of atomic bomb attacks. Those northerners who chose to leave were far more concerned about the possibility of Viet Minh reprisals for anticommunist activities; many refugees were also influenced by what they heard about economic opportunities in the south.³⁴ In addition, northerners often considered their relocation options in light of their prior travel experiences. Contrary to what many Americans supposed, many of the refugees who chose to leave the north were not leaving their villages for the first time. Indeed, the population movements of 1954–1955 should be understood in light of the “cultures of mobility” that had long thrived in northern Vietnam.³⁵ Knowledge gained from earlier travel may have been particularly important for Catholics, many of whom had previously made pilgrimages to places such as the shrine of the Virgin Mary at La Vang in Quang Tri province—a site that happened to lie just south of the 17th parallel.³⁶

Diem understood the concerns that were driving some northerners to consider moving to the south, and he spared no effort to encourage them to make the journey. Even before he took office, Diem had inquired about the possibility of U.S. assistance for a “mass evacuation of the population of Tonkin” should the French cede control of the north to the Viet Minh.³⁷ After news of the Geneva agreements reached Vietnam, the premier ordered his officials to craft a propaganda campaign to warn northern residents of the dire fates that awaited them under Viet Minh rule; the government also promised free transportation, a living allowance, and resettlement assistance to anyone willing to make the trip to the south.³⁸ Diem participated personally in these efforts to convince northerners to move. On August 2, he flew to Hanoi (which was still under French control) and addressed a large crowd that included many of the Catholics who had fled to the city ahead of the Viet Minh occupation of southern

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Tonkin. Banners at the event exhorted the population to “evacuate to the south to protect our forces” and promised that relocating to the south would “hasten the reunification of the country.”³⁹

The SVN efforts to encourage and control the movement of refugees into the south did not achieve all of the ambitious goals set by Diem. Feuds among South Vietnamese officials frequently threatened to disrupt the enterprise, and many of the refugees accused the government of treating them in high-handed and coercive ways.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, Diem’s later boasts about his successful management of the massive influx were not without basis in fact. South Vietnamese propagandists were correct to represent the SVN as a key actor in the refugee drama, even if they distorted both the causes and the consequences of the migration. In the years after 1954, Diem’s dealings with refugee leaders and communities would have far-reaching effects. Among other things, the refugees would heavily impact the political fortunes of the Diem government and its nation-building programs—albeit not always in the ways Diem expected or intended.

The Diem government’s surprisingly agile response to the post-Geneva refugee influx was all the more remarkable for the fact that it coincided with a new political crisis in South Vietnam. As Diem had correctly surmised, the most immediate danger to his survival was posed by General Hinh, the head of the VNA. Since Hinh had close ties to senior French military commanders in Indochina, his coup threats could not be dismissed as mere bluster. If Hinh were to join forces with the Binh Xuyen crime boss Bay Vien, the two leaders would almost certainly have enough military power to force Diem from office. Diem also had to consider the possibility that Hinh or Bay Vien might seek to ally with one or more of the Cao Dai or Hoa Hao factions that collectively controlled most of the western Mekong Delta.

To prevent his enemies from colluding against him, Diem hoped to enlist the help of the U.S. government. His expectations in this regard were buoyed by his emerging friendship with Lansdale and by the assistance he received from other U.S. backers such as Wesley Fishel. Diem could also take comfort in the fact that the Eisenhower administration had publicly declared its support for him. Nevertheless, the premier knew that this support was far from absolute and that many U.S. officials in both Saigon and Washington doubted his ability to succeed in the long run. As he soon discovered, the Americans also had their

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own ideas about how he should deal with General Hinh and his other rivals.

In an early August memorandum to the State Department, senior embassy officials outlined what they saw as the best remedy for the “political chaos” in South Vietnam. According to the memo, Diem should be pressured to adopt a strategy of conciliation and reform; specifically, he ought to reconstitute his cabinet as a broad-based “government of national union” and to convene a “constituent assembly” that would include representatives of all of South Vietnam’s various non-communist groups, parties and factions. Once his rivals had been brought into the government, the memorandum argued, Diem could undertake a sweeping program of nation building. This program should include land reform and an overhaul of SVN fiscal and monetary policies as well as the U.S.-sponsored “reconstruction” of the VNA. The embassy recommended that continued aid to the SVN be predicated on Diem’s adoption of all these measures and on his willingness to “accept U.S. or other expert advice.”⁴¹

Diem readily agreed with U.S. officials that extensive reforms were needed if he was to achieve his nation-building goals in South Vietnam. However, the embassy’s advice about reform and conciliation were not at all what he had in mind. He had no intention of seeking compromise with General Hinh, Bay Vien, or any other leader who might be seeking to overthrow him. Instead of creating a unity government, Diem planned to pursue a divide-and-conquer strategy: he would seek the support of certain key leaders and factions as a means to isolate and weaken his most formidable opponents. In this way, Diem believed, he could neutralize or eliminate his enemies one by one. At the same time, he would buy time to consolidate his government’s authority and power.

One of Diem’s first maneuvers following the announcement of the Geneva cease-fire was aimed at increasing his leverage with Bao Dai—a figure whose actions would be crucial to Diem’s political survival during the months ahead. On July 22, Diem sent a secret telegram to the ex-emperor (who was still in France) in which he offered to resign, citing his failure to prevent the division of the country and the loss of the north to the Viet Minh. This move was less risky for Diem than it seemed. Diem knew that Bao Dai could not hold him responsible for the Geneva agreements, which Diem had loudly denounced. Nor could Bao Dai afford to accept Diem’s resignation after such a short time in office; doing so would have invited comparisons to the 1933 resignation that had transformed Diem

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into a nationalist martyr. The real objective behind Diem's move was revealed by a second telegram he sent to his brother Ngo Dinh Luyen, who had remained in Paris specifically for the purpose of maintaining contact with Bao Dai. Diem instructed Luyen to tell Bao Dai that he was willing to stay on as premier, on the condition that he receive written confirmation of the "full powers" Bao Dai had previously pledged to him. According to Luyen, the stratagem worked to perfection: Bao Dai rejected Diem's resignation and consented to put his earlier oral promise in writing.⁴²

Having bolstered his standing with Bao Dai, Diem turned to the task of isolating Hinh and Bay Vien from South Vietnam's other anti-communist groups and leaders. His initial steps included direct warnings to both leaders not to interfere with his plans to assert the authority of his new government.⁴³ At the same time, Diem also signaled his interest in making an accommodation with certain Hoa Hao and Cao Dai commanders. On July 12, Diem met with General Nguyen Thanh Phuong, the head of the Cao Dai army. An independent-minded figure whose loyalty to the Cao Dai "pope" was far from absolute, General Phuong seemed flattered that Diem received him with full military honors. A few days later, Phuong showed his appreciation by cooperating with Ngo Dinh Nhu in the staging of a pro-Diem demonstration in downtown Saigon. Thousands of Phuong's Cao Dai followers joined with a large contingent of Catholics to express their support for the premier and his hard-line stance on the Geneva talks.⁴⁴ Over the next several days, Diem held additional talks with Phuong and Tran Van Soai, the temperamental Hoa Hao militia commander. By mid-August, Diem was "full of determination and optimism" and expected to oust Hinh soon.⁴⁵

Unfortunately for Diem, his predictions of success were premature. Generals Phuong and Soai had not yet made up their minds about the new premier. Even as they were parleying with Diem, both commanders were also secretly in touch with Bay Vien, who proposed a pact to bring down the government.⁴⁶ The credibility of the Binh Xuyen leader's scheme was boosted by the backing it received from some senior French officials. In mid-August, Jacques Raphaël-Leygues, a high-ranking French diplomat, arrived in Vietnam from Paris on a mission officially described as an effort to strengthen the Saigon government. In reality, Raphaël-Leygues had come to push for Diem's removal from office. On August 25, the diplomat hosted a reception that featured a blatantly staged show of unity among "Pope" Tac, General Phuong and General Soai, several Binh

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Xuyen representatives, and General Hinh. According to Heath, the “air of conspiracy was thick.” “Is it all right to go ahead and change the government?” one Cao Dai officer asked the ambassador. Heath’s alarm about the emerging anti-Diem coalition was compounded the next day, when he discovered that Ély, the French high commissioner, had also concluded that Diem should be removed due to his failure to broaden his government. By the end of August, Saigon was rife with rumors about coup plots and the possibility of a military government.⁴⁷ Heath bluntly warned Diem that his government was in an “extremely parlous situation” and advised him to “come to terms” with his rivals as soon as possible.⁴⁸

But Diem was determined to stick to his original strategy. Instead of taking Heath’s advice, the premier provoked a confrontation with General Hinh. On September 8, Diem ordered the arrest of two of Hinh’s subordinate officers on charges of inciting rebellion. This led to several stormy face-to-face meetings between Diem and Hinh. After Hinh refused to back down, Diem announced that he had dismissed the general and ordered him to go to France for a six-month “study mission.” Hinh responded by barricading himself in his house behind a phalanx of loyal soldiers while the VNA’s radio station broadcast vitriolic denunciations of Diem. Thanks to frantic mediation by French and U.S. officials, the dispute between the two leaders did not immediately escalate into an armed clash. But the standoff between the two rivals would keep Saigon on a knife’s edge for the next two months.⁴⁹

In the eyes of Heath and other U.S. embassy officials, Diem’s attempts to provoke Hinh were foolhardy and potentially disastrous. But Diem was convinced that a confrontational approach, combined with continued outreach to other potential allies, was the best way to undercut and isolate the rebellious general. On September 24, Diem made the surprise announcement that he had reshuffled his cabinet “to make it compatible with the new situation.” The new lineup of ministers included General Phuong and General Soai; six additional posts were assigned to other Cao Dai and Hoa Hao figures, while the Tinh Than group retained four portfolios. No one, including Diem, was under any illusions that the inclusion of Phuong and Soai in the government amounted to anything more than a temporary *modus vivendi*. Nevertheless, the cabinet reshuffle was a victory of sorts for Diem. In addition to dealing a setback to General Hinh, Diem had also successfully deflected U.S. pressure for the creation of a government of national union, at least for the moment. For Diem, the idea of

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pursuing compromise for the sake of unity now seemed even less appealing than it had before.⁵⁰

On October 1, just a week after reconstituting his government, Diem received a telegram that gave him new cause for concern. From his villa in Cannes, Bao Dai advised Diem that he needed to reshuffle his cabinet a second time. The ex-emperor wanted Diem to give portfolios to General Hinh and Bay Vien; he also told Diem to appoint Nguyen Van Xuan, a retired French army officer and Hinh ally, to the post of vice premier. In issuing these instructions, Bao Dai appeared to be bowing to pressure from Hinh and Bay Vien, both of whom had been lobbying him to remedy the “deficiencies” in Diem’s government.⁵¹

General Hinh viewed Bao Dai’s telegram as license to take a more belligerent line with Diem. On October 9, Hinh informed Ambassador Heath that he planned to force Diem from office within forty-eight hours if the premier did not comply with Bao Dai’s new instructions. That night, VNA armored cars were observed prowling the streets around Diem’s palace. At a state dinner the following evening, Hinh theatrically warned one of Diem’s ministers that the coup would take place the next day. Although Hinh failed to make good on this threat, his actions boosted the tensions in Saigon to new heights.⁵²

Most accounts of this episode (the “Hinh crisis”) have explained Diem’s political survival during the fall of 1954 as due to the support he received from certain U.S. government officials. Lansdale later claimed to have single-handedly thwarted one Hinh’s coup attempts by sending several of his staff officers on an official junket to the Philippines. Lansdale also sought to water down VNA propaganda attacks on Diem by arranging for a U.S. naval officer to gain access to the Army’s radio station; once inside, the officer tried to persuade Hinh’s men to moderate the tone of their broadcasts. Although recently declassified materials suggest that Lansdale exaggerated the impact of these maneuvers, some authors have seen them as providing critical help to Diem at a delicate moment.⁵³

Lansdale was not the only U.S. official who sought to assist Diem. Shortly after Bao Dai’s October 1 telegram, Heath flew to France to admonish him to refrain from actions that might encourage Hinh to oust Diem by force. Bao Dai contritely assured Heath that he had no plans to replace Diem, and that the meaning of his message about changes to the cabinet had been distorted by a “drafting error.”⁵⁴ After returning to Saigon, Heath redoubled his efforts to prevent Diem’s enemies from trying to oust

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him by force. According to one report, the ambassador drove to Binh Xuyen headquarters at three o'clock in the morning to remonstrate with Bay Vien about rumors that he was planning to assassinate Diem.⁵⁵

Perhaps the most important gesture of U.S. support that Diem received during the Hinh crisis came from President Eisenhower. By mid-October, Eisenhower was thoroughly exasperated by the standoff in Saigon; he was also anxious to resolve the disagreements among his advisors over whether and how to continue support for Diem and South Vietnam. In a National Security Council (NSC) meeting on October 22, Eisenhower ordered the immediate implementation of a "crash program" of military assistance to the SVN. This program was specifically intended "to improve the loyalty and the effectiveness of the Free Vietnamese forces." Eisenhower also dispatched a personal letter to Diem in which he proposed to begin delivering aid directly to the SVN government instead of indirectly through the French.⁵⁶

Eisenhower's decision to go ahead with the "crash program" of aid for South Vietnam would have important long-term implications for U.S. relations with the Diem government. It did not, however, mark an immediate change in U.S. policy toward the SVN, nor did it put an end to the crisis in Saigon. Eisenhower's letter to Diem contained an important *quid pro quo*: the new aid would be contingent on the "undertaking [of] needed reforms." Among other things, Washington wanted Diem to implement the U.S. embassy's proposal for a broad-based unity government, including all anticommunist leaders and factions—including General Hinh. Thus, Eisenhower's decision to move ahead with the "crash program" did not significantly increase Diem's leverage over Hinh.⁵⁷ Nor had Heath's interventions with Bao Dai and Bay Vien decisively tilted the situation in Diem's favor. At most, these U.S. actions had merely bought Diem a little more time.

Instead of relying on the Americans to remove Hinh from the scene, Diem pursued his own strategy for containing and neutralizing the general. His first move was to enter into negotiations with Hinh and his other enemies as a way to stall for time. Shortly after receiving Bao Dai's October 1 telegram, Diem invited Hinh, Bay Vien, and General Xuan to join him for a face-to-face conference, ostensibly to discuss the new instructions. But while Diem portrayed the talks as a conciliatory gesture, he had no intention of reaching agreement with his rivals. After listening to their demands and sketching out a power-sharing arrangement, he proceeded to temporize; over the next several weeks, he floated and then retracted a

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Temporizing with the enemy: Diem's meeting with General Nguyen Van Hinh (far left), Bay Vien (far right), and Nguyen Van Xuan, October 1954. (Edward Geary Lansdale Papers, envelope GP, Hoover Institution Archives)

series of proposals, each of which appeared calculated to appeal to one of his rivals while annoying the others. These stalling actions infuriated Hinh and exasperated Heath, who complained bitterly to Diem about his inconstancy.⁵⁸

At the same time Diem was dragging out the talks with his enemies, he was also quietly pursuing the second part of his strategy: clandestine efforts to increase his support within the the VNA officer corps. As noted above, Diem's brothers Can and Nhu had been recruiting VNA junior officers into the Can Lao Party since 1953. After Diem took power, the Ngos continued these efforts and supplemented them with a pro-Diem propaganda campaign aimed at persuading both officers and enlisted men to support Diem in his struggle against Hinh. By the fall of 1954, it was clear that these activities were paying off—especially in the Ngos' home region of central Vietnam.

During October and November, as the crisis in Saigon intensified, VNA units in the coastal cities of Nha Trang, Phan Rang, and Phan Thiet

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launched a series of pro-Diem mutinies. After seizing government buildings in each city, the rebellious units proclaimed their loyalty to Diem and declared that they would no longer take orders from Hinh. According to Nguyen Tran, a Ngo family supporter serving as a province chief in central Vietnam, the uprisings were instigated and directed by Ngo Dinh Can. Although these rebellions have been mostly overlooked by historians, contemporary observers saw them as a sign that Hinh was losing control of the army.⁵⁹

The last and most important part of Diem's strategy for dealing with General Hinh involved a new effort to get back into the good graces of Bao Dai, who was clearly annoyed with Diem for his attempts to provoke a showdown with Hinh. Diem realized that he needed to convince Bao Dai that Hinh was dangerous and had to be removed. To accomplish this, the premier was counting on his brother Ngo Dinh Luyen, who was continuing his lobbying activities in Paris. Operating from an office on the Avenue Kleber, Luyen and his assistants plied Bao Dai and the members of his entourage with evidence that purportedly demonstrated Hinh's unfitness for command.⁶⁰

In late October, Luyen reported that Bao Dai was about to order Hinh to cease his opposition to Diem. A few days later, an "affable but nervous" Bao Dai told a U.S. diplomat that he had summoned Hinh to Paris for consultations.⁶¹ Although Hinh delayed his departure from Vietnam for as long as he could, he reluctantly concluded in mid-November that he had no choice but to comply. On November 19, he boarded a flight to France. Around the same time, Luyen furnished Bao Dai with documents suggesting that Hinh was secretly collaborating with the Viet Minh. Bao Dai's response to these materials is unknown, but he had clearly concluded that Hinh was a liability. On November 29, Bao Dai formally relieved Hinh of his command.⁶²

Hinh's recall was an important victory for Diem that strongly reinforced the Ngos brothers' faith in the strategy they had devised. In late December, Nhu and Luyen explained their plans to a CIA officer: having successfully engineered Hinh's removal, the Ngos were now confident that the VNA was "well in hand and loyal" to the government. They expected next to break the power of Bay Vien and the Binh Xuyen, while maintaining their delicate accommodation with Hoa Hao and Cao Dai commanders.⁶³ As subsequent events would demonstrate, Nhu and Luyen's predictions were more than just wishful thinking. In the half year since Diem

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had taken power, he and his brothers had achieved several unexpected political victories. The next six months would reveal just how far Diem's practice of dividing and isolating his enemies could carry him.

The Collins Mission and Confrontation with the Binh Xuyen

On November 8, 1954, U.S. Army General J. Lawton Collins arrived in Saigon with orders of an unusual nature. A week earlier, Eisenhower had tapped Collins to serve as a "Presidential envoy" to South Vietnam. The appointment was occasioned by the imminent departure of Ambassador Heath, who was due to rotate to another post. Because Collins's mission was expected to last no more than a few months, he technically did not succeed Heath as the officially accredited U.S. ambassador to the SVN. However, Eisenhower gave Collins the "personal rank of ambassador" as well as a sweeping grant of authority to "direct, utilize and control all the agencies and resources" of the United States in Vietnam.⁶⁴

The Collins mission was the result of Eisenhower's frustration over affairs in South Vietnam. Eisenhower greatly respected Collins, who had helped him plan the D-Day invasion in 1944 and whose famously efficient style of command had earned him the nickname "Lightning Joe." Collins, Eisenhower believed, could be trusted to go to Vietnam, size up the situation, and provide objective advice.

In accounts of the events of 1954–1955 in South Vietnam, Collins and his mission have come in for both derision and praise. Diem's defenders claim that Collins undermined the premier; according to these authors, Collins's perception of Diem was colored by his arrogant attitude and his ignorance of Vietnamese political realities. Diem's critics, in contrast, have often lionized Collins as a clear-eyed Cassandra whose prescient warnings about Diem's shortcomings went unheeded. Neither of these interpretations is entirely inaccurate, but both fail to capture the complex bureaucratic and political dynamics that shaped the mission and its results. The outcome of the Collins mission was not a case of American folly triumphing over American wisdom (or vice versa). Rather, it was an affair in which internal U.S. disagreements over Diem and South Vietnam collided with Diem's ongoing efforts to weaken his rivals and consolidate his grip on power. As Collins and other U.S. leaders clashed over whether and how they might get Diem to follow their advice, Diem was already moving ahead with his plans for a high-stakes showdown with his enemies.

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Although Collins would eventually find himself at odds with Diem, his dealings with the SVN premier during the first three months of his mission were surprisingly positive. Following Hinh's departure from Vietnam in mid-November 1954, Collins's main goal was to win the approval of French and South Vietnamese officials for the "crash program" of U.S. training and aid for the VNA. As Collins knew, General Ély and Diem both had reservations about the program. Ély suspected—correctly—that Washington saw direct U.S. aid to the VNA as a way to displace the French as mentors and advisors to the South Vietnamese military. Diem, in contrast, welcomed the idea of direct U.S. aid but balked at Collins's suggestion that the target size of the SVN armed forces should be reduced from 170,000 men to less than 90,000. In the end, Collins found a compromise formula that was acceptable to all parties. In January 1955, the French consented to share training duties with the Americans, and Diem agreed that VNA troop levels would eventually level off at a total of one hundred thousand men. On February 12, the U.S. Military Advisory Assistance Group in Saigon formally assumed responsibility for advising, training, and equipping the VNA.⁶⁵

Encouraged by the success of the three-way negotiations on the crash program, Collins outlined a broader agenda for cooperation on nation building. In addition to continued collaboration in military affairs, he proposed closer U.S.-French-SVN coordination on refugee resettlement, land reform, the creation of a national assembly, financial/economic assistance, and the overhaul of the SVN civil service. To Collins's surprise, Diem professed his willingness to hear U.S. advice on all these topics. By mid-January, Collins had become cautiously optimistic about Diem and his prospects for success. As he explained to the NSC, Diem had recently shown "greater flexibility in handling people" as well as "increased self-confidence in dealing with his ministers and public issues." Diem was, Collins concluded, "the best available Prime Minister" to lead the SVN. Eisenhower welcomed Collins's upbeat report and asked him to continue his mission in Saigon beyond its original ninety-day limit.⁶⁶

Collins's positive assessment of Diem in early 1955 was reinforced by encouraging signs of growing support for the premier in some parts of South Vietnam. During early January, Diem toured portions of the central Vietnamese coast to the east and north of Saigon. In the cities of Nha Trang, Phan Rang, and Phan Thiet, he was greeted by large and enthusiastic crowds. The high point of the trip was his arrival in Tuy Hoa, where

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his plane was “practically mobbed” by a crowd of fifty thousand people—a stunning turnout in an area that had been under Viet Minh control throughout the First Indochina War. United States officials viewed the strongly positive response to Diem’s tour as a cause for hope. “There is general impression [that the] atmosphere [in] Free Vietnam has begun to lighten,” the embassy cabled to Washington in early February. “There is a quickening of almost reluctant optimism in spite of [the] heavy and dark clouds yet remaining.”⁶⁷

Even at its peak, however, the U.S. official optimism about Diem was tempered by nagging doubts. Collins invariably qualified his praise for Diem with a familiar complaint: the premier was still ignoring U.S. advice about broadening his government. Collins was particularly annoyed about Diem’s reluctance to offer a cabinet post to Dr. Phan Huy Quat of the Dai Viet Party. Embassy officials viewed Quat, a former SVN defense minister, as a competent technocrat whose skills and experience were desperately needed. During the last weeks of 1954, Collins, Fishel, Mansfield, and Lansdale all urged Diem to bring Quat into his cabinet as defense or interior minister. On several occasions, Diem pledged to give Quat the defense portfolio but then failed to follow through. In mid-December, he announced that he had elevated Ho Thong Minh, his top deputy for defense issues, to ministerial rank, effectively ending Quat’s chances of getting the post.⁶⁸

Collins and other U.S. officials attributed Diem’s unwillingness to appoint Quat to Diem’s inflexibility and reluctance to share power. Several Americans would come to see Quat as a potential replacement for Diem—a notion that some authors later lamented as a missed opportunity to create a more democratic and inclusive South Vietnamese government.⁶⁹ For Diem, however, the risks of including Quat in the government far outweighed the benefits. Diem knew that Quat’s appointment would be strongly resisted by Cao Dai and Hoa Hao leaders, many of whom bitterly recalled how the ex-defense minister had once tried to conscript their militia fighters into the ranks of the VNA. Diem had no intention of allowing Quat to upset his fragile marriage of convenience with General Phuong and General Soai. Instead, he merely pretended to Collins and other Americans to be giving their proposal serious consideration.

At the same time that Diem was deflecting U.S. pressure about Quat, he was also positioning himself for a confrontation with Bay Vien and the Binh Xuyen. In late December, Diem announced that he would not

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renew the Binh Xuyen's gambling concession, which was due to expire in mid-January. After some hesitation, Bay Vien decided not to resist Diem's decision. At midnight on January 15, 1955, the fantastically lucrative Grande Monde and Cloche D'Or casinos were shuttered. Diem made a point of dispatching VNA soldiers to both establishments to make sure that his orders were enforced. The closing of the casinos proved popular with Saigon's middle-class residents, many of whom resented the preponderant power the Binh Xuyen had gained over the city's economic life. But because Bay Vien's cronies still controlled the municipal police and the regional Sûreté, Diem's move had little impact on the overall balance of military forces in Saigon.⁷⁰

To prevail against the Binh Xuyen, Diem needed to bolster his military strength. Although the Ngos believed that the VNA officer corps was now mostly loyal to the government, they doubted that the army was strong enough to defeat Bay Vien and his fighters on its own.⁷¹ The brothers therefore sought to enlist the help of key Cao Dai and Hoa Hao leaders. For several months, the palace had been quietly discussing the possibility of a military alliance with General Phuong, General Soai, and other militia commanders. The talks focused on two intertwined issues: the payment of government subsidies to the warlords and the integration of their militias into the ranks of the VNA.

Since the late 1940s, French officials had furnished Cao Dai, Hoa Hao, and Binh Xuyen leaders with monthly subsidies for their militias. These subsidies provided the French with a measure of control over their warlord allies. However, by late 1954, colonial officials had concluded that they could no longer afford the payments, which amounted to millions of piasters every month. In December, they announced that all subsidies would cease at the end of the month.⁷² South Vietnam's strongmen were suddenly in need of a patron. This presented Diem with an opportunity—but only if he could muster the necessary funds.

For decades, journalists and historians have speculated about payments made to various Cao Dai and Hoa Hao leaders on Diem's behalf during the winter and spring of 1955. Who got paid, how much, and by whom? Accounts published during the 1960s claimed that certain warlords had received millions of dollars supplied by the United States; several authors also alleged that Lansdale had brokered these payments on Diem's behalf.⁷³ But these allegations rested mostly on hearsay. Thanks to the recent releases of previously unavailable South Vietnamese, French, and U.S.

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official records, a more accurate assessment of these transactions is now possible. While the total amount of money delivered to Cao Dai and Hoa Hao leaders during the first few months of 1955 is still unknown, the new evidence suggests that these payments, though significant, were considerably smaller than the millions of dollars reported previously.⁷⁴ And although the payments were made with cash provided by the U.S. government, the terms were arranged by Diem and his brothers, not by Lansdale or any other American. By controlling the timing, amounts, and recipients of the payments, Diem was able to manipulate the negotiations with Cao Dai and Hoa Hao leaders in ways that advanced his divide-and-conquer agenda.

Diem's parleys on the issue of troop subsidies included talks with three key commanders: General Phuong, General Soai, and another Hoa Hao leader, General Nguyen Giac Ngo. During the fall of 1954, Diem offered to integrate around three thousand of each warlord's militia fighters into the VNA.⁷⁵ He also dangled the possibility of continuing payment of the subsidies—though at a level far lower than the nearly 26 million piasters (equivalent to approximately U.S. \$750,000 at official exchange rates) that the French had been funneling to the three commanders each month.⁷⁶

General Phuong and General Soai welcomed the idea of putting their fighters on the government's payroll but balked at the proposed cuts to the subsidies. To pressure them to come to terms, Diem resorted to a combination of incentives and threats. On December 31, with the cutoff of French funds about to take effect, Diem authorized payments of 7 million piasters each to Phuong and Soai as a "temporary expedient."⁷⁷ Shortly afterward, however, he ratcheted up the pressure on them by striking a separate troop integration deal with General Ngo.⁷⁸ A few weeks later, Diem raised the stakes further by announcing additional agreements with two lower ranking Hoa Hao commanders who had previously been loyal to Soai.⁷⁹ The premier also warned Phuong and Soai that they would have to withdraw their forces from certain parts of the western Mekong Delta. To reassure the two warlords of his good faith, Diem arranged for each to receive an additional 2-million-piaster payment in late January. Still, it was clear that Diem was angling to force Phuong and Soai to moderate their demands.⁸⁰

At the same time that Diem was leaning on Phuong and Soai, he was also negotiating with Trinh Minh Thé, another powerful anti-communist leader. A charismatic and talented commander, Thé had formerly served as chief of staff of the Cao Dai army under Phuong. Eventually, however,

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his staunchly anti-French views led him to break with Phuong, Tac, and the other Cao Dai leaders who had opted for collaboration with the colonial state. In 1951, Thé announced the establishment of the “Lien Minh Army,” an independent force of twenty-five hundred soldiers sworn to fight both the Viet Minh and the French. Thé’s first move after declaring his dissidence was to assassinate a French general via a suicide bomb attack—one of the earliest uses of that tactic. The French declared Thé an outlaw but were unable to corner him or his fighters. His ability to remain at large, coupled with the vitriolic anti-French propaganda he broadcast from his hideouts, helped make him Cochinchina’s most famous Third Force leader. By 1954, the Lien Minh Army had expanded its operations and established a fortified base on the slopes of Ba Den mountain in Tay Ninh, just a day’s march from Saigon. Thé thus appeared well positioned to play the role of kingmaker, or perhaps to make his own bid to become leader of South Vietnam.⁸¹

From the moment he appeared on South Vietnam’s political stage, Trinh Minh Thé was a controversial figure. He was the real-life inspiration for “General Thé,” the shadowy villain of Graham Greene’s 1955 novel *The Quiet American*. In Greene’s telling, Thé was a brutal terrorist whose Third Force persona was just a cynical ploy to secure covert aid from naïve U.S. officials.⁸² Lansdale, in contrast, preferred to see Thé as a champion of freedom and democracy. In his memoir, Lansdale described meeting Thé at his mountainside headquarters during the fall of 1954. According to Lansdale, Thé was a “boyishly merry” figure who espoused American-style notions of liberation and self-government and readily pledged his support to Diem.⁸³

Lansdale’s romanticized description of Thé led many readers to conclude that the alliance between Diem and Thé must have been his brainchild. This hypothesis appeared to be confirmed by the *Pentagon Papers*, which revealed that Lansdale had furnished the funds Diem used to make a cash payment to Thé during the fall of 1954.⁸⁴ But other sources show conclusively that the Diem-Thé alliance was engineered by the Ngo brothers. Lansdale’s first encounter with Thé in September 1954 was preceded by extensive discussions between the palace and Thé’s subordinates. These exchanges were arranged by Ngo Dinh Nhu, through his own contacts among the Cao Dai. The money used to make the initial payment to Thé, though furnished from CIA coffers, was delivered by the Ngos during these earlier talks. The actual terms of the alliance were

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hashed out not during Lansdale's visit to Thé's headquarters but in a later series of face-to-face conferences between Nhu and Thé. The deal was cemented in late January 1955, when Diem flew by helicopter to Tay Ninh to meet Thé in person. Two weeks later, Thé marched into Saigon at the head of a column of Lien Minh fighters and formally proclaimed his allegiance to the government. Although Lansdale remained in contact with Thé during this period, he was not privy to Nhu's separate negotiations with the Lien Minh commander. As a result, Lansdale believed that his role in brokering the deal was "more operative than was actually the case."⁸⁵

If Diem expected his alliance with Trinh Minh Thé to make General Phuong and General Soai more accommodating, he had misjudged them. Although Phuong had previously cooperated with the Ngos, he now became concerned that the palace's deal with Thé would cause Diem to renege on his earlier promises to integrate Phuong's troops into the VNA. In mid-February, Phuong let it be known that he would abandon the government if Diem did not offer better terms.⁸⁶ Meanwhile, General Soai was incensed over Diem's plans to deploy Thé's men into an area of the Mekong Delta currently under the control of Hoa Hao forces. "You intend to send these [Lien Minh] troops against our brothers and allies!" Soai shouted before storming out of a meeting with Diem. "You want to kill us, don't you?"⁸⁷

Phuong's and Soai's anger with Diem provided an opening for Bay Vien. In early March, the Binh Xuyen leader joined with the Cao Dai "pope" in announcing the formation of a new coalition called the "United Front of Nationalist Forces." General Soai openly backed the Front; General Phuong was rumored to be providing support behind the scenes. In a manifesto issued on March 4, Front leaders did not mention Diem by name but clearly referred to him in their denunciation of the "dictatorship and sectarian policy which would provoke fratricidal war." On March 21, the Front demanded that Diem reorganize his cabinet within five days. If he did not comply, they intended to cut off all rice shipments into Saigon. In what appeared to be a devastating setback for Diem, the Front's March 21 declaration was signed by not only Soai and Phuong but also Thé.⁸⁸

Diem's response to the Front's ultimatum was to resume the temporizing strategy he had used the previous fall. He quickly agreed to talks with Front representatives and professed his willingness to undertake another cabinet reshuffle. But he also insisted that there could be no deal until all

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of South Vietnam's various independent militias had been dismantled. The current crisis, he declared, was a "military problem" that was not susceptible to a political solution.⁸⁹ Negotiations between the two sides on March 25 were fruitless. The following morning, with the Front's deadline just hours away, Diem opted for defiance. After signing a decree terminating Binh Xuyen control over the Saigon-Cholon municipal police force, Diem advised the cartel to vacate the city police headquarters immediately. Binh Xuyen leaders, perhaps caught off guard, protested the move but did not offer any resistance when VNA troops arrived to secure the building.⁹⁰

Believing that he had successfully called his enemies' bluff, Diem became bolder. On the morning of March 29, he instructed the VNA to seize the offices of the regional *Sûreté* from the Binh Xuyen. Brushing aside the concerns of his defense minister, who feared that the move would lead to open warfare on the streets of the city, Diem ordered VNA commanders to carry out the operation immediately. Only after frantic intervention by French officials was Diem persuaded to put the operation on hold.⁹¹ By now, however, Bay Vien was as eager for a fight as Diem. That evening, Binh Xuyen commandos attacked the VNA soldiers guarding the Saigon municipal police headquarters. At the same moment, Binh Xuyen mortar batteries began lobbing shells onto the grounds of Diem's palace. After a few hours of skirmishing, VNA forces regrouped and drove the attackers back toward Cholon. Casualties on both sides were light, but Diem and his supporters were convinced that the VNA would have crushed the Binh Xuyen if French commanders had not used their tanks to block the deployment of government reinforcements. On the afternoon of March 30, Diem reluctantly agreed to observe a French-mediated cease-fire. Thanks mostly to the determined efforts of Collins and Ély, the truce would hold for nearly a month. Still, everyone in Saigon understood that the showdown between the government and its rivals had merely been postponed.⁹²

Although Diem's forces had not fired the first shots in the March 30 incident, it was clear that the Ngo brothers had deliberately provoked their opponents. By late March, the Ngos believed that the VNA was ready to take on the Binh Xuyen.⁹³ They were also convinced that several Front leaders remained secretly loyal to Diem. In a meeting with a Saigon intellectual who had offered to facilitate talks with the Front, Nhu rejected the idea of a negotiated solution. "I'll start a little military action," Nhu said. "That will provide an opening to those people [in the Front] who are already

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bought, and they'll destroy these sects from the inside."⁹⁴ Diem expressed similar views, insisting to U.S. and French officials that General Phuong and General Thé were merely pretending to cooperate with the Front in order to learn Bay Vien's plans.⁹⁵

In the end, Diem and Nhu's assessments of the Cao Dai commanders were proved correct. On March 31, an "extremely self-confident" Diem hosted Phuong and Thé in a ceremony at Independence Palace. Both generals affirmed their support for the government, and Diem promised that their forces would be speedily integrated into the ranks of the VNA. Photographs showed Diem toasting the two commanders who just days before had seemed poised to betray him. That Diem would be in a celebratory mood was understandable. One Hoa Hao observer later ruefully estimated that the defections of Phuong and Thé cost the United Front two-fifths of its total fighting strength.⁹⁶ Slowly but surely, the military balance in South Vietnam appeared to be tilting in favor of the government. Diem's determination to end the crisis by force was now stronger than ever.

While Diem viewed the events of late March as confirmation that his plans were working, Collins drew a very different conclusion. Collins had little sympathy for the United Front or its leaders; he also agreed with Diem that the brief flare-up of fighting in Saigon had exposed the Front's military weaknesses. But Collins deplored Diem's attempts to exploit these weaknesses through armed confrontation. In his view, Diem should have been content to build up his forces while waiting for the Front to fall apart of its own accord. By provoking a confrontation now, Collins feared, Diem had alienated key leaders and groups and damaged his ability to build broad support within South Vietnam. Collins was particularly worried that several of Diem's cabinet ministers had tendered their resignations to protest his actions.⁹⁷

In a secret cable to Washington on March 31, Collins declared that it was time for Diem to go. Describing Diem as "almost entirely isolated" and "operating [what is] practically [a] one-man government with his two brothers Luyen and Nhu as principal advisors," Collins recommended that the United States open confidential talks with French officials on the subject of "possible alternatives" to Diem. Collins named Phan Huy Quat of the Dai Viet Party and Tran Van Do, the current foreign minister of the SVN, as the best candidates to replace Diem but also suggested that Bao

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Diem with the Cao Dai generals Nguyen Thanh Phuong (holding glass) and Trinh Minh Thé (far right) at a reception at Independence Palace, March 31, 1955. The event celebrated an agreement to integrate Phuong's and Thé's troops into the Vietnam National Army. (Edward Geary Lansdale Papers, envelope GQ, Hoover Institution Archives)

Dai might be persuaded to return to Vietnam and take charge of the government.⁹⁸

Why did Collins, after weighing the alternatives for months, finally conclude that regime change was Washington's best option in South Vietnam? Some scholars see Collins as bravely swimming against an overwhelming tide of U.S. official support for Diem; according to this view, Collins was able to set aside the blinkered and racist thinking that caused most of his colleagues to treat Diem as America's chosen instrument in Vietnam.⁹⁹ Other authors have argued for the opposite view, insisting that Collins's negative assessment of Diem reflected his arrogant and condescending attitude toward Vietnam and Vietnamese people in general. In this interpretation, Collins is represented as a small-minded bigot, and his critics appear as wise and forward-thinking.¹⁰⁰

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Neither of these explanations of Collins's decisions is convincing. The internal U.S. debate over Diem is most usefully understood not as a struggle between racism and antiracism but as a clash between contrasting ways of thinking about human difference and development. As Collins's rhetoric suggests, he subscribed to a rather particularist view of human nature in which racial and cultural distinctions between "Westerners" and "Asians" were deep-seated and not easily erased. Thus, in his view, Vietnam was a backward nation that would continue to need European or American oversight for the foreseeable future.¹⁰¹ By contrast, Lansdale viewed racial and cultural differences between Americans and Vietnamese through a more universalist lens. Although Lansdale agreed with Collins that Vietnam was a backward society—one "still in the feudal Middle Ages"—he was more optimistic than Collins about the ability of the Vietnamese to "break out" of this backwardness within a relatively short period of time.¹⁰² This optimism inclined Lansdale to see Diem as a leader who might catalyze the changes Vietnam needed—provided, of course, that the United States provided him with the proper guidance and encouragement. In response to Collins's complaints about Diem's intransigence, Lansdale insisted that Diem was a freedom fighter who aspired to follow in the footsteps of other "men of goodwill." In this respect, Lansdale argued, Diem's worldview was fundamentally compatible with U.S. development objectives in South Vietnam.¹⁰³

Washington's policy for South Vietnam would eventually fall in line with the staunchly pro-Diem position Lansdale advocated. This outcome, however, did not follow automatically from any preexisting strategic imperative, nor can it be chalked up merely to the racism displayed by one or another group of U.S. officials. Rather, the U.S. alliance with Ngo Dinh Diem emerged out of the interplay between events and agendas in South Vietnam during the spring of 1955. While many Americans and Vietnamese contributed to the making of this alliance, the most important role was the one played by Diem himself. In later years, Diem's unshakable confidence in his ability to make his own destiny would help bring about his downfall. But in 1955, as U.S. officials argued over what to do, Diem's penchant for swift and dramatic action was his best asset. Although he would draw many erroneous conclusions from the events of that year, he was correct to see those events as a triumph that had been largely of his own making. That conviction would become the foundation on which all his subsequent dealings with the United States would rest.

The Battle of Saigon

Collins's March 31 cable about replacing Diem provoked great consternation in Washington. John Foster Dulles, who had visited Saigon just a month earlier and returned more confident than ever in Diem's abilities, was particularly dismayed to read Collins's recommendations. In his response, the secretary urged Collins to reconsider.¹⁰⁴ But Collins would not be put off. Backed by his advisors and most of the embassy staff, he insisted that South Vietnam could not be saved under Diem's leadership. Meanwhile, French officials, who sensed that U.S. doubts about Diem were growing, made new overtures about a joint effort to remove him from office. Dulles sought to squelch this talk by repeating his earlier threat to pull out of South Vietnam if Diem was ousted.¹⁰⁵ But Washington's political winds were now blowing against Diem. In mid-April, aware that Collins's views were gaining support and that Eisenhower was anxious to resolve the debate once and for all, Dulles proposed recalling Collins to Washington. When Collins departed Saigon on April 20, U.S. officials in both capitals expected that Diem's fate—and perhaps the fate of South Vietnam—would hinge on his trip.

In Washington, Collins launched an all-out bureaucratic offensive. In meetings on April 22, Collins "vigorously reiterated" that the Diem experiment had failed. Dulles and Diem's other backers sought to rebut Collins, but officials from the Pentagon and other agencies found him persuasive. Collins also made his case to his friend Eisenhower over lunch at the White House. The president was surprised and disturbed to hear Collins say that Diem had brought his difficulties on himself. By Monday, April 25, it was clear that Collins had won the argument. Over the next two days, Collins, Dulles, and Mansfield hammered out a plan to approach the French about replacing Diem with Tran Van Do or Phan Huy Quat. On the evening of April 27, the plan was transmitted in two cables to the U.S. embassy in Paris, with copies to Saigon.¹⁰⁶

If Diem had been content to wait for Collins to return to South Vietnam, the maneuvers in Washington might have sealed the fate of his government. But Diem had no intention of waiting. Even before Collins departed Saigon, it was apparent that the fragile cease-fire with the Binh Xuyen was breaking down. Shooting incidents between VNA troops and Binh Xuyen forces were almost daily occurrences, with each side accusing the other of kidnappings and assassinations. On April 19, the two armies

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skirmished in Cholon, resulting in several casualties.¹⁰⁷ Binh Xuyen fighters reportedly murdered a squad of captured VNA soldiers by disemboweling them.¹⁰⁸ Meanwhile, Diem received disturbing reports from his brother Luyen, who had discovered on his return to Paris that Bao Dai was no longer willing to see him. Bao Dai, possibly at French urging, had already informed U.S. officials that he was preparing to dismiss Diem in favor of Phan Huy Quat.¹⁰⁹ Diem also worried about General Ély, who was refusing to meet with him or his ministers.¹¹⁰

Most worrisome of all for Diem was the rising anger among anticommunist nationalist groups in South Vietnam. In 1954, many of the most ardently anti-French leaders and groups in Saigon had supported Diem with the expectation that he would quickly sweep away what remained of the colonial state. But by the spring of 1955, these nationalists were exasperated with Diem's apparent inability to end the continued French meddling in South Vietnamese politics. Nationalist feeling was also growing among VNA officers, many of whom were incensed that French officials were still supporting the Binh Xuyen.¹¹¹

After briefly considering and discarding a plan to organize a popular referendum on his reform proposals,¹¹² Diem decided the time had come to settle the conflict with the Binh Xuyen once and for all. On April 26, the palace announced that the Binh Xuyen-appointed chief of the South Vietnamese Sûreté had been replaced. The chief promptly broadcast a defiant reply on a United Front-controlled radio station in which he declared that only Bao Dai could remove him. Although the government and the Front had previously agreed to extend the shaky cease-fire, few in Saigon expected the truce to last.¹¹³

The long-anticipated Battle of Saigon finally began on the morning of April 28, 1955. The first exchange of gunfire took place shortly after eleven o'clock near a Binh Xuyen command post in Cholon. An hour later, mortar shells exploded near Bay Vien's headquarters on the far bank of the Arroyo Chinois, the canal that marked the southern edge of the city. These incidents strongly suggest that Diem and his commanders were trying to incite the Binh Xuyen.¹¹⁴ If this was in fact Diem's plan, it was a smashing success. At 1:15 p.m., Binh Xuyen mortar batteries opened fire on Independence Palace. A short time later, Binh Xuyen fighters attacked the VNA headquarters building. Around two o'clock, Diem called General Ély to tell him that the Binh Xuyen had broken the truce and that he would order the VNA to counterattack if the shelling of the palace did not cease immedi-

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Vietnam National Army soldiers advancing on the Binh Xuyen stronghold district of Cholon during the Battle of Saigon, April 1955. (Edward Geary Lansdale Papers, envelope IR, Hoover Institution Archives)

ately. When Ély suggested that Diem would be responsible for the ensuing bloodshed, the premier abruptly hung up.¹¹⁵

Fighting between VNA troops and Binh Xuyen forces raged for the rest of the afternoon and throughout the night in several areas of the city. The indiscriminate use of incendiary weapons by both sides triggered massive fires along Tran Hung Dao Boulevard, the main street connecting downtown Saigon to Cholon. By midday on April 29, several square blocks of the city had been reduced to ash and rubble; the number of dead and injured civilians ran into the hundreds. Both the VNA and Binh Xuyen had contributed to the destruction, but the gangsters' losses were far heavier. By that afternoon, the VNA had overrun most of the enemy's strongpoints within Saigon and had forced Bay Vien's remaining fighters to retreat across the Arroyo Chinois. The Binh Xuyen paid dearly not only in blood but also in treasure: the famous Grand Monde casino, the symbol of the cartel's power, burned to the ground.¹¹⁶

Among the casualties of the Battle of Saigon was the newly adopted U.S. plan to withdraw support from Diem. The two State Department telegrams outlining the new strategy were received at the embassy in Saigon shortly

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after seven o'clock on the morning of April 28, about four hours before the battle began. However, at 12:56 p.m.—after the initial exchange of gunfire in Cholon but before the Binh Xuyen had mortared Independence Palace—the State Department dispatched another cable ordering the Saigon and Paris embassies to “take no action whatsoever” on the earlier messages.¹¹⁷ The dispatch of this “blocking cable,” coupled with the VNA's subsequent success on the battlefield, effectively suspended Collins's regime-change plan just as it was about to be implemented.

The timing of the “blocking cable” has led some historians to speculate that someone might have warned Diem about the impending change in U.S. policy toward his government. Much of this speculation centers on Lansdale. Several authors maintain that Lansdale could have tipped Diem off about Collins's recommendations and thus encouraged him to preemptively attack the Binh Xuyen.¹¹⁸ In his memoir, Lansdale claimed that he was still in the dark about the policy change when the battle began.¹¹⁹ But other sources suggest that he at least suspected that such a change might be in the works. Kenneth Young of the State Department later recalled that Dulles's dispatch of the “blocking cable” was prompted by a message sent by Lansdale to CIA headquarters around nine o'clock on the morning of April 28, before the fighting in Saigon began but after the telegrams containing the new policy had been transmitted.¹²⁰ Although the text of Lansdale's message has not been declassified, published summaries of it indicate that Lansdale opposed withdrawing support for Diem on the grounds that to do so “would cause great damage to American prestige and would doom any successor government to Diem's to failure.” In a longer cable sent twelve hours later, after the battle was under way, Lansdale elaborated this argument. Among other things, he insisted that the Ély-Collins strategy of simply waiting for the Binh Xuyen to collapse had not worked.¹²¹

Lansdale's messages on April 28 provided valuable ammunition to Dulles and the other pro-Diem officials in Washington as they scrambled to block the implementation of the Collins plan. In this regard, Lansdale may have helped turn the internal U.S. bureaucratic battle in Diem's favor.¹²² There is no evidence, however, that Lansdale or any other U.S. official exercised any influence on Diem's decision to attack the Binh Xuyen. Even if Lansdale had informed Diem about the imminent change in U.S. policy, the news would not have come as a surprise to Diem or caused him to alter his plans. For weeks, rumors had swirled about U.S. plans to abandon Diem.

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On April 18, the *New York Times* reported that Collins had already bowed to French pressure and was working with Ély to ease Diem out of power. Collins himself told Diem that his government seemed beyond saving and that Bao Dai would soon remove him.¹²³

In the end, the Battle of Saigon did not come about as a result of the actions of Lansdale or any other American. Rather, it was the culmination of Diem's evolving plan to defeat his enemies and consolidate his power in South Vietnam. For nearly a year, U.S. officials had admonished Diem to compromise with his rivals to avoid disunity and bloodshed. But he stubbornly pursued a different strategy—one designed to isolate, weaken, and defeat each of his rivals in turn. The success of his campaign against General Hinh only fortified his belief that this strategy was working. It also confirmed his suspicion that the Americans did not understand Vietnam's political realities. In a perceptive analysis written two weeks before the start of the battle with the Binh Xuyen, a U.S. embassy officer noted that Diem had pursued confrontation with Hinh even in the face of U.S. warnings about sparking an army rebellion or a civil war. "Similarly, in the present crisis, Diem believes his judgment is correct," the officer concluded. "He does not think that using force against the Binh Xuyen will bring on civil war."¹²⁴

As dawn broke over Saigon on April 30, a pall of smoke still hovered above the devastated area along the Arroyo Chinois and the parts of Cholon that had suffered the worst of the fighting. In addition to the casualties among combatants, hundreds of civilian residents were dead or missing, and thousands were homeless. The fighting on the city's outskirts would continue for several more days, and it would be months before the VNA would finally dislodge the Binh Xuyen from their hideouts farther south. Still, it was clear that the government had gained the upper hand. "You have written a glorious page in history," Diem gushed in a statement of thanks to his soldiers.¹²⁵ That Diem would resort to hyperbole was understandable. Against all odds and expectations, his forces had prevailed over his enemies and delivered the city into his hands. This stunning military victory, Diem believed, was proof of both the righteousness of his cause and the wisdom of his decision to keep his own counsel. For Diem and his brothers, these were powerful lessons indeed—lessons that would guide them until the end of their days.

4

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Diem's victory in the Battle of Saigon in early May 1955 did not bring peace to South Vietnam. On the contrary, the expulsion of the Binh Xuyen from the capital touched off a new series of military and political conflicts. In addition to the continuing resistance from elements of the United Front, Diem faced new challenges from other anticommunist nationalist leaders and groups, including several of his former allies. At the same time, he was also moving toward a final showdown with Bao Dai, who was furious with Diem for his actions during the recent crisis. Last and most important, Diem was taking his first steps toward confrontation with the group he viewed as the most dangerous long-term threat to his power: the “stay behind” communist operatives who had remained in South Vietnam after the Geneva Conference to prepare for the all-Vietnam elections that were supposed to take place by mid-1956. All of these intensifying conflicts during the summer and fall of 1955 unfolded in a revolutionary atmosphere that recalled the events that had taken place in Vietnam a decade earlier. In 1945, the springtime coup carried out by Imperial Japan against the French colonial regime had triggered months of political ferment and upheaval, culminating in the August Revolution and the establishment of a new Vietnamese republic, the DRV.¹ South Vietnam now appeared poised to repeat this cycle—though the ultimate outcome remained hard to predict, and Diem's ability to capitalize on his recent triumph was far from certain.

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Having secured control of his capital, Diem's first priority after the Battle of Saigon was to expand his government's authority across the rest of South Vietnam's territory. Nevertheless, Diem did not focus solely on military conquest and the physical control of land and people. In addition to the various military and administrative initiatives that he launched during 1955, he devoted particular attention to the ideological aspects of his nation-building agenda. In its official propaganda, the Diem regime referred to its evolving program of action as the "National Revolution"—a slogan Diem had first used in 1954 but that now took on a more elaborate meaning. In retrospect, the key event of Diem's National Revolution took place in October 1955 when he announced the transformation of the SVN into a new entity known as the Republic of Vietnam (RVN). In part, Diem founded the RVN to legitimate his efforts to replace Bao Dai as South Vietnam's official head of state, as well as his refusal to participate in the 1956 Geneva-mandated elections. But he also created this new state as a means to bring about fundamental changes in politics and governance in South Vietnam. Shortly after establishing the RVN, Diem held elections for a South Vietnamese national assembly and then drafted and promulgated a national constitution. He also created a new executive office—the presidency of the RVN—invested with the power to dominate both the new state and South Vietnamese political affairs in general.

While Diem's revolutionary undertakings produced neither political stability nor lasting peace in South Vietnam, they were still highly consequential happenings with far-reaching implications. They also profoundly affected the evolution of the U.S.-Diem alliance. After Diem's triumph over the Binh Xuyen, many of the U.S. officials who had backed him during the crisis looked forward to a new period of cooperation with his government. In some ways, the years from 1956 to 1958 were the halcyon days of the alliance, a time when optimism and expectations ran high in both governments and each side's nation-building objectives seemed within reach. But it was also a time in which many U.S. officials and experts—including some of Diem's staunchest American backers—were dismayed to discover that their influence in Saigon seemed to be shrinking and that their South Vietnamese counterparts seemed increasingly resistant to their advice. South Vietnam appeared to have been saved from communism, but for some Americans, the rescue had not gone according to script.

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The National Revolution

The most obvious problem Diem faced in the aftermath of the Battle of Saigon was the ongoing military resistance mounted by the remnants of the United Front. After VNA units drove Bay Vien and his fighters out of Saigon, Diem ordered his commanders to focus on the western Mekong Delta, which was still under the sway of the militias controlled by the Hoa Hao chieftains Tran Van Soai and Ba Cut. In June 1955, VNA forces overran Soai's headquarters near the city of Can Tho. Over the next several months, VNA units and other security forces gradually expanded the territory under their control, while the enemy's ranks steadily shrank due to battle losses and defections. In early 1956, Soai concluded that further resistance was useless and accepted a government offer to lay down his arms and retire from politics. Shortly after this, Ba Cut was captured by government soldiers. According to some accounts, Ba Cut had been deceived by Diem's representatives, who reneged on a promise to allow him to negotiate his surrender under a flag of truce just as Soai had. Whatever the truth, the palace was not disposed to show mercy. In a high-profile trial during the summer of 1956, Ba Cut was convicted, sentenced to death, and executed by guillotine. Although some of his followers would continue to fight for several years, Hoa Hao resistance had ceased to be a danger to the government's survival.²

Diem's forces also succeeded in eliminating the Binh Xuyen as a credible threat to his regime. During the fall of 1955, a VNA force under the command of Colonel Duong Van Minh—a famously tall officer who was called "Big Minh" by his U.S. counterparts and affectionately known to his soldiers as "Fatty" (Beo)—marched into the Rung Sat swamps south of Saigon in search of what remained of Bay Vien's army. Minh's troops made quick work of the demoralized gangsters. Hundreds gave up without a fight; many others fled, including Bay Vien and his top lieutenants, who escaped to a comfortable exile in France. For his achievement, Colonel Minh received a promotion to lieutenant general, the first of several rewards bestowed on "Fatty" by the grateful Diem.³

Diem's military victories over the Binh Xuyen and Hoa Hao boosted his prestige enormously, but they did not assure the survival of his government. Even before Diem's troops had gained the upper hand on the battlefield, he was already confronting a new constellation of threats. In late

April 1955, just prior to the outbreak of the Battle of Saigon, representatives of several so-called radical nationalist political parties gathered for a government-sponsored conference in the capital. Although most of these nationalists had backed Diem against the Binh Xuyen, many suspected that he and his brothers harbored dictatorial aspirations—fears that were exacerbated by the “conspicuous presence [of] Brother Nhu’s agents” at the conference. As a result, a majority of conference attendees rejected the regime’s efforts to enlist them in a new political front controlled by the palace. On April 29, the day after the fight for the city began, the radicals met again. As artillery shells thudded in the distance, the conclave endorsed a resolution of support for Diem. But the participants also proclaimed that Bao Dai’s tenure as SVN chief of state had ended and that Diem should move immediately to form a “provisional revolutionary government” and to organize elections for a national assembly. To ensure that their demands would be met, the radicals established a standing “Revolutionary Committee” (Uy Ban Cach Mang). The supporters of the new committee included three of the key militia commanders who had sided with Diem against the United Front: General Nguyen Giac Ngo of the Hoa Hao and General Nguyen Thanh Phuong and General Trinh Minh Thé of the Cao Dai.⁴

The emergence of the Revolutionary Committee took place at an extremely delicate moment for Diem. A day earlier, after receiving the news of the fighting between VNA and Binh Xuyen forces in Saigon, Bao Dai had dispatched a long telegram to Diem in which he ordered the premier to come to Paris at once. Bao Dai also announced that General Hinh, who had been cooling his heels in France since his recall the previous fall, was now going back to South Vietnam as a “special envoy.” The command of the VNA was to be handed over immediately to General Nguyen Van Vy, an officer known to be close to Hinh. To many in Saigon, it seemed as if Bao Dai had authorized Hinh and Vy to carry out a coup against Diem.⁵

Diem had no intention of obeying Bao Dai’s summons or permitting Hinh to return. Still, he was anxious to avoid an immediate rupture with Bao Dai. Because Bao Dai remained the SVN chief of state, many Vietnamese would view any attempt to overthrow him by fiat as an act of usurpation. Given Diem’s avowed respect for Vietnamese traditions of sovereignty, he felt obliged to observe the niceties of legitimate succession—something Ho Chi Minh had taken care to do in 1945, when he had secured

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The Saigon meeting of anti-Bao Dai nationalists at which the Revolutionary Committee was formed, April 29, 1955. A smashed portrait of the former monarch lies on the floor. (Time & Life Pictures/Getty Images)

Bao Dai's abdication prior to establishing the DRV. But unless Diem could figure out a way to do this, he faced the likelihood that Bao Dai would force him out of office first.

Thanks to a rather remarkable stroke of good fortune, Diem survived Bao Dai's attempts to oust him. On the night of April 30, General Vy of the VNA arrived at Independence Palace to meet with Diem. He had come to inform Diem that he was taking command of the army, as Bao Dai had ordered. But in a palace hallway, Vy ran into a delegation of Revolutionary Committee members—including General Phuong and General Thé—who had also come to see Diem. Among the revolutionaries was Nhi Lang, an aide to General Thé who had been elected head of the Committee the day before. After getting nods of approval from Thé and the rest of his party, Nhi Lang dramatically drew a pistol out of his briefcase, pointed it at Vy, and announced that he would shoot the general if he did not submit to arrest. Vy raised his hands in surrender and was summarily stripped of his insignia. Some of the revolutionaries wanted to

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execute Vy on the spot. But when VNA soldiers outside the palace discovered what was going on, they threatened to storm the building if the general was not freed immediately. Diem, recognizing the volatility of the situation, quickly assumed the role of mediator. After several tense hours, he managed to negotiate a peaceful end to the standoff.⁶

Diem's intervention on Vy's behalf, combined with the success of the army's offensive against the Binh Xuyen, cemented his high standing in the eyes of many VNA officers. By checking the radical designs of the Revolutionary Committee, Diem seemed to signal that he was willing and able to protect the army's prestige. The political implications of Diem's actions became apparent the next morning, when Vy's bid to take control of the government collapsed. After proclaiming himself the only legal authority in Vietnam, Vy ordered elements of Bao Dai's Imperial Guard to occupy key facilities in Saigon. But VNA commanders refused to comply. Humiliated, Vy fled the city and departed shortly afterward into foreign exile.⁷

Diem had dodged yet another attempt to oust him, but his grip on power was still uncertain. He needed to remove Bao Dai while preserving at least a veneer of legality. At the same time, he was anxious to curb the influence of Trinh Minh Thé and the other leaders of the Revolutionary Committee. In the days after Vy's failed coup, Diem briefly considered the Committee's demand to simply remove Bao Dai from office by proclamation.⁸ But he decided instead on another approach: an elaborate campaign of political action and propaganda that would burnish his reputation at the expense of Bao Dai and other rivals. This campaign, which would last from mid-1955 until at least the middle of 1956, quickly evolved into a larger program of political and social transformation that the palace referred to as the "National Revolution" (*Cach Mang Quoc Gia*). By outlining his own brand of revolution, Diem aimed to seize the political initiative and marginalize Bao Dai while neutralizing the influence of the Revolutionary Committee. He also sought to pave the way for the transformation of the SVN into a republic in which he would hold predominant power. Finally, he and his supporters began to sketch out a distinctive brand of official Vietnamese nationalism—one that would be strongly associated with anticommunism.

The term "National Revolution" had been invoked by Diem several times during his first year in office. His use of the phrase reflected the influence of Ngo Dinh Nhu, who began using it around the time of Diem's return from exile in mid-1954.⁹ In part, Nhu seems to have embraced

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“National Revolution” simply as a way to associate the regime with the idea of revolution (*cach mang*), a concept that had been a fixture of Vietnamese political discourse since the 1920s. But the Ngos also expected the idea of National Revolution to appeal to certain groups of Vietnamese in particular. During the early 1940s, Indochina Governor-General Jean Decoux had followed the lead of Marshall Pétain’s metropolitan Vichy regime and announced a *révolution nationale* in Indochina. The Ngo brothers were no Vichy sympathizers; Diem, as we have seen, sided with the Japanese against the Decoux regime, and his republicanism seemed incompatible with Pétain’s antirepublican brand of reaction. Nevertheless, Diem and Nhu were aware that some conservative Vietnamese had fond memories of Decoux and the period of his rule. In particular, many SVN civil servants and intellectuals recalled that the Vichy era marked the first time the upper levels of the colonial bureaucracy had been opened to Vietnamese. These conservatives also remembered Decoux as the first governor-general to use the term “Vietnam” in official discourse. Although Decoux had made these concessions to Vietnamese nationalist sentiment in order to shore up French imperial authority, Vietnamese conservatives had appropriated his gestures for their own purposes.¹⁰ Nhu could therefore expect that his call for a “National Revolution” implemented by “virtuous, competent and trustworthy” men would resonate with these groups.¹¹

In October 1954, Nhu presided over the founding of a new organization known as the National Revolutionary Movement (NRM; *Phong Trao Cach Mang Quoc Gia*). The NRM was, in fact, a political party that would eventually acquire a mass membership and become a key tool of propaganda, popular mobilization, and indoctrination. But the NRM had little impact on events in South Vietnam prior to the Battle of Saigon. Not until the turbulent summer and fall of 1955 did NRM emerge as an important vehicle for the palace’s agenda.¹²

The NRM’s first high-profile undertaking was a special congress convened at Independence Palace on May 4, 1955. This congress—which the government grandiosely described as an “Estates General,” in deliberate imitation of French revolutionary history—was attended by several hundred delegates representing Vietnam’s northern, central, and southern regions. The Ngos hoped to use the event to build support for the regime and to lay the groundwork for Bao Dai’s eventual removal. But many of the delegates agreed with the Revolutionary Committee that the former monarch should be ousted immediately. After two days of raucous debate

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and a walkout by a contingent of southern delegates, the government narrowly secured approval of a compromise proposal: Bao Dai would remain in office, and Diem's mandate would be extended on an interim basis for six months, at which point the government would hold elections for a national assembly. For the Ngo brothers, this outcome was far from ideal; nevertheless, it provided them with some badly needed political breathing room. On May 10, Diem announced that he had formed a new cabinet. In contrast to the reshuffle he had carried out during the previous fall, this shake-up left most of the key ministries in the hands of technocrats and figures known to be loyal to Diem. Members of the Revolutionary Committee were notably absent from the new lineup.¹³

A few days before Diem unveiled his new cabinet, the political fortunes of the Revolutionary Committee had been dealt a severe blow. Trinh Minh Thé, in his best swashbuckling fashion, had volunteered to lead his Lien Minh fighters on a flanking maneuver against the Binh Xuyen forces still ensconced in Saigon's southern outskirts. On May 3, while directing an attack at a bridge over a canal, Thé was killed by a bullet that struck him in the back of the head. Reports that the fatal shot had been fired by a sniper soon gave rise to rumors that Thé had been assassinated. Many in Saigon suspected that his longtime adversaries in French military intelligence had taken revenge on him. Others speculated that Nhu had arranged the killing to eliminate a powerful potential rival. Few seemed willing to accept the most obvious explanation: that Thé had been felled by one of the Binh Xuyen gunmen with whom his troops were engaged. Whatever its cause, Thé's demise robbed the Revolutionary Committee of its most charismatic leader. It also proved highly advantageous for the Ngo brothers, who eulogized Thé as a hero and valued ally, even as they sought to contain the influence of the other members of the committee.¹⁴

Following the dramatic events of late April and early May, the Diem regime took several steps designed to invest the National Revolution with greater political momentum. In July 1955, the NRM began publication of *Cach Mang Quoc Gia*, a daily newspaper that quickly became the palace's primary Vietnamese-language mouthpiece. An editorial in the paper's inaugural issue celebrated the recent "concrete victories" against "feudal" and "colonial" elements, but also warned that the "democracy of the Vietnamese nation is still in its embryonic period" and that the "evil lackeys" of the communists were continuing to scheme against the government.¹⁵

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Ominous warnings about the “three enemies” of the Vietnamese nation—feudalism, colonialism, and communism—quickly became a major staple of the Diem regime’s propaganda. As recent scholarship has demonstrated, the construction of this trio of enemies served several important ideological objectives. For example, the government could invoke the feudalism-colonialism-communism combination when alleging that the Vietnamese communists were secretly collaborating with French efforts to establish a form of neoimperial rule in Vietnam. The “three enemies” could also be deployed to challenge the nationalist credentials of Diem’s noncommunist rivals and critics, including Bao Dai and the Revolutionary Committee. Finally, the identification of communism as one of the main threats to the Vietnamese nation presaged the regime’s plans to gradually step up its emphasis on anticommunism. The construction of this triad of enemies was thus a key step in the elaboration of a new form of official Vietnamese nationalism—one that the Diem regime would use to frame its policies and political agenda for years to come.¹⁶

In addition to categorizing and denouncing its enemies, the regime sought to associate its opponents with certain immoral behavior. In the months after the Battle of Saigon, the government and the NRM organized a series of morality campaigns aimed at the general population. One initiative targeted what officials called “the four social evils”: alcohol, prostitution, opium, and gambling. In part, this campaign aimed to associate the Diem regime with preexisting discourses about social reform. But it was also designed to promote Diem’s reputation for personal incorruptibility. In addition, it reminded the public of Diem’s triumph over the Binh Xuyen—who, not coincidentally, had trafficked in all four “evils.” To make these connections, the campaign organized public rallies with huge bonfires in which opium pipes, pornographic books, and playing cards were burned.¹⁷

By far the most important aspect of the National Revolution inaugurated in mid-1955 was a mass mobilization drive known as the “Denounce Communists” (To Cong) campaign. This NRM-sponsored campaign later evolved into the centerpiece of the Diem regime’s efforts to uncover and destroy the clandestine networks of Communist Party agents that were operating in the South Vietnamese countryside. But in its early stages, the denunciation campaign deployed anticommunist rhetoric mainly to whip up nationalist fervor and intimidate the government’s opponents. These tactics were in evidence during the campaign’s official kickoff in Saigon on July 20. That date was selected because it marked the first anniversary of

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the signing of the Geneva Accords—a event the regime commemorated as “national humiliation day.” The campaign thus aimed to highlight Diem’s opposition to the Geneva agreement, as well as the communists’ supposedly treasonous collaboration with French colonialism. After a boisterous NRM rally in the plaza in front of City Hall, a large mob marched on the nearby Majestic and Gallieni hotels. It proceeded to sack both buildings, ostensibly because they housed some of the Viet Minh representatives on the International Control Commission, the body charged with oversight of the Geneva Agreements. Although the palace denied inciting the rioters—*Cach Mang Quoc Gia* went so far as to blame communist agents for the violence—witnesses were sure the government was responsible. South Vietnamese government documents confirm that senior officials had ordered event organizers to target the hotels.¹⁸

Both the NRM and the Denounce Communists campaign were overseen by Tran Chanh Thanh, the RVN minister of information. After briefly joining the Viet Minh and serving as an official in the DRV government during the late 1940s, Thanh had abandoned the revolution and moved to Saigon, where he met Nhu. The two men began collaborating on political activities, and in 1953 Thanh became one of the founding members of the Can Lao Party.¹⁹ After taking over as NRM chairman in mid-1955, Thanh built the movement into a mass organization that stretched across South Vietnam, with chapters at the district and village level in rural areas. By the late 1950s, the NRM claimed to have 1.5 million members. In addition to implementing the Denounce Communists campaign, the NRM organized the progovernment rallies, parades, and indoctrination sessions that became a regular—and widely resented—part of life in both urban and rural areas of South Vietnam.²⁰ By 1956, thanks to his control over the NRM and his position within the Can Lao Party, Thanh was probably the most powerful man in South Vietnam outside of the Ngo family. Visitors to the provinces during this period reported that Thanh’s official portrait was displayed almost as prominently as Diem’s in government and NRM offices.²¹

While organizing the Denounce Communists campaign and other mass mobilization activities, Thanh and the NRM received advice and funding from the CIA. In the summer of 1955, CIA officials concluded that the NRM offered a means to close “the present enormous gap between the Government and the people.” The Agency’s Saigon station began supplying the NRM with a monthly subsidy. But some of the station’s officers

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quickly developed misgivings about Thanh, whom they accused of having “Leninist tendencies.” They also became leery of what Paul Harwood described as the “totalitarian spirit” of the Denounce Communism campaign. Despite this ambivalence, the station continued to supply the NRM with funds for various popular mobilization activities over the next several years, in hopes of encouraging the emergence of “political leaders with more democratic ideas.”²²

Although the Denounce Communists campaign was a mass mobilization initiative, parts of it were aimed at specific groups within South Vietnam. One group that received particular attention from the palace was civil servants, a group the Ngo brothers viewed with deep ambivalence. As former civil servants themselves, Diem and Nhu understood that the fate of their reform agenda would depend in part on the cooperation of SVN officials and administrators. At the same time, however, the Ngos were convinced that many, if not most, of the bureaucrats currently working for the SVN lacked the moral qualities essential for good governance. They saw great differences between the officials who had served in the pre-1945 imperial bureaucracy—as Diem and Nhu had—and those who served in the colonial and SVN administrations during the 1945–1954 period. In the earlier era, the Ngos believed, Vietnamese civil servants had fought valiantly to uphold the country’s sovereignty and traditions of statecraft, despite French encroachments. After 1945, in contrast, the Vietnamese officials who continued to work for the French lost their moral bearings and became mere handmaidens of colonialism.²³ According to Diem, the latter group could not participate in the reform of the government until they had embraced “progressive, nationalist, and democratic concepts.” The premier specifically exhorted SVN civil servants to rectify the “bad points” of their behavior.²⁴

The regime’s efforts to bring civil servants into line included the establishment of the National Revolutionary Civil Servants League, an NRM-affiliated organization. Launched in July 1955, the League promised to support the government “without reservation” in its fight against feudalism, colonialism, and communism. Although the League was supposedly open only to those civil servants who displayed a “nationalist spirit,” membership quickly became *de rigueur* for most government employees. Those who joined discovered that they had to attend “study groups” and other indoctrination sessions; the League also routinely mobilized its members to attend government-sponsored rallies and “spontaneous” demonstrations.

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Participation in such events was widely resented by civil servants, many of whom complained about the “crudeness” of the propaganda they were obliged to mouth. But they had little choice if they wanted to keep their jobs.²⁵ Indeed, Diem made it clear that the onus was on civil servants to demonstrate their loyalty to the regime. In June 1955, Diem announced that any SVN civil servant previously affiliated with any “opposition” group—whether Viet Minh or noncommunist—would have to be investigated and then sign an oath of loyalty to the government.²⁶

The investigations of civil servants were carried out by the Service des Études Politiques et Sociales, an agency created by Diem in 1955.²⁷ Known simply as SEPES (“say-pay”), this innocuously named office would eventually become one of the most feared components of the Diem government’s security apparatus. The Service was under the direction of Dr. Tran Kim Tuyen, a Catholic from North Vietnam who met Nhu in 1946. Although he was a diminutive man who weighed less than a hundred pounds, Dr. Tuyen was not a figure to be taken lightly. Under his direction, SEPES evolved into an elaborate organization responsible for a broad range of secret missions. While its activities included counterintelligence operations against communist operatives inside South Vietnam and espionage operations in Laos, the largest share of SEPES’s resources was devoted to surveillance of RVN government employees, military personnel, and noncommunist opposition groups and leaders. SEPES informants and operatives were seeded throughout the South Vietnamese state bureaucracy. Tuyen was said to devote “a good deal of attention” to RVN police agencies, including the security police. He also oversaw the production of several newspapers, including *Cach Mang Quoc Gia*. In addition, SEPES was deeply involved in the Can Lao Party; its responsibilities included the vetting of new members, indoctrination programs for the rank and file, and fund-raising operations.²⁸

As Tuyen’s portfolio of covert activities expanded, his influence within the government increased accordingly. He quickly emerged as a rival to Tran Chanh Thanh, whom he detested. In 1957, Tuyen helped engineer Thanh’s ouster as NRM chair, apparently with Nhu’s assistance. He also sought to sideline other potential rivals within the Can Lao Party. One such rival was Huynh Van Lang, a young Catholic from the Mekong Delta whom Nhu had placed in charge of the party’s finances. Although Lang had established a network of Can Lao-controlled business ventures that supplied the party with a steady stream of revenue, Tuyen convinced

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Nhu in 1958 to curtail Lang's power within the party. By the late 1950s, most South Vietnamese considered Tuyen to be Nhu's most powerful and dangerous lieutenant. Although Tuyen himself would eventually fall out of favor with the palace, no other Ngo family loyalist contributed more to the regime's growing capabilities in surveillance, repression, and control of the RVN state and military.²⁹

By September 1955, both the National Revolution and the Denounce Communists campaign appeared to be picking up steam. In the months since Diem's victory in the Battle of Saigon, the authority and prestige of his government had increased greatly, and his prospects appeared better than at any time since he had taken power. Despite these gains, however, Diem's future—and the future of South Vietnam—remained murky. He still faced considerable resistance to his rule in many quarters of South Vietnamese society, the disgruntled Bao Dai continued to serve as SVN chief of state, and the consequences of Saigon's attempts to opt out of the 1956 reunification elections were as yet unclear. During the next several months, Diem moved to address all these problems by undertaking a series of state-building initiatives. Within the space of a year, these initiatives transformed the political landscape in South Vietnam and greatly advanced his efforts to consolidate his authority. But they also raised new doubts in some Vietnamese and American minds about the overall trajectory of his policies and especially about the depth of his commitment to democracy.

Democracy, Elections, and the Birth of the RVN

During his foreign exile in the early 1950s, Diem wrote an essay in which he considered what kind of government postcolonial Vietnam should have. From his opening lines, he made it clear that he wanted Vietnam to become a democratic country. Yet he was at pains to show that his understanding of democracy was not derived from European or American political theories or practices. Rather, he proposed to seek democracy in Vietnam's precolonial past, arguing that "our institutions, customs and the principles underlying them are democratic facts." He focused on the Nguyen dynasty of the early nineteenth century, arguing that its practices revealed certain "moral norms" that had governed the behavior not only of kings and ministers but also of ordinary people. Among these norms was the idea that "the state is founded on the people"—a notion derived, Diem asserted, from the well-known Confucian concept of the mandate of Heaven. According to Diem, the people could and often

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did withdraw their support from monarchs deemed “unworthy” of the mandate. With the proper “renovation,” he argued, these old concepts could serve as a foundation for democracy in Vietnam in the twentieth century.³⁰

Few historians have taken Diem’s professions of interest in democracy seriously. The elections carried out under his rule mostly failed to conform to the standards of freedom and fairness that Americans and Europeans associated with democratic rule. Moreover, his style of governance became increasingly dictatorial over time. As a result, scholars have usually dismissed Diem’s attempts to represent himself as a democratic reformer, as well as his claims about the existence of an indigenous Vietnamese democratic tradition. For example, most of the authors who have cited the aforementioned essay have ignored its main point about democracy and instead portrayed it as evidence that Diem was a reactionary who persisted in believing in the divine right of kings.³¹

In fact, Diem’s views on democracy were a key part of his thinking about politics and governance in general. Like many other aspects of his worldview, his understanding of democracy was colored by his dual identity as a Confucian and a Vietnamese Catholic. For example, he found democratic insights in the Confucian social commentaries of Phan Boi Chau, the retired revolutionary he befriended in Hue during the 1930s. Diem also associated democracy with communitarianism, and especially with the doctrine of personalism that he and Nhu had discovered in the works of European Catholic philosophers. By combining these disparate strands of social philosophy, Diem sought to define democracy as a social ethos based on a certain sense of moral duty. This definition was a far cry from the standard meaning of democracy favored by postwar American theorists, most of whom thought of democracy as a form of political pluralism. As Diem’s U.S. critics pointed out, his professed commitment to “democracy” did not inhibit him from adopting authoritarian policies and practices. Nevertheless, the fact that his notions about democracy were not very democratic in practice does not mean that those notions were nothing more than the cynical rantings of a reactionary mandarin.

Diem’s attempts to draw connections between democracy and Confucianism were rooted in his conviction that Confucian principles were highly relevant to contemporary problems of politics, governance, and social change in Vietnam. “We are not going back to a sterile copy of the mandarin past,” he declared, “but we are going to adapt the best of our

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heritage to the modern situation.”³² In this regard, Diem’s views echoed those of Phan Boi Chau, whose writings had challenged the popular perception of Confucianism as dogmatic and old-fashioned. Phan referred to Confucian thought as “Confucian learning” (Khong Hoc), a term that was intended to convey the basic applicability of Confucian principles in a broad variety of social and cultural contexts.³³ Diem frequently used the same language in his speeches and conversation, and he maintained that Confucianism could aid “the revitalization of the nation.”³⁴

In addition to endorsing Phan’s ideas about the modern relevance of Confucian thought, Diem also embraced his understanding of Confucianism as a philosophy of social relations. Unlike some Vietnamese conservatives, Phan did not treat Confucian precepts simply as a code of ethics. Instead, he portrayed them as social objectives that could be realized via the interactions among members of a community. For Phan, this essentially communal understanding of Confucianism extended even to the classical concept of “self-improvement” (*tu nhan*). This concept had traditionally been defined by reference to introspection and the solitary meditative activities of Confucian literati. But Phan portrayed self-improvement as something that could be achieved only via collaboration with the fellow members of the community, society, or nation in which an individual lived.³⁵ This representation of self-improvement as an inherently social process resonated strongly with Diem. Despite his preference for solitude in his personal life, Diem was intensely interested in the relationship between individuals and their communities. He was particularly interested in the tension between an individual’s desire for personal fulfillment and a community’s need to foster an ethos of mutual responsibility among its members. In Phan’s Confucian commentaries, Diem found what he considered a useful way of thinking about this tension.

For Diem, Phan’s understanding of Confucianism as a social philosophy was logically congruent with the doctrine of personalism, which served as the government’s official ideology. As we have seen, the Ngo brothers first encountered personalism in the writings of the Catholic philosopher Emmanuel Mounier. Following Mounier, Diem and Nhu thought of personalism as a form of communitarianism that aimed to split the ideological differences between liberal individualism and Marxist collectivism. Yet the Ngos also tried to present personalism as a doctrine with strong Confucian overtones. This was most clearly apparent in their discussions of the term *nhan vi*, the Sino-Vietnamese term they used as the equivalent of Mounier’s

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concept of *la personne*. Diem, who was an accomplished student of classical Chinese, was well versed in the etymology of *nhân vi*, and he liked to parse the meaning of its component parts. For example, he observed that *nhân* could correspond either to the Chinese ideograph for “humanity” or to the character that means “human being.” In this abstract way, Diem tried to connect his reading of Confucian principles with Mounier’s objective of seeking a “middle way.”³⁶

If *nhân vi* is understood as Diem’s attempt to combine his communitarian sensibilities with his view of Confucianism as a social philosophy, it becomes possible to read his declarations about democracy as something more than just a rhetorical smoke screen. Democracy, Diem insisted, ought not to be thought of as something that could be instituted “by drafting and promulgating documents and regulations.” Instead of linking democratic reform to civil liberties, he depicted it as a process of collective social improvement. “Democracy is primarily a state of mind, a way of living that respects the human person [*nhân vi*], both with regard to ourselves and with regard to others,” he stated in 1955. “More than any other form of government, democracy demands that we all display wisdom and virtue in our dealings with each other.”³⁷

As these comments suggested, Diem viewed democracy as dependent less on the protection of political *rights* than on the assertion of moral *duties*. He readily acknowledged that the establishment of democracy in South Vietnam depended on certain institutional reforms, such as the election of a national assembly and the drafting of a new constitution. Nevertheless, he insisted that these political reforms would be insufficient by themselves. Above all, the realization of democracy in South Vietnam depended on the willingness of Vietnamese to embrace a certain kind of moral ethos. “We must re-forge a spirit of sacrifice and mental discipline, a spirit of responsibility and decency in social relations in order to foster respect for one’s fellow man and respect for oneself,” he declared in 1956. “Every person must accept his duties with respect to everyone else, and must carry out those duties.”³⁸

The moralizing quality of Diem’s thinking about democracy was a key feature of his approach to political and administrative reform. Beginning in 1955, he embarked on a sweeping transformation of the South Vietnamese state. At first glance, the reforms Diem imposed appeared broadly consistent with American thinking about democracy and government administration. But the surface similarities concealed deeper differences between the

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allies. Perhaps the most salient of these differences had to do with Diem's conviction that all political and administrative activities—including those that pertained to individual rights—ought to be subordinate to the maintenance of moral order. "Moral development remains the end of all rational activity," Diem declared. "Politics is only a means."³⁹ For Diem, political rights and good government were important and useful—but only insofar as they promoted the ethos of moral and social responsibility he hoped to foster. As Diem's political reform program unfolded, many of his American allies and South Vietnamese compatriots would discover that his notions about democracy were less and less to their liking.

Diem's first sustained attempt to put his ideas about democracy into practice came during the summer and fall of 1955, as he once again confronted the tricky question of what to do about Bao Dai. According to the compromise worked out at the NRM's "Estates General" conference in May, Bao Dai was supposed to remain as SVN head of state until after elections for a national assembly. But in late June, Diem's cabinet began to consider an alternative plan in which Bao Dai's fate would be determined by a popular referendum. Voters would either allow him to continue as SVN chief of state or authorize Diem to assume that status.⁴⁰

Although some would portray the referendum as an American idea—Lansdale later claimed credit for it⁴¹—contemporary documents show that Washington remonstrated strongly against the proposal. U.S. officials argued that Diem's refusal to take part in the Geneva-mandated 1956 elections made it imperative that he install a democratically elected national assembly as soon as possible, lest he be accused of dictatorial designs. But Diem believed that a referendum would both demonstrate his democratic credentials and allow him to claim that he had succeeded Bao Dai as the legitimate ruler of South Vietnam. The contest would also provide an opportunity for Diem to contrast himself with a widely unpopular leader who was deeply tainted by his association with French colonialism. The idea of a referendum was publicly floated by progovernment newspapers in mid-September. Shortly afterward, the palace announced that the plebiscite would take place on October 23.⁴²

In the weeks leading up to the referendum, the regime devoted itself to destroying what remained of Bao Dai's reputation. The NRM and the government unleashed a wave of propaganda in which Bao Dai was excoriated in print, on the radio, and via mobile loudspeaker trucks. Enor-

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mous effigies portraying him as treasonous and corrupt were displayed at major intersections in Saigon and other cities. The palace also organized large pro-Diem rallies attended by members of the Civil Servants League and other government-controlled groups. Throughout the campaign, regime propagandists sounded the same themes established during the preceding months. The notion of the “three enemies” was invoked to depict Bao Dai as a craven puppet who had a long record of selling his loyalties to feudalists, colonialists, and communists. He was also said to possess an insatiable appetite for the “four social evils.”⁴³

On referendum day, the voting was as one-sided as the propaganda campaign that preceded it. Voters received a ballot with photographs of Diem and Bao Dai printed side by side; they were required to tear the slip in half and deposit the image of their preferred candidate in a box, while discarding the other image on the ground. This forced them to indicate their choice to all who were present, including government monitors. Predictably, the floors of most stations were soon covered with copies of the dour picture of Bao Dai that the government had selected for the occasion. Not content to leave anything to chance, regime officials took additional steps to slant the results in Diem’s favor. In the former imperial capital of Hue—where members of the royal household comprised one of the last bastions of genuine support for Bao Dai—police arrested hundreds of suspected Bao Dai supporters in the days prior to the referendum. American and other foreign observers were unable to document any cases of ballot box stuffing, but the NRM’s participation in the tabulation process meant that the results could be easily manipulated behind the scenes. The final tally gave Diem a whopping 98 percent of the 5.8 million votes cast. Even some of the regime’s supporters could not help but note the similarities between the lopsided margin and the results of elections held in communist countries.⁴⁴

Many historians have treated the blatantly unfair nature of the October 1955 referendum as evidence of Diem’s tradition-minded “mandarin mentality” and his lack of interest in democracy.⁴⁵ Others argue that the regime’s determination to secure an overwhelming victory reflected Diem’s unsuccessful efforts to reconcile his “traditional” Confucian outlook with “Western” democratic practices.⁴⁶ But neither of these interpretations is consistent with Diem’s actual reasons for holding the referendum or with the main thrust of his thinking about democracy. As the regime’s propagandists correctly pointed out, by October 1955 Bao Dai no longer had any real political influence in South Vietnam. This was made obvious four days before the

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referendum, when he made the feeble gesture of announcing that he was removing Diem from office. From the regime's perspective, therefore, the referendum was a transfer of legal authority, not a shift of political power.⁴⁷ Since Diem had long maintained that such authority could be conferred only according to the "people's will," he insisted that the decision to hold a referendum reflected his commitment to democratic principles.

Another key aspect of Diem's thinking is revealed by the final vote tally. For any observer who understood democracy as a form of political pluralism—that is, as a contest between representatives of distinct parties, groups, or coalitions—the ludicrously skewed margin of victory was sufficient proof that the contest had not been a genuinely democratic one. But Diem understood democracy as a "state of mind" in which voters would naturally select the morally superior leader. Since Diem believed his moral standing to be vastly higher than Bao Dai's, he considered his outsized margin of victory eminently plausible, his regime's manipulation of the results notwithstanding. His conviction in the validity of the results was reflected in his decision to display the vote count on huge signs mounted on the outside of Saigon's City Hall. Many Americans and more than a few Vietnamese understandably viewed this decision as evidence that Diem had sacrificed democratic principle to political expedience. But Diem was adamant that the outcome was entirely consistent with his view of democracy as the citizenry's embrace of a common moral ethos.

Three days after the referendum, on October 26, Diem claimed victory over Bao Dai and announced the advent of a "new era" in Vietnam's national history. He also proclaimed that the State of Vietnam had become a new state known as the Republic of Vietnam (Viet Nam Cong Hoa). In a "provisional constitution" issued the same day, Diem indicated that he planned to appoint a commission charged with drafting a permanent constitution for the new state. This draft charter was to be submitted to a national assembly that would be elected before the end of the year. In the meantime, the only practical difference between the SVN and the RVN had to do with the post of chief of state. With Bao Dai now deposed, Diem announced, that office would henceforth be held by the same person serving as the head of the government. Instead of the old title of prime minister, the chief executive was to be known as the president of the RVN.⁴⁸ The transformation of the South Vietnamese state into a republic headed by a president came as something of a surprise, since it had not



The lopsided results of the October 1955 Diem versus Bao Dai referendum, displayed at Saigon's City Hall a few days after the vote. (Gamma-Keystone via Getty Images)

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been explicitly authorized by the language of the referendum. But for Diem, this step was a logical and necessary step in the broader state-building agenda he was pursuing. By assuming the RVN presidency at the very outset of the republic's existence, Diem signaled that the new state would be dominated by its chief executive. This feature of the RVN system would persist throughout Diem's tenure in power and afterward, down to the last days of the republic in 1975.

Having decreed the RVN into existence, Diem turned to his next major state-building exercise: the election of a national assembly. For Diem, the organization of elections offered another opportunity for him to represent himself as a champion of democracy; he hoped especially to undermine the critics who had blasted the referendum as an antidemocratic farce. At the same time, he hoped to burnish the legitimacy of the newly created RVN state by casting it as a remedy to the lack of democracy that had plagued the SVN. At the time of the SVN's founding in 1949, Bao Dai had promised to establish a national assembly. However, except for local balloting for "municipal councils" in SVN-controlled areas during 1953, little tangible progress had been made toward these goals during the intervening years. The DRV, in contrast, had successfully held elections to create a national assembly in 1946, less than a year after its founding.⁴⁹ By delivering on the long-deferred promise to create an anticommunist national legislature, Diem could further underscore the differences between himself and Bao Dai. He also hoped to bolster his claim that the RVN could successfully challenge and defeat the DRV in the ongoing struggle for national legitimacy in Vietnam.

The elections for the first RVN National Assembly took place across South Vietnam on March 4, 1956. In some respects, these elections were more free and fair than the referendum of the previous fall. In contrast to the period preceding the referendum, when no campaigning for Bao Dai had been allowed, many of the government-backed candidates running for national assembly seats found themselves in fiercely contested races against independents and members of opposition groups. Some of the campaigns in Saigon featured lively debates conducted via posters, pamphlets, and newspaper editorials. Nevertheless, the regime's willingness to permit a measure of electoral competition did not mean that it had suddenly decided to let the political chips fall where they may. According to rules imposed by the palace, the government could block the candidacy of anyone deemed to have links to the Viet Minh or other "rebel" groups.

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In addition, all campaign materials had to be screened by district-level “electoral committees,” an arrangement that invariably favored the palace’s preferred candidates. In some districts, opposition candidates were forced to withdraw in the face of police intimidation; in others, large numbers of army soldiers appeared at the polls on election day to cast ballots for government-approved candidates.⁵⁰

Not surprisingly, the results of the elections strongly favored the government. Of the 123 seats in the new assembly, 61 were captured by candidates who were openly affiliated with the NRM; 48 additional seats went to members of three other pro-Diem parties. The winners included several members of Diem’s cabinet, along with both Ngo Dinh Nhu and Madame Nhu. Although the handful of opposition figures who managed to win their races would later gain attention and praise from foreign observers for their willingness to criticize government policies during Assembly sessions, the results ensured that the body would be controlled by proregime deputies.⁵¹

One important consequence of the 1956 National Assembly elections was the elimination of the Revolutionary Committee as an effective political force in South Vietnam. A few weeks before the balloting, several key figures associated with the Committee denounced the government’s campaign rules and proclaimed that they and their parties would boycott the elections. The committee’s announcement briefly attracted some attention in South Vietnam and the international media; however, it did not produce any groundswell of opposition to the government’s plans or otherwise derail the elections. Its main effect was to prompt the regime to start harassing some of the Committee’s most vocal members, several of whom soon found themselves facing criminal investigations. Among those targeted was the Cao Dai general Nguyen Thanh Phuong, whose support had boosted Diem’s fortunes during the late stages of the Binh Xuyen crisis. When Saigon police officers announced that they had found illegal weapons at his residence in the city, Phuong concluded it would be better to retire rather than remain in opposition to the regime. Other Revolutionary Committee members decided to go into foreign exile, where they continued to criticize the government. By mid-1956, the Committee had ceased to be a significant force in South Vietnamese politics.⁵²

According to the plan Diem announced after his referendum victory over Bao Dai, the election of the first RVN National Assembly was supposed to take place shortly after the government had promulgated a permanent

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constitution for the new state. However, Diem's effort to keep to this timetable was upset by the commission of lawyers and government officials he selected to draft the new charter. Most observers expected this hand-picked commission to deliver a draft constitution that conformed to the NRM's official platform, which stated that "the authority of the state must be supreme."⁵³ But the commission's document contained several surprisingly liberal provisions, such as an allowance for writs of habeas corpus. Diem responded by suppressing the commission's draft and announcing that the business of constitution-writing would instead be turned over to the National Assembly after it had been seated. During the summer and early fall of 1956, Assembly deputies hammered out a new draft. Because some of the Assembly's work was conducted in open sessions covered by the press, the government insisted that the process was a model of democracy and transparency. But with the Assembly under the firm control of the NRM and other progovernment parties, any opposition complaint could easily be swept aside.⁵⁴

U.S. officials were keenly interested in the new RVN constitution, which they viewed as a golden opportunity for Diem to rebut his critics and make concrete progress on the construction of a democratic political system in South Vietnam. In a bid to steer the drafting process in the desired direction, the U.S. embassy arranged for two constitutional law experts to come to Saigon to advise Diem. Juan "Johnny" Orendain, a Filipino lawyer, arrived in Saigon in early 1956. An acquaintance of Edward Lansdale, Orendain came under the auspices of Freedom Company, an organization Lansdale had set up to bring Filipino military officers and civilian experts to South Vietnam as government consultants. Among other things, Lansdale and Orendain hoped to persuade Diem that the RVN should emulate the U.S. and Filipino constitutions in establishing a clear separation of executive, legislative, and judicial powers. In this way, the Americans believed, Diem's desire for presidential predominance might be moderated. Orendain's advice to Diem was echoed by that of J. A. C. Grant, an American professor of constitutional law who visited Saigon during the summer of 1956. In addition to pushing for an independent legislature and court system, Grant urged Diem to adopt an "eye-catching" bill of rights, including a habeas corpus guarantee.⁵⁵

In the end, Orendain's and Grant's advice had little impact on the actual content of the RVN Constitution. Although Diem dropped some of his most blatant attempts to empower the executive at the expense of other branches—including a clause that would have allowed him to dissolve the

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National Assembly at will—the final version of the charter still came down firmly in favor of executive supremacy. This was made clear by article 3, which appeared to endorse the principle of “a separation of powers between the executive and legislative agencies” but also declared that the two branches “must be brought into harmony.” Any doubt about how this “harmony” would be achieved was removed by the next sentence, which Diem himself had crafted: “The President leads the nation” (*Thong-thong lanh-dao Quoc-dan*). Recognizing that such a bald assertion of presidential prerogative was likely to provoke accusations of dictatorship from international critics, Diem altered the official English translation of this line to read: “The President is vested with the leadership of the Nation.” He wanted to soften the official French translation in a similar way; however, he felt that the standard French rendering of “leadership” (*la direction*) also had undesirable overtones. He therefore decided that the official French translation would read: “Le Président assume le leadership de la nation.”⁵⁶

In Grant’s assessment, article 3 and its presidential leadership clause served to set the tone for the rest of the RVN constitution.⁵⁷ Subsequent articles granted the president the power to issue decrees when the Assembly was not in session; he also gained the ability to proclaim a state of emergency in any part of the country and to suspend laws in those areas at his discretion. Although the charter included numerous guarantees of particular individual liberties, all of these were carefully circumscribed. For example, the text promised that anyone who undermined “the republican form of government, the democratic regime, national freedom, independence and unity” would be “deprived of his rights.” The charter did not include any habeas corpus provision—something the Assembly briefly considered and rejected. After reviewing the text of the final draft of the constitution, a U.S. embassy officer concluded that its “dominant philosophy” was reflected in “its desire to maintain the present eminence of President Diem.”⁵⁸

On October 26, 1956—exactly one year after he had proclaimed the existence of the RVN—Diem formally promulgated South Vietnam’s new constitution. The regime spared no expense for the celebration of what would henceforth be known as the republic’s National Day. In a speech delivered before a large crowd in downtown Saigon, Diem reviewed the events that had transpired since his referendum triumph over Bao Dai and exulted that it had taken “only one year to lay the foundation for democratic institutions.” In contrast to previous speeches, however, he made no mention of the National Revolution. Instead, he expounded on

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the connections between democracy, civic virtue, and what he described as “respect for the human person [*nhân vi*] and the common good.”⁵⁹ In retrospect, Diem’s choice of words—especially his emphasis on *nhân vi*, a term that was quickly becoming ubiquitous in RVN official discourse—was revealing. By October 1956, Diem’s National Revolution appeared to have succeeded beyond all expectations. Having vanquished his rivals, established a new republic, and established the supremacy of his personal authority in South Vietnam, Diem seemed well positioned to embark on the next phase of his nation-building agenda. Over the course of the next year, invocations of the National Revolution would decline as *nhân vi* received new emphasis in the regime’s propaganda. The National Revolution would eventually be replaced by the “personalist revolution” (*nhân vi cach mang*)—the term that the Ngos would use to frame almost all of their subsequent nation-building projects and programs.⁶⁰

For many Americans in South Vietnam, the culmination of the National Revolution in late 1956 was a cause for celebration. The survival of South Vietnam as an anticommunist state—an outcome that had appeared almost impossible eighteen months earlier—now seemed assured. Nevertheless, some U.S. officials continued to harbor private doubts about Diem. The U.S. ambassador, G. Frederick Reinhardt, who had replaced Collins shortly after the Battle of Saigon, noted in late 1956 that the palace was showing “greater assertiveness” in its dealings with the embassy. As a result, he lamented, American influence over the regime and internal South Vietnamese affairs “has been extremely circumscribed.” Reinhardt also deplored “the unfortunate state of affairs” brought about by Diem’s efforts to concentrate power in his own hands. In his view, there was little the United States could do to remedy this, except to encourage Diem to delegate more responsibility to others.⁶¹ Even as Diem neared the peak of his success and power, American misgivings about him had merely been submerged, not laid to rest. As the two allies moved ahead with their plans to collaborate on a new set of nation-building projects and initiatives, these misgivings would return quickly to the surface.

Adventures in State Building

In August 1954, Wesley Fishel wrote a letter to a Michigan State College faculty colleague in which he described his first whirlwind visit to South Vietnam. When he landed in Saigon two weeks earlier, Fishel explained, he had been brought straight to Diem’s palace, where his “dear friend” asked for

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help on reorganizing his newly established government. Fishel immediately set about gathering information about the structure of the SVN bureaucracy. At the same time, he also began preparations to bring a team of political and administrative reform experts to South Vietnam. To hear Fishel tell it, the fate of South Vietnam had been placed in Michigan State's hands:

Believe me, our work will be cut out for us here. . . . The Government is shaky as all hell. . . . Nothing can help it so much as administrative, economic and social reforms (and these I am attempting to effectuate on the Presidential level). But it's a tough haul. . . . [Diem] has just about two months to make good. If he doesn't, the country will go to the Communists by default. If he does, there's just a *chance* it can be saved. And this is the challenge [Michigan State] has been handed!⁶²

Fishel was not alone in his belief that an American-led overhaul of the SVN government apparatus could play a major role in saving South Vietnam from communism. His colleagues at Michigan State had already enthusiastically endorsed the idea of creating what one of them described as "a total program of technical assistance in public administration" that would address "all the problems confronting government" in South Vietnam.⁶³ In the spring of 1955, the first members of the Michigan State University Group (MSUG) arrived in Saigon. Over the next seven years, the MSUG brought more than one hundred academic and professional experts to Vietnam to advise the Diem government on a remarkably diverse assortment of reform projects. These included refugee resettlement, tax and fiscal policy, civil service training, and the reorganization of the RVN police.⁶⁴

The remarkably ambitious agenda of the MSUG was part of a larger U.S.-sponsored undertaking to transform the South Vietnamese state in accordance with American plans and principles. When Fishel returned to Saigon in 1956 to assume the post of chief advisor of the MSUG, he was more confident than ever that the group would achieve its reform goals. In addition to enjoying the support of senior U.S. officials in Washington, the MSUG expected to benefit from Fishel's personal friendship with Diem. During his two-year tenure as chief advisor, Fishel routinely had breakfast with Diem at Independence Palace several times per week—an arrangement that gave Fishel better access to the RVN president than all but a handful of U.S. and Vietnamese officials.⁶⁵

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On the whole, however, the MSUG mostly failed to bring about the sweeping changes that Fishel and other Michigan State officials envisioned. As MSUG members soon discovered, their excellent access to Diem and other senior RVN officials often did not translate into influence over the regime's policies and practices. Time and again, the Michigan Staters would be forced to scale back or abandon the ambitious reform plans they had designed. As a result, the MSUG's once warm relations with Diem had begun to cool even before Fishel's stint as chief advisor ended in 1958, and the scope and scale of the MSUG's responsibilities steadily diminished after that date. In 1959, Michigan State's ties to the government were further strained by a series of critical articles published in the United States by former MSUG members who had become disillusioned with the regime. These tensions would lead eventually to the termination of Michigan State's contract with the RVN government. They would also contribute to Fishel's growing estrangement from Diem. In 1962, around the same time that the last MSUG members were departing from Vietnam, Fishel broke with Diem and began advocating his removal from office.⁶⁶

What explains the rise and demise of the MSUG? To date, most accounts of the group's history have focused on cultural factors. Former MSUG members mostly attributed the group's failings to the instinctual resistance to reform displayed by their RVN counterparts; historians, in contrast, have focused on the biases and prejudices displayed by MSUG members themselves.⁶⁷ Both interpretations capture important dynamics that contributed to the eventual dissolution of the relationship. But by focusing so heavily on the cultural baggage carried by one side or the other, these accounts mostly overlook the actual clashes of agendas and ideas revealed in the conversations, correspondence, and other interactions between MSUG members and RVN leaders and officials. Beneath their disagreements over particular reform plans and proposals lurked more fundamental differences over how to think about politics, governance, and democracy. In the long run, these deeper ideological differences were the most important cause of the MSUG's undoing.

For Fishel and many of his colleagues, South Vietnam's political and administrative reform needs during the 1950s were best understood by reference to certain recent innovations in U.S. social science. One of the most important of these was a new theory of democracy known as pluralism. As elucidated by the political scientist Robert Dahl, pluralism held

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that the essence of liberal democracy lay in the practice of power-sharing among political parties, interest groups, and other organizations. In the United States and other liberal societies, Dahl argued, competitive elections and other democratic practices ensured that power would be diffused and that political leaders would invariably compromise with their rivals—a phenomenon Dahl dubbed “polyarchy.”⁶⁸

As some critics pointed out, pluralism’s emphasis on bargaining among leaders seemed to invest the theory with a decidedly elitist—and therefore undemocratic—quality. But pluralist scholars were adamant that the success of a democratic system would turn on elites’ ability to manage political and social conflict by negotiating among themselves. Fishel was firmly convinced that the democratization of South Vietnam and other countries in the region would depend on the “Asian political elites” who had been a major focus of his research from early in his career. For him, South Vietnam’s most pressing political reform needs lay not in the area of civil liberties—a topic he considered a “side issue” in Vietnam—but in the cultivation of a cohort of liberal-minded leaders committed to pluralist principles.⁶⁹

At first glance, the pluralist approach that Fishel and some other Americans espoused seemed compatible with Diem’s thinking about political and administrative reform. In keeping with contemporary American writings on public administration, the MSUG claimed that its advice was designed to make the South Vietnamese government more responsive to citizens’ needs and more efficient in meeting those needs—two objectives Diem also endorsed.⁷⁰ Members of the MSUG also frequently asserted that it was unrealistic to expect South Vietnam to become a multiparty democracy in the near future; such comments seemed implicitly to approve of the strict controls the regime had imposed during the 1956 RVN National Assembly elections.

This did not mean, however, that the MSUG always saw eye-to-eye with Diem or that he was prepared to embrace pluralism as a model for South Vietnam’s political future. On the contrary, the very idea that good governance outcomes could be derived from bargaining among the leaders of interest groups seemed to run contrary to Diem’s basic understanding of administration as a moral practice. For Diem, democracy and good governance depended on the leadership of wise and incorruptible officials who could be counted on to uphold an ethos of mutual social responsibility. Thus, while Diem and the MSUG often agreed on the specific goals of particular reform

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projects, such agreement often concealed deeper philosophical differences—differences that became increasingly contentious as the 1950s wore on.

Some of the key problems the MSUG encountered in its dealings with the Diem government can be seen in one of its earliest and most ambitious administrative reform projects. In the fall of 1955, Diem asked the MSUG to undertake a major study of the RVN state apparatus at the regional, provincial, and local levels—what the Americans referred to as “field administration.” Everyone agreed that reform in this area was desperately needed. When Diem became SVN premier in 1954, he took over a state in which *de facto* administrative authority lay not in central government ministries and agencies but in the hands of powerful regional governors. Indeed, the Vietnamese officials Bao Dai had appointed to these posts during 1949–1954 wielded many of the same powers that the French *résidents* had enjoyed earlier. Each governor administered his own budget and appointed all of the province chiefs within his region; these chiefs, in turn, firmly controlled the provincial, district, and village administrations within their bailiwicks. Not surprisingly, this system lent itself to cronyism and corruption. The governors were widely viewed as petty tyrants who had been left alone to govern as they pleased.⁷¹

When Diem came to power in 1954, he was determined to break the governors’ administrative stranglehold. Immediately after taking office, he exercised the “full powers” Bao Dai had granted him and replaced all of the governors and other senior regional officials. For good measure, he launched a corruption probe into the affairs of the deposed chief of the central region, who happened to be one of his longtime rivals. According to Diem, these moves were only the first step toward the eventual abolition of the regional administrations. However, the political turmoil of 1954–1955 prevented him from pursuing this goal; in the meantime, the regional chiefs (known as “delegates”) whom Diem had appointed to replace the governors continued to exercise the same sweeping powers as their predecessors.⁷²

The MSUG’s public administration experts had arrived in Vietnam with virtually no prior knowledge of the country, but they were determined that their reform recommendations would not be based solely on abstract principles and theory. As their internal reports and memoranda show, the MSUG’s Field Administration team quickly acquired a reasonably detailed knowledge of Vietnam’s recent administrative history.⁷³ This knowledge was derived largely from interviews with Vietnamese officials working at every level of government. Working in tandem with their police consultant coun-

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terparts, the Field Administration team conducted an astonishing 1,096 interviews all over South Vietnam in the space of just a few months.⁷⁴

The MSUG's reliance on interviews as a source of information about Vietnamese administrative practices was consistent with postwar trends in U.S. administrative science. According to Walter Mode, the Field Administration team leader, the Americans' efforts to meet and listen to their RVN counterparts showed their willingness "to modify our own administrative 'principles' and experiences to conform with the Vietnamese situation and culture." By inviting Vietnamese officials to suggest possible reforms, Mode asserted, MSUG members were building the goodwill and mutual understanding that would ensure RVN official support for the their subsequent recommendations. The interview technique "forced [RVN officials] to be on our side," Mode wrote. "Psychologically, they support the ideas because they are their own ideas and we have merely reported them." Mode believed that this technique had worked particularly well in the MSUG's evaluation of the fate of the regional administrations. After discovering that many Vietnamese officials felt the regional organization to be "unnecessary, cumbersome and costly," the team advised the government to abolish the regions.⁷⁵

Unfortunately for Mode and the MSUG, their avowed flexibility on matters of "principle" turned out to be insufficient to ensure the success of the Field Administration project. Diem's decision to abolish the regions had little to do with the MSUG's advice; since he had announced his intent to do this before the group arrived in Vietnam, the results of their interviews merely reflected RVN officials' determination to follow the palace line. The real test for MSUG members had to do with their ability to persuade the Vietnamese to adopt recommendations on the parts of the RVN administrative system for which policy had not yet been determined.

In addition to their proposed elimination of the regional administrations within South Vietnam, the MSUG also urged Diem to consider what seemed a rather more radical step: the abolition of the provincial governments and the province chiefs who headed them. Instead of administering South Vietnam as a collection of provinces, MSUG members called for the creation of new administrative units called "areas," which would be larger than provinces but smaller than regions. Each of these new entities would be headed by an "area chief" whose authority would be relatively circumscribed in comparison to the power formerly wielded by the regional governors and provincial chiefs. The power of the area chief would be limited by

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the establishment of a popularly elected “area council,” which would have the authority to approve or reject the chief’s major policy initiatives; the council would even be able to remove the chief from office in certain situations. In addition, the area chief would have to cooperate much more closely with the various ministries of the central government to ensure the delivery of government services and benefits to the population of the area. Since the areas would neither enjoy budgetary autonomy nor be required to cover all expenses from local tax receipts, they would be more directly tied to the operations of the central government. As an illustration included in the MSUG’s January 1956 report to Diem suggested, Michigan State was in effect proposing to make the RVN government more like that of the United States, with the area chiefs and councils functioning as the equivalent of U.S. state governors and legislatures.⁷⁶

Diem’s response to the Field Administration team’s report was far from enthusiastic. For several months after the report was submitted in mid-January 1956, the government took no action on the MSUG’s recommendations. In the spring, following the appointment of a new interior minister, Diem created three commissions to examine various aspects of the MSUG proposals; however, in subsequent meetings with team members, several Vietnamese officials expressed opposition to many of the group’s recommendations.⁷⁷ Finally, in August 1956, the Field Administration team met twice with Diem himself. While professing agreement “in principle” with some of the proposals, Diem resisted most of them. He specifically took issue with those of the MSUG’s recommendations that were designed to curb the power of the province chiefs vis-à-vis the national ministries. He also disliked the idea of absorbing the provincial budgets into the RVN national budget—a step the Michigan Staters deemed essential to ensure good communication and coordination between central government agencies and the provinces. The president rejected outright the idea of creating “areas,” claiming that security considerations and a lack of adequately trained personnel made it impossible for him to consider anything more than a limited consolidation of existing provinces into larger entities.⁷⁸

In advising Diem to restrict the powers of RVN province chiefs, the MSUG had unwittingly challenged a key tenet of his approach to public administration. For Diem, the province chief was more than just a cog in the administrative apparatus of the state. Rather, he saw the chief as the personal representative of the president at the provincial level. In his view,

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it was essential that the province chief demonstrate the moral probity Diem considered the *sine qua non* of good governance. The chief would also need to exercise the same kind of sweeping authority in his province that the RVN constitution granted to the president at the national level. Diem's views on these matters were based largely on his service as the chief of various districts and provinces in central Vietnam during the 1920s and early 1930s. He maintained that the administrative successes he had achieved derived from his personal moral commitment to the needs of local people and his willingness to supervise personally all aspects of administration within the territories under his jurisdiction. If RVN province chiefs displayed the same kind of diligence and moral character Diem had demonstrated, there would be no need to impose constraints on their authority either from above or below.⁷⁹

In response to the MSUG's proposal to reduce or eliminate the budgetary autonomy of the provinces, Diem offered another counterargument. In his view, it was essential that provincial and local governments be required to balance their own budgets. This principle, he argued, would compel officials to exercise restraint and to enlist the support and participation of the people whom they were governing. In the precolonial era, he explained, Vietnamese villages had enjoyed "large autonomy" from the king. Local officials were thus forced to rely on "popular contributions" of taxes and labor to carry out public works projects—an arrangement Diem believed had a salutary effect on civic spirit:

[The] population shared the job mostly by furnishing labor, materials (man-made bricks, lumber, stone . . .) because money was scarce. Even people who could afford to pay taxes in cash preferred instead to furnish some workdays and saved their money. All the time the conception of the public service every citizen owes to the community is sound[ly] rooted among the Vietnamese people, and in the old times mandarins were recommended to collect taxes as little as possible while making the population share the common burden to a large extent.⁸⁰

In defending his budgetary policy in this way, Diem revealed a key aspect of his beliefs about the relationship between government and social development. By requiring provinces, districts, and villages to practice fiscal self-sufficiency, Diem believed that the government would promote an ethos

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of mutual responsibility among citizens—what he considered the very essence of democracy. The fact that this requirement might lead local officials to compel citizens to contribute labor or money to public works projects—a practice most Americans would consider both undemocratic and repressive—did not trouble him.

Not all of the MSUG's administrative reform initiatives encountered the same kind of resistance that the Field Administration project did. Although the team's 1956 report was shelved following Diem's criticisms of its recommendations, its members went on to carry out other consulting projects on various other aspects of public administration in South Vietnam. Nevertheless, the demise of the Field Administration project led team leaders to alter their advisory plans. After 1956, the MSUG's public administration division focused more exclusively on the National Institute of Administration, a training facility for civil servants. But as the group's final report in 1962 acknowledged, even their accomplishments at the Institute fell well short of what the MSUG's leaders had initially set out to achieve.⁸¹

The downsizing of the MSUG's goals in public administration reform was part of a broader retreat from the heady ambitions expressed during 1955–1956. By the time Fishel's tenure as chief advisor ended in 1958, the MSUG had significantly scaled back its operations and expectations. Meanwhile, signs of tension had begun to manifest themselves in Fishel's personal relationship with Diem. Although the ties between the two men remained outwardly correct after Fishel's return to Michigan, he was concerned that Diem had failed to build adequate popular support within South Vietnam. Fishel also worried about the growing feelings of restlessness among South Vietnamese elites; in letters to Diem, he offered advice for enlisting the "intelligentsia" in the government's reform initiatives.⁸²

In public, Fishel maintained a stance of strong support for Diem. He even vigorously defended Diem in a 1959 magazine article with the deliberately ironic title "Vietnam's One-Man Democratic Rule." The article acknowledged that Diem employed dictatorial methods but insisted that he used them for democratic ends; Diem was already "thinking and planning in terms of enlarged areas of freedom for individual citizens" in the future.⁸³ Nevertheless, Fishel's public expressions of faith in his friend were increasingly belied by the doubts he voiced in private.⁸⁴ Like many of his MSUG colleagues and other Americans in South Vietnam, Fishel had long been willing to accommodate himself to Diem's authoritarian prac-

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tices. But the democratic aspects of his “democratic one-man rule” were becoming increasingly difficult to abide.

On August 30, 1959, South Vietnam held elections for the second RVN National Assembly. For some anticommunist Vietnamese, the balloting—the first major electoral event in South Vietnam since the assembly elections three years earlier—seemed to offer new democratic possibilities. Nguyen Thai, a journalist and longtime Diem supporter who served as the head of the official RVN news agency, later recalled how the regime’s propaganda had emphasized that “elections in South Vietnam had to be fair and democratic.” As a result, “even skeptics who had refused to participate in the 1956 elections submitted their candidacy in 1959.” But the actual conduct of the elections shattered these hopes. In many districts, candidates who registered to run against government-supported opponents were pressured to withdraw; those who persisted endured harassment and intimidation. On election day, according to one assessment, the government mostly adhered to the letter of the procedures for casting and counting ballots. As in 1956, however, some government officials tried to skew the results by arranging for large groups of soldiers to cast ballots for the regime’s preferred candidates. Even in the face of such tactics, independent candidates made strong showings in several Saigon districts; at least three independents actually won their races. But the palace proceeded to overturn two of those upsets on the basis of trumped-up technicalities. For Nguyen Thai, whose wife narrowly lost to an ally of Madame Nhu, the elections were “an unnecessary mockery of democracy” that alienated many anticommunists who had previously supported the regime.⁸⁵

The fiercely contested elections in Saigon stood in marked contrast to those in the rest of South Vietnam, where most government-backed candidates won by large margins.⁸⁶ But as U.S. embassy officials pointed out, those results did not mean that support for the government was necessarily higher in rural areas. While the government’s electoral practices generated relatively little controversy outside South Vietnam’s urban centers, its development policies in the countryside generated different forms of resistance. In the provinces, as in the cities, the regime’s early triumphs were no guarantee of the long-term success of its nation-building agenda. For both the Diem government and its U.S. allies, questions of land, livelihood, and rural development in South Vietnam would prove even more vexing than their differences over democracy.

5

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By Wolf Ladejinsky's own account, his relationship with Ngo Dinh Diem did not begin in promising fashion. In early 1955, Ladejinsky arrived in Saigon in his capacity as the U.S. embassy's new resident expert on agrarian reform. He quickly concluded that the need for land reform in South Vietnam was even more pressing than he had anticipated. As he discovered during field trips to the Mekong Delta and the central provinces, landholdings in rural areas were concentrated in the hands of a small number of wealthy landlord families. The vast majority of the South Vietnamese population was comprised of poor tenant farmers who suffered from high rents and perpetual indebtedness. For the government to survive, Ladejinsky warned, it would have to act immediately to address the misery and resentments of these poor rural residents. Unfortunately, however, Diem appeared uncomprehending of the magnitude of the problems he faced. Although the premier had recently promulgated a rent reduction law, Ladejinsky found that the measure had not had any real effect. What Diem needed to do was to implement a sweeping program of land reform—something in which he appeared to have little interest. After Ladejinsky presented his recommendations to Diem in a meeting in early June 1955, he informed his superiors that the South Vietnamese leader was refusing to treat land reform as “a truly abiding concern.”¹

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A year later, Ladejinsky was singing a very different tune about Diem. In January 1956, Ladejinsky resigned his position at the U.S. embassy and took a new job as Diem's personal advisor on agrarian reform. That fall, Diem promulgated Ordinance 57, a land reform law modeled in part on earlier U.S.-sponsored programs in Japan and Taiwan. The new decree, Diem proclaimed, was a "land to the tiller" measure that would end the economic and social dominance of large plantation owners and transform the lives of South Vietnam's rural masses for the better. By the early 1960s, the government claimed to have expropriated nearly half a million hectares of farmland from rich landlords and to have wiped out usury in the countryside. In articles and speeches, Ladejinsky hailed Diem's measures as a turning point in Vietnamese history. The reforms had "broken the traditional, exploitative character of Vietnam's landlordism" and transformed the bulk of rural residents into freeholders, making them "measurably better off."²

But Ladejinsky's glowing assessments were far from the last word on the issue. In the late 1960s, a retrospective American study of Diem's land reform program confirmed that the government had acquired vast tracts of land from rich Vietnamese and French landlords. But the study also discovered that less than half of this expropriated land was ever redistributed to farmers. Moreover, the total number of farming households that benefited from the program was only about one hundred thousand, out of a total rural population of several million. Thus, the proportion of tenants who became landowners as a result of Diem's policies was vastly smaller than what Ladejinsky had reported, and never amounted to more than 10 percent of the South Vietnamese rural population. In 1968, approximately 80 percent of the farmland in the Mekong Delta was still cultivated by poor tenants—a percentage virtually unchanged since 1954.³

Why did Diem fail to carry out the kind of thoroughgoing land reform that Ladejinsky advocated? Several authors have argued that Diem was unwilling to challenge the large landowners who had long dominated South Vietnamese rural society. These scholars note that some of Diem's cabinet ministers owned large amounts of land, and that Diem himself insisted on setting the limits on individual landownership much higher than the caps imposed by the programs in Japan and Taiwan. According to this interpretation, Ordinance 57 was merely a cosmetic measure designed to conceal Diem's real objective, which was to defend the rural status quo in South Vietnam.⁴

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This chapter presents an alternative view of Diem's thinking about rural development in the years after 1955. Contrary to the conventional wisdom, Diem was not beholden to South Vietnam's large landowners, most of whom disdained him and his policies.⁵ Nor was he indifferent to the plight of the rural poor, whom he sympathetically described as a "real proletariat."⁶ But instead of undertaking the sweeping land reform policies urged on him by Ladejinsky, Diem believed that the key to rural social transformation lay in a strategy of resettlement—that is, in policies and programs that redistributed *people* rather than *land*. By moving large numbers of rural dwellers to new communities in previously unpopulated areas, Diem aimed not only to provide land to the landless but also to advance his broader economic, security, and ideological objectives. Far from being uninterested in agrarian reform, Diem was convinced that a rural development policy organized around resettlement offered the best opportunity to realize his nation-building objectives in the South Vietnamese countryside.⁷

By examining the history of three key RVN resettlement initiatives—the Cai San resettlement project, the Land Development Program, and the Agroville Program—this chapter charts the evolution of Diem's vision of rural development during 1955–1960. It also examines the problems these initiatives created for Diem in his dealings with the United States. Following a large initial increase in U.S. aid for rural reconstruction during 1956 and 1957, U.S.-RVN cooperation on agrarian reform declined sharply. By 1960, American involvement in rural development in South Vietnam was at a virtual standstill, and many of the agrarian reform experts who worked for the U.S. Operations Mission (USOM) complained bitterly about the regime's intransigence.⁸ Diem, meanwhile, had become exasperated with what he viewed as American ignorance of Vietnam's rural realities. The story of nation building in the South Vietnamese countryside in these years is therefore one in which divergent approaches produced mutual feelings of frustration and even recrimination. Over time, these feelings helped push relations between Washington and Saigon toward a new nadir.

Diem and Rural Development

Diem's description of tenant farmers as a "real proletariat" expressed his genuine desire to end the exploitation and misery that afflicted millions of South Vietnamese rural residents. But Diem's revolutionary ambitions in this area were in conflict with his evolutionary instincts. Although he

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wanted to provide assistance and opportunity to poor farmers he was determined to do so via methods that emphasized moderation and gradualism rather than an immediate leveling of landownership. For Diem, the ultimate goal of rural development was what one scholar aptly describes as the “middle peasantization” of the South Vietnamese countryside—the creation of a society dominated by freeholding farmers of middling wealth and status.⁹ Diem’s pursuit of this goal explains the relatively conservative nature of the 1956 land reform law, and especially its provision that set the cap on individual landholdings at one hundred hectares—a figure much higher than the limit imposed in earlier land reform programs in Japan and Taiwan. Although Diem was determined to break up the sprawling estates and plantations owned by the richest landlords, he was adamant that the property rights of those who owned smaller amounts of land should be protected. By fixing the ceiling for landownership at a relatively high level, he hoped to accommodate those farmers who were already moderately prosperous. The result was a land reform program that benefited the well-to-do much more than the poor, even as it successfully expropriated the super-rich.¹⁰ “You don’t understand,” Diem complained when U.S. officials suggested that the one-hundred-hectare cap on landholdings should be revised downward. “I cannot eliminate my middle class.”¹¹

On its face, Diem’s vision of the “middle peasantization” of South Vietnam appeared broadly compatible with American ideas about rural reconstruction. Indeed, Diem’s notion of a society in which every farming household owned a “basic piece of property” seemed similar to Ladejinsky’s invocation of the Jeffersonian myth of the independent yeoman farmer. However, the means by which Diem proposed to pursue this vision differed from Ladejinsky’s prescriptions in crucial ways. Although Diem was willing to use land reform on a limited basis, he did not believe that land reform alone could address all of the problems that plagued South Vietnamese rural society. He therefore did not intend to emphasize it in the way Ladejinsky hoped he would.¹²

Diem’s doubts about the broader utility of land reform were conditioned by his worries about one rural social problem in particular: overpopulation. In many of South Vietnam’s rural districts, Diem believed, there were too many people crowded onto too little land. The recent arrival of hundreds of thousands of refugees from the north, many of whom were farmers, only threatened to make the situation worse. If South Vietnamese agriculture

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was to grow and prosper, Diem argued, it would be necessary to find some means to alleviate this population pressure by expanding the total amount of land under cultivation. For Diem, this pointed to a strategy of resettlement.

Diem was not the first ruler of Vietnam to worry about overpopulation. During the 1920s, French scholars and colonial officials became convinced that many of Indochina's rural areas were too crowded. In some districts of Tonkin and Annam, they feared, population densities had reached a tipping point at which famine, poverty, and general misery had become both inevitable and reinforcing. In his monumental 1936 study of the Red River delta, the geographer Pierre Gourou estimated that the "surplus" population of the delta might run into the hundreds of thousands.¹³ As recent scholarship has demonstrated, these claims rested on sketchy demographic data and unproven Malthusian assumptions. Nevertheless, many colonial officials were persuaded that the people living in the lowlands of Tonkin and Annam were "doomed to poverty" if nothing was done to reverse current trends.¹⁴

To those who feared overpopulation and its consequences, resettlement seemed an appealing solution. According to colonial officials and experts, Indochina actually had plenty of arable land, much of which was uninhabited. These virgin territories, they argued, could easily absorb the "surplus" population of the overcrowded areas. During the late 1930s and early 1940s, colonial experts drew up plans to move large numbers of farmers from Tonkin and Annam to other parts of Indochina. French engineers proposed to create a series of settlement zones known as *casiers* on the right bank of the Mekong River; these compartmentalized swaths of reclaimed land would be protected from seasonable floods and saltwater penetration by a network of dikes and canals. Other French schemes envisioned the transfer of lowlanders to the Central Highlands to work on newly established rubber plantations. For various reasons, the colonial regime failed to bring these resettlement plans to fruition; most were not carried out or were implemented only in limited fashion.¹⁵ But the appeal of resettlement persisted. In the post-1954 period, the leaders of both North and South Vietnam incorporated resettlement into their rural development strategies.¹⁶

From early in Diem's tenure in power, government-controlled media described the Central Highlands as a region of enormous agricultural and economic potential that could support vast numbers of new residents. RVN propagandists also waxed lyrical about the resettlement of the west-

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ern Mekong Delta, where “huge tracts of land lie idle as far as the eye can see.” All told, regime officials argued, South Vietnam’s territory could “easily support another ten million people.”¹⁷

For Diem, the demographic benefits of resettlement dovetailed with other development objectives, such as economic nationalism. Among its other benefits, resettlement would promote agricultural expansion by increasing the total amount of productive farmland in South Vietnam. Resettlement would also facilitate agricultural diversification. Rubber, jute, hemp, and other crops with industrial applications could be grown in the Central Highlands. Such diversification fit well with Diem’s overall approach to foreign trade, which emphasized economic independence and a strategy of import substitution.¹⁸

In addition to these economic benefits, Diem viewed resettlement as a means to promote his military and security goals. By building a chain of new settlements along South Vietnam’s borders with Laos and Cambodia, he hoped to construct a “human wall” against communist infiltration.¹⁹ He also expected population relocation to facilitate the government’s internal security campaigns. Many new settlements were located in centers of dissidence and rebellion; these included areas previously controlled by Hoa Hao and Cao Dai militias, as well as communist strongholds and base areas. By moving poor farmers into these areas and furnishing them with land, Diem expected to create bastions of progovernment sentiment. In this regard, resettlement was an extension of the divide-and-conquer tactics the Ngos had used during their first year in power.

Last but not least, Diem hoped to use resettlement to promote his ideological objectives. The settlements he envisioned were intended to be more than just military outposts and centers of economic production. In addition to cultivating new lands and crops, settlers were expected to cultivate the social values and practices the regime wanted to implant in rural areas. The communities the settlers built would be neither communist-style collectives nor incubators of rugged individualism; instead, they would occupy the communitarian middle ground between these ideological poles. Especially after 1957, Diem explicitly linked his settlement policies to the values and ethos of the personalist revolution. These linkages showed that the regime’s agrarian reform goals aimed to do more than just make landholding patterns more equitable. For Diem, providing poor and landless peasants with the opportunities to become freeholders was not an end in itself but a step in his broader plan to transform the fabric of South Vietnamese rural society.

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For Diem, one of the key precepts that resettlement was supposed to promote was the notion of “self-sufficiency” (*tu tuc*). As the regime defined it, self-sufficiency was neither an economic concept nor a reference to administrative autonomy. Instead, it referred to a feeling of communal solidarity among settlers and their willingness to join together to promote the collective interests of the new communities they had joined. As a critic of liberal individualism, Diem worried that resettlement ventures would fail if settlers focused too exclusively on their own personal interests; as an opponent of socialism, he also worried about settlers becoming overly dependent on government assistance. The solution to both problems, he concluded, was to encourage the settlers to rely on each other. They needed to learn that they could contribute to the betterment of their new communities when they were mobilized en masse to work together for the common good. The regime’s emphasis on collective action and communal interdependence was reflected in official celebrations of settlements that had reached the “stage of self-sufficiency”: the point when settlers no longer needed any financial or material support from the government.²⁰

Diem’s efforts to promote the “self-sufficiency” of rural settlements were reflected in his rather novel interpretation of the concept of “community development.” As noted above, this concept had gained currency during the early 1950s among U.S., United Nations, and other international aid experts who advocated small-scale, community-focused forms of development. In 1956, the palace began to promote a distinctly Diemist version of community development (*phat trien cong dong*). In its emphasis on communal solidarity and self-sufficiency, this version at first appeared similar to community development practices in India and elsewhere. It soon became clear, however, that the RVN approach was different. Instead of providing opportunities for rural communities to design and implement their own local improvement projects, the regime defined community development as a way “to mobilize the active participation and contribution of the people to the public projects of the government.”²¹ In practice, this meant that settlers and other rural residents were frequently rounded up and compelled to participate in group work activities such as land clearance, canal digging, and the construction of roads and public buildings. In Diem’s view, the strenuous nature of this labor—much of which was to be conducted by hand, without heavy machinery—was actually a positive feature of this approach to community development, since it would teach settlers the value of the “hard work” (*can lao*). In any case, Diem

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expected that farmers would welcome the opportunity to contribute to infrastructure improvements and other activities that would increase the productive capacity and value of the land on which they now lived.²²

For many in South Vietnam, Diem's understanding of community development seemed indistinguishable from older forms of unfree labor, such as the *corvée* obligations imposed by the French. Vu Van Thai, the RVN director-general of foreign aid during the late 1950s, once appealed to Diem to reconsider his approach. Thai explained to Diem that he had recently stopped his jeep next to a ricefield and ordered the farmers working there to dig a trench across the middle of the road. When the task was finished, he ordered the farmers immediately to fill the trench back up. Thai cited the farmers' silent obedience to his absurd commands as evidence of a submissive mentality that the government should try to eradicate. But to Thai's dismay, Diem responded that "of course" the farmers had done as they had been told. "They were right to obey," Diem declared. "You were wrong to ask them!"²³

Like Vu Van Thai, Americans in South Vietnam often found Diem's justifications of his rural development programs both perplexing and exasperating. U.S. officials did not object to Diem's plans to use resettlement to alleviate overpopulation or promote economic expansion. But his views on self-sufficiency and community development often seemed wrong-headed, if not counterproductive. For Ladejinsky and other Americans, a great virtue of land reform had to do with its self-evident appeal: land for the landless. Americans believed that resettlement could be similarly appealing to rural dwellers—but not if it required too much hardship or sacrifice for the sake of vague principles. By 1957, U.S. officials and experts were criticizing the government for its apparent indifference to the material well-being of its settlers. They also increasingly suspected that Diem's rhetoric about self-sufficiency and hard work merely rationalized the government's desire to extract as much labor as possible from the population. For these Americans, Diem's resettlement programs would appear increasingly misguided and grandiose as the decade wore on.

The Cai San Project

In late 1955, officials in the RVN Ministry of Agrarian Reform informed their USOM counterparts about plans for a massive new rural development project in the Mekong Delta. The Ministry proposed to resettle one hundred thousand northern refugees—more than 10 percent of those who had

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arrived in South Vietnam since 1954—in the western province of An Giang. Government surveyors had already identified the land on which the settlers would be placed: an expanse of seventy-seven thousand hectares near the town of Long Xuyen. This land, RVN officials explained, had once been productive rice land but had fallen into disuse during the Franco-Viet Minh war. The government proposed to transform this territory by constructing a grid of canals across the landscape. Communities of settlers would be established along the banks of these canals; each family would be assigned a plot of approximately three hectares. The initiative was dubbed the Cai San project, after the name of a nearby stream.²⁴

The Americans noted that the government had set a remarkably short timetable for the implementation of Cai San project. Officials planned to transport a group of settlers to the site in January and hire them to work on the digging of the new canals; they would also be furnished with materials to build homes. At the same time, tractor crews would clear and plow the settlers' new land parcels in preparation for planting. This initial flurry of work needed to be completed by late spring, when seasonal monsoon rains would bring plowing and construction activities to a halt. To ensure that the mechanized work would be finished on time, the Vietnamese explained, they needed a total of one hundred tractors delivered to the site as soon as possible. USOM officials, despite some reservations, agreed in late December to provide the equipment on an expedited basis.²⁵

The location of the Cai San project was dictated partly by the fact that it lay in territory that had previously been under the control of Hoa Hao rebels.²⁶ But the selection of the site also harkened back to earlier settlement plans and ventures. Cai San lay inside the Long Xuyen quadrangle, a floodplain lying between the lower branch of the Mekong River and the Gulf of Thailand. During the colonial era, French engineers had planned several hydrological and resettlement projects in the quadrangle. One project envisioned the creation of a *casier tonkinois*—a grid of reclaimed land to be filled by settlers from the north. Like most of the resettlement ventures devised by the colonial state, this one did not realize its creators' ambitions; the mass influx of northerners never materialized, although a few thousand were eventually transported to the area. Despite these earlier failures, Diem determined that a fresh attempt to create a *casier tonkinois* was in order.²⁷

After securing U.S. promises for material support and expertise, the RVN government plunged ahead with the project. By February 1956, several

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U.S.-supplied farm equipment at the Cai San Settlement, May 1956. (Time & Life Pictures/Getty Images)

hundred male refugees were building houses and digging canals at the site.²⁸ Over the next several months, thousands more men, women, and children poured into the area. By May, the government had processed thirty-three thousand new arrivals. According to official statistics, thousands of new homes were erected and more than a dozen new canals dug and opened for use. Officials also reported that the crucial task of readying the land for planting was under way.²⁹

The first major problems at Cai San had to do with the planting and harvesting of rice. The government had planned to use the USOM-supplied tractors to plow and harrow thirty thousand hectares before the beginning of the rainy season in June. But most of the tractors did not reach the site until April and May. Even worse, almost all were equipped with heavy steel wheels that tended to get stuck in the muddy soil of Cai San; only a few featured the more effective caterpillar treads. Diem later concluded that the U.S. embassy had deliberately delayed the delivery of the tractors to demonstrate its opposition to the project. USOM officials denied this; they also pointed out that the Vietnamese lacked trained operators and mechanics and were therefore unable to make efficient use of the tractors when they

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did arrive. The entire operation was further hampered by the unexpected onset of the rainy season in April, six weeks earlier than normal. As of early June, a total of just ten thousand hectares had been prepared for planting, and only about half of that had been seeded. The planting also proved problematic, since most of the refugees had previously used northern rice cultivation methods and were unfamiliar with the “floating rice” used in the Mekong floodplains.³⁰

In addition to the agricultural setbacks, Cai San was soon beset with administrative and social problems. After an April visit to the site, Ladejinsky—now Diem’s personal advisor—reported that the construction of permanent housing had been “unreasonably delayed.” The cause, he claimed, was not a lack of building supplies but “the failure of the refugee leadership to exert its influence in the proper direction.”³¹ By June, the number of new homes at Cai San had increased substantially. However, as the *Times of Viet Nam* revealed in an usually frank article, many new dwellings had been built hastily with substandard methods.³² The housing problems were exacerbated by the presence of several thousand refugees who had traveled to Cai San “in an extra-administrative fashion” and were settling wherever they could find space.³³

As settlers poured into Cai San, many found themselves in conflict with native residents. Although most of the land in Cai San had not been cultivated in years, that did not mean it was unowned. As RVN military forces established control over the western delta, many native residents returned to assert usufruct and ownership rights over land within the settlement area. Government officials promised to adjudicate all such claims; they also indicated that former residents who returned to the area would receive the same subsidies and other assistance as the refugees. But such promises did not prevent confrontations between natives and refugees, especially when the former discovered the latter squatting on their land.³⁴

The tensions over land at Cai San were exacerbated by confusion and controversy over certain government policies. The refugees who came to Cai San expected to receive title to the land on which they settled. However, since the project had been launched prior to the promulgation of the October 1956 land reform law, the government had not made any definite plans to conduct land reform in the project area; instead, officials expected the settlers to work their plots as tenants for a period of years.³⁵ By the late summer of 1956, disagreements over this key issue had escalated into a major confrontation that pitted the government against the settlers.

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In late August, Diem threw down the gauntlet and decreed that the refugees must sign rental contracts with the owners of the land on which they had been settled. This move, which took both the settlers and U.S. officials on the scene by surprise, triggered angry demonstrations in Cai San. The government responded by deploying army troops and restricting travel within the settlement; officials also suspended the distribution of rice and cash subsidies to the settlers for several weeks. The settlers eventually agreed to sign rental contracts, but only after the government promised that they could eventually buy the land they worked at a rate fixed in advance.³⁶

Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of the clash over rental contracts was the dramatic change in the government's attitude toward the Catholic priests who lived among the refugees. Most of the priests at Cai San were northerners who had accompanied their flocks on their flight to the south. Because these prelates enjoyed enormous prestige among the settlers, the government had initially relied on them to oversee important administrative tasks, such as the distribution of the settlers' daily rations and subsidy payments. But Diem's August 1956 order abruptly terminated this arrangement and transferred all administrative responsibilities to a provisional village council. The clergymen, furious, accused the government of reneging on its earlier promises. The government responded by making the priests the target of a corruption investigation. Father Nguyen Ba Loc, who had earlier been praised by RVN officials for his cooperative attitude, now found himself accused of graft, fraud, and the running of an illegal ferry service. Not coincidentally, the police report on Father Loc was filed only days after he organized a large public demonstration against the compulsory rental contracts.³⁷

On the surface, the conflict between the Cai San settlers and the government over land tenure appeared to confirm the portrayal of Diem as a defender of landlord interests. But the regime's agenda, though implemented in a heavy-handed manner, was not as reactionary as it appeared. In keeping with his plan for the gradual "middle peasantization" of South Vietnam, Diem expected that the settlers would gain title to their land after a few years. In the meantime, he expected them to demonstrate productivity and self-sufficiency. Government propagandists chided the refugees for waiting to see "what the government can and will do for them" instead of relying on their own resourcefulness.³⁸ For Diem, the interim rent contracts would facilitate a gradual transition to universal landownership while inculcating the moral virtues he so prized.

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The angry response of the refugees and their priests to Diem's land policies did not bode well for the success of his larger rural development goals. If any group in South Vietnam could be expected to embrace the philosophical niceties of Diemist personalism it was the Cai San settlers, almost all of whom were Catholic, resolutely anticommunist, and seemingly predisposed to support Diem and the state he had founded. That the members of this group appeared not to appreciate—or even understand—the moralizing rationale behind Diem's agrarian reform policies was a worrisome sign. The appeal of communal “self-sufficiency” may have seemed self-evident to Diem and his brothers, but the Cai San settlers found the notion of owning their own land more tangible and compelling.

In the long run, the clash over the rental contracts did not prove fatal to the Cai San project. Indeed, Cai San turned out to be one of the Diem government's most striking and lasting rural development successes. Under the terms of the compromise worked out with the government in late 1956, most of the refugees opted to remain at Cai San; many of them eventually obtained title to the land on which they had settled. By the early 1960s, Cai San had become a fairly prosperous place. Some settlers became wealthy by diversifying from rice into other crops, such as tobacco raised from seeds brought from the north. As the memory of the controversy over landownership faded, the settlement gradually evolved into the progovernment stronghold Diem expected it to be—a status it retained down to the end of the Vietnam War in the 1970s.³⁹

Nevertheless, the success of Cai San would be clearer in hindsight than it was at the time. Most of the Americans who watched the project unfold believed it had yielded mixed results at best. In public, the U.S. embassy duly praised the project as a development success and a blow against communism.⁴⁰ But internal U.S. assessments were less glowing. Although USOM officials had consented to provide aid and advice to the project, they were annoyed that their RVN counterparts had presented Cai San to them as a *fait accompli*. The embassy also deplored the palace's mishandling of the land issue. Even Ladejinsky believed that the efforts to force the settlers to become tenants constituted “an obvious and glaring contradiction” that undermined the government's larger agrarian reform goals.⁴¹ The episode thus served to strengthen American suspicions that Diem's approach to agrarian reform left much to be desired. After 1956, as the government expanded its rural development activities, the disagreements between the allies would become more pronounced.

The Land Development Program

The RVN government wasted little time in applying the Cai San settlement model in other parts of South Vietnam. In early 1957, Diem announced a multiprovince agrarian reform initiative intended to unite all South Vietnamese in the “great task of building the national economy.”⁴² After some initial hesitation, the government decided that the new undertaking would be officially known as Dinh Dien, a Sino-Vietnamese term that can be transliterated as “to nourish ricefields.”⁴³ In English, the new program was known simply as the Land Development Program. As with the Cai San project, this program aimed to relocate “surplus” populations of poor settlers onto land deemed to be abandoned or otherwise underutilized. However, unlike the Cai San settlers, most participants in the Land Development program were natives of central and southern Vietnam, not refugees from the north. The program also included members of non-Vietnamese ethnic minority groups, such as Khmers and highlander tribes. In its initial form, the Land Development Program aimed to establish four separate settlement zones, including three Cai San-like projects in the Mekong Delta. The fourth zone, by far the largest, stretched across several provinces in the Central Highlands.⁴⁴ The plans for some of the Mekong Delta settlements were based on the blueprints for pre-1954 land reclamation schemes that the colonial state had designed but never implemented.⁴⁵

The primary goal of the Land Development Program had to do with what one historian aptly describes as “engineered social change.”⁴⁶ Like high modernist development projects pursued in the United States and elsewhere, the program aimed to use science and technology to transform South Vietnamese landscapes, living patterns, and agricultural practices. The palace stressed that much of the initial work of constructing the Land Development Centers (as the individual settlements were called) would be done using heavy machinery. Pictures of tractors and bulldozers featured prominently in official pamphlets and magazine articles; other images showed settlers at work on freshly tilled plots of land. The RVN officials promised that the program would emphasize new and more efficient agricultural methods, especially those that relied on mechanical inputs.⁴⁷

The program also aimed to apply engineering in the service of RVN security objectives. Two of the first four settlement zones—the U Minh Forest in the far south of the Mekong Delta and the Plain of Reeds along the border with Cambodia—were selected mainly because of their status

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as longtime communist base areas. Diem also hoped that a string of Land Development Centers along South Vietnam's borders with Cambodia and Laos would lay the foundation for the "human wall" he wanted to erect against communist infiltration. RVN officials acknowledged that the construction of this "wall" would require some settlements to be placed in remote areas. Yet they insisted that this could be advantageous for settlers by allowing access to previously untapped land and water resources.⁴⁸

Beyond its economic and security benefits, the Land Development Program also aimed to achieve what the government described as "social objectives." Diem declared that the program would provide each adult male settler with a house, land, and "the private property needed to guarantee his concrete democratic freedom." However, before receiving title to their land parcels, settlers were required to farm them for a period of months or years. In the meantime, they were expected to demonstrate their commitment to the "principle of cooperation." They would do so by participating in various community improvement projects, including the construction of public facilities and work on collective farming ventures. From the outset, therefore, the Land Development Program leavened its emphasis on opportunities for individual betterment with expectations about settlers' obligations to their communities.⁴⁹

The Land Development Program was implemented in dizzyingly rapid fashion. In February 1958, just ten months after the official launch of the program, the RVN's Land Development Commission reported that it had established a total of twenty-one centers. More than forty-one thousand people were living in these settlements, a figure comparable to the size of the refugee population transported to Cai San during its first year. Most settlers were native southerners, and a large majority were non-Catholic.⁵⁰ By mid-1959, the number of centers had quadrupled, and the total population of settlers had tripled.⁵¹ At the end of the Diem era in 1963, RVN official statistics indicated that the program had established more than two hundred settlements and relocated around a quarter of a million people.⁵²

The ambitious scale of the Land Development Program was revealed in the massive engineering projects that were designed to transform the resettlement zones even as they were filling with settlers. The U Minh Forest project was organized around the construction of a grid of newly built canals. RVN authorities instructed both new arrivals and native residents to settle along the freshly bulldozed banks of the waterways; anyone who did not comply would be treated as an outlaw. Canals also figured promi-

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nently in the Plain of Reeds, where French consultants designed a complex drainage system to alleviate the massive floods that turned the area into an inland sea during the rainy season. The symbolic centerpiece of the project was the "Republic Canal," which was supposed to drain the floodplain and allow RVN police and military vessels to move more easily across the region.⁵³

In the Central Highlands, RVN officials pursued engineering projects of a different sort. In addition to using heavy machinery to transform wilderness into farmland, the regime also sought to bring certain social and cultural changes to the region. These goals were especially apparent in the Land Development projects aimed at highlander minority groups. Diem hoped to end the highlanders' reliance on swidden agriculture, a method of raising crops on forest land that had been cleared via burning. The regime also aimed to "sedentarize" the highlanders in special settlements where they would learn about everything from animal husbandry and health to the Vietnamese language. These goals rested squarely on lowlander assumptions about the inferiority of highlander cultural practices and the desirability of assimilating highland residents to lowland norms. Such assumptions were often stated explicitly in government propaganda, which described highlanders as "living in a most backward fashion" and expressed the hope that they would quickly embrace "the Vietnamese way of life."⁵⁴

As they sketched their plans for the Land Development Program, Diem and his subordinates hoped and expected that the United States would play a major role in it. American officials, having been excluded from the initial planning for the Cai San project, were eager to provide both advice and material aid. Washington's initial pledge of aid for Land Development totaled more than U.S. \$10 million and accounted for more than 4 percent of the entire annual U.S. aid budget for South Vietnam. Americans participated in the planning and surveying of sites in the first four Land Development zones. In addition to furnishing tractors, dredges, and other heavy machinery, USOM agreed to train Vietnamese crews to operate and maintain the equipment they had delivered.⁵⁵

It was not long, however, before embassy personnel discovered that there were some aspects of Land Development that were not to their liking. They were particularly concerned that the government seemed bent on pursuing overly ambitious goals without adequate preparation.⁵⁶ USOM technicians urged their Vietnamese counterparts to scale back their

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elaborate plans for building roads and canals in the U Minh Forest and the Plain of Reeds; it would be better, they advised, to focus initially on sites that did not need new infrastructure.⁵⁷ In both cases, the results of the building projects appeared to validate USOM's concerns. In the U Minh settlements, the newly dug canals and the adjacent cropland became contaminated by ocean salt due to tidewater penetration during the dry season. On the Plain of Reeds, the government's engineers discovered that the U.S.-supplied dredges sent to dig the showcase Republic Canal were unable to cut through a hard layer of clay beneath the topsoil. Although RVN officials managed to finish the canal by hiring laborers to dig it by hand, their triumph was short-lived. A few months after its opening, the new waterway and the Land Development Centers along its banks were overwhelmed by unusually severe seasonal floods.⁵⁸

Americans also criticized the implementation of Land Development projects in the Central Highlands. One U.S. expert who took part in a survey mission to the area in 1957 concluded that most of the settlement sites identified by the government had insufficient water for irrigation. His concerns were dismissed by the Land Development Commission, which declared that settlers would cultivate drought-resistant plants during the dry months.⁵⁹ In another case, U.S. aid officers were dismayed to learn that the Commission had constructed a settlement four kilometers from the nearest supply of water. They were even more flabbergasted by the placement of another settlement at a site nearly ninety kilometers from the nearest town over roads that were impassable for several months each year.⁶⁰

In addition to their complaints about the lack of planning, some Americans objected to the social and cultural aspects of Land Development in the highlands. Gerald Hickey, an American anthropologist who came to Vietnam in 1956 as a member of the MSUG, was an early critic of the regime's efforts to compel highlander minority groups to adopt lowlander practices. In 1957, Hickey drafted a report in which he argued that the arrogance Vietnamese officials displayed in their dealings with highlanders was undermining the government's programs in the region. He advised the government to modify its settlement plans to accommodate the highlanders' "traditional system of land tenure." Diem was said to be upset over the critical tone of Hickey's report and rejected its recommendations. According to Hickey, the episode caused him to fall into disfavor with the palace, and he subsequently found himself working under "a terrible cloud."⁶¹

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By late 1957, the escalating tensions over Land Development had become a major issue in U.S.-RVN relations. In October, USOM officials gave their RVN counterparts a sharply worded memorandum stating that the program suffered from inadequate planning, poor coordination, and an inattention to economic considerations. More generally, "the urgency attached to land development and resettlement in Viet Nam has been permitted to override basic considerations."⁶² As a result, the embassy had decided to suspend aid for the program, pending a U.S.-RVN agreement on new planning procedures. This step was described by one U.S. technician as an effort to "brake the reckless speed of the project and protect U.S. funds against possible serious misuse."⁶³

The U.S. aid cutoff did not produce the desired effect. In response to the American move, RVN officials readily agreed to negotiate detailed parameters for each of the thirty new Land Development Centers planned for 1958. The U.S. aid suspension was duly lifted; however, the new arrangements soon broke down when the Americans discovered that the government was continuing to move settlers into the centers before the plans had been finalized. USOM officials were also upset by the palace's decision to dismantle the special RVN agency that had been set up to operate and maintain the hundreds of tractors and other pieces of agricultural equipment furnished for use at the centers. The Americans feared—correctly, as it turned out—that turning the management of the equipment over to the Land Development Commission would hinder its efficient use. In mid-1958, USOM ceased providing aid for Land Development, except for a small amount of additional equipment and technical support. The immediate practical impact of this move was negligible; the total U.S. aid budget for South Vietnam did not decrease, so RVN officials were able to continue operations as before by transferring funds from other portions of the American aid program. Nevertheless, USOM's withdrawal from the program showed the depth of the antipathy that had developed over the issue.⁶⁴

Most American observers explained the controversy over Land Development as the result of clashing U.S. and RVN priorities. According to this view, USOM conceived of the program as an economic development initiative first and foremost and therefore insisted on careful advance planning to ensure that each new settlement would be economically viable. Diem, in contrast, "saw the program primarily as a means for improving conditions of internal security" and demanded speedy implementation at

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any cost.⁶⁵ This understanding of the dispute was apparently shared by Ngo Dinh Nhu, who blasted the Americans for supporting only “those projects which can return 100 per cent the first year.” “Our economy suffers from American slowness,” he complained.⁶⁶ The U.S. and RVN officials thus appeared to agree on what divided them, even though they disagreed over who was to blame.

In fact, the allies’ differences over Land Development ran deeper than the economics-versus-security interpretation suggests. Their disagreements had less to do with perceived trade-offs between prosperity and stability than with contrasting beliefs about the social organization of rural communities, especially with regard to land and labor. In the U.S. view, economic progress and security in the South Vietnamese countryside both depended on the same thing: the creation of communities in which farmers owned the land they worked and residents saw genuine opportunities to improve their economic and social status. The embassy therefore urged the government to provide “vigorous and continuing assistance” to settlers for an extended period after their arrival at their new homes.⁶⁷ Diem, in contrast, insisted that settlers had to earn the right to landownership by demonstrating their willingness to participate in the settlement of the wilderness on a communal basis. For Diem, it was essential that Land Development Centers be places where settlers would find personal fulfillment within a web of communal activities and obligations—and thus embrace the personalist revolution.

The American worries about the Land Development Program were heightened by the Diem government’s labor practices in the new settlements. In contrast to Cai San, where settlers had been paid for their work on canals and other infrastructure projects, the construction of Land Development Centers was organized according to the “community development principle,” which meant the labor settlers performed would be compulsory and uncompensated. As a result, many settlers found themselves impressed into communal work gangs shortly after arriving at the centers. As RVN propagandists emphasized, the labor performed under this version of community development included many arduous tasks such as the digging of canals by hand and the clearing of land for planting. As the palace saw it, the demanding nature of this work was a positive feature of the program. But U.S. officials worried that the settlers would resent being forced to work without pay, thus undercutting the potential appeal of the program.⁶⁸

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In retrospect, the demise of U.S.-RVN cooperation on the Land Development Program cannot be explained merely by American objections to the overly hasty implementation of particular projects. Nor was U.S. pullout designed to pressure the Diem government to reorganize the settlements along capitalist lines, as Ngo Dinh Nhu claimed. Instead, the disputes over Land Development reflected the allies' contrasting approaches to rural development. For the Americans, success in agrarian reform depended on persuading poor rural residents that the government's actions would bring tangible, near-term improvements in living standards. To this end, U.S. experts maintained that Land Development ought to focus first and foremost on the concrete advantages it conferred on settlers—especially the land and other material assistance rendered by the government. Diem did not disagree with the Americans that the government ought to provide land and material aid to settlers. But he insisted that these material benefits were less important than the ethos of mutual obligation and “self-sufficiency” he hoped to foster. If the Americans could not understand this, Diem reasoned, then he might have to pursue his resettlement plans without their assistance. As the decade of the 1950s drew to a close, the divide between the allies over agrarian reform issues appeared to be growing wider.

The Agroville Program

During the spring of 1959, U.S. officials in Saigon began to hear rumors of a major debate taking place inside the Diem government. For at least a year, the number of assassinations and other attacks carried out by communist operatives in rural areas had been gradually rising. The increase in violence prompted some of Diem's advisors to recommend an expansion of the regime's countersubversion activities in the countryside. These hard-liners argued that RVN security forces needed broader authority to pursue, detain, and kill suspected communist operatives if the government hoped to prevail against the insurgents. But not all senior RVN officials endorsed such a response. According to Ladejinsky, some cabinet ministers and other RVN leaders were worried that harsher security measures would be counterproductive unless they were linked to efforts to improve the lives and welfare of ordinary rural residents.⁶⁹

The embassy had correctly divined that a debate was taking place inside the palace, but the issues at stake were not quite as the Americans understood them. According to Diem and other members of his inner circle, the regime's agrarian policies needed to be modified to take account of

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two seemingly contradictory trends. On the one hand, it was increasingly obvious that a communist-led resistance movement was growing rapidly in many parts of rural South Vietnam. As we will see, Diem firmly believed that it was necessary to fight fire with fire, and that the spike in enemy attacks justified the adoption of harsher security measures. On the other hand, Diem did not believe that all of the news from the countryside was bad. Indeed, he was convinced that the insurgency was intensifying because his government's rural development policies were working. While South Vietnam remained overwhelmingly poor and highly dependent on American aid, data compiled by U.S. and RVN experts suggested that the country had made measurable—if still modest—economic gains during the late 1950s.⁷⁰ In addition, many South Vietnamese farmers felt that their personal economic prospects had improved since the end of the Indochina War, despite the fact that most of them remained on the edge of subsistence.⁷¹ Diem clearly hoped to build on this economic momentum, even as he was also seeking to crush the communist insurgency against his government. In Diem's mind, therefore, the challenge the government faced in the countryside in 1959 was not a straightforward choice between coercion and co-optation. Instead, the challenge lay in finding the correct mix of sticks and carrots—the magic combination of repression and outreach that would make it possible for the government to crush the communists while cementing its recent gains.⁷²

In the summer of 1959, Diem announced that the government planned to create a network of new settlement zones known as “dense and prosperous areas” (*khu tru mat*) throughout the Mekong Delta. By relocating thousands of local residents into each of these compact zones, Diem explained, the government would be better able to protect them from the communists. At the same time, the new settlements would make it possible to provide farmers with access to economic benefits and social services they had never previously enjoyed. Because the residents of these settlements would live in close proximity to each other, some RVN officials began referring to the proposed settlements first as “agricultural towns” and eventually as “agrovilles.”⁷³

In some ways, Diem's attempt to create “dense and prosperous areas” in the Mekong Delta was the reverse of his earlier rural development policies. If the Land Development Program had been designed to alleviate overcrowding in those parts of South Vietnam afflicted with a “surplus” popula-

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tion, the Agrovillage Program was intended to address the opposite problem: too few people spread across too much open territory. Like many of his French and Vietnamese contemporaries, Diem viewed the Mekong Delta as a region that was socially and environmentally distinct from the rest of lowland Vietnam. In contrast to the compact and crowded villages of the north and center, settlements in the south were scattered and spread out, with hamlets and even individual farms located far apart from each other. As a result, many Delta residents lived in physical and social isolation—a condition the communists could easily exploit. As Diem put it, the people of the south were “more thinly spread geographically and more naïve politically.”⁷⁴

The Diem regime’s portrayal of southern farmers as isolated and vulnerable went hand in hand with its stereotyped understanding of the Mekong Delta as a place of ignorance, backwardness, and perpetual toil. According to RVN propagandists, Delta villages were “tiny islets of greenery lost in the middle of what seems a harsh boundless swamp”; the “black-clad” farmers of these settlements led “semiaquatic” lives while their “sun-tanned, worm-naked children” went without clothes or school.⁷⁵ The agrovillages were supposed to rescue farmers from this wretched existence. By gathering farming families into compact, well-ordered settlements, the government would make it possible for them to gain access to the “comforts and advances” that had previously only been available to city dwellers.⁷⁶ This emphasis on bringing the benefits of urban modernity to the countryside served to invest the Agrovillage Program with a decidedly high modernist quality. Even more than the Land Development Centers, the agrovillages aimed to transform the economic and social lives of farmers via sweeping reconfigurations of spaces and landscapes. As one of Diem’s aides stated, each agrovillage would be a “little city, with all of the modern conveniences.”⁷⁷

Unlike the Land Development Program, the Agrovillage Program was organized around the concept of population regroupment—that is, the physical relocation of all of the people already living in a given area into a single settlement. The core of each agrovillage would consist of a grid of residential and commercial plots demarcated by roads and canals. Once this central residential area had been prepared, all of the families living within a radius of five or six kilometers would build new homes on their assigned residential plots within the grid. But even after moving into the agrovillage, farmers would continue to work the same land they had previously tilled, an arrangement that would oblige them to commute to their fields every

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day. The agrovilles were therefore designed to furnish rural residents with the benefits of town life while allowing them to retain their farms and income. In addition to offering amenities such as electricity, agrovilles were also supposed to provide access to retail shops, markets, parks, hotels, clinics, and schools.⁷⁸

Besides promoting economic and social progress, the agrovilles were designed to serve the regime's internal security goals. Diem's initial interest in the idea of population regroupment stemmed from its potential utility as a tactic in the intensifying war against the communists. During the winter of 1958–1959, Diem learned that a district chief in Phong Dinh province had devised a scheme to undermine and isolate the insurgents by moving local farming families into compact “agglomeration” settlements set up and controlled by government security forces. Diem was intrigued by the new approach and wondered if it might serve as a model for a new program. In its initial form, the agglomeration scheme proposed to create two types of settlements: one for families deemed loyal to the government, the other for those rural residents who were suspected of having ties to the communists.⁷⁹ Although senior RVN officials eventually persuaded Diem to drop this two-tier structure and place more emphasis on economic and social issues, he remained convinced that a strategy based on the concentration of the population into compact, defensible settlements was a sound approach. As the Agrovillage Program took shape during late 1959 and early 1960, regroupment remained its defining feature.⁸⁰

The inaugural agrovillage was constructed in Phong Dinh province, where the enterprising district chief had conducted his initial experiments with regroupment tactics. To design this showcase settlement, Diem turned to Ngo Viet Thu, an internationally acclaimed architect and recent winner of the prestigious Grand Prix de Rome. In keeping with the notion of the agrovillage as a “little city,” Thu proposed that its residential core would be structured by an elaborate grid of angular canals, whose combined length ran to more than forty thousand meters. In total, the agrovillage contained fifteen hundred family-sized residential plots. Thu's design also included administrative offices, schools, hotels, markets, and several artificial lakes. The largest lake contained an island connected to the shore by a footbridge—a configuration reminiscent of the famous Lake of the Restored Sword in Hanoi. After enthusiastically approving Thu's plan, Diem ordered that it be implemented as quickly as possible. The

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inauguration ceremony for the new settlement was held in March 1960, a mere one hundred days after construction began.⁸¹

With the memory of the U.S. withdrawal from the Land Development Program still fresh in his mind, Diem was determined that the agrovilles would be planned, administered, and funded exclusively by the RVN government without any U.S. guidance or material support. In part, this decision reflected Diem's growing doubts about the utility of American advice on agrarian reform. But it also reflected his belief that the fate of South Vietnam's nation-building programs would hinge on the cultivation of a spirit of self-sufficiency. As an underdeveloped country, Diem warned, South Vietnam had no choice but to make use of its own resources. To rely on foreign aid to build agrovilles would be "like sitting and waiting for figs to fall"—that is, it would foster passivity and discourage Vietnamese from taking up the hard work of development.⁸² To generate the initial funds needed to launch the program, Diem proposed to use the profits from a national lottery set up by the government.⁸³ At the same time, he insisted that direct construction costs be kept to an absolute minimum. The official budget for each agroville was set at just 1 million piasters, or the equivalent of about U.S. \$14,000 at official exchange rates—an amount barely sufficient to cover the construction costs of the schools and other public buildings in the new settlements.⁸⁴

The government's emphasis on austerity and self-sufficiency meant that local farmers would have to bear many of the costs associated with the construction of agrovilles. All regrouped families were required to purchase their residential plots in the center of the agroville; this obligation provoked considerable resentment, especially among those who were forced to take out government-funded loans to meet it. Residents were also expected to dismantle the houses in which they had previously lived and use the materials to build their new homes inside the agrovilles. Although the government provided a small allowance to defray the cost of moving, many farmers complained that the money was insufficient. They also noted that it would be difficult or impossible to house livestock on the small plots inside the agrovilles and that the sites to which they were moving typically lacked the streams and ponds that delta residents traditionally used as toilet facilities.⁸⁵

Of all the burdens the Agroville Program imposed on participants, the most onerous were the government's compulsory labor practices. Like

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the Land Development Centers, the agrovilles were supposed to conform to Diem's "Community Development Principle"—that is, residents were expected to contribute to the building of the new settlements by participating in collective work projects. But the Agrovillage Program differed from earlier RVN resettlement ventures in the sheer amount of labor it aimed to extract from the rural population. As one Vietnamese observer noted, each agrovillage was a "colossal earthwork" that required the digging of canals, the construction of roads, and the transport of large amounts of soil for use in the foundations of new homes and other buildings. Diem was adamant that the bulk of this backbreaking work would be completed by the prospective residents of each agrovillage. He also insisted that it was neither necessary nor desirable to pay farmers to perform this labor. In his view, the mere prospect of living in an agrovillage would be so appealing that those who lived in the area would eagerly contribute their time and energy. And even if residents were initially reluctant to volunteer, Diem argued, they would be quickly won over after they saw the amenities and benefits the agrovilles had to offer.⁸⁶

Diem's predictions about farmer enthusiasm for the Agrovillage Program proved wildly inaccurate. Those living near the agrovilles, U.S. observers noted, were highly resistant to the idea of having to work on the new settlements without pay.⁸⁷ Local RVN officials typically did not even bother to try to persuade farmers to contribute voluntarily to agrovillage construction. Instead, they organized mass levies in which all nearby villages were required to supply a certain quota of workers. This practice effectively transformed agrovillage building sites into large forced labor camps. One local RVN official boasted of having mobilized twenty thousand people to work without compensation on the inaugural agrovillage in Phong Dinh province; the construction of the artificial lake and island alone consumed over twenty-five thousand man-hours.⁸⁸ Not surprisingly, the government's use of compulsory labor on such a large scale prompted comparisons to the old French *corvée* system. Although Diem made a point of rejecting such comparisons, the mere fact that he felt it necessary to do so publicly suggested the depth of resentment the program had generated.⁸⁹

Despite his refusal to acknowledge the problems with the agrovilles in public, Diem soon began to have doubts about the program and its prospects for success. In September 1960, just six months after the official unveiling of the first settlement, Diem informed the U.S. embassy that he had decided to scale back the program. The target number of agrovilles to

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be built was reduced from eighty to twenty; instead of a total population of half a million, the number of people living in agrovilles probably never exceeded fifty thousand. Even the showcase agrovillage in Phong Dinh fell far short of the government's lofty expectations. In 1962, nearly two years after it was inaugurated, a melancholic newspaper account described the settlement's signature lake and island as "isolated in the middle of a plain of grass, like a flower vase in an unfurnished room."⁹⁰

In the eyes of U.S. government officials in Saigon, the reasons for the failure of the Agrovillage Program were obvious. During the spring of 1960, Ambassador Durbrow warned Diem about a popular backlash against the government's demand for "free work" from farmers. In subsequent visits to agrovillage sites, U.S. investigators confirmed that the coercive measures used to move local residents into the new settlements had provoked deep feelings of anger. When Durbrow learned that the government had put the program on hold, he concluded that Diem had finally realized its shortcomings. "Perhaps he has finally been convinced by all and sundry who have told him of the disgruntlement caused by the program that the 'real cost' is loss of popular support for his regime," Durbrow stated hopefully.⁹¹

As Durbrow and his colleagues saw it, the Agrovillage Program was broken. However, they refused to believe that it was beyond repair. Although Durbrow welcomed Diem's decision to suspend the program, the ambassador believed that the "basic merits" of the program would justify its later revival, albeit in overhauled and better funded form. State Department officials in Washington concurred and instructed the embassy to make it clear to Diem that the United States did not object to the program, only to the way it was being executed. For all the problems with implementation, the agrovilles retained their appeal as a security tactic. "There is little doubt," one U.S. assessment concluded, "that the fortress-like quality of the agrovilles, as well as the improved roads and the [regroupment] of the population, could provide greater physical security."⁹² For many U.S. officials and strategists, the advantages of a mass regroupment strategy seemed too good to pass up.

But Diem's conclusions about both the successes and shortcomings of the Agrovillage Program differed on almost every point from the U.S. assessment. In response to U.S. criticisms that the government had underfunded the program by refusing to pay wages or subsidies to residents, Diem insisted that the program was actually too expensive because of construction

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and infrastructure costs. He also refused to believe that agroville residents were generally unhappy with the program, insisting that “some originally were not too satisfied [but] all now see the many advantages of agroville life.”⁹³ He further disagreed with U.S. officials about the very thing Washington considered the Agroville Program’s redeeming feature: its potential effectiveness as a security measure. During the year following the mid-1960 decision to curtail the program, U.S. officials repeatedly suggested that the agrovilles be revived as the basis for a new counterinsurgency strategy. But Diem rebuffed these U.S. proposals.⁹⁴ Although he did not explain why he no longer considered the program viable, he may have been persuaded by RVN intelligence reports that showed that the existing agrovilles had been thoroughly penetrated by communist operatives.⁹⁵ Whatever the reason, Diem had clearly concluded by late 1960 that the entire agroville concept was flawed and ought to be discarded.

With the shelving of the Agroville Program in the fall of 1960, Diem’s plans to transform the South Vietnamese countryside were in disarray. While the palace continued to trumpet the Cai San project and the Land Development Centers as brilliant successes, even Diem’s most ardent supporters could see that the agrovilles had not lived up to expectations. This did not mean, however, that Diem was more inclined to accept U.S. official advice and criticism than he had been previously, or that a meeting of American and South Vietnamese minds was in the offing. Although both U.S. and RVN officials now recognized that the situation in the countryside had deteriorated badly, leaders on each side continued to analyze the problem and potential solutions according to the same beliefs and assumptions that had guided their thinking since 1955. While the allies continued to discuss the possibility of renewing their joint collaboration on agrarian reform, these conversations would not bear fruit until mid-1962. In the meantime, the security situation in the countryside continued to deteriorate, and relations between Washington and Saigon moved steadily from bad to worse.

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On February 22, 1957, Ngo Dinh Diem delivered a speech at an agricultural fair in the city of Ban Me Thuot in the Central Highlands. The address, which marked the official unveiling of the Land Development Program, was one that he almost did not have a chance to give. As he sat with several other senior officials on the elevated platform that had been set up for the speech, a man stepped out of the crowd and raised a submachine gun that he had concealed underneath his clothes. He fired just one shot before his weapon jammed and he was wrestled to the ground by the president's bodyguards. Despite being only a few feet away from Diem, the gunman missed him and instead wounded the RVN minister of agrarian reform, who happened to lean into the line of fire at the fateful moment. Remarkably, Diem insisted on going ahead with his speech. He amazed his audience by delivering it with apparently preternatural calm.¹

Diem's would-be assassin was Ha Minh Tri, a twenty-two-year-old VWP operative. Although Tri was later celebrated as a hero of the Vietnamese communist movement, he was not acting on orders from senior party leaders in North Vietnam; rather, his mission had been planned by cadres inside South Vietnam, in violation of Hanoi's instructions.² In many respects, the decision of these southern cadres to make an attempt on Diem's life was a move born of desperation. By early 1957, VWP members in South Vietnam were under enormous pressure from an RVN countersubversion



The capture of Ha Minh Tri, just after his failed attempt to assassinate Diem, February 1957. (Time & Life Pictures/Getty Images)

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campaign. Over the next two years, Diem's intensifying crackdown would devastate the party's apparatus in both urban and rural areas, as thousands of cadres were arrested or killed by RVN security forces. In this regard, Tri's assassination plot was a response to the Diem regime's internal security policies—policies that appeared for a time to be succeeding, their increasingly violent and brutal character notwithstanding.

In later years, many South Vietnamese would recall the period between the Geneva Conference of 1954 and the formation of the National Liberation Front in 1960 as the "Six Years of Peace."³ The last half of the 1950s was indeed a relatively peaceful time in South Vietnam, compared to the carnage that preceded and followed it. But it was also a time when war and violence were never far from the minds of Diem and other Vietnamese leaders. Like his U.S. allies, Diem believed that the RVN state faced grave threats both from within and without. Even more than some of his U.S. advisors, Diem strongly emphasized measures designed to prevent internal subversion and rebellion. Contrary to what his critics alleged, these measures were not based on force and domination alone; his plans also included propaganda and mass mobilization programs designed to gain the support of South Vietnam's rural masses. Still, Diem's approach to internal security also relied heavily on coercion, punishment, and intimidation. Because of the menace of "red imperialism," Diem warned, the government did not dare relax its vigilance, nor could it afford to give any quarter to its enemies. While this hard-line approach seemed to pay handsome dividends for Diem during 1956–1958, by the end of the decade it was clear that the communist insurgency he had hoped to prevent was under way. It was also apparent that his internal security policies had caused profound resentment and fear in many quarters of South Vietnamese society. This unfavorable turn in Diem's political and military fortunes had far-reaching implications for his interactions with many key constituencies and groups in South Vietnam, including the ARVN. It also negatively affected his relations with U.S. officials, who had their own ideas about internal security and countersubversion.

Fear, Discipline, and Internal Security

From the outset of Diem's tenure in power, the maintenance of internal security in South Vietnam was one of his central preoccupations. Even after the VNA defeated the Binh Xuyen and broke the back of Cao Dai and Hoa Hao resistance during 1955–1956, Diem remained keenly interested in military affairs in general and in internal security strategy in particular.

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This was due in part to his concern about the communist cadres who had remained in the south after Geneva and were continuing to carry out antigovernment activities. But it also had to do with the connections he perceived between the maintenance of order and social change. For Diem, internal security was an integral component of his nation-building designs, in a time of peace no less than in a time of war.

Contrary to what some authors have suggested, Diem was neither insensible to the threat of insurgent rebellion nor driven by a mindless “mandarin” impulse to impose his rule via absolute force.⁴ Instead, Diem’s thinking about internal security rested on two things: his assessment of the overall strategic situation in Indochina after 1954, and his experience as colonial official in central Vietnam during the 1930s. From these ideas and experiences, Diem fashioned his own rather distinctive approach to the problem of communist subversion. In implementing this approach, he did not neglect measures designed to gain the support of the rural population. Indeed, Diem laid particular stress on the importance of mass mobilization, indoctrination, and other activities designed to forge close ties between the government and ordinary Vietnamese. Yet he also endorsed the use of harshly repressive and authoritarian measures designed to root out and destroy clandestine enemy networks. Unlike some of his U.S. advisors, Diem was mostly unconcerned about the possibility that the latter activities might undermine the effectiveness of the former. In his view, the building of popular support and the eradication of the enemy would naturally go hand in hand.

Diem’s views on the danger of insurgency in South Vietnam were shaped by his surprisingly optimistic view of the prospects for Vietnam’s national reunification. Contrary to what some observers supposed, Diem neither expected nor hoped that the separation of Vietnam into rival communist and anticommunist zones would harden into a permanent division.⁵ Instead, he saw the post-Geneva rivalry between the RVN and the DRV as a temporary period of uneasy coexistence that would last for no more than a few years. During this time, Diem believed, the superiority of the RVN model of economic and social development would become steadily more obvious; meanwhile, the communists would find it harder to maintain their grip on power in the north. Eventually, these trends would give rise to a new exodus of refugees from North Vietnam to the south on a scale even more massive than the migration of 1954–1955. This transfer of population, he expected, would bring about the collapse of the Hanoi regime, followed by reunification under RVN leadership.⁶

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But Diem did not expect the communists to give up without a fight. If maintaining the post-Geneva status quo in Indochina would favor the RVN in the long run, as Diem believed, then DRV leaders had a strong incentive to try to destabilize the south. He therefore concluded that a communist assault on his regime was all but certain to take place, and that it would likely come sooner rather than later. Although Diem acknowledged that this attack might come in the form of a conventional invasion across the 17th parallel, he suspected that Hanoi was more likely to strike via covert means. In late 1955, he informed U.S. officials that the Viet Minh, having failed to realize their objectives via propaganda and political agitation, had “regrouped their cadres for concerted action in key areas” inside South Vietnam.⁷

To block the campaign of covert subversion he anticipated, Diem sought to disrupt Hanoi’s ability to infiltrate men and supplies from North Vietnam into the south. In addition to fortifying RVN military capabilities along the 17th parallel, he located Land Development Centers and other settlements in the lightly populated areas near South Vietnam’s long borders with Laos and Cambodia. But Diem was not content to rely on border defense alone. Like his communist rivals, he viewed all of Indochina—Laos and Cambodia, as well as both halves of Vietnam—as a single strategic theater. He placed particular significance on control of the long north–south mountain chain that sprawled across all three countries.⁸ To inhibit infiltration through this region, he argued, it would be necessary to develop a comprehensive defense plan that included Laos and Cambodia as well as South Vietnam. The Indochina-wide scope of Diem’s thinking was apparent in his attempts to revive a colonial-era scheme to build a trans-border network of highways.⁹ It was also evident in the espionage operations and other covert activities RVN government organizations carried out inside Laos and Cambodia during the second half of the 1950s.¹⁰ Although some U.S. officials would interpret these measures as evidence of Diem’s excessive focus on external defense, he insisted that they were an extension of his internal security measures.¹¹

In formulating the security strategies that RVN forces would use inside South Vietnam, Diem drew on experience gained during his service as a province chief more than two decades earlier. His tenure as head of Ninh Thuan province during 1930–1931 had taken place during a period of rising revolutionary activity in Indochina. Shortly after his arrival in the province, Diem had learned that ICP cadres were recruiting and organizing protests in nearby villages. Unfortunately, many key details about

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both the ICP's activities and Diem's attempts to suppress them remain obscure. It is clear, however, that he was convinced that the methods he devised had succeeded in stamping out the incipient rebellion.¹²

According to Diem, the defeat of the communists in Ninh Thuan had been secured by action along two fronts. He had first sought to persuade the ordinary people of the province that he was genuinely concerned about their welfare. He claimed to have accomplished this by visiting villages and inquiring about residents' needs, he also made a point of siding with poor farmers in land disputes with the French owners of several large plantations in the provinces. At the same time, he quietly dispatched investigators throughout the province with orders to uncover the identities of the communist organizers who were behind the demonstrations and other acts of protest. These investigators were drawn from the ranks of the *garde civile*, a provincial militia force under his direct command. Once his men had collected enough information about the agitators, Diem ordered them to roll up the communist network by making "ruthless, fast arrests." Although he insisted that all detained suspects were treated well and many of them were released to the custody of the elders in their home villages, he readily acknowledged that intimidation was a key objective of his policies. "Fear is the beginning of discipline," he explained to his subordinates.¹³

The internal security policies Diem pursued in South Vietnam after 1954 aimed to employ the same combination of repression and appeals for popular support he had used in Ninh Thuan. On the one hand, he acknowledged the importance of winning the cooperation and loyalty of the South Vietnamese rural population. This could be facilitated, he believed, by providing concrete material aid to rural residents and through vigorous propaganda and indoctrination activities. On the other hand, Diem made no bones about his plans to use harsh measures to identify, hunt down, and eliminate all of the Viet Minh cadres who remained in South Vietnam. He specifically planned to assign the latter tasks to a force organized along the lines of the colonial *garde civile*. Responsibility for implementing this strategy would rest not with central government ministries in Saigon but with the chiefs of South Vietnam's various provinces, each of whom would report directly to him.¹⁴ In this way, Diem expected to replicate his earlier triumph in Ninh Thuan on a province-by-province fashion.

Armed with this blueprint for internal security, Diem was anxious to put his ideas into practice. To do so, however, he would be obliged to work with his U.S. military and civilian advisors. While many of Diem's ideas seemed

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compatible with some of the basic security and counterinsurgency principles espoused by these Americans, actual collaboration on security matters often proved difficult. Amid the relative calm that followed the passing of the 1956 Geneva election deadline, the allies discovered mutual disagreements about the means and the ends of internal security strategy. With South Vietnam no longer at war but not yet entirely at peace, security remained an issue on which no one wanted to compromise.

The Civil Guard Controversy

Many of the existing accounts of U.S.-RVN military ties during the last half of the 1950s have portrayed the relationship as one that was dominated and defined by the United States. According to this view, the members of the U.S. Military Advisory Assistance Group (MAAG) were obsessed with a single military problem: training the ARVN to defend South Vietnam against an all-out attack by the North Vietnamese Army. During 1955–1960, the MAAG was commanded by Lieutenant General Samuel “Hanging Sam” Williams, a pugnacious officer known for his skill as a conventional warfare tactician. A veteran of the recently concluded Korean War, Williams feared that Hanoi might seek to repeat North Korea’s 1950 massive invasion of South Korea. As a result, the MAAG transformed the ARVN into a conventional army that was ill-prepared to cope with internal subversion.¹⁵ In some versions of this narrative, Diem is portrayed as having reluctantly acquiesced to the American strategy, even though he knew it was misguided.¹⁶

This interpretation is mistaken on several key points. Although Williams strongly emphasized the danger of a conventional North Vietnamese invasion, he did not ignore the possibility of internal rebellion in South Vietnam. In keeping with current U.S. military doctrine, he urged Diem to develop a comprehensive counter-guerrilla warfare plan to suppress any future communist-led resistance movements. In Williams’ view, primary responsibility for executing this plan should belong to RVN paramilitary and other internal security forces, thus freeing the ARVN to focus on external defense. This proposed division of military labor turned out to be broadly similar to Diem’s thinking on the issue. As a result, Williams remained on good terms with Diem throughout his tenure as MAAG chief.¹⁷

But Diem’s warm relations with Williams were not always sufficient to prevent disagreements between the two governments on matters of military strategy and internal security. On the contrary, the allies sparred frequently over several key questions after 1955. The most contentious of these

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questions concerned the RVN Civil Guard (Bao An), a force that Diem had created specifically to maintain order and disrupt communist designs in rural areas. By the late 1950s, the dispute over the Guard had become a major source of tension in relations between Washington and Saigon.

In part, the controversy over the Guard was an internal U.S. embassy disagreement over what the Guard's mission should be. On one side was the MSUG's Police Advisory division, which Diem had asked to provide training and equipment to the Guard. MSUG police experts viewed the Civil Guard as a civilian police force, not a military organization. But this approach was vigorously resisted by the MAAG and General Williams, who conceived of the Guard as a paramilitary force that should function as a kind of auxillary internal army. The fight inside the embassy over the Guard's role eventually became quite heated and lasted several years.¹⁸

But the controversy over the Civil Guard was more than just a bureaucratic struggle between the MSUG and the MAAG. Diem had his own strongly held views about the Guard—views that did not match those of any of the U.S. participants in the debate. Diem saw the Guard neither as a conventional police agency nor as a paramilitary auxiliary that would operate in the shadow of the ARVN. Instead, he wanted it to be a hybrid force that would combine certain police powers (including surveillance, detention, and counterintelligence duties) with elaborate military capabilities. In this way, Diem expected to use the Guard not merely as a means to keep the peace but as a frontline force in the aggressive war he expected to wage against communist operatives in South Vietnam's provinces, districts, and villages.

Diem's plans for the Civil Guard can be glimpsed in its formation in 1955 out of an amalgam of preexisting paramilitary and police forces. These preexisting groups included several militias whose members had just moved to South Vietnam from the north as part of the recent mass influx of refugees. Since some of these newly arrived militia fighters were Catholics, several observers concluded that Diem envisioned the Guard as an ultraloyal force that would serve as a counterweight to the ARVN and as a form of "coup insurance."¹⁹ But this interpretation overlooks the inclusion in the Guard of large numbers of men who were neither northerners or Catholics.²⁰ It also discounts Diem's actual plans for the organization and deployment of the force.

The hybrid force Diem had in mind would have both military and administrative missions. To facilitate the use of the Guard against commu-

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nist networks, Diem proposed to station Guard units in every province and district of South Vietnam and to place these units under the direct command of RVN province chiefs. This was in keeping with his view of the province chief as the pivot on which government administration should turn; it also reflected his determination to invest the chiefs with both military and civil powers. Diem's proposals required the Guard to be quite large—at least sixty thousand men.²¹

The MSUG's police advisors objected strongly to Diem's conception of the Civil Guard and its mission. In their view, the Guard ought to be "a civilian police [force] in every respect."²² This meant that it should conform to U.S. understandings of law enforcement as "an apolitical, technical, and problem-solving activity."²³ The MSUG also maintained that the Guard should be a national police force that would report to the RVN Interior Ministry rather than the province chiefs. In the view of MSUG members, the Guard needed neither extensive military capabilities nor vast reserves of manpower. Instead of checking communist designs through superior firepower or numbers, it would rely on conventional police powers of investigation and arrest; it could also be safely reduced in size to about twenty-five thousand men. This would be sufficient, the MSUG advisors argued, to create a force that would be "somewhat similar to a combined American state police force, a sheriff's department, and National Guard."²⁴

The differences between the MSUG proposals and Diem's views quickly became apparent. Group members objected strongly to a 1956 palace proposal to transfer the Guard from the control of the Interior Ministry to the Defense Ministry; they also complained that Diem had filled most of the top positions in the Guard with military officers.²⁵ By 1957, the relations between the MSUG's police advisors and the palace had become strained, and the Michigan State proposals were hotly debated within the U.S. mission. While Ambassador Durbrow backed the MSUG, General Williams and the MAAG came down strongly on Diem's side. In a private meeting with Diem in late 1957, Williams derided the MSUG as "police types who don't see the big picture." Diem agreed, complaining that the MSUG neither understood his thinking nor appreciated the unique security challenges that South Vietnam faced.²⁶

In 1958, U.S. officials in Washington tried to break the deadlock by suspending scheduled deliveries of equipment and weapons to the Civil Guard—a move reminiscent of USOM's earlier cutoff of aid to the Land Development Program. The aid suspension was vigorously opposed by

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Williams, who proposed that the MAAG take over the advising of the Guard from the MSUG. When he was unable to get the aid suspension lifted, Williams tried to circumvent it by arranging for the Guard to receive submachine guns from U.S. military stocks in Japan. Durbrow was furious about Williams's insubordination, but Williams received only a mild letter of reprimand.²⁷

In mid-1958, MSUG leaders decided to extricate themselves from the intensifying battle over the Guard by proposing that their advising duties be transferred to USOM.²⁸ The MSUG's involvement with the Guard ended in mid-1959. But their withdrawal from the fray did not put an end to the controversy, as Durbrow, Williams, and Diem continued to clash over the issue. Not until the fall of 1960 did Durbrow finally relent and agree to Diem's demands about equipping and training a larger Guard force. By that point, however, the fire had largely gone out of the debate, as the rapidly spreading communist insurgency forced leaders in both governments to reconsider their overall approach to military planning and strategy.

Despite his difficulties in obtaining the equipment he wanted for the Civil Guard, Diem continued to treat the Guard as a core element of his counterinsurgency strategy in the countryside throughout the 1950s. Although historians have not yet assembled a complete picture of the Guard's activities and operations, the available evidence shows that Diem and his province chiefs considered the Guard the primary force they would use to fight the communists and their supporters in the countryside. This was apparent in Diem's decision to make Guard units responsible for providing security at the newly constructed agrovilles during 1959–1960. When communist operatives organized labor slowdowns and mass demonstrations inside the new settlements, undercover Guardsmen were used in a counterintelligence operation designed to identify the agitators.²⁹ The front-line role of the Civil Guard in the late 1950s is confirmed by the fact that it sustained much higher casualties than the ARVN during the early stages of the communist insurgency against the RVN. During the last six months of 1959, the total number of battle injuries and deaths among Guardsmen exceeded the figures for ARVN soldiers by more than 50 percent. And although casualty rates for both forces rose sharply after that date, the Guard continued to suffer considerably higher losses until at least 1961.³⁰ In matters of counterinsurgency and military strategy, as in other areas of policy, Diem remained determined to keep his own counsel, even when his ideas conflicted with U.S. prescriptions.

“Welfare Improvement” and Repression in the Countryside

While the Civil Guard was a key component of the government’s overall plan to prevent subversion and destroy communist networks in the South Vietnamese countryside, Diem did not intend to rely on policing and military tactics alone. The regime also launched various other measures designed to mobilize and enlist the rural population in the fight against the communists. Some of these measures were carried out under the auspices of the Denounce Communists Campaign, which the regime had launched with both fanfare and mob violence in July 1955. In designing this campaign, NRM and RVN leaders aimed to build popular support for Diem while indoctrinating rural residents in the government’s brand of anticommunism. At the same time, these village-level programs also incorporated many harsh practices aimed at weakening the VWP by identifying, isolating, and stigmatizing its cadres and sympathizers. Moreover, the denunciation campaign and its associated mass mobilization activities coincided with the government’s adoption of a host of repressive security measures, including a system of new laws and severe punishments for those accused of subversion. The documentary record shows clearly that these measures had a devastating effect on the VWP and its operations inside South Vietnam after 1955. But the record also reveals growing fear and resentment in the countryside—feelings that the communists would exploit to great effect after 1959.

Although propaganda and mass rallies were an important part of the Denounce Communists Campaign from the outset, Diem did not think the government should rely exclusively on such tactics. He also wanted to reach the rural population in the villages and hamlets where they lived and provide them with tangible demonstrations of the government’s concern for their welfare. In March 1955, Diem established the Special Commissariat for Civic Action (Dac Uy Phu Cong Dan Vu) under the direction of Kieu Cong Cung, a former Viet Minh commander who had rallied to the government. Cung proposed to create a specially trained force of cadres who would be deployed in teams to villages. These cadres would provide various kinds of “practical and real help” to local residents while also conducting indoctrination activities.³¹

According to Diem, a key goal of Civic Action was “welfare improvement.” Cadres organized and directed the construction of wells, roads, canals, and schools; they also led public health and educational initiatives

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such as literacy campaigns. At first glance, such projects seemed broadly consistent with the ideas espoused by Lansdale and some other Americans about how the government could build ties to the population.³² However, the actual implementation of Civic Action hewed much more closely to Diem's thinking than to any American formula. In keeping with his ideas about communitarianism, self-sufficiency, and community development, Diem stressed that village residents should participate in and contribute to all Civic Action projects. Indeed, the villagers were expected to supply the bulk of the necessary labor. By tying his understanding of community development as mandatory collective labor to the Civic Action program, Diem sought to fold the program into his larger economic and ideological agenda.³³

To implement "welfare improvement" and community development in South Vietnam's districts and villages, the Civic Action program needed highly motivated cadres. But most of South Vietnam's veteran civil servants balked at the idea of leaving their comfortable posts in Saigon. So Director Cung turned to another group: recently arrived refugees from northern and central Vietnam. Among the refugee population were large numbers of men anxious to find work in the south, including many who had university educations and were staunch anticommunists. According to Lansdale, about half of the cadres recruited during the first months of the program were northerners. As men who had fled Viet Minh rule and tended to identify with Diem's government, they seemed ideal candidates to become the government's "hard-core anticommunist agents" in the villages.³⁴

But the zeal the refugee cadres displayed did not always redound to their credit in the eyes of the village residents. Native southerners often found it hard to understand the northerners' strange accents. The new arrivals also seemed unfamiliar and disdainful of southern agricultural practices. Even worse was the haughty and arrogant attitude displayed by many of the cadres, especially those who came from elite backgrounds. Local RVN provincial officials complained that some northerner cadres bullied local residents with verbal abuse and physical assaults. That the perpetrators of these abuses often invoked Diem's authority to justify their behavior hardly served to increase the government's prestige among the population.³⁵

Even the Civic Action cadres who were most scrupulous in carrying about their duties were resented for their seemingly fanatical commitment to anticommunism. When setting up the network of interfamily groups in a village or hamlet, cadres often used colored placards installed outside a

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family's home to indicate their assessment of the residents' loyalty. Those who did not have ties to the Viet Minh or were deemed supportive of the government received attractive gold or white signs; the households suspected of having links to the resistance were marked by black signs. While these actions sometimes served to isolate the VWP's supporters, they also exacerbated ordinary villagers' fear and distrust of the government.³⁶

Civic Action operations were not always counterproductive. Some cadres took "welfare improvement" seriously and gained the trust of village residents. In addition, the establishment of a system for recruiting and training personnel who could operate at the village level would prove useful later; for example, Civic Action cadres would play key roles in the implementation of the regime's Strategic Hamlet Program during 1962–1963. On the whole, however, the achievements of the Special Commissariat for Civic Action were outweighed by its cadres' inability to persuade rural residents that they should cast their lot with the government. "During the Resistance the communists had been the only ones in the village to fight against the French," one Civic Action cadre later remembered. "So when we tried to explain that communists were evil people, the villagers just didn't listen to us."³⁷ Even at a time when the VWP's influence in the countryside was at a low ebb, the RVN Civic Action program proved unable to build even modest levels of popular support for the regime. The costs of this failure would become apparent within a remarkably short period of time.

The launch and expansion of the Civic Action program during 1955–1956 coincided with the early stages of a new government crackdown on subversion in the countryside. Presidential Ordinance No. 6, issued in January 1956, asserted the government's right to detain any person deemed "dangerous to national defense and public security" for up to two years. The law specifically permitted officials to "exile" such suspects to detention camps. Another ordinance made it a capital offense to maintain relations with any "foreign nation or communist organization."³⁸ By making it illegal to have any dealings with the VWP, these measures granted sweeping powers to administrative and police officials at the provincial, district, and village level. Anyone whom local authorities suspected of being a communist—or simply having communist sympathies—could be arrested, interrogated, and jailed. Although many of those detained were in custody for only a few days or weeks, thousands were imprisoned for years. Because the new laws allowed provincial officials to impose sentences without sending a suspect

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to trial, only a fraction of those arrested on political charges were ever allowed to make a formal defense in court. The total number of people arrested on political charges during 1954–1960 is unknown, but the available evidence shows that it ran into the tens of thousands.³⁹

The VWP's apparatus in South Vietnam was severely damaged by the Denounce Communists Campaign and the other elements of the regime's crackdown. According to contemporary party sources and postwar histories, the party had approximately sixty thousand members in southern Vietnam (Cochinchina) at the time of the Geneva cease-fire in 1954. Over the next five years, that number shrank by more than 90 percent to around five thousand. Much of this decline was due to an internal purge in which cadres with "dubious political backgrounds" were expelled from the party.⁴⁰ It is clear, however, that RVN security forces arrested or killed significant numbers of cadres in the southern provinces, especially after 1957. In many districts and villages, security forces wiped out the party's local operations. Between 1954 and 1957, party membership in the Saigon districts of Go Vap and Tan Binh declined from around 1,000 cadres to 385. By mid-1959, a total of just six cadres were left in the two districts. The regime's crackdown also took a heavy toll on the party in central Vietnam, where as many as 70 percent of rank-and-file cadres were caught in the government dragnet. By 1958, all provinces in central Vietnam were under firm government control, and the party appeared to have been eliminated as a political force in the region. Insofar as the disruption of the party's subversive capabilities was one of the Diem regime's primary goals in the countryside, its internal security strategy during the late 1950s can be correctly characterized as a short-run success.⁴¹

This success, however, proved both incomplete and fleeting. Although Diem often insisted that the rural population supported the regime's operations against the communists, such claims were belied by the many noncommunists who got caught up in the crackdown. People not connected to the party were often detained on the basis of false information given to authorities. Government officials sometimes made bogus accusations to settle old scores, to punish their local business rivals, or to extract bribes or other favors. The officers working in the Security Bureau of the National Police were known to be especially rapacious. In 1958, the RVN interior minister admitted that "many illegal arrests" had been made by the security police due to a "lack of discipline" in the Bureau. Officers who were found to have abused their authority were not punished but simply transferred to another province.⁴²

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Rural residents' fears about mistreatment at the hands of corrupt local officials were compounded by their awareness of the deplorable state of the South Vietnamese prison system. Anyone imprisoned on political charges was required to undergo "reeducation"—a process that involved mind-numbing lectures on the dangers of communism and the virtues of personalism. Prisoners also endured abysmal living conditions, overcrowding, and lack of access to clean water. Malnutrition and disease were rampant in many prisons.⁴³

Those arrested for political crimes in South Vietnam were often subjected to torture. Prior to 1954, colonial police officers had routinely used torture in interrogations; torture was also used by all sides during the First Indochina War. As a result, RVN police and security agencies had no shortage of experienced torturers among their ranks. Many of the particular forms of torture that would be condemned by human rights activists during the later years of the Vietnam War were already being used in South Vietnam during the late 1950s. Some prisoners were subjected to the "water treatment," during which they were forced to ingest huge quantities of dirty water or had their heads submerged until they were on the verge of drowning. Other prisoners endured the "airplane," in which they were tied up and suspended painfully from ropes and then spun around. It was not unusual for suspects to be kept lashed to wooden posts for hours in the hot sun, sometimes while being subjected to the bites of insects and animals.⁴⁴ Reports by U.S. advisors show that the "tiger cages" on the prison island of Con Son, which would become internationally infamous during the 1970s as symbols of the South Vietnamese government's brutality, were in use during Diem's tenure in power. Prisoners identified as hard-core communists were kept in these cramped cages for up to several months at a time, often while immobilized by leg irons.⁴⁵ While some of these acts of torture can be attributed to the zealotry or the sadism of individual officials, there is considerable evidence that senior leaders of the Diem government—including members of the Ngo family—endorsed torture as a means to extract information. After the fall of the Diem government in 1963, several former political prisoners testified that they had been tortured at a secret Can Lao prison located on the grounds of the Saigon Zoo. Others were brutalized at Ngo Dinh Can's "Nine Bunkers" complex outside Hue.⁴⁶

If the repression that accompanied the Denounce Communists Campaign had been focused exclusively on communists and the VWP sympathizers, the Diem regime might have permanently eliminated the party as

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an effective force in South Vietnam. But in its indiscriminate zeal to cow the enemy's cadres and supporters into submission, the government helped create the conditions that would fuel the party's comeback. By its own actions—the granting of arbitrary powers of arrest to corrupt local officials, the detentions of thousands of innocent people, and the widespread use of torture—the regime produced a rising tide of fear that washed across all segments of South Vietnamese rural society. The VWP, despite the devastating setbacks it had been dealt by Diem's security forces, quickly learned to turn this emerging terror to its own advantage. Instead of fear serving as “the beginning of discipline,” as Diem had hoped, it became the lever the party would use to reverse its fortunes and throw the government on the defensive.

The weaknesses in the government's strategy of repression—and the communists' ability to exploit those weaknesses—were apparent in RVN Law 10/59, the most controversial of the government's repressive measures. Adopted in May 1959, Law 10/59 created special military tribunals comprised of ARVN officers. These tribunals were empowered to investigate and pass judgment on anyone accused of murder, sabotage, or any “offense to national security.” If found guilty, a suspect could be sentenced to a long prison term or death; in the case of the latter, the execution was to be carried out immediately, barring a last-minute reprieve from the president. This streamlining of the justice process was clearly a reaction to the sharp escalation in communist attacks on government targets during 1958 and early 1959. In the regime's view, Law 10/59 was an eminently just and necessary response to the party's “elimination of traitors” (*tru gian*) assassination campaign, which had claimed the lives of hundreds of RVN officials and other supporters since mid-1957.⁴⁷

Law 10/59 marked a significant shift in the regime's tactics of repression. After his much-criticized decision to execute the Hoa Hao rebel chieftain Ba Cut in 1956, Diem had appeared to move away from applying capital punishment to political prisoners. But with the passage of Law 10/59, Diem reverted to his earlier willingness to use capital punishment as a means of intimidating his enemies. As the U.S. embassy noted, the palace intended the law as a signal of its new resolve that “the Viet Cong be shown no quarter.”⁴⁸

The number of people executed under the provisions of Law 10/59 remains unclear. The available evidence, however, suggests that the total was

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far lower than the thousands that some of the regime's critics later alleged. Instead of using the law to conduct mass executions, Diem arranged for the military tribunals to try and condemn a relatively small number of accused communists in what amounted to a series of show trials. In Diem's mind, this was a carefully calibrated show of restraint that would demonstrate the government's determination to punish its enemies without derailing its efforts to gain popular support.⁴⁹

But the psychological impact of Law 10/59 turned out to be very different from what Diem intended. Previously, most RVN death sentences had been carried out on remote Con Son island, where they had not attracted much attention; the Law 10/59 executions, in contrast, were performed on the spot in the provincial capital or town where the military tribunal happened to be sitting. This strengthened the impression that the government's crackdown had moved into a new and more draconian phase. The regime's bloodthirsty image was further reinforced by its decision to continue the colonial-era practice of conducting executions by guillotine. The members of the tribunal brought a portable version of the gruesome device with them as they traveled around the country—a detail communist propagandists did not fail to highlight in their denunciations of the tribunals.⁵⁰ Given the large numbers of rural residents who had been falsely accused of being communists prior to 1959, Law 10/59 and its emphasis on capital punishment only heightened ordinary people's fear of the government and its representatives.

Whatever the actual number of executions carried out under Law 10/59 may have been, the military tribunals were not the only means the regime used to kill suspected communists after 1959. According to one high-ranking RVN source, Diem sometimes ordered province chiefs to dispense with judicial procedure altogether in cases involving prisoners believed to be high-ranking party cadres. These presidential orders for summary execution without trial were issued verbally and were supposed to be carried out in secret. The number of such extrajudicial killings committed by RVN security forces is unknown, but Diem's reliance on the practice is telling of how far he was willing to go in his efforts to crush the expanding resistance to his rule.⁵¹

To call attention to the Diem regime's repressive practices is not to suggest that the government was the sole author of the rebellion that arose in South Vietnam during the late 1950s. As in earlier revolutions, the insurgency that

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exploded across the countryside after 1959 had many causes and progenitors. To portray the insurgency as nothing more than a reaction to the regime's repressive actions is to overlook the calculations and decisions made by senior VWP leaders in North Vietnam, as well as the rising tide of violent resistance organized and fomented by the party's cadres in the South.⁵² Such an interpretation also discounts the agency of ordinary rural South Vietnamese, many of whom chose to take up arms against Diem for reasons that transcended mere survival.⁵³ There is no doubt, however, that the Diem government's efforts to destroy the VWP in the south helped to bring about the uprising he had hoped to prevent. While Diem never intended that his internal security strategy would rest on force and repression alone, harsh measures were nonetheless a key part of his plan from the outset. In its reliance on mass arrests, torture, and corrupt local officials, the regime helped produce the conditions in which rebellion could thrive. By 1960, Diem faced the bitter realization that his internal security policies and strategies had failed and his communist enemies had recovered from the devastating losses they had endured during 1956–1958. As he would soon discover, these failures were fueling discontent within his government and in the ranks of South Vietnam's armed forces. They would also present new difficulties in his relations with the United States.

The Failed Coup of 1960

Shortly after three o'clock in the morning on November 11, 1960, the nighttime quiet in Saigon was shattered by machine-gun fire and mortar explosions. A few hours earlier, three battalions of ARVN paratroopers had entered the city's downtown districts and taken control of key military, police, telephone, and radio facilities. The soldiers were under the direction of Colonel Nguyen Chanh Thi, the head of the ARVN's elite Airborne Brigade. Thi and his men encountered little resistance until they attempted to take their main objective: Independence Palace. Despite being badly outnumbered and under heavy fire, the members of Diem's Presidential Guard stood their ground and repelled the paratroopers' initial assault. The palace would not, however, be able to hold out for long without reinforcements. By dawn, the news had spread across South Vietnam and around the world: a coup was under way in Saigon, and Diem's chances of putting it down looked very bad indeed.⁵⁴

The rebels' failure to seize the palace at the outset of their coup attempt proved to be their undoing. Convinced that Diem had no choice but to

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A rebel armored car outside Independence Palace during the early stages of the attempted coup against the Diem government on November 11, 1960. (Edward Geary Lansdale Papers, envelope HG, Hoover Institution Archives)

acquiesce to their demands, the coup leaders offered to negotiate with him on the establishment of a new government. Diem agreed to parley, figuring that it would allow him to stall for time. Once the talks started, the rebels were hampered by confusion within their own ranks. This confusion stemmed in part from the fact that the rebellion had been masterminded not by Thi but by two of his subordinates, the lieutenant colonels Vuong Van Dong and Nguyen Trieu Hong. The twenty-eight-year-old Dong, who unexpectedly had to take over the negotiations after Hong was killed during the initial attack on the palace, seemed uncertain about the specific demands he wanted to impose on Diem. His indecision was made more costly by a mistake committed during the early stages of the coup. Although the paratroopers had taken control of the Saigon's main telephone exchange when they seized the city's central post office, they had neglected to secure a backup system in the basement of the building. A few hours after the coup began, the post office director used this

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system to place a call to Dr. Tran Kim Tuyen, who was frantically seeking to bring reinforcements into the city to raise the siege. With the director's help, Tuyen was able to summon loyal armor and infantry units to the capital.⁵⁵ Diem, knowing that help was on the way, pretended to agree to most of the plotters' demands, and even consented to make a radio broadcast in which he announced that he would work with the rebels to establish a provisional government. At midday on November 12, Dong and his fellow plotters realized that the balance of forces in the city had tipped against them. Making their way to the city airport, they boarded a military plane and fled into exile in Cambodia. Diem had survived—barely.⁵⁶

The failed coup of November 1960 has long been viewed as a watershed in the history of South Vietnam's first republic. The uprising marked the first time since Diem's victory in the Battle of Saigon that he faced the prospect of being overthrown by his own armed forces. The rebellion also sharply changed the tone of the regime's relations with the U.S. embassy, since Diem and Nhu suspected—incorrectly, as it turned out—that some Americans had encouraged the coup. Thus, one effect of the rebellion was to make the brothers more wary and suspicious of the partners whose support they needed to stay in power. In other ways, however, the episode merely reinforced the Ngos' prior convictions and patterns of behavior. As we have seen, Diem and Nhu believed that their earlier triumphs had turned on their ability to find individuals within key organizations—including the ARVN and the U.S. mission—whom they could enlist in their efforts to isolate and undercut their enemies. The paratroopers' revolt, even though it had nearly toppled their government, seemed to show that they had been right to rely on such tactics. November 1960 was indeed a moment full of danger for the beleaguered Diem regime, but the Ngo brothers were determined to treat it also as a moment of opportunity—a opportunity to regain the advantage in their dealings with rivals and allies alike.

The paratroopers' rebellion came at the end of a year of revolutionary upheaval and military setbacks for the Diem government. During 1957 and 1958, the South Vietnamese countryside had been relatively quiet; the use of violence by communist operatives was limited mainly to their "elimination of traitors" assassination campaign and occasional strikes against lightly defended army and police outposts. By the fall of 1959, however, antigovernment attacks and agitation had increased sharply. In September, a force of several hundred insurgents successfully ambushed two

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ARVN companies in the Plain of Reeds in the Mekong Delta. Killings and kidnappings of government officials also rose.⁵⁷

This uptick in activity was only a prelude to a much larger explosion of revolutionary violence during 1960. In mid-January, party cadres launched a “concerted uprising” (*dong khoi*) in Ben Tre province in the Mekong Delta. Using a combination of small-scale military strikes and antigovernment demonstrations, the revolutionaries briefly took over large parts of the province. On January 26, in the midst of the Lunar New Year holiday, a large force of insurgents overran an ARVN regimental headquarters at Trang Sup, near Tay Ninh city west of Saigon. The attackers killed several dozen soldiers and made off with six hundred firearms—by far the insurgency’s biggest battlefield victory to date.⁵⁸ Over the next few months, VWP activists organized additional uprisings across the Mekong Delta, and insurgent units continued to mount attacks on government troops.⁵⁹ A disturbing indicator of the insurgency’s growing strength during 1960 was the sixfold expansion of the communists’ radio network in the southern provinces.⁶⁰ The rebellion also spread to central Vietnam, an area the government had long considered secure. In August, a rebel attack on an ARVN outpost in Quang Nam was the first large-scale strike by communist forces in the region since the end of the First Indochina War.⁶¹

For most ARVN officers, the rapid spread of the insurgency during 1960 was deeply worrisome. But some army commanders were even more concerned about the regime’s response to the crisis and its apparent unwillingness to address the shortcomings in its strategies and policies. While Diem was dismayed by the Ben Tre uprising and the communist victory at Trang Sup, he quickly persuaded himself that these events were evidence of the enemy’s growing desperation. Like some U.S. officials, Diem preferred to view the attacks as proof that the insurgency was in its death throes. As late as the spring of 1960, he maintained that the insurgents had been forced to go on the offensive because of the success of the Land Development Centers and the agrovilles.⁶²

In contrast, many ARVN officers believed that the communists’ gains showed that the palace was paying insufficient attention to the military dimensions of the problem. These officers also complained that palace meddling in the army’s internal organization had begun to erode its effectiveness as a fighting force. They were especially disturbed by the fact that promotions and assignment to combat commands seemed to depend more on Can Lao Party membership than on leadership ability. The mauling of the

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ARVN regiment at Trang Sup, which at the time was under the command of a Ngo family loyalist whom many ARVN officers considered incompetent, seemed to underscore how serious this problem had become.⁶³

Some ARVN commanders were also upset that Diem seemed increasingly unwilling to listen to the opinions of his fellow Vietnamese anticommunists. During his first year in power, Diem had appointed several prominent anticommunists to cabinet positions or other government posts; the regime had also tolerated the criticisms some deputies voiced in the first RVN National Assembly. But by the late 1950s, Diem had replaced almost all of the high-profile political figures in the cabinet with technocrats. In addition, the regime's blatant manipulation of the second Assembly elections in 1959 suggested that its willingness to listen to dissenting views had been exhausted.

Alarmed by these and other developments, a group of eighteen Saigon civilian political leaders wrote an open letter to Diem on April 19, 1960. While none of the eighteen could claim a broad popular following, all were well known in elite circles in South Vietnam. More than half had served in the cabinet or other high government office since Diem had come to power in 1954. Their letter, later dubbed the "Caravelle manifesto" after the hotel where it was signed, was a wide-ranging and scathing critique of the regime's policies. Among other things, the authors decried the general lack of political freedom in South Vietnam and the harsh security measures that had "crammed the jails and prisons to the rafters." They also criticized the regime's rural development policies, especially its use of compulsory labor to build the "imposing but useless agrovilles." The National Assembly elections of the previous fall, the authors declared, had "trampled and insulted" the will of the people. Most pointed of all were their remarks about the Ngo family ("the place from which all orders are issued") and the actions of the Can Lao Party. Diem, predictably, rejected the allegations and ignored the specific reform proposals presented in the manifesto. But many of the letter's complaints resonated with ARVN officers—especially its denunciation of the regime's use of the Can Lao to sow divisions in the army and its assertion that such divisions were the cause of the recent defeat at Trang Sup.⁶⁴

By the fall of 1960, the frustration with Diem in the ARVN officer corps was higher than at any time since the Battle of Saigon five years earlier. This does not mean that the army was overflowing with insurrectionary sentiment. While many commanders sympathized with the criticisms voiced by the Caravelle group, few were prepared to take up arms against

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Troops arriving in Saigon to put down the attempted coup against the Diem government, November 12, 1960. (Edward Geary Lansdale Papers, Envelope HG, Hoover Institution Archives)

the government. Indeed, many officers retained considerable respect for Diem and his past accomplishments. The commanders who had rallied to Diem in 1955 had not forgotten his praise for their valor in the fight against the Binh Xuyen; many officers also gave him credit for defending the army's honor during the late-night confrontation at Independence Palace between General Nguyen Van Vy and the Revolutionary Committee. Those memories help to explain one of the most puzzling aspects of the 1960 coup: the coup leaders' decision to negotiate with Diem when they could have easily captured or killed him. Although some of the rebel commanders favored removing Diem from power—Colonel Thi wanted to use artillery to level Independence Palace—Lieutenant Colonel Dong tried to persuade Diem to stay on as the “supreme advisor” to a provisional government made up of opposition politicians and army commanders. In hindsight, Dong's negotiation attempts were foolhardy, but they reflected the conflicted feelings he and many of his fellow officers had about Diem.⁶⁵

The ambivalence of the ARVN officer corps toward Diem was a key factor that allowed him to put down the paratroopers' coup. During the first

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hours of the uprising, a small number of officers rallied to Diem and provided him with crucial help in his efforts to stall for time. Among these was Nguyen Khanh, a recently promoted brigadier general who lived in downtown Saigon. Awakened by the sound of gunfire when the coup began, Khanh raced to the palace to join its defenders; because the guards were under strict orders not to open the gate for anyone, he had to climb over the fence to get inside. In the tense hours that followed, Khanh engaged the rebel leaders in dialog while also assisting the palace's efforts to bring reinforcements into the city. Khanh worked with Ky Quang Liem, a deputy director of the Civil Guard, to trick the rebels into letting a column of tanks drive through their lines; Khanh then ordered the unit's commander to turn his guns around and point them at the besiegers.⁶⁶ Khanh, Liem, and the handful of other army leaders who made such displays of loyalty during the coup were duly rewarded afterward. Nevertheless, Diem and Nhu could not help but notice that most top ARVN commanders had chosen to keep out of sight until it was clear that the putsch had failed. After the coup collapsed, the brothers lost no time in conveying their displeasure to the senior officers who had failed to come to the president's aid.

The Ngo brothers were particularly suspicious of the behavior of three of the ARVN's most senior generals: Lieutenant Generals Tran Van Don and Duong Van Minh and Major General Le Van Kim. Don, Minh, and Kim had all once been counted as strong supporters of Diem. Although they had begun their military careers in the French army, they had chosen to cast their lots with Diem during the Binh Xuyen crisis of 1955 and had been rewarded with promotions and choice commands. But none had been able to stay permanently in Diem's good graces. Kim, who was widely considered the ARVN's most skilled tactician, was the first to be sidelined. While overseeing the Land Development Program in the Central Highlands in the mid-1950s, Kim provoked Diem's ire by his decision to compensate highlander minority groups who had been forced to surrender their land.⁶⁷ The palace may also have blamed Kim for the security breach that nearly resulted in Diem's assassination at the highlands agricultural fair in 1957.⁶⁸ Although Diem subsequently promoted Kim to brigadier general, he did so only to clear the way for Kim to become head of the ARVN's military academy at Dalat—a noncombat post widely viewed as a dead-end job.

Duong Van Minh's fall from favor was even more precipitous than Kim's had been. Following the Battle of Saigon, Diem had glowingly described



The ARVN colonel (later general) Duong Van Minh during a Saigon parade celebrating his victory over Binh Xuyen forces in the Rung Sat campaign, November 1955. (AP Photo)

then—Colonel Minh as the best and most loyal officer in the entire army.⁶⁹ Minh's stock with Diem rose even higher after his successful conduct of the fall 1955 campaign against the remnants of the Binh Xuyen in the swamps south of Saigon. After defeating the gangsters, Minh returned to a hero's welcome in the capital. During a celebratory parade, Diem embraced the bewildered commander and kissed him on both cheeks.⁷⁰

It was not long, however, before Diem began to revise his positive assessment of Minh—possibly at the instigation of Nhu, who reportedly disapproved of his brother's fawning attitude toward the officer.⁷¹ After returning from a training mission in the United States in 1957, Minh did

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not receive any combat assignments. Instead, he was made head of the ARVN's newly created "Field Command," a position that required him to spend most of his time inspecting troops commanded by other officers. Minh's colleagues noted that his duties had been reduced to mere "sitting and playing at drinking tea."⁷²

Tran Van Don shared Kim's and Minh's frustration with the Ngo brothers, even though his dealings with the palace had followed a different course. Don's service record included a five-year stint as the head of the ARVN's First Army Corps in central Vietnam from 1957 to 1962—the longest tenure of any ARVN general in a combat command under Diem's rule. This did not mean, however, that Diem trusted Don. In fact, Diem seems to have harbored doubts about Don's loyalties from the outset. Despite Don's support for Diem during the Battle of Saigon, Diem suspected that he might be playing a "half-French, half-Vietnamese game," a reference to Don's previous service as an aide to General Nguyen Van Hinh.⁷³ Don, for his part, resented certain slights he believed the president had deliberately inflicted on him. He was especially angry that Diem had put off the formal approval of his promotion to lieutenant general until the day after Minh had been elevated to that rank—a delay that vaulted Minh ahead of Don in the ARVN hierarchy.⁷⁴

Any hopes that Kim, Minh, and Don might have harbored for patching up their relations with the palace were dealt a severe blow by the paratroopers' failed coup. Because Don and Minh had both been in Saigon during the coup but had not attempted to reach the palace, the Ngo brothers wondered whether they had secretly sympathized with the rebels—or perhaps even orchestrated the uprising from behind the scenes. Although Don and Minh were subsequently cleared of any wrongdoing, they were incensed that Diem entrusted these investigations to officers of inferior rank.⁷⁵

General Kim was also obliged to endure the indignity of a formal inquiry, even though he had been in Dalat throughout the rebellion. Because of Kim's reputation for competence, the coup leaders had announced that they intended to make him prime minister of the provisional government they intended to establish. Despite Kim's insistence that he had been unaware of the rebels' plans, he was detained for several weeks after the coup. After he was cleared, Diem decided to transfer him to Minh's makework "Field Command." Kim's only consolation was that he was now able to accompany Minh on his frequent inspection tours to

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Don's First Corps headquarters in Hue, where the three generals discussed their growing disgust with the Ngos.⁷⁶

In the years after the failed coup of 1960, some observers concluded that its main effect had been to awaken Diem and Nhu to the dangers of an army rebellion. According to this view, the brothers were so shocked by their near-overthrow that they became obsessed with manipulating the army's chain of command to prevent future uprisings—even at the cost of undermining the RVN war effort against the communists.⁷⁷ The manipulative aspects of the palace's dealings with the ARVN are indisputable; nevertheless, this interpretation underestimates the Ngos' self-assurance and misrepresents the conclusions they drew from the coup. Despite the rebels' near-success, the brothers saw the outcome of the episode as proof that they remained in effective control of the army. They noted that only a tiny number of officers had joined the rebellion and that their strategy of placing loyalists in key posts had paid off. And while they were irked that several senior officers had chosen to remain neutral during the crisis, they did not see this as requiring a fundamental change in their methods. The existence of dissatisfaction within the South Vietnamese army was neither new nor unduly troubling for Diem and Nhu. In their view, the threat posed by such dissatisfaction could be neutralized by continued application of the divide-and-conquer tactics they had employed since 1954. As their treatment of Minh, Kim, and Don suggested, the brothers were as confident as ever in their ability to identify and contain potential opponents within the army. By keeping their friends close and their enemies closer, they believed they could check any future coup attempts, even as they continued to wage war against the communists in the countryside. For the Ngo brothers, coups were a kind of occupational hazard—challenges they expected to face and overcome, just as they had defeated all earlier attempts to oust them from power.

Beyond its impact on internal RVN politics, the paratroopers' abortive coup also profoundly affected the Diem government's relations with the United States. Although the U.S. mission had no advance knowledge of the coup, the actions of some embassy personnel during the uprising led the Ngos to suspect otherwise. These suspicions, combined with Diem's growing irritation over U.S. pressure for government reforms, helped push relations between the embassy and the palace to new lows during the last weeks of 1960.

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In the months before the coup, Diem's dealings with Ambassador Durbrow had become increasing tense. By mid-1960, Durbrow was convinced that Diem had no effective plan for countering the rising communist insurgency. He was also convinced that the backlash against the regime's internal security policies had reached alarming dimensions. But when Durbrow broached the issues of corruption and political favoritism with Diem, Diem angrily denied that either was a problem.⁷⁸ Convinced that the regime was "in quite serious danger," Durbrow proposed to have a "frank and friendly talk" with Diem to press for particular reforms and personnel changes. Among other things, he wanted to urge Diem to name new defense and interior ministers, to bring opposition leaders into the cabinet, and to "surface" the Can Lao Party by publicizing its membership and operations. Durbrow also believed that the time had come to remove Nhu, Madame Nhu, and Dr. Tuyen from the scene by sending them overseas. With the State Department's approval, Durbrow delivered his *démarche* to Diem on October 14.⁷⁹

Durbrow's proposals were blasted by those U.S. officials who favored a soft-sell approach to Diem.⁸⁰ Several authors would later criticize Durbrow's *démarche* as a presumptuous and counterproductive gesture that greatly eroded Diem's confidence in his U.S. allies.⁸¹ It is unlikely, however, that Diem saw the *démarche* as marking a major change in the U.S. attitude toward his government. Almost all of Durbrow's points—especially the changes to the cabinet and the removal of the Nhuses—were similar to what Diem had heard from other U.S. officials at various times since 1954. Although he was clearly annoyed by the *démarche*, he did not seem particularly surprised or upset by it.⁸²

For Diem, Durbrow's reform demands were less troubling than the actions undertaken by U.S. embassy personnel during the November coup. George Carver, an operative in the CIA's Saigon station, had been canvassing Saigon opposition politicians in the weeks prior to the uprising. When the coup began on November 11, one of Carver's contacts invited him to sit in on the meetings of a group of anti-Diem civilian leaders who were involved in the negotiations with the palace. Another CIA operative, Russ Miller, went to the headquarters of the ARVN Joint General Staff at the Saigon airport, which the rebels had commandeered. As the coup unfolded and loyal reinforcements closed in on Saigon, Durbrow ordered both Carver and Miller to urge the rebels not to storm or shell Diem's palace. This order might well have saved the lives of the Ngos and their defenders; Miller claimed to have persuaded Colonel Thi not to fire a battery of 105-mm

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howitzers that rebel gunners had trained on the palace. After the coup collapsed, the Ngo brothers initially professed to be pleased with the CIA's actions. However, they were furious to discover that Carver had helped smuggle one of his rebel contacts out of the country. They were also angry that Durbrow had adopted a neutral stance during the coup and had advised Diem to compromise to avoid bloodshed.⁸³

In the weeks after the coup, relations between the U.S. mission and the Diem government appeared to hit deadlock. In December, Durbrow reported a "serious undercurrent of malaise and skepticism" in Saigon. He planned to continue to urge Diem to undertake reforms and to implement the points contained in the October *démarche*. But he also admitted that "we must find suitable means to bring pressure" on the RVN president. In general, the situation in South Vietnam had become "highly dangerous to U.S. interests." The communist insurgency was continuing to gain strength in the countryside. Meanwhile, Diem faced "widespread popular dissatisfaction" due to his government's failure to end the war and its "heavy-handed methods of operation." If Diem did not address these problems, Durbrow warned his superiors, the United States would soon be "forced" to begin the work of "identifying and supporting alternative leadership."⁸⁴

Durbrow was correct about the Diem regime's declining support within South Vietnam and the Ngos' continued unwillingness to hear U.S. advice about reforms. But he was mistaken to suggest that Diem planned merely to continue on the same course as before. In fact, the palace had recognized, albeit belatedly, that its nation-building programs and internal security strategy in the countryside had failed and that new approaches and policies needed to be found. Along with Nhu, Diem was determined that 1961 would be a year of change in both policies and personnel in South Vietnam. In addition, the Ngos expected their relations with the United States to improve in the new year. Diem was looking forward to a new beginning with John F. Kennedy, who had narrowly won the U.S. presidential election on November 8. Diem hoped that Kennedy, a fellow Catholic whom he had met nearly a decade before, would make good on his past expressions of support for Diem and South Vietnam. As badly as things had gone in their relations with Washington recently, the Ngos remained confident that the alliance could be remade in a form that would facilitate a new drive toward victory over their enemies.

7

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On May 25, 1961, John Kennedy delivered the first congressional address of his presidency. Although his speech would be best remembered for his proposal to commit the United States to the goal of sending a man to the moon within a decade, Kennedy devoted the bulk of his remarks to more terrestrial concerns. In the four months since he had taken office, the new president had already faced foreign policy crises in Laos, Congo, and Cuba. It was therefore no accident that he began by referring to the countries of the Third World—what he called “the whole southern half of the globe” and “the lands of the rising peoples.” Many of these countries, Kennedy declared, were endangered by the “adversaries of freedom” who sought to “prey on unstable or unpopular governments.” But sheer military might would be insufficient to combat the threat. Because the struggle in the Third World was “a battle for minds and souls as well as lives and territory,” the United States must be prepared to combine its military assistance to those nations with increased amounts of nonmilitary aid. “The most skillful counter-guerrilla efforts cannot succeed,” he warned, “where the local population is too caught up in its own misery to be concerned about the advance of communism.”¹

Kennedy’s victory in the 1960 presidential election seemed to offer new hope for renewed collaboration between Washington and Saigon in the war against the NLF. Kennedy had genuinely admired Diem ever since

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meeting him at the 1953 luncheon in Justice Douglas's chambers. To the Ngos, Kennedy's emphasis on counterinsurgency warfare and increased foreign aid appeared to signal a welcome change from the policies of his predecessor. Like Kennedy, Ngo Dinh Diem and Ngo Dinh Nhu were convinced that victory over the communists could be achieved only via the development of a successful counterinsurgency strategy. Moreover, they had come to believe that such a strategy must rest on more than just security measures designed to protect the population from the enemy. Thus, with the tide of the war in the countryside now clearly running against the Diem government, both sides appeared to have compelling reasons to agree to reconfigure the U.S.-RVN alliance. Kennedy and Diem would eventually forge such an agreement, but neither its terms nor its consequences were what either president expected.

Hopes and Fears, Hearts and Minds

For Kennedy and his senior advisors, the problems the United States faced in South Vietnam in 1961 were related to a broader array of threats to Washington's Cold War strategic interests. At the time that the new president took office in January, tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union were spiking to levels not seen since the early 1950s. In a widely noted speech delivered shortly before Kennedy's inauguration, Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev announced that the communist bloc was driving toward "inevitable victory" over the West; he also signaled Moscow's support for "wars of national liberation" across the Third World. That Khrushchev had definitively abandoned his previous calls for "peaceful coexistence" with the West seemed to be confirmed by events during the spring and summer of 1961, when Kennedy found himself wrestling with crises in Germany, Cuba, Laos, and the Congo. In retrospect, it is clear that the interventionist policies the United States had previously pursued in each of those countries—policies Kennedy now adopted as his own—helped foment the crises that he faced during his first months in office. Nevertheless, many members of the administration viewed these events as proof that Moscow had embarked on a new worldwide offensive aimed at seizing the initiative in the Cold War. Viewed against this ominous backdrop, the Diem government's inability to check the "Viet Cong" insurgency inside South Vietnam was worrisome indeed. As the incoming secretary of defense, Robert McNamara, later recalled, the new administration felt "beset and at risk" from recent Soviet moves when it took office.²

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Nevertheless, Kennedy's decisions about Vietnam were not driven by fear and pessimism alone. From the moment he took office, Kennedy signaled his intent to pursue a foreign policy that would use U.S. knowledge and material aid to transform the world for the better. His confidence in America's capacity for uplift was particularly apparent in his plans for increased foreign aid to the countries of Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Although his inaugural address of January 1961 would later be remembered as a stirring call to service aimed at Americans, Kennedy also made reference to "those peoples in the huts and villages across the globe struggling to break the bonds of mass misery." He promised the United States' "best efforts to help them help themselves, for whatever period is required."³ In some ways, Kennedy's words were reminiscent of Truman's 1949 Point IV address, especially in his invocation of U.S.-led development as a means to lift Third World nations out of poverty. Yet Kennedy was also asserting his conviction that U.S. aid and advisory programs could be configured in new and more effective ways.

The idealism that underlay Kennedy's approach to Third World development was reflected in the connections he drew between foreign aid and counterinsurgency. As part of his efforts to distinguish his Cold War policies from those pursued by Eisenhower, Kennedy called for "a wholly new kind of strategy" to combat communist-led insurgencies around the world. This call helped trigger a "counterinsurgency ferment" in U.S. military circles during the early 1960s. Officers and civilian strategists scrambled to read up on Mao and the "lessons" of past insurgencies in Malaya, the Philippines, and elsewhere. As indicated by his aforementioned comments to Congress in May 1960, Kennedy was adamant that counterinsurgency should not be thought of merely as an alternative set of battlefield tactics. Guerrillas would not be defeated merely through force of arms; military efforts would have to go hand in hand with measures to remedy miserable living conditions. This implied a blurring of the conventional distinction between military and nonmilitary aid. Henceforth, economic and political reform measures had to be integrated directly into Washington's counterinsurgency strategies.⁴

While Kennedy himself was the driving force behind the "counterinsurgency ferment," the task of devising the actual strategies to be used in particular countries fell to his subordinates. In the case of South Vietnam, the administration's decisions were shaped by an internal debate involving officials who espoused a variety of approaches to counterinsurgency. Although

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this debate has sometimes been cast as a contest between “military” and “political” approaches, such a characterization does not accurately capture the main issues at stake.⁵ Nor can the debate be explained as nothing more than a product of the bureaucratic rivalries that pitted the Pentagon against the State Department, the White House, or other executive branch agencies. Rather, the wrangling over counterinsurgency in the Kennedy administration was rooted in older arguments over development, and especially in the differences between high and low modernist styles of thinking.

Among Kennedy’s top advisors, the preeminent advocate for a high modernist approach to counterinsurgency was the economist Walt W. Rostow. By 1961, Rostow was one of America’s best known academic experts on modernization. As a professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology during the 1950s, Rostow had worked at the university’s Center for International Studies (CENIS), a hothouse of academic work on modernization theory. In 1960 he published *The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-communist Manifesto*, a slim volume that garnered wide attention and praise. As the title implied, Rostow was an economic determinist who accepted Marx’s proposition that all human societies moved inexorably from tradition to modernity via the same sequence of “stages.” His main point of disagreement with Marxist theory had to do with the endpoint of modernization, which he identified not as communism but as American-style consumer capitalism. This understanding of history, Rostow argued, had important implications for U.S. policy and strategy in the Cold War. He called for expanded foreign aid for Third World nations on the grounds that such aid, properly applied, would propel those societies toward economic growth, market liberalism, and stability. Rostow’s proposals and his liberal idealism resonated strongly with Kennedy, who befriended Rostow during the late 1950s and drew heavily on his advice during the 1960 presidential campaign. Rostow’s contributions to the campaign included the slogan “New Frontier,” which Kennedy used to refer to the transformative policies he aimed to promote both at home and abroad. After taking office, Kennedy appointed Rostow his deputy special assistant for national security affairs, a position that afforded him considerable influence over U.S. policy for Vietnam during 1961.⁶

Like other high modernists, Rostow conceived of modernization as a process in which changes in living conditions would lead to changes in the thinking and behavior of ordinary people. According to this view, the war in South Vietnam was first and foremost a battle for control of the social,

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political, and economic environments in which rural residents lived. For Rostow, the insurgents were “scavengers of the modernization process” who aimed to win by creating disruption and fear, not by winning hearts and minds. “The Viet Cong are not trying to persuade the peasants of Viet Nam that communism is good,” he declared in a 1961 speech. “They are trying to persuade them that their lives are insecure unless they cooperate with them.” To thwart these disruptive designs, the United States and the RVN first needed to reestablish order in the South Vietnamese countryside; the modernization process would unfold only after a measure of security had been restored. Rostow concluded that the first and most essential step of any counterinsurgency strategy involved the targeted use of military force. He placed particular emphasis on operations to secure South Vietnam’s borders against infiltration. If the insurgents were cut off from their base of support in North Vietnam, he insisted, they would quickly lose momentum. In advocating the use of aggressive military measures, Rostow did not discount the importance of outreach to the South Vietnamese population by means of indoctrination and community-based economic aid. But he maintained that such nonmilitary activities would be ineffective unless and until a secure military environment had been established.⁷

Rostow’s high modernist view of counterinsurgency warfare as a military struggle for control of a strategic environment held considerable appeal for many U.S. officials and strategists. In 1962 the NSC explicitly adopted Rostow’s understanding of modernization as the theoretical framework for U.S. counterinsurgency strategy.⁸ Several senior U.S. military officers—including General Maxwell Taylor, Kennedy’s most trusted advisor on military matters—found Rostow’s approach consistent with their own thinking.⁹ Rostow’s ideas also seemed to track with the evolving views of many of his fellow modernization experts. By the early 1960s, many U.S. social scientists had endorsed what would later become known as “military modernization.” This concept, as elaborated by some of Rostow’s CENIS colleagues and other scholars, suggested that U.S. goals in the Third World were best pursued not via alliances with democratic regimes but through partnerships with military institutions and authoritarian leaders. While he continued to see modernization as primarily an economic process, Rostow was increasingly persuaded that it ought to be guided and controlled by military men, especially during its early “stages.”¹⁰

Kennedy held Rostow and his ideas about modernization in high regard. Still, Kennedy’s thinking about counterinsurgency in South Vietnam did

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not correspond to Rostow's views on every point. Although Kennedy was amenable to the notion that Third World armies could contribute to the development of their societies, he was skeptical of Rostow's argument that the use of military force was an a priori condition for successful socioeconomic reforms in places like South Vietnam. If anything, Kennedy seemed to lean toward the opposite view: reforms would help win popular support and lead to battlefield success. On this point, Kennedy's thinking was closer to the low modernist views of Lansdale and other officials who argued that counterinsurgency must begin as a form of psychological warfare. Kennedy's admiration for Lansdale was evident in his efforts to seek Lansdale's advice on Vietnam during 1961; Kennedy even briefly considered sending the former CIA operative back to Saigon as ambassador. Had Kennedy done this, Lansdale would undoubtedly have become the administration's main advocate for what was rapidly becoming known as the "winning hearts and minds" approach to counterinsurgency. But Lansdale's appointment was blocked by administration officials who objected to his lone-wolf reputation and his well-known sympathy for Diem. As a result, Lansdale's involvement in the formulation of the administration's policies for Vietnam would be indirect and limited.¹¹

With Lansdale on the sidelines, it fell to other administration figures to provide alternatives to Rostow's views on counterinsurgency. One of Rostow's critics was Roger Hilsman, a State Department official with an unusual background. A graduate of West Point, Hilsman had served with distinction in the Office of Strategic Services during World War II. His assignments included a stint in Burma, where he worked behind enemy lines to organize resistance to Japanese occupation forces. Hilsman would later describe this mission in Kiplingesque terms, as a venture in which a team of "about 150 Americans created a guerrilla force of 30,000."¹² After the war, Hilsman earned a Ph.D. in international relations at Yale and subsequently worked as a foreign affairs specialist in the Legislative Reference Service in Washington. During the 1960 presidential campaign, he provided briefings and draft speeches to Kennedy, who was impressed by Hilsman's intellectual capabilities as well as his claims of expertise on guerrilla warfare. In 1961, Kennedy tapped Hilsman to head the Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR), the State Department's primary office for intelligence analysis. As INR chief, Hilsman enjoyed extraordinarily good access to Kennedy. His bureaucratic clout was enhanced by his friendship with W. Averell Harriman, a Democratic Party elder statesman

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Roger Hilsman at his desk in the State Department, 1963. (AP Photo)

who became assistant secretary of state for Far Eastern affairs in late 1961. Through Harriman, Hilsman also became close to Michael Forrestal, a Harriman protégé who joined the White House staff in early 1962 and became one of Kennedy's favorite aides.¹³

Washington insiders considered Hilsman abrasive, arrogant, and supremely confident in his own judgment. During a crisis in Laos in 1962, Hilsman informed the acting chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff that the president had ordered the redeployment of the navy's Seventh Fleet—a rather brazen act for any civilian official, but especially for one well below cabinet rank.¹⁴ In the case of South Vietnam, Hilsman was sure that Rostow and MAAG leaders were wrong to claim that the insurgency lacked popular support. Hilsman also criticized the Pentagon for having an overly exclusive focus on military operations. Invoking Franklin Roosevelt's famous distinction between "Dr. New Deal" and "Dr. Win the War," Hilsman declared that "in guerrilla wars in underdeveloped nations, both 'doctors' are needed. Military action and a social new deal have to proceed together."¹⁵

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Perhaps the most striking point of difference between Hilsman and Rostow had to do with their views on the possible use of U.S. combat forces in Vietnam. On this issue, Rostow was arguably the most hawkish member of Kennedy's national security team. In 1954, Rostow had criticized the Eisenhower administration for its reluctance to send American soldiers to Indochina. During 1961, he repeatedly advised Kennedy to send U.S. troops to Laos and South Vietnam. Rostow even raised the possibility of bombing attacks and other military action against North Vietnam—prompting Kennedy to refer to him wryly as “Air Marshall Rostow.”¹⁶ In contrast, Hilsman generally opposed the idea of deploying U.S. combat units to Vietnam, even as he called for expanding the scope and scale of the U.S. aid and advisory efforts in South Vietnam.

In late 1961, Hilsman joined Harriman, Forrestal, and national security assistant McGeorge Bundy in advocating what one historian aptly describes as a “soft hawk” position on Vietnam policy. The soft hawks agreed with Rostow that the United States had to fight and win in South Vietnam lest it suffer a major setback in the Cold War. But unlike Rostow, the soft hawks maintained that stepped-up U.S. assistance and expertise—including increased numbers of U.S. military and civilian advisors—would be sufficient to secure victory.¹⁷

Because Kennedy's advisors offered divergent perspectives on counterinsurgency, the overall trajectory of the administration's policies in South Vietnam remained in flux throughout his first year in office. For much of the spring and summer of 1961, it seemed that Rostow's arguments in favor of direct U.S. military intervention would prevail. However, by year's end, Rostow was in eclipse, and the views of Hilsman and the soft hawks had gained greater traction. The rise of the soft hawks resulted in part from the preferences and actions of Kennedy, who was clearly uncomfortable with the idea of deploying large numbers of U.S. combat forces to Southeast Asia. At the same time, the evolution of U.S. policy was also shaped by developments that took place in South Vietnam—including certain actions undertaken by Diem. Like Kennedy, Diem was casting about for new military strategies while also weighing the possibility of revising the terms of the U.S.-RVN alliance. But while both presidents were anxious to find a new basis for cooperation in the fight against the NLF, each initially doubted the other's willingness to accept what he deemed to be essential changes in strategy. Kennedy and Diem would eventually strike a deal to overhaul the alliance, but the forging of that agreement proved far

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more contentious—and provoked far more controversy within their respective governments—than either of them anticipated.

Diem, Kennedy, and the Limited Partnership

No less than Kennedy, Ngo Dinh Diem was wrestling with his own hopes and fears when 1961 began. Since the communists' surprise attack on the ARVN regiment at Trang Sup in January 1960, the Diem government had endured a relentless series of military and political setbacks. In the Mekong Delta, communist agitprop and the "concerted uprisings" had derailed the Agrovillage Program during the spring and summer of 1960. The regime was also caught off guard by a wave of enemy attacks in central Vietnam, a previously quiescent region.¹⁸ By early 1961, the palace estimated that the RVN wielded effective control over less than half of South Vietnam's population.¹⁹ According to Diem, these setbacks could be blamed partly on events in Laos, where communist forces appeared poised to seize control of the provinces bordering South Vietnam. But the Laos crisis did not explain the growing restlessness of South Vietnam's anti-communists, whose dissatisfaction with Diem appeared to have reached new heights. Although high-profile acts of dissent such as the Caravelle Manifesto and the paratroopers' failed coup of November 1960 attracted the most attention among foreign observers, the Ngo brothers knew that resentment was also smoldering inside the RVN bureaucracy and even within the ranks of the Can Lao Party.

To reverse these worrisome trends, the Ngos undertook several new military, administrative, and diplomatic initiatives in 1961. In the long run, the most consequential of these was the Strategic Hamlet Program, which would eventually become the centerpiece of the regime's counterinsurgency and nation-building efforts. But the main outlines of the hamlet program emerged only in late 1961 and did not coalesce into official RVN policy until early 1962. In the interim, the palace cast about for other means to reverse its flagging fortunes. In addition to making key changes in the internal structure of his government, Diem also sought a larger U.S. aid commitment to South Vietnam. Although he was well aware that such an expansion might lead to greater U.S. influence over RVN policy and strategy, the risks appeared justified in light of the regime's increasingly precarious position.

Diem's first attempts to right his listing ship of state involved high-level organizational and personnel changes. In the fall of 1960, he began to

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ease several once-powerful officials out of key posts. These included RVN Information Minister and former NRM chairman Tran Chanh Thanh, as well as other prominent figures who had fallen from favor.²⁰ The purge was followed by a major restructuring of Diem's cabinet. All government departments were grouped into three "super-ministries," each headed by an official known for his personal loyalty to the Ngo family. Although Diem billed these changes as reforms that would promote openness, the main effect seemed to be to concentrate power further in the hands of the regime's shrinking inner circle. Diem also promised "democratic" reforms at the provincial and local level that would permit rural residents to once again elect members of their village councils. If implemented, this move would have reversed Diem's controversial 1956 decision to abolish village elections—though the regime's timetable for these reforms remained vague.²¹

Diem's shake-up of the RVN state apparatus also extended to the regime's police and internal security agencies. In May 1961, he established a new organization within the presidency, the Special Commissariat for Central Intelligence, which the Americans called the Central Intelligence Organization (CIO). This move had long been urged on Diem by U.S. officials, who viewed it as a way for the government to produce "actionable" intelligence for use in the war; the embassy also hoped that the creation of the CIO would lead to the consolidation or elimination of some of the RVN intelligence and covert action agencies that had been proliferating since the mid-1950s. Diem, however, allowed those other agencies to operate alongside the CIO, even as he transferred some of their responsibilities to the new organization. Thus, instead of streamlining the RVN intelligence establishment, the CIO functioned mainly as a rival to Tran Kim Tuyen's SEPES organization—an indication that Tuyen's influence had begun to wane.²²

Although these administrative moves were a far cry from the liberalizing reforms that Durbrow and other U.S. officials had been demanding, Diem still believed that his actions could contribute to a general warming in the regime's relations with Washington. The palace's cautious optimism about a fresh start with Kennedy was reflected in its efforts to portray its dealings with the new administration as positive and cordial. An April editorial in the government-run *Times of Viet Nam* declared that Kennedy's attitude toward South Vietnam was "that of a gentleman."²³ It quickly became apparent, however, that the hoped-for breakthrough with

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Washington would depend on more than mere friendly words. To improve their collaboration in the struggle against the NLF, the presidents needed to agree on changes to the scope, form, and substance of the U.S. participation in South Vietnam's war effort. Given the strains that had emerged in the allies' dealings with each other during 1960, finding such an agreement would be no easy task.

During early 1961, exchanges between Washington and Saigon focused on a U.S. proposal known as the Counterinsurgency Plan (CIP). This plan, which had been developed mostly by the MAAG and the Pentagon over the preceding year, was formally presented to Diem in February. While much of the CIP concerned changes to the structure and organization of South Vietnam's armed forces—including a provision to increase the ARVN by twenty thousand men, a move for which Diem had been pressing for years—the plan also suggested that the stepped-up U.S. aid would depend on Diem's willingness to adopt certain economic and political reforms. In particular, the plan incorporated many of the political gestures included in Durbrow's earlier demarche, such as the idea that the Can Lao Party should be either "surfaced" or disbanded. Predictably, Diem responded warily to the CIP and its quid pro quo provisions; while he did not reject it outright, neither did he rush to embrace it. The most immediate effect of the American proposal was thus to perpetuate the impasse in U.S.-RVN relations that had existed since the previous fall.²⁴

The CIP also failed to resolve the disagreements with Kennedy's national security team about the overall direction of U.S. policy in South Vietnam. In April, with the CIP still in diplomatic limbo, these internal disagreements came sharply to the fore. The intensifying crisis in Laos forced Kennedy to weigh different policy options for that country, including proposals for large-scale deployments of U.S. combat forces. Kennedy strongly resisted the idea of direct American military intervention and opted instead to enter into negotiations aimed at neutralizing Laos. But the issue of using troops had not been put to rest; the debate among Kennedy's advisors over how to respond to the Laos crisis quickly spilled over into discussions of what to do in South Vietnam. Hilsman's views were expressed in an April INR report that argued that the danger of "overt aggression" in both Laos and South Vietnam had been overemphasized at the expense of attention to the problem of "internal subversion."²⁵ Rostow, in contrast, continued to hold open the possibility of sending U.S. troops to Laos or

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South Vietnam, a position many senior U.S. military leaders backed.²⁶ Rostow's arguments appeared to gain momentum in late April when Kennedy created an intraagency task force for Vietnam policy. The task force advised sending hundreds of additional U.S. military advisors to South Vietnam. In addition, task force members recommended the creation of a "clear-cut defensive alliance" with South Vietnam, one that "might include the stationing of U.S. troops on Viet-Nameese soil."²⁷

Kennedy, in what would become a recurring pattern, accepted most of the task force's recommendations but deferred the proposed deployment of U.S. troops for "further review." Among the measures he approved were funding increases to cover the twenty-thousand-man expansion of the ARVN that Diem had long wanted. Kennedy also consented to set the size of the RVN Civil Guard at sixty-eight thousand men, up from the previously authorized level of thirty-two thousand. To improve RVN counter-guerrilla capabilities, the United States sent four hundred Special Forces personnel to provide training to their South Vietnamese counterparts—a significant augmentation of the U.S. military advisory presence in South Vietnam, which previously totaled fewer than seven hundred men. In a move sure to be welcomed by Hilsman and other "hearts and minds" enthusiasts, Kennedy approved several new economic aid and civic action initiatives designed to win the support of rural residents. But Hilsman was less sanguine about Kennedy's decision to seek to "get across to President Diem our confidence in him as a man of great stature and as one of the strong figures in Southeast Asia on whom we are placing our reliance." As would so often be the case in the making of his Vietnam policies, Kennedy had split the differences among his clashing advisors. In the process, he greatly expanded U.S. support for Diem, both rhetorically and materially, even as he deflected the most hawkish advice about the use of U.S. combat troops.²⁸

The task of restoring Diem's confidence in Washington fell to Fredrick Nolting, whom Kennedy named to succeed Durbrow as U.S. ambassador in Saigon. Both by instinct and temperament, Nolting seemed predisposed to get along well with Diem. A career diplomat whose previous experience was mostly in Europe, his only previous brush with U.S. policy-making for Vietnam had come in 1950, when he had asked "whether any attention is to be paid to the views of the Vietnamese themselves" regarding American aid.²⁹ Nolting later recalled that he was impressed by Diem's "dedication" during their first meeting in May 1961, and by the president's remark

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that South Vietnam was “sous-développé, sous-unifié et sous attaque” (underdeveloped, divided, and under attack). Nolting was also touched when Diem invited him to a Ngo family event at which the Nhus’ young son performed Mozart.³⁰ It did not take long for Nolting to decide that he admired Diem “as a person” and that his philosophy and objectives were “sound and good.” Nolting concluded that his “first commandment” as ambassador was to rebuild Diem’s trust in the United States—an objective he would pursue assiduously for the next two years.³¹

Nolting’s plans for a charm offensive were boosted by Vice President Lyndon Johnson, who visited Saigon in May 1961 during a Southeast Asian trip. Like Nolting, Johnson had no scruples about using flattery in his efforts to win Diem’s compliance with U.S. objectives. During his stay in South Vietnam, Johnson compared Diem to Winston Churchill, George Washington, and Franklin D. Roosevelt; he also delighted Saigon residents with a series of impromptu, campaign-style hand-shaking sessions on city streets. In his private meetings with Diem, Johnson delivered a letter from Kennedy that outlined the increased funding for the ARVN and the Civil Guard.³²

Diem was clearly encouraged by Johnson’s visit, which seemed to portend the shift in the official U.S. attitude that he had been hoping to see. Diem welcomed Kennedy’s offer of increased aid—the twenty-thousand-man increase in the ARVN, he observed drily, was among the “wise and far-sighted proposals . . . which I myself have advocated for four years or more”—and he readily consented to allow more U.S. military advisors into the country. But he had no intention of stopping there. He also told Johnson that he wanted to expand the ARVN by an additional 100,000 soldiers beyond the just-approved increase, to a new total of 270,000 men. Although U.S. officials had not anticipated this request, Johnson did not reject it out of hand. In response to Johnson’s query about the possibility of sending U.S. combat troops to Vietnam, Diem replied that he would endorse this only in the case of an overt invasion by North Vietnam—exactly the response Kennedy had been hoping to hear. For both presidents, therefore, Johnson’s Saigon trip seemed to be a sign that relations between Saigon and Washington were finally on the upswing and that it might yet be possible to find some mutually agreeable formula for renewed collaboration in the fight against the NLF.³³

But the differences between the allies had only been obscured, not transcended. In July, both governments agreed in principle to a “joint

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program of action” developed by a team of American and Vietnamese social scientists. Among other things, the team recommended various forms of “emergency” aid for the Agroville and Land Development Programs. They also advised more funding for infrastructure projects, basic education, and training for government officials. However, translating these recommendations into action proved an elusive goal. When Kennedy sent a letter to Diem outlining his views about the next steps in the implementation of the joint program, Diem’s first response was to complain that the message contained “no figures about the amount of U.S. aid.” While the two sides continued to talk about the program, the dialog served mainly to paper over the fact that nothing had been resolved. The Americans maintained that the new aid would be predicated on RVN willingness to accept U.S. reform prescriptions. Diem, who was clearly irritated by this condition, reverted to his habit of trying to wear down the embassy by simply refusing to discuss the specific recommendations that the United States had put forward. In the end, neither the CIP nor the joint program were implemented. While officials in both governments paid lip service to the alliance and the idea of an expanded joint effort against the communists, each side doubted that the other was prepared to take the steps needed to move ahead with such an effort.³⁴

Meanwhile, the war continued to go badly for the RVN. Shortly after midnight on September 18, 1961, a large NLF force overran and briefly occupied Phuoc Vinh, a provincial capital lying just fifty-five miles north of Saigon. In addition to burning several public buildings, the insurgents captured and beheaded the province chief and his assistant. This and other military setbacks sustained by the ARVN and by anticommunist forces in Laos triggered a new wave of memoranda in Washington, including several calling for large-scale deployments of SEATO and U.S. troops to South Vietnam. The communists’ gains also provoked a “rather large and unexpected request” from Diem: in late September, he informed Nolting that he wanted a bilateral defense treaty with the United States. Since Diem had previously insisted that the RVN would observe the Geneva-mandated prohibition on military alliances between the Indochinese states and foreign powers, this request seemed to signal a major change in the palace’s overall stance toward its U.S. ally—and perhaps a new sense of desperation.³⁵

Recognizing that his previous attempts to craft a new policy for South Vietnam had failed, Kennedy tried a new tack. On October 11, he

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announced that he was dispatching a fact-finding mission to South Vietnam, to be headed by Maxwell Taylor, his top military advisor. Rostow would serve as Taylor's deputy; Lansdale was also added to the team, at Kennedy's insistence.

The Taylor-Rostow mission landed in Saigon a week later. Taylor later recalled that "a great cloud of doom" seemed to have settled over the South Vietnamese capital. This feeling was underscored on the night of the team's arrival when the RVN National Assembly voted to give Diem emergency powers. During the mission's weeklong stay, its members conferred with numerous high-level RVN military and civilian officials, including Diem and Nhu. Diem reiterated his desire for a new defense treaty and Washington's "formal commitment" to the defense of South Vietnam. He also appeared open to the idea of introducing U.S. combat troops into the country, but then hedged when questioned directly on the issue. Taylor himself became convinced during the visit that U.S. forces were desperately needed. He also believed that Diem was prepared to endorse such a step.³⁶

The Taylor-Rostow Mission Report, submitted to Kennedy in early November, recommended a sweeping transformation of the U.S.-Diem alliance. The relationship between the allies should be upgraded, the report declared, to a "limited partnership and working collaboration with the Vietnamese." This "limited partnership" would require the United States to provide new kinds of material aid and military equipment, such as U.S.-piloted helicopter squadrons, light aircraft, and armored personnel carriers. In addition, the report envisioned a sharp expansion of the U.S. advisory presence. This included "a high-level [U.S.] government advisor or advisors" as well as "radical increases" in the number of U.S. military personnel working with the ARVN and other security forces. The report also called for additional economic aid and other measures to bring "Diem's administration closer to the Vietnamese people." These measures included not only several previously mooted reform proposals (such as more support for civic action) but also dramatic administrative reforms to "broaden" the regime. Most important of all, in Taylor's view, was the step—outlined in a top-secret annex to the report—that called for the insertion of six to eight thousand U.S. soldiers into South Vietnam, ostensibly for the purpose of providing relief from a recent flood that had devastated parts of the Mekong Delta. Taylor suggested that these troops could "phase . . . into other activities" if and when Washington deemed them necessary.³⁷

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In Taylor and Rostow's report, Kennedy got much more than he expected. While he anticipated that Rostow would repeat his earlier arguments for dispatching U.S. combat forces, he was shocked to find that Taylor also favored the deployment of American troops. Kennedy was further dismayed to discover that almost all of his top advisors agreed with Taylor. In internal deliberations with his team, Kennedy maintained his opposition to the deployment of regular U.S. combat units and eventually resorted to the device of deferring this issue for further discussion and study. However, he endorsed virtually all other aspects of the "limited partnership."³⁸

Among its many other consequences, the Taylor-Rostow mission prompted Kennedy to make several personnel changes in his foreign policy team. Rostow was moved from the NSC staff to the State Department; although not a demotion, this substantially reduced Rostow's impact on policy-making for Vietnam for the balance of Kennedy's presidency. Rostow's replacement on the NSC was Hilsman's ally Michael Forrestal. In addition, Forrestal's mentor Averell Harriman became the assistant secretary of state for Far Eastern affairs, the State Department bureau with responsibility for Vietnam policy. These moves substantially increased the influence of the soft hawks over the administration's Vietnam policies. Over the next two years, Forrestal, Harriman, and Hilsman promoted the particular combination of policies they favored in South Vietnam: expanded U.S. involvement in RVN nation-building activities and increased pressure on Diem for reform of the Saigon regime.³⁹

The Taylor-Rostow mission also deeply impacted the policies and internal politics of the Diem government. Diem, like Kennedy, did not get what he expected from the mission. When Nolting presented the idea of the "limited partnership" to Diem in mid-November, he immediately asked if Washington planned to send U.S. troops to South Vietnam. After he learned that the administration had opted against this but that the United States still intended to press its demands for reforms, Diem's mood suddenly darkened. South Vietnam "did not want to be a protectorate," he declared angrily. A few days later, several newspapers in Saigon accused Washington of seeking to use South Vietnam "as a pawn of capitalist imperialism"—the first time in years that the RVN-controlled media had explicitly criticized U.S. policies. Nolting reported that Diem was "very sad and very disappointed" that the United States wanted "great concessions" from Saigon while offering "little additional help." In a conversation with

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a CIA officer, Ngo Dinh Nhu accused Taylor of formulating his recommendations before he even arrived in Vietnam.⁴⁰

Nolting would eventually win Diem's consent to the idea of a "limited partnership." However, the ambassador achieved this only by backing away from the quid pro quo component of the U.S. proposal. After sensing Diem's initial anger, Nolting suggested that the United States focus on the problem of RVN "efficiency" rather than the "more nebulous concept of 'political reform.'" In subsequent conversations with Diem, Nolting capitulated to virtually all of the RVN leader's objections. Although he readily agreed to accept the increased military aid and the larger U.S. advisory presence, Diem was adamant that noncommunist opposition leaders would not serve in the cabinet or other high-level RVN positions. He also made it clear that his first priority in the countryside had to do with the reestablishment of security. Any efforts to build an "infrastructure of democracy" would have to wait until the government had regained the capacity to protect the rural population from the insurgents.⁴¹

The seemingly contradictory aspects of Diem's response to the Taylor-Rostow report—his initial interest in receiving U.S. combat forces, followed by his denunciations of U.S. neoimperial designs, followed by his decision to allow an increased number of U.S. advisors in South Vietnam—are best understood as a product of the crisis atmosphere that prevailed inside the palace during the fall of 1961. With the tide of the war running strongly against the RVN, the Ngo brothers were anxious to obtain a firmer U.S. commitment to defend South Vietnam. For Diem, a bilateral defense treaty with Washington, especially if accompanied by a measured deployment of U.S. combat forces, seemed desirable under the circumstances.⁴² But Nhu was skeptical about receiving U.S. troops; as he later recalled, he opposed a bigger U.S. military presence in South Vietnam because he believed it would damage the RVN government's credibility both at home and abroad. Nhu was also deeply worried about what he saw as the inconstancy of the United States. As he explained to Lansdale, recent U.S. moves in Laos had come as a "psychological shock" to the RVN because they suggested that U.S. leaders did not understand the magnitude of the effort that was required to defeat communism in Southeast Asia. Nhu's greatest fear was that a massive increase in U.S. involvement in Vietnam might be followed by an American change of heart and a precipitous U.S. withdrawal.⁴³ By appearing first to dangle and then to withdraw a promise to send U.S. combat troops to South Vietnam, the

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Taylor-Rostow mission seemed to prove the validity of Nhu's doubts about the Americans. Thus, even though Diem decided in the end to endorse the "limited partnership," the episode reinforced his suspicions about the true depth of the U.S. commitment to his government. It also made him even more inclined than before to heed his younger brother's advice.

The Taylor-Rostow mission marked more than just an expansion of the scope and scale of the United States' involvement in the Vietnam War. In Washington, the rise of Hilsman and the soft hawks meant that the Ngos' most strident American critics had gained Kennedy's ear. In Saigon, meanwhile, Nhu's loud denunciations of the U.S. proposals signaled his re-emergence as the regime's leading skeptic of American intentions in South Vietnam. Events had therefore served to intensify each government's doubts about the other, even as they were embarking on new collaborative ventures. During 1962, these mutual doubts were mostly suppressed by the apparent success of the limited partnership, which appeared at first to produce spectacular gains on the battlefield and in the realm of nation building. But these initial triumphs proved insufficient to bridge the deep conceptual and ideological differences between the allies. Despite appearances, the events of late 1961 set the stage for future disagreements that would eventually lead to a new crisis in U.S.-RVN relations—a crisis that would make all previous contretemps between the allies seem tame by comparison.

The Creation of the Strategic Hamlet Program

The establishment of the U.S.-RVN limited partnership in December 1961 did not resolve the impasse between Saigon and Washington over counterinsurgency strategy. For some U.S. officials, the Ngo brothers' unenthusiastic response to the CIP suggested that the regime was not really interested in revising its approach to the war. But William Colby, the CIA Station Chief, thought he detected signs of change within the palace. Colby was particularly encouraged by his weekly meetings with Ngo Dinh Nhu, who displayed increased interest in the history and theory of counterinsurgency. During 1960 and 1961, Colby supplied Nhu with reading materials on figures such as T. E. Lawrence, Lenin, and Mao; he also engaged Nhu in long discussions about the merits of particular counterinsurgency tactics. Although Colby characteristically overestimated his ability to steer Nhu's emerging views in the direction he desired, he was correct about the shift in Nhu's thinking. During the last months of 1961,

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Nhu began to fashion his theoretical musings into a major new RVN initiative known as the Strategic Hamlet Program.⁴⁴

In devising the hamlet program, Nhu hoped to remedy what he saw as the main flaws with the Agroville Program, an initiative he had never fully supported.⁴⁵ He was especially determined to move away from the Agroville Program's emphasis on population regroupment. In part, Nhu's criticism of regroupment derived from his belated realization that the harsh relocation and forced labor practices used to build the agrovilles had provoked a popular backlash. But an even more important factor in his thinking was his recognition that the agrovilles had failed as a security measure. Diem had been wrong, Nhu declared, to believe that the government could protect rural residents simply by moving them into more compactly settled areas. Instead of herding people into "agricultural towns," the government needed to figure out how to reorganize and defend South Vietnam's existing villages and hamlets.⁴⁶

Nhu's skepticism about regroupment gives the lie to one of the most enduring myths about the origins of the Strategic Hamlet Program. Many commentators later portrayed the program as a replica of the population relocation strategy used by British colonial officials during their war against communist insurgents in Malaya (1948–1960). According to this view, the strategic hamlets were modeled on the "New Villages" the British built to isolate communist guerrillas from the population that supported them. But this interpretation misunderstands the Ngos' thinking about the Malayan war. Although Diem and Nhu treated Malaya as a useful source of ideas and support—Diem arranged for RVN security forces to receive weapons and training from their Malayan counterparts, and he welcomed a special British Advisory Mission to Saigon in 1961—the brothers pointedly rejected key parts of the British model as inappropriate for Vietnam. According to Nhu, the widespread use of mass relocations in South Vietnam would produce what he derisively called "fenced hamlets"—tightly packed settlements in which residents would remain vulnerable to the enemy, just as they had been in the agrovilles.⁴⁷

Instead of relying on British ideas and advice, Nhu drew much more heavily on certain French theories of counterinsurgency. He seemed especially intrigued by the writings of Roger Trinquier (1908–1986), a veteran of France's colonial wars in Indochina and Algeria. In 1961, just as Nhu was casting about for new ideas, Trinquier summarized his basic approach to counterinsurgency in a book entitled *La Guerre Moderne*

(Modern Warfare). For many readers, the most disturbing aspect of Trinquier's book was his nonchalant advocacy of torture as a means of combating insurgent networks. But the crux of his argument lay in his ideas about how counterinsurgents could incorporate local populations into their campaigns against guerilla forces. Like many other counterinsurgency theorists, Trinquier believed that enlisting the participation of "the people" was essential to success. Yet he firmly rejected the notion that this participation could only be secured by winning hearts and minds. "We know that it is not at all necessary to have the sympathy of a majority of people in order to rule them," he declared. "The right organization can turn the trick."⁴⁸

Trinquier claimed to have built the "right organization" in Algeria by transforming rural villages into fortified settlements that could be used to both defend and control their inhabitants. Upon arriving at a village, police and army forces quickly surrounded it with a "tight, impassable perimeter" made of barbed wire or underbrush. They then launched a "police operation" inside the perimeter that included the taking of a village census and the issuance of identification cards to residents. In addition, all adults in the village were interrogated to reveal information about enemy agents operating in the area. Once the village was firmly under the counterinsurgents' control, they proceeded to set up what Trinquier described as "a structured organization encompassing the entire population." This new organization was typically headed by a cooperative local resident who was made responsible for recruiting other men to oversee particular neighborhoods or groups of households within the village. Among other things, the village organization was charged with carrying out "simple police missions," such as the detection and surveillance of suspected enemy operatives. The villagers also guarded the newly fortified perimeter and controlled all movement in and out of the village. These practices served to "enlist the participation of the populace in its own protection" and eliminated the need for a permanent garrison of soldiers in the village, thus freeing government troops for offensive operations against enemy forces. Trinquier referred to the reorganized villages as "strategic hamlets" (*hameaux stratégiques*).⁴⁹

Although Nhu never explicitly acknowledged it, the Strategic Hamlet Program clearly bore the imprint of Trinquier's ideas. In addition to borrowing the name of his new program from Trinquier, Nhu also adopted several of the specific tactics outlined in *La Guerre Moderne*. Like Trinquier, Nhu

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proposed to create strategic hamlets by dispatching roving squads of counterinsurgency specialists to the countryside. The “Strategic Hamlet Operational Teams” he envisioned would be commanded by the local district chief and staffed by a few dozen civil guardsmen, police officers, intelligence operatives, civic action personnel, and technical experts. When a team arrived at a target hamlet, the guardsmen would immediately fortify it by building blockhouses, gun emplacements, and a fence made of bamboo or barbed wire. At the same time, the police and intelligence officers would begin “to eliminate the remaining planted communists” in the hamlet by conducting a census and interrogating residents. The team would also sort the population by age and gender and then create separate groups for men, women, children, and the elderly. Each group was required to contribute to a “defense and combat system” for the hamlet; residents were trained to guard the hamlet’s perimeter, conduct patrols, maintain an alarm system, and build additional fortifications. Once this communal defense system was in place, Nhu argued, there would be no need to keep government security forces in the hamlet. In this way, the hamlets would become “strong points” that would actively support regular government troops in their operations outside the hamlet perimeter.⁵⁰

Nhu’s view of the strategic hamlet as a “defense system in miniature” was an important departure in official RVN thinking about counterinsurgency and agrarian reform.⁵¹ By organizing rural residents to defend themselves, the Strategic Hamlet Program aimed to move beyond the population control measures on which the government had previously relied. Still, the new program was not a complete break with past practices. Diem and Nhu were adamant that the program was not merely a military strategy; it was also the means by which the long-promised personalist revolution would finally be realized. Like the land development centers and the agrovilles, strategic hamlets were supposed to catalyze a host of changes within South Vietnamese rural society. Among the most important of these changes was the inculcation of a spirit of self-sufficiency—a concept that had figured in the regime’s earlier rhetoric but now received even heavier emphasis.

In some ways, the renewed attention to self-sufficiency was merely the latest expression of the Ngos’ desire to wean South Vietnam from its chronic dependence on U.S. support. (To rely on foreign aid for survival was like “being close to death,” Nhu told his subordinates in 1962.)⁵² However, the Ngos also framed self-sufficiency in local and communal terms, as a form



“A defense system in miniature”: a strategic hamlet in Phu Yen province, c. 1962.
(Courtesy of Rufus Phillips)

of solidarity that the residents of particular villages and hamlets could forge among themselves. This kind of self-sufficiency, Nhu suggested, would thrive only when hamlet inhabitants realized that their fates were bound up with those of their neighbors. To arrive at this realization, each hamlet needed to experience what the Ngos called a “triple revolution”—a specific set of social, political, and military reforms that would transform the its residents’ lives and thinking.⁵³

The transformations Nhu envisioned involved nothing less than the overturning of each hamlet’s existing social order. According to Nhu, a glaring shortcoming with previous RVN agrarian reform programs had to do with the regime’s reliance on corrupt local officials and entrenched village elites. He railed in particular against the “rotten cadres” who had abused their authority over ordinary people for personal gain. In addition to enriching themselves, he complained, these craven officials had colluded with the richest families in each village to exploit the poorer inhabitants. To remedy these problems, Nhu declared, it was essential that these “village

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bullies and tyrants be liquidated”—a remark that seems far more similar to communist rhetoric than to the gradualist formulas for social change the regime had previously favored. According to Diem and Nhu, such radical measures were the only way to establish “social justice” in the hamlets and ensure that all residents would stand united in the fight against the NLF.⁵⁴

To bring about a “social revolution” in the hamlets, Nhu believed it would be necessary to have an accompanying “political revolution.” In his view, the conversion of any existing settlement to a strategic hamlet would not be complete until it held an election to establish a hamlet- or village-wide council. These elections, to be organized by the Strategic Hamlet Operations Teams, were to be conducted on a “truly democratic” basis under which all adult residents would cast ballots. Once elected, the members of the council were required to draft a communal charter (*huong ước*) that would regulate the hamlet’s internal affairs. Among other things, the charters were supposed to contain guarantees of protection from arbitrary arrest by local officials; they also outlined each resident’s duties and responsibilities to the community, such as compulsory participation in public works projects. As Nhu acknowledged, these measures marked a reversal of the government’s controversial 1956 decision to abolish village elections and replace elected local leaders with officials appointed by provincial and district authorities. The restoration of local elections, Nhu declared, would be “very advantageous in the psychological field.” The newly elected leaders “will not be influenced by the district chief to be dictatorial towards the inhabitants, and consequently the latter will like the village authorities better.”⁵⁵

The last part of Nhu’s three-part formula for change—a “military revolution”—may have been the most ambitious. In keeping with Trinquier’s ideas about popular mobilization, Nhu expected all hamlet residents to participate in the defense of their community. But his plan required them to do more than simply protect the hamlet from attack or infiltration. Once a strategic hamlet’s fortified perimeter had been secured, the residents who served in the hamlet militia were supposed to venture out and begin patrolling the surrounding countryside. Nhu asserted that such patrols would throw the NLF on the defensive, while also enabling hamlet residents to wage a different kind of warfare. Previously, Nhu argued, RVN security forces had relied exclusively on counter guerrilla tactics in which they relied on superior mobility (conferred by helicopters

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and amphibious vehicles) to outmaneuver the enemy. Although these counterguerrilla tactics had inflicted losses on NLF forces, they had failed to “eradicate at the roots the subversive war waged by the enemy.” It was therefore necessary to switch from counterguerrilla to guerrilla warfare—to give the enemy a taste of his own medicine by forcing him to defend against a “popular guerrilla action.”⁵⁶

In the role reversal Nhu imagined, the inhabitants of strategic hamlets would actually become guerrillas. They would operate in small bands and carry out ambushes and other opportunistic attacks beyond their hamlet’s perimeter; they would also need to be capable of living off the land and remaining in enemy-controlled areas for extended periods without receiving provisions or reinforcements. In Nhu’s view, this would allow the hamlets to survive without regular deliveries of weapons and munitions. Except for an initial cache of twenty or thirty rifles furnished by the Strategic Hamlet Operations Team, a hamlet’s defenders were expected to equip themselves with whatever guns and ammunition they could capture in the course of their operations against the NLF. In this way, Nhu declared, the hamlets would quickly become self-sufficient “in administration, in military affairs and in armaments.”⁵⁷

Notably absent from Nhu’s vision of the triple revolution in the hamlets was any discussion of near-term economic improvements. Although he often asserted that the Strategic Hamlet Program would contribute to South Vietnam’s economic development in the long run, he warned his officials that its initial gains would not be measured in material terms. Efforts to improve living standards in the hamlets would come later.⁵⁸ This downplaying of material improvements was born in part from Nhu’s determination to hold U.S. aid levels to a minimum. Yet it also reflected his desire to distinguish the Strategic Hamlet Program from the development agendas that some U.S. experts and aid officials were promoting. Nhu was particularly suspicious of high modernist plans for development, complaining about the U.S. advisors who advocated the “Tennessee Valley model” of bringing social change via massive infrastructure projects.⁵⁹ He also explicitly rejected Rostow’s portrayal of modernization as a process in which economic transformation would drive social and psychological changes. According to Nhu, industrialization and other economic changes would come to South Vietnam only after “we irrevocably depart from the traditional society as far as our thinking, our organization and our technique are concerned”—a

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formula that seemed reminiscent of some the low modernist alternatives favored by the TVA's American critics.⁶⁰ But even those Americans who favored low modernist approaches would have objected to Nhu's suggestion that development would not confer immediate economic benefits at the village level. Like other Third World nativist leaders during the 1950s and 1960s, Nhu thought of economic development not as a choice among competing Western models but as a process that ought to fit with Vietnamese priorities and Vietnamese cultural needs. The United States could help South Vietnam achieve economic self-sufficiency, but Washington would have to provide this help on Saigon's terms.

As Nhu elaborated the theory behind the Strategic Hamlet Program, he was also devising administrative procedures to implement it. During mid-1961, senior RVN officials visited several provinces where local authorities were experimenting with various village and hamlet fortification schemes. In August, the head of the RVN Civic Action Ministry announced that the government wanted "as many 'strategic hamlets' as there are hamlets" in South Vietnam. Over the next several months, Nhu studied the results of these local initiatives for lessons that could be applied across the country. In January 1962, the palace declared the creation of strategic hamlets its top policy priority. Oversight responsibility for the new program was vested in a newly created "Interministerial Committee for Strategic Hamlets." The Committee's members included the RVN ministers of interior, civic action, and rural affairs, as well as the deputy minister of defense and high-ranking army, police, and intelligence officials. Meetings of the Committee were chaired by Nhu himself in his capacity as Diem's "political advisor." This arrangement not only provided Nhu with operational control over the Strategic Hamlet Program but also significantly expanded his influence within the palace. Over the next two years, the Committee functioned as a kind of shadow cabinet that wielded broad authority over the regime's military, social, and agrarian policies.⁶¹

According to Colonel Hoang Van Lac, the ARVN officer who kept the minutes of the Interministerial Committee's meetings, Nhu dominated the biweekly sessions with "lengthy speeches delivered in his boring, broken tone of voice." These disquisitions covered both the ideological goals behind the Strategic Hamlet Program and the specific procedures Nhu wanted RVN officials to follow. Nhu saw his monologues as a way to dispel the widespread confusion in government ranks about the program's means

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and ends. But his lectures often failed to produce the desired results. The Committee was frequently confronted with evidence showing that most provincial and local officials did not grasp the finer points of Nhu's triple revolution. Although Nhu blamed this lack of comprehension on the backward and "antirevolutionary" outlook of the government's cadres, even his closest aides found his rambling commentaries hard to follow. As Colonel Lac observed, the province chiefs who sat in on the meetings of the Committee seemed mostly uninterested in Nhu's explanations of the ideological rationale behind the program. Instead, they concentrated on using statistics to show that they were implementing the program as rapidly as possible.⁶²

Despite his subordinates' failure to absorb his abstract theoretical formulas, Nhu saw the creation of the Committee and the official launch of the Strategic Hamlet Program in early 1962 as major breakthroughs. He had not only persuaded Diem that his theories were valid but also secured sweeping authority to implement them throughout South Vietnam. Still, Nhu's optimism about the program was tempered by his recognition that its ultimate success was anything but certain. His aversion to foreign aid notwithstanding, he realized that the RVN would need substantial help to carry out the program on the massive scale he envisioned. This implied that the program needed to be incorporated into the terms of the regime's new "limited partnership" with the United States. As Nhu would soon discover, there were many Americans in both Saigon and in Washington who welcomed the Strategic Hamlet Program as a promising new approach—indeed, some were more excited about it than their RVN counterparts were. But as Nhu frequently reminded the other members of the Interministerial Committee, any U.S. aid for strategic hamlets was certain to come with strings attached. As the Ngo brothers plunged ahead with their efforts to transform the South Vietnamese countryside, limiting U.S. influence over the Strategic Hamlet Program remained an overriding concern.

The Limits of Collaboration

Like their RVN counterparts, U.S. officials in Saigon and Washington were often bewildered by Nhu's monologues on the "triple revolution" and the rest of the ideological rationale behind the Strategic Hamlet Program. This did not mean, however, that the U.S. government was uninterested in the palace's proposals. On the contrary, the embassy and the Kennedy administration viewed the emergence of the program during late 1961 and early 1962 as a highly encouraging turn of events. Although they

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had not been involved in the program's genesis, U.S. officials and experts quickly embraced it. As a result, U.S. participation in the planning and implementation of the Strategic Hamlet Program during 1962–1963 far exceeded the support furnished for previous RVN agrarian reform ventures. Remarkably, the U.S. mission provided this support despite never reaching agreement with the palace on the basic principles behind the program. Although many U.S. officials were aware that the Ngos' understanding of the program differed significantly from their own, most remained optimistic that it could be molded to fit with the particular counterinsurgency theories and strategies they preferred. As a result, Americans and South Vietnamese often found themselves talking past each other, even as the scope and scale of U.S.-RVN collaboration on strategic hamlets expanded.

Initially, U.S. officials expected to fold the Strategic Hamlet Program into one or another of the U.S. counterinsurgency plans that were circulating inside the embassy and in Washington during late 1961 and early 1962. General Paul Harkins, the new senior U.S. military commander in South Vietnam, viewed the strategic hamlets as part of a general overhaul of RVN military strategy that he hoped to persuade Diem to undertake. As the first head of the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MAC-V)—an organization established in early 1962 to oversee the implementation of the military aspects of the limited partnership—Harkins argued that the ARVN should go on the offensive by launching a nationwide “explosion” of sweep operations and tactical air attacks. Strategic hamlets, Harkins suggested, could be used to sequester, protect, and control the population while this offensive was taking place.⁶³

Harkins's attempts to fit the Strategic Hamlet Program into a conventional military strategy were opposed by William Colby, who advocated an unconventional warfare approach. Under Colby's direction, the CIA's Saigon station had undertaken a series of small-scale counterinsurgency “experiments” in various locales across South Vietnam during 1961. These projects emphasized the creation of community-based paramilitary units as a means to enlist the rural population in the fight against the NLF. The Strategic Hamlet Program, Colby argued, should be organized on a similar model.⁶⁴

Yet another view of the program and its utility was offered by the State Department's Roger Hilsman. In a February 1962 memo, Hilsman outlined

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a “strategic concept” for South Vietnam that called for entire villages—not just individual hamlets—to be regrouped into compact, Malayan-style settlements. Once the population had been secured in this manner, Hilsman argued, the government could begin delivery of social and economic aid as well as basic services. Such an approach would serve “to tie the villages into the network of government administration and control.”⁶⁵

Despite their strong interest in strategic hamlets, neither Harkins nor Colby nor Hilsman would play a major role in defining the official U.S. response to the program. The responsibility for providing aid to the Strategic Hamlet Program fell instead to the State Department’s economic aid arm, the newly renamed U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). In early 1962, USAID officials learned that they needed to find a use for a \$10 million “counterpart” fund set up specifically to support civilian-focused counterinsurgency operations in South Vietnam. Unsure how to proceed, these officials turned to an old Vietnam hand: Rufus Phillips, a former member of Lansdale’s team who had worked on RVN pacification and civic action programs during the mid-1950s. Although Phillips had left the CIA for the private sector in 1959, he agreed to return to South Vietnam for a few weeks in the summer of 1962 to advise USAID on creating “a civilian economic and social component” of U.S. counterinsurgency activities. In addition to meeting with Diem, Nhu, and other senior RVN officials, Phillips visited four provinces so he could examine the Strategic Hamlet Program in action.⁶⁶

Phillips was greatly impressed by what he saw and heard during his trip. Contrary to the “rumors of rural discontent” circulating in Washington and Saigon, he judged the Strategic Hamlet Program a success in all but one of the four provinces he toured. He attributed this success partly to the energetic efforts of RVN provincial and local officials. However, Phillips also gave credit to the rural population, whom he portrayed as instinctively anticommunist. Citing his official informants, he reported that most rural residents were either neutral or supportive of the government; he found no signs of “a shift toward voluntary support of the Viet Cong.” This encouraging assessment was reinforced by stories of determined resistance Phillips heard from strategic hamlet residents. Although all of these conversations were mediated by the RVN provincial officials who arranged his visits to particular hamlets, Phillips was convinced that they were representative of popular attitudes throughout South Vietnam. He

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therefore recommended “sustained and constructive American support” for the Strategic Hamlet Program to reinforce the “conspicuous success” it had already achieved.⁶⁷

As he and Lansdale had advocated during the mid-1950s, Phillips suggested that some of the U.S. aid for the Strategic Hamlet Program should be used for civic action. Unlike some other U.S. officials, however, Phillips did not believe that hamlet inhabitants could be won over merely by more material aid and improved security. Instead, he insisted that the program’s success or failure would turn on another of Lansdale’s favorite themes: democracy. According to Phillips, the “central idea” behind the program was to furnish rural communities with a measure of self-government. This would permit residents to gain “a political stake in their own hamlets, and ultimately in the national government.” He noted that both Diem and Nhu had emphasized the democratizing aspects of the program in their meetings with him. For Diem, the strategic hamlets were a means “to institute basic democracy in Vietnam” and “realize the ideals of the constitution on a local scale which the people can understand.” Most encouraging of all for Phillips was Diem’s comment that the strategic hamlets were “a state of mind.” This remark appeared to be perfectly in tune with Lansdale’s low modernist approach to counterinsurgency and the emphasis he placed on psychological factors. For Phillips, as for his mentor, the universal appeal of democratic values and practices was the key concept on which the success of the program—and the outcome of the war—would hinge.⁶⁸

Phillips’s report convinced USAID officials that he was the ideal choice to head the new counterinsurgency aid program he envisioned. In September 1962, he returned to Saigon to head the Office of Rural Affairs, a new division of USOM. With the assistance of Bert Fraleigh, a veteran U.S. aid official who had formerly worked for the Economic Cooperation Administration in China and Taiwan, Phillips began building an aid apparatus designed to steer the Strategic Hamlet Program in a Lansdalian direction. He and Fraleigh decided that most Rural Affairs personnel would be “USOM provincial representatives” who would work and live in a particular South Vietnamese province. In language reminiscent of Burdick and Lederer’s novel *The Ugly American*, Phillips called for volunteers who had “enthusiasm, energy, imagination and initiative,” who were willing to endure hardship and danger, and who showed “a manifest capacity to understand and work with Asians.” This

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last quality was essential, Phillips explained, because each provincial representative would serve on a joint "Provincial Rehabilitation Committee" headed by the RVN province chief. Phillips and Fraleigh saw these committees as analogous to the Joint Commission for Rural Reconstruction (JCRR), the organization that U.S. and Republic of China officials had used to administer American agrarian development aid in Taiwan. Phillips was adamant that the provincial committees needed discretionary power over all U.S. aid for strategic hamlets in each province. This would allow Rural Affairs to bypass the existing U.S. and South Vietnamese bureaucracies and wield substantial influence over the Strategic Hamlet Program at the provincial and local levels, even though the Vietnamese province chief would technically remain in charge.⁶⁹

The low modernist aspects of Phillips's approach were apparent in the ways he proposed to use U.S. aid to transform the lives and the thinking of ordinary hamlet residents. For example, the Rural Affairs provincial representatives worked with their RVN counterparts to furnish not only material aid but also American technical expertise to the hamlets. By furnishing farmers with new breeds of pigs and high-yield varieties of rice, Rural Affairs would raise incomes and living standards. Yet Phillips was adamant that Rural Affairs would not function only as a "top-down" aid organization. The representatives were exhorted to find ways to enlist hamlet residents in "self-help development projects." In this way, they would cultivate hamlet-level democracy even as they also facilitated a "two-way flow of actions and help" between local populations and the RVN government.⁷⁰

Perhaps the most revealing expression of the Rural Affairs view of the hamlet program is "Notes on Strategic Hamlets," a pamphlet drafted in mid-1963 to clear up "misunderstandings" among U.S. and RVN officials. Invoking Diem's definition of the strategic hamlet as a "state of mind," this document argued that the program's most important effect lay in its impact on the "psychological realities" of hamlet residents. All aspects of the program—even the construction of fortifications and the distribution of weapons and ammunition—were geared to produce changes in residents' attitudes and outlooks. The program could not succeed merely by satisfying the population's basic material wants or by physically sequestering the people from the insurgents. Instead, farmers needed to be persuaded that life in a strategic hamlet offered them the chance to improve their own lives via self-defense and self-government.⁷¹

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On the surface, the arguments presented in “Notes on Strategic Hamlets”—especially its emphasis on “psychological realities” and self-government—appeared broadly consistent with the Ngo brothers’ vision of the Strategic Hamlet Program.⁷² But these rhetorical similarities concealed deeper differences between the Rural Affairs approach and the ideas the palace espoused. One of the most important differences had to do with the two sides’ contrasting views of democracy. Diem, as we have seen, never embraced liberal notions of democracy as a pluralist contest among rival leaders, groups, or ideas. Instead, he saw democracy as a means to enlist the South Vietnamese population en masse in the struggle against the RVN’s enemies, and as a way to promote his communitarian vision of social transformation. The practical implications of this understanding of “democracy” for the Strategic Hamlet Program were a far cry from what Phillips and his Rural Affairs colleagues expected. In his instructions to RVN officials on how to conduct hamlet elections, Ngo Dinh Nhu made it clear that the outcome of the voting was too important to be left to voters. “If the district chief is prudent enough,” he declared, “the inhabitants will elect the persons selected by him.” In the event that the balloting did not turn out as hoped, a district chief could simply void the result and organize a new election—though Nhu warned that “it is better to be careful beforehand.” Given such instructions, it is not surprising that few of the elections held in strategic hamlets were the free and fair affairs Americans had hoped to see. A November 1962 CIA assessment of hamlet elections found that many district chiefs had resorted to rigged votes and other manipulative measures to produce the outcomes they wanted. As a result, “the democratic process [was] often honored in the breach or applied only in part.”⁷³

Another major point of difference between the palace and the Americans had to do with the self-sufficiency the Strategic Hamlet Program was supposed to produce. Virtually all Americans in South Vietnam—including Phillips and his Rural Affairs colleagues—believed that direct deliveries of U.S. aid to the hamlets, if properly administered, would facilitate the program’s success. But Nhu insisted that outside aid should be kept to minimal levels and ended as soon as possible. Such limits were essential, Nhu argued, lest rural residents become too dependent on government largesse. “You do not understand these villagers,” he told one American interlocutor. “Satisfy one demand and they would return with ten more.”⁷⁴ Nhu was also anxious to prevent the United States from using its aid as

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leverage to gain influence over the program. These concerns led him to advocate policies that Americans often found strange, if not downright counterproductive. For example, U.S. officials were mystified by Nhu's statement that the government would only provide weapons and ammunition to hamlet militias for a period of six months, after which they would be expected to arm themselves with weapons captured from the enemy.⁷⁵

Nhu's attempts to explain the rationale behind this and other policies only deepened the Americans' confusion. In a December 1962 meeting with Phillips, Nhu held forth on his theories of guerrilla and counter guerrilla warfare. Although Phillips agreed with some of Nhu's observations, he could not understand his musings about "three interdependent levels of self-sufficiency, to be added to three degrees of personal vigilance, to equal Personalism." Phillips left the meeting "baffled by [Nhu's] combination of wooly-headedness with some fairly good insights."⁷⁶

Despite Nhu's abstruse ideological commentaries, Phillips's enthusiasm for the Strategic Hamlet Program remained strong. During the fall of 1962, Phillips leveraged his palace connections to set up the joint U.S.-RVN Provincial Rehabilitation Committees that would oversee the distribution of American aid within each province. Rural Affairs also began using Vietnamese commercial trucks and barges to move hamlet building supplies and other aid materials from Saigon to some of South Vietnam's outlying provinces. (Although these commercial operators often had to pay "tolls" to NLF commanders to get their cargos through insurgent-controlled areas, Phillips defended these payments to the enemy on the grounds that "some compromises had to be made for the greater good of getting relief and other supplies to where they were needed.") By early 1963, Phillips was convinced that the Strategic Hamlet Program had thrown the NLF on the defensive. "We are winning the war in Vietnam," he declared in an April 1963 memo. In his view, a recent wave of NLF attacks on strategic hamlets showed that the guerrillas had been forced into actions that "can only further separate them from the people."⁷⁷

Yet Phillips, despite his optimism, was not yet willing to declare the Strategic Hamlet Program an unqualified triumph. The program could still fail and all the recent gains could slip away, he warned. He was not much concerned that the NLF would devise new tactics that would undermine the hamlets' effectiveness; instead, he argued that the real danger to the program's ultimate success lurked inside the South Vietnamese

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government bureaucracy. While he judged the basic concepts behind the program to be “excellent,” he had found that far too many RVN officials either did not understand these concepts or simply did not care to follow them. “There is, almost across the board, great difficulty in grasping the idea that ‘the strategic hamlet program is a state of mind,’” he complained. Rural Affairs had discovered that “basic requirements were being disregarded” at the provincial and local levels and that “principles and application alike were being sacrificed to reporting paper ‘accomplishments.’” In Phillips’s view, the blame for this state of affairs lay mainly with the province chiefs, many of whom were corrupt, incompetent, or both. But he also suggested that Diem and Nhu had exacerbated the problem by setting unrealistic goals for the program’s implementation. With only a handful of exceptions, the chiefs were “so frightened by the pressures from the president and his brother that they would employ any measures, from forced labor and confiscation to false reporting, to achieve the quantitative goals” the palace set. “At this time,” Phillips observed, “many of the province chiefs would prefer to take the people from their established homes and herd them into quasi-refugee camps, calling these strategic hamlets, rather than risk the wrath of Saigon by telling the truth.” Since these officials could not be counted on, the ultimate success of the program depended on continued American oversight and guidance.⁷⁸

Phillips would later hold up Rural Affairs’ participation in the Strategic Hamlet Program as a shining example of American-Vietnamese collaboration on counterinsurgency and nation building. But the complaints that he and other USOM officials voiced at the time show that they never achieved the hoped-for meeting of the minds with the palace. On key issues such as democracy and self-sufficiency, Nhu’s thinking about the Strategic Hamlet Program was sharply different from the liberal vision Phillips and other Rural Affairs personnel promoted. And while Diem and Nhu undoubtedly agreed with Phillips that many RVN province chiefs and local officials were venal and incompetent, the brothers would have objected stridently to his suggestion that the best remedy for this problem was to increase U.S. influence over the program at the provincial and local levels. Thus, despite the unprecedented scope and extent of U.S.-RVN collaboration on the Strategic Hamlet Program, the allies were still working at cross-purposes. They were engaged in what one historian has aptly described as “competitive cooperation”—a joint enterprise in which each side was convinced that the fate of the program depended on

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promoting its own ideas over the wrongheaded notions favored by the other.⁷⁹ Such convictions did not bode well for the long-term success of the program, even at a time when things finally appeared to be going well for the government in its war against the NLF.

Many of the flaws Phillips and his colleagues perceived in the Strategic Hamlet Program were reminiscent of the shortcomings Americans had found in earlier RVN nation-building ventures such as the Agroville Program and the Land Development Program. But the Strategic Hamlet Program differed from those earlier ventures in one key respect: for all its evident shortcomings, it appeared to be part of a remarkable turnaround in the government's fortunes in its war against the NLF. During 1962, the ARVN claimed several notable battlefield victories; the government also claimed to have reversed the dismal pattern that had prevailed in 1960–1961, when the guerrillas had been steadily expanding the territory and population under their control. While U.S. assessments of these gains were more guarded than the palace's, most American officials agreed that the outlook was vastly improved. Thus, as 1963 began, the two governments were no longer operating in the crisis atmosphere that had prevailed when Kennedy and Diem had established their limited partnership in late 1961. Instead, U.S.-RVN collaboration on strategic hamlets and other nation-building ventures was unfolding amid growing feelings of optimism. This shared positive outlook would strongly color the allies' dealings with each other throughout 1963. Even after the alliance was rocked by an unexpected series of new crises during the spring and summer, leaders in both governments continued to hope and believe that more and greater triumphs were imminent. Thanks to the perceived success of the limited partnership, the nightmare scenarios of 1961 were giving way to new dreams of victory.

8

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At the beginning of 1963, the Ngo brothers' outlook was radically different from what it had been a year earlier. The anxiety and gloom of the previous winter had dissipated, replaced by new feelings of exuberance. During early 1962, the United States began deliveries of the helicopters, armored personnel carriers, and other military aid promised under the terms of the limited partnership. This equipment greatly increased the ARVN's tactical mobility and allowed its units to inflict several stinging defeats on NLF main force units. In the Mekong Delta, government soldiers mounted on M-113 troop transports stormed through enemy-controlled areas as if "hunting wild birds or driving rats from their holes," one South Vietnamese commander later boasted.¹ At the same time, the government reported major progress in the implementation of the Strategic Hamlet Program, which was expanding rapidly in almost every province. The regime had built about four thousand strategic hamlets by the end of 1962—far less than the sixteen thousand Nhu initially planned to complete during the year but enough to have a major impact on the insurgency. By the end of the year, the Strategic Hamlet Program had allowed the government to gain effective control over one-third of the rural population in Mekong Delta and two-thirds of all the people living between Saigon and the 17th parallel.² The optimistic conclusions that the palace drew from these developments were confirmed by many U.S. officials and other

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foreign observers in South Vietnam. British counterinsurgency expert Sir Robert Thompson, who had criticized the implementation of the Strategic Hamlet Program in its early stages, declared in early 1963 that “the government is beginning to win the war against the Viet Cong.”³ MAC-V commander Paul Harkins, predicted that South Vietnam would enjoy a “white Christmas” in 1963—meaning that insurgent activity would be reduced to the point that the ARVN’s color-coded maps would show all provinces as white (the color that designated an area under firm government control).⁴

The Diem government’s achievements during the first year of the limited partnership were significant and impressive. In retrospect, however, it is clear that they were not nearly as decisive or as permanent as they seemed to be at the time. In an October 1962 report, State Department officials acknowledged the many encouraging signs of progress and agreed that “the Viet Cong are not winning the war.” Yet the report also compared the military situation in South Vietnam to the U.S. Civil War in 1862 and to World War II in 1942; as at those earlier moments, “no one clearly has the initiative.” These analogies were perhaps more insightful than the report’s authors realized. Viewed in hindsight, the year 1963 marked a moment of particular fluidity and volatility in the history of the Vietnam War—one that was filled with danger as well as opportunity for all of the participants in the conflict. But in the minds of Ngo Dinh Diem and Ngo Dinh Nhu, the tide of the struggle had already turned. Doubt and despair had given way to confidence and optimism; in 1963, more than ever before, the Ngos were certain that the fate of their nation lay in their hands. No one—neither their allies nor their enemies—would prevent them from winning the new triumphs they believed lay just ahead.

The Ngos and the Battle of Ap Bac

The Ngos’ optimism about the war in early 1963 was based in large measure on their strongly positive assessment of the Strategic Hamlet Program. But as some of the regime’s own supporters later admitted, the actual implementation of the the program in the countryside frequently fell short of the palace’s lofty expectations. Although the regime had built a large number of strategic hamlets and sequestered a significant portion of the rural population within them during 1962, there was precious little evidence that hamlet residents had embraced the self-sufficient outlook that the Ngos had defined as the *raison d’être* of the program. Indeed, as

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Nhu frequently complained to his subordinates, the government's own officials had largely failed to understand the ideological goals behind the program. In lieu of such understanding, these officials concentrated on the construction of hamlet fortifications and on the physical control of the population via coercive and even brutal methods. To be sure, not all government representatives agreed with ARVN Brigadier General Van Thanh Cao, who observed that "many people are obliged to support the VC" and concluded: "we must give them good reason to refuse by shooting some of them."⁵ But even those province and district chiefs who did not subscribe to such draconian views were under pressure to implement the program as rapidly as possible. As Rufus Phillips noted in April 1963, pressure to show results led many RVN officials to emphasize quantity over quality, and to employ "methods sure to alienate the population."⁶ Most retrospective studies of the Strategic Hamlet Program at the provincial and local levels in South Vietnam have underlined the program's coercive character, as well as the gulf that separated the theories formulated in Saigon from the regime's actual practices in the countryside.⁷

In addition to overestimating the success of the Strategic Hamlet Program, Diem and Nhu underestimated the NLF's ability to recover from the battle defeats it had suffered during 1962. Although the ARVN had gained a significant advantage from its new ability to carry out heliborne and mechanized assaults, the insurgents adapted to the new battlefield realities with remarkable alacrity. During the fall of 1962, NLF commanders in the Mekong Delta reorganized their provincial and main force units to increase their range and mobility. At the same time, they devised a "stand and fight" doctrine, under which their best-armed units would initially hold their positions when attacked—even in the face of superior firepower—in the hopes that strict fire discipline would allow them to inflict heavy casualties and throw the enemy into confusion.⁸

The insurgents' new doctrine worked brilliantly at the Battle of Ap Bac in January 1963. In this clash near the Mekong Delta city of My Tho, elements of two NLF battalions mauled an attacking force of fifteen hundred ARVN soldiers and Civil Guardsmen. The guerillas destroyed or damaged fourteen U.S.-piloted helicopters and inflicted nearly two hundred casualties on the attackers before escaping with comparatively minor losses.⁹ The significance of Ap Bac would subsequently be distorted both by U.S. news reports, which blamed the defeat on ARVN incompetence and cowardice, and by communist propaganda, which retrospectively

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depicted the battle as a decisive moment in which the revolution recovered the strategic initiative and effectively sealed the fate of the Diem regime. In reality, the overall military situation in South Vietnam remained murky for several months after Ap Bac, as both NLF and ARVN forces continued to claim victories at the other's expense.¹⁰ Nevertheless, Ap Bac was still an indicator of the insurgency's impressive resilience and its commanders' ability to learn from setbacks. By proving that the ARVN's new mobility did not make its troops unbeatable, the NLF victory at Ap Bac boosted the revolutionaries' morale and provided the crucial tactical insights that would pave the way for future successes.

Yet Diem and Nhu refused to see Ap Bac as a sign of trouble. They instead treated it as evidence that they were closer than ever to defeating the insurgency. In the months prior to the battle, Diem and Nhu had become convinced that communist forces, having realized that the tide of the war was running against them, were planning an all-out offensive during 1963. This desperation offensive, the brothers believed, would surely fail, leaving RVN forces in position to launch a deadly series of counterattacks. From this perspective, the defeat at Ap Bac, though disappointing, did not merit any rethinking of the government's overall approach to the war.

The Ngos' optimism about the war at the time of Ap Bac was apparent in the remarkably ambitious strategic objectives they planned to pursue during 1963. Two months before the battle, Nhu ordered the RVN Civic Action Ministry to begin preparing for the "reoccupation" of North Vietnam. The "march to the north" he envisioned was not a conventional military invasion. No such invasion would be necessary, he argued, because the news of the revolutionary success of the Strategic Hamlet Program would soon filter across the 17th parallel. This news would inspire northerners to begin building their own strategic hamlets, perhaps with the assistance of small teams infiltrated from the south.¹¹ Diem and Nhu also planned to go on the offensive against communist forces in Laos, where a neutralization agreement brokered by the United States and Soviet Union had gone into effect a few months earlier. In October 1962, Diem severed diplomatic relations with Vientiane—over Washington's strenuous objections—and intimated that the RVN would wage a covert war inside Laos, possibly in collaboration with the anticommunist government of Thailand. In Nhu's opinion, Laos offered the "perfect terrain" on which to meet and defeat the communists.¹²

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The Ngos' expectations for new strategic gains during 1963 undermine some of the conventional wisdom about the battle of Ap Bac and the reasons for the ARVN defeat. John Paul Vann, a U.S. military advisor who witnessed the battle, concluded that the ARVN's miserable performance proved that Diem was not really interested in fighting the communists. According to Vann, ARVN commanders on the scene had refused to take his advice about deploying reinforcements during the battle because they were under strict orders to avoid taking casualties. Diem had issued these orders, Vann maintained, because he feared that heavy losses in ARVN ranks might lead some officers to reprise the 1960 paratrooper coup attempt that had nearly toppled him from power. Vann was not the first to make allegations about Diem's willingness to lose battles and territory merely to hang onto power; such rumors had circulated widely among U.S. military advisors prior to Ap Bac. But by voicing these allegations to American reporters after the battle, Vann helped them gain greater currency.¹³

In fact, Vann's understanding of the Ngos' thinking about military strategy was incorrect on almost every point. While it was certainly true that Diem and Nhu placed a heavy premium on personal loyalty when selecting their military commanders, they still expected those commanders to fight and defeat the NLF—in other words, they did not believe that they had to choose between battlefield victories and political survival. In the case of Ap Bac, their annoyance with the ARVN's poor performance was attenuated by their belief that the defeat was merely a bump on the road to victory. Ngo Dinh Nhu acknowledged that ARVN commanders had made mistakes at Ap Bac but still insisted that that the battle had not been a complete defeat for the government side; with better use of artillery and more emphasis on “envelopment” tactics, he asserted, RVN forces would prevail in future clashes.¹⁴ This reassuring assessment was affirmed in an April 1963 report on Ap Bac produced by the ARVN General Staff. The battle had not been the result of a carefully laid enemy trap, the report concluded; moreover, its outcome would have been different if only the attackers had made better use of their tactical advantages.¹⁵ Proregime Saigon newspapers insisted that the battle had actually been a victory for the government. According to these accounts, the insurgents had managed to destroy only one helicopter while losing over one hundred men—evidence that they had abandoned guerrilla warfare and were now pursuing a “suicidal” strategy of attacking in larger formations.¹⁶

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In the weeks after Ap Bac, Nhu became even more confident that the insurgency was in its death throes. He predicted that the war would reach a “major turning point” in mid-1963 as NLF forces made a desperate effort to reverse the losses they had suffered over the previous year.¹⁷ By allowing the enemy to exhaust himself, Nhu maintained, the government would pave the way for a counteroffensive that would result in the “massive extermination” of any remaining insurgents.¹⁸ While conceding that “the time was not ripe for large scale victories,” Nhu had no doubt that such a moment was coming soon.¹⁹ Thus, the main conclusion the Ngos drew from Ap Bac was that the months ahead would bring more clashes, but also many more successes against a reeling enemy. Instead of ordering their commanders to avoid combat and casualties, the brothers were convinced that ARVN units would soon be fighting—and winning—the most intense and decisive battles of the war.

“Revisionism” and the Idea of a U.S. Withdrawal

The Ngos’ expectations for victory in 1963 stood in stark contrast to their views of their current relations with the United States. The limited partnership, despite its apparent success, had served to heighten the palace’s long-standing concerns about Washington’s designs for South Vietnam. Over the course of 1962, the number of Americans serving in official capacities in South Vietnam had risen sharply. By early 1963, the civilian staff of the U.S. mission was at least twice as large as it had been two years earlier; over the same period, the number of “in country” American military personnel had shot up from fewer than a thousand to more than twelve thousand men. For Diem and Nhu, these huge increases were uncomfortably reminiscent of the era of French colonial rule. In their view, the main problem with the growing American presence was not simply that it appeared to lend credence to communist allegations about the regime’s subordinate relationship to Washington. The brothers were actually more concerned that too many South Vietnamese—including many of their own officials and military officers—continued to display a “colonial mentality” that would facilitate American efforts to transform the country into a U.S. protectorate. The Ngos were especially worried about the American civilians and military advisors who had been dispatched to work in South Vietnam’s provincial towns and rural districts. In those areas, Diem complained, many residents “believe that the Americans are now the government and disregard the authority of my local officials.”²⁰

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The Ngos' concerns about the American presence appear to have been piqued by the February 1963 release of a critical report on South Vietnam by U.S. senator Mike Mansfield. Mansfield had long been considered one of Diem's most ardent supporters in Washington. But during a trip to Saigon in late 1962—his first in seven years—Mansfield was dismayed to discover that "South Viet Nam appears less, not more stable" than in 1955 and "more removed from, rather than closer to, the achievement of popularly responsible and responsive government."²¹ The palace's public reaction to these criticisms was surprisingly restrained; after reading the RVN Foreign Ministry's assessment that the report did not herald a shift in Kennedy's policy, Diem was content to limit the official response to a mild rebuttal by the RVN National Assembly.²² Nevertheless, the episode seems to have underlined Nhu's often-expressed concerns about the unreliability of the U.S. commitment to South Vietnam. Instead of waiting for the administration to abandon the regime—as Mansfield apparently had—it would be better to steer the Americans toward an orderly departure, conducted on Saigon's terms.

During the early spring of 1963, the Ngos began to advocate what Nhu described as a new "revisionism" in their dealings with the United States. Although Nhu's use of this term was characteristically opaque, he indicated that it referred to an overhaul of the terms under which the United States provided aid to the RVN and participated in its nation-building programs.²³ While the substance of the brothers' criticisms was not new, the confrontational tone of their complaints raised hackles in the U.S. embassy and in Washington. In mid-April, the CIA reported that the palace's accusations about U.S. infringements on RVN sovereignty had produced a "considerable amount of tension" between the two governments.²⁴

In outlining his "revisionist" approach to foreign aid, Nhu stressed that he was calling for a reduction, not an end, to U.S. material support for South Vietnam. While continued deliveries of certain forms of aid (such as helicopters and armored personnel carriers) were essential, he argued, other kinds of assistance could be phased out over time, and some could be ended immediately.²⁵ For example, in March 1963 he ordered RVN officials to encourage the residents of strategic hamlets to begin producing their own small arms and land mines so that deliveries of U.S.-supplied munitions could be reduced. Such measures, Nhu argued, would promote self-sufficiency at both the national and communal level.²⁶ In addition to placing limits on the scope and types of aid the RVN was receiving,

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Nhu also wanted more exclusive control over U.S.-supplied assistance. Washington, he suggested, should treat South Vietnam the same way it treated the communist government of Yugoslavia—that is, as a country that received military equipment and other material aid but did not accept any U.S. advice about its internal affairs.²⁷

In addition to cutting back on the total amount of U.S. aid to South Vietnam, Nhu also sought to impose new limits on U.S. involvement in the Strategic Hamlet Program. Since mid-1962, U.S. funding for the program had been provided through the \$10 million counterpart fund set up by USAID to support counterinsurgency operations. By early 1963, those monies were largely exhausted. Nolting warned the palace that the counterpart fund was a “one-shot operation” and the United States expected the RVN to furnish a much larger share of the funding for the program during the upcoming fiscal year. After considering the U.S. proposal, Diem informed Nolting that he would increase the RVN’s contribution to the fund. To Nolting’s chagrin, however, Diem also stated that he would end the current practice of channeling money and supplies for the hamlet program through the three-member Provincial Rehabilitation Committees (each consisting of the RVN province chief, a U.S. military advisor, and the USOM Rural Affairs representative). In Diem’s view, to allow Americans to administer funds from Vietnamese coffers constituted an intolerable violation of RVN sovereignty. He complained that some Rural Affairs employees and other U.S. personnel had been exploiting the servile mentality of their RVN counterparts. Although Nolting appealed forcefully to Diem to reconsider, he seemed unmoved.²⁸

In late April, Rufus Phillips learned that the embassy was ready to capitulate to Diem’s demands and dissolve the provincial committees Phillips had set up during the previous fall. Although Phillips later admitted that the funding arrangements were “a considerable abrogation of Vietnamese sovereignty,” he insisted that they had to be preserved in order for the Strategic Hamlet Program to succeed.²⁹ “We don’t need the provincial committees,” he told Nolting. “The *Vietnamese* need the provincial committees.”³⁰ In a long and strongly worded memorandum, Phillips argued that the proposed changes would be disastrous. “Without substantial U.S. influence at the provincial level,” he insisted, “the Vietnamese government is most unlikely to succeed in truly winning the populace—in which case the war is lost.”³¹ With Nolting seemingly unwilling to press the matter further with the palace, Phillips considered resigning in protest. “I’m

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pretty goddamned discouraged,” he wrote to Lansdale. “We may lose our revolution.”³²

The most controversial of Nhu’s “revisionist” proposals called for reversing the enormous increase in the number of U.S. military advisors in South Vietnam. In a meeting with CIA station chief John Richardson in mid-April, Nhu suggested that the American military presence could be reduced by up to four thousand men in the near future.³³ Around the same time, the palace began to air its complaints about U.S. advisors in public. Some of the sharpest of these public criticisms were leveled by Madame Nhu. Though she did not specifically identify U.S. military personnel as the targets of her ire, her denunciations of the “false brothers” who were undermining South Vietnam’s right to self-determination were clearly directed at Americans. She also warned of foreigners who were using aid “to make lackeys of Vietnamese and to seduce Vietnamese women into decadent paths.”³⁴

Madame Nhu’s thinly veiled attacks on the U.S. advisory program marked a significant step in the evolution of her public image. Although she had been a powerful figure in palace politics from the earliest days of Diem’s rule, she had not initially been much involved in presenting or defending the regime’s policies to the outside world. In the fall of 1954, following her controversial appearance at a proregime rally in Saigon that ended in violence, she was quietly dispatched to Hong Kong, where she lived for several months in a Catholic convent.³⁵ After winning election to the RVN National Assembly in 1956, she focused her activist energies on burnishing her self-proclaimed role as a feminist and liberator of Vietnamese women. Her major accomplishment in this area was the 1959 RVN Family Law, a measure that outlawed polygamy, arranged marriages, and other practices she deemed harmful to women. It also eliminated divorce, a measure that generated considerable opposition in the normally pliable National Assembly. Many deputies complained that the ban was an attempt to impose Catholic morality on non-Christian Vietnamese.³⁶ (It did not help that Madame Nhu was widely known to be trying to prevent a high-ranking RVN official from divorcing his unfaithful wife, who happened to be Madame Nhu’s sister.)³⁷ The opposition to the Family Law contributed to Madame Nhu’s growing unpopularity within South Vietnam but had little immediate impact on her reputation outside the country. Most of the profiles of Madame Nhu that appeared in U.S. and other foreign

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Madame Ngo Dinh Nhu at a press conference in Saigon, 1962. (Time & Life Pictures/Getty Images)

publications during the late 1950s were sympathetic, if also rather condescending and Orientalist.³⁸

After 1960, as Ngo Dinh Nhu gradually regained his position as the dominant figure in the Diem government, Madame Nhu began to play a more prominent role in some of the regime's nation-building initiatives. In January 1961, she established the Vietnamese Women's Solidarity Movement, a mass organization that claimed to have more than a million members and was supposed to serve as the female counterpart to Nhu's Republican Youth movement. Like the Republican Youth, the Women's Solidarity Movement recalled the Vichy-era mass mobilization programs undertaken by Indochinese colonial officials during the 1940s. It also mimicked the Republican Youth's emphasis on paramilitary training for its members. Madame Nhu seemed to relish her appearances at events at which hundreds

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of women dressed in military fatigues demonstrated their skills with parade rifles and pledged loyalty to the regime.³⁹ She also became more deeply involved in the palace's contentious dealings with foreign journalists in South Vietnam. By the fall of 1962 she had earned the enmity of the Saigon foreign press corps by demanding the expulsion of veteran *Newsweek* reporter Francois Sully, who had published several stories critical of the Ngo family. Following Sully's departure from South Vietnam, many journalists concluded that Madame Nhu had conspired with Nhu to take effective control of the government. Some even suggested that her influence within the palace had surpassed that of her husband.⁴⁰

In reality, it was Nhu who enlisted his wife in the schemes he designed, not the other way around. But even if Madame Nhu was not running the government, her overheated rhetoric still had a major effect on the state of U.S.-RVN relations. With tensions between Washington and Saigon once again on the rise, Nhu seemed to be betting that his wife's sharp-tongued comments would make his and his brother's remarks seem tame by comparison—a dubious wager, but one he would make several more times in the months ahead.

Nhu eventually lent his own voice to the regime's public campaign to reduce the U.S. advisory presence in South Vietnam. On May 12, the *Washington Post* published an interview with Nhu in which he stated that “at least 50 percent” of the U.S. military advisors in Vietnam were “not absolutely necessary in the field” and should be removed from the country. He also suggested that too many of the current crop of advisors were “daredevils” who were often too impatient to attack the enemy.⁴¹ These remarks—which echoed private complaints Nhu had made earlier to U.S. and European diplomats—elicited consternation and condemnation in Washington, where some officials and journalists seized on them as evidence of Nhu's shift to an anti-American position. In Saigon, the comments fueled speculation that U.S.-RVN relations were approaching a breaking point.⁴²

But the Ngos had no desire for a rupture in their relations with Washington. As Nhu stressed to the *Post*, he did not wish his comments to be construed as a demand for a complete U.S. military withdrawal or for an end to U.S. aid for South Vietnam. He pointedly cast his remarks as a response to those made two days earlier by a Pentagon spokesman who had indicated that Washington was planning to reduce its forces in South Vietnam within “one to three years”—a statement that had been mostly overlooked in the United States but received prominent coverage in the

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Saigon newspapers controlled by Nhu.⁴³ This suggests that Nhu viewed his call for a reduction in U.S. force levels not as a demand for a reversal of U.S. policy but as an attempt to press Washington to move more quickly along a course it was already planning to pursue.

Viewed in hindsight, Nhu's call for a drawdown in the U.S. advisory presence appears replete with historical irony. As his reference to the words of the Pentagon spokesman showed, Nhu had picked up on the first public hints of what historians now refer to as the "Kennedy withdrawal." During the spring of 1962, Defense Department analysts predicted that the ARVN would defeat the communist insurgency in South Vietnam sometime in 1965. Working from this assumption, the Pentagon drew up plans to begin a phased withdrawal of U.S. military advisors during late 1963. Although Kennedy had not yet formally endorsed this plan in May 1963, he eventually would. Historians remain sharply divided over whether Kennedy's commitment to a complete U.S. withdrawal by 1965 was unconditional or contingent on the ARVN's continued success on the battlefield; however, there is no doubt that the idea of a U.S. withdrawal from South Vietnam was more than a theoretical possibility during the spring of 1963. The timing of Nhu's comments to the *Post*, coupled with his reference to the recent Pentagon statement, suggests that he expected his proposal to be received positively in some quarters of the U.S. government bureaucracy, if not by Kennedy himself.⁴⁴

Nhu was clearly caught off guard by the vehemence of the American responses to his *Post* interview. Within days, he had backed away from his most provocative statements by claiming that his words had been misrepresented.⁴⁵ In subsequent conversations with U.S. and European reporters, both Diem and Nhu avoided the issue of an immediate U.S. drawdown and noted simply that discussion of the issue had been deferred for the time being.⁴⁶

The palace also moved quickly to defuse the controversy over the Strategic Hamlet Program and the counterpart fund. On May 17, just five days after the publication of Nhu's interview, Diem and Nolting released a joint statement that declared that the two sides had struck a deal to extend U.S.-RVN cooperation on all counterinsurgency projects, including the hamlet program. Officially, the agreement allowed RVN province chiefs to disburse funds without the countersignatures of MAAG advisors and the Rural Affairs representatives, just as Diem and Nhu had insisted; in practice, however, the regime consented to let the provincial committees

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continue to function as before.⁴⁷ This outcome appeared to be a vindication for Phillips, who claimed that it proved that the palace's complaints about meddlesome and arrogant Americans "did not apply" to Rural Affairs. But Nhu's own comments on the subject showed that his fears about the corrupting effects of U.S. aid had not been laid to rest. Although he assured Phillips that he appreciated the work that Rural Affairs had done, Nhu also stated that he wanted "a better common understanding and relationship between Vietnamese and Americans, particularly in regard to those working in the provinces." And while he was willing to allow the current funding arrangements to continue, he maintained that "we should not accustom ourselves to getting funds too easily."⁴⁸

By late May 1963, Nhu's experiment with "revisionism" in his dealings with Washington appeared to have run its course. On the surface, the harmony within the alliance seemed to have been restored without any major changes to the terms of the limited partnership. Leaders in both governments remained strongly optimistic about the current course of the war; there seemed little reason to expect that the rest of the year would bring anything other than continued steady improvement in the Diem government's political and military fortunes. Nevertheless, the deeper differences revealed by the debate over the advisory presence and the counterpart fund controversy had not been resolved. As Mansfield had noted in his report, South Vietnam remained "only at the beginning of a beginning in coping with its grave inner problems." The events of the next six months would throw those inner problems into sharp relief and reveal just how brittle the relations between the allies had become.

The Origins of the "Buddhist Crisis"

The crowd that gathered in the courtyard of the radio station in Hue on the evening of May 8, 1963, was angry. Most were Buddhists who had come to listen to a special broadcast to mark the occasion of Wesak Day, the annual celebration of the Buddha's birth, life, and enlightenment. But when the broadcast failed to begin as scheduled at eight o'clock, the gathering became restless and quickly assumed the form of a demonstration. Some in the crowd appeared ready to storm the station. At one point, a protestor climbed to the roof of the station, pulled down the RVN national flag that was flying there, and replaced it with the flag of international Buddhism. The crowd shouted its approval. Meanwhile, a group of Buddhist monks were inside the station, trying to persuade the station

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manager to start the broadcast by playing a tape recording they had brought with them. The station manager refused, on the grounds that the tape had not been cleared by government censors.⁴⁹

Around ten o'clock, a detachment of soldiers and police officers arrived. Under the direction of their commander, an ARVN major named Dang Si, they attempted to disperse the crowd, first by using loudspeakers and then by spraying the crowd with fire hoses. These actions served only to make the crowd angrier. Determined to prevent the crowd from attacking the station, Major Si ordered one of the armored cars to begin inching through the people who were standing between his men and the building. As the car slowly pushed through the throng, several more troops followed behind on foot. The vehicle was about halfway across the station's courtyard when the area was rocked by at least one loud explosion and a series of gunshots. Seven protestors died at the scene; two more succumbed to their injuries a few hours later. Although the government insisted that a communist bomb had caused the carnage, most witnesses insisted that Dang Si and his men were responsible.⁵⁰

Historians have long seen the May 8 incident at the Hue radio station as the beginning of the end of the Ngo Dinh Diem government. The killings that evening helped to transform simmering Buddhist resentment with the regime into a powerful anti-Diem protest movement. But if the importance of the "Buddhist crisis" seems obvious in retrospect, scholars remain divided over how to interpret its origins and meaning. Many authors have seen the Buddhist movement as a struggle for religious freedom in the face of repression—an interpretation that echoes the protestors' own rhetoric.⁵¹ Others, in contrast, have argued that the Diem government was correct to portray the movement as a cynical attempt to use religion for political purposes. According to this view, the Buddhists' complaints about repression were mostly specious; the monks who led the movement either sought power for themselves or were secretly working on behalf of the communists.⁵² A third kind of interpretation depicts the movement as an irruption of centuries-old Buddhist beliefs and practices. By these lights, the Buddhists were avatars of tradition who struggled to come to grips with Vietnam's modern social and political realities.⁵³ Yet another interpretation connects the 1963 movement to other instances of Buddhist activism on behalf of peace, democracy, or human rights.⁵⁴

All of these interpretations offer insights into the origins and evolution of the 1963 crisis. However, none of them relates it to the larger history of

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Vietnamese Buddhism in the twentieth century. They also overlook the links between the 1963 events and the earlier history of Diem's dealings with Buddhist groups. When the 1963 movement is situated within a broader pattern of Buddhist reform activism in Vietnam, a different picture of the movement and its motives comes into focus. While there is no doubt that the protests were sparked by the discriminatory practices and bigoted attitudes of some Catholic officials in the Diem government, participants in the Buddhist movement were not concerned only or even primarily about discrimination and religious freedom. They were also deeply worried about the Diem government's nation-building agenda and especially about the personalist revolution, which they had come to see as a threat to their plans to revitalize Vietnamese Buddhism. Like the Ngo brothers, Buddhist leaders were ardent nationalists who hoped to steer Vietnam's postcolonial development in particular directions. In this regard, the 1963 crisis marked a critical moment in the unfolding politics of nation building in South Vietnam—one that would help write the fortunes of both the Diem government and the U.S.-RVN alliance.⁵⁵

Throughout the twentieth century, the history of institutional Buddhism in Vietnam was profoundly affected by a reform movement known as the Buddhist Revival (Chan Hung Phat Giao). During the 1910s and 1920s, growing numbers of clerical and lay Buddhists expressed worry that Vietnamese Buddhism was in the midst of an extended period of decline. Over several centuries, they asserted, Buddhists in Vietnam had gradually abandoned their principles and succumbed to spiritual lassitude. They also feared that many of their compatriots had come to see Buddhism as outdated and irrelevant to contemporary social concerns. Although this perceived decline may have been more imagined than real—many Vietnamese Buddhist institutions and practices thrived throughout the colonial era—Buddhist preachers and authors called for new efforts to revitalize the faith. In fashioning their reform agendas, these activists drew on transnational discourses and on the works of Buddhist reformers in China and other Asian countries. Yet the Buddhist Revival was also shaped by the broader ideological currents that shaped Vietnamese political and intellectual life during the interwar era. Among other things, Buddhists displayed growing interest in revolution, national liberation, and modernity; they also were intrigued by the possibility that Buddhism could be a progressive force for social change.⁵⁶

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During the 1950s and 1960s, the organization most closely linked to the Buddhist Revival was the General Buddhist Association of Vietnam (Tong Hoi Phat Giao Viet Nam; GBA). Founded in Hue during the first-ever “national congress” of Vietnamese Buddhists in 1951, the GBA was celebrated as a major advance toward the goal of building Buddhist solidarity. In addition, the GBA became a vocal proponent of a distinctly Buddhist form of Vietnamese nationalism. The association’s leaders endorsed the work of Buddhist historians who argued that medieval Vietnam had enjoyed a golden age under the leadership of devout Buddhist kings between the tenth and thirteenth centuries; according to this narrative, the country’s long decline began only after its leaders abandoned Buddhist principles in the fourteenth century, following an invasion by Ming Chinese armies. The prescriptive implications of this nationalist historical narrative were clear: to realize its postcolonial destiny, Vietnam needed to get back to its Buddhist roots. “For nearly two thousand years, the destiny of the nation and Buddhism have been intertwined,” the editors of the GBA’s official journal declared. “Let us join hands in cultivating national Buddhism [*Phat Giao dan toc*] in order to bring peace and happiness to the country.”⁵⁷

The GBA’s embrace of “national Buddhism” did not seem to bode well for Buddhist relations with the South Vietnamese government after Diem took power in Saigon in 1954. But Diem turned out to be more accommodating of the Buddhists and their reform objectives than many expected. During the first years of his rule, Diem appointed several Buddhists to his cabinet and filled most of the ARVN’s top command posts with Buddhist generals. He also welcomed the large number of Buddhist refugees from North Vietnam who joined their Catholic compatriots in the massive migration to the south during 1954–1955. At the same time, he sought to cultivate ties with certain GBA leaders. In 1956, Diem granted a GBA request to stage a second national congress. He also furnished funds for the construction of Xa Loi pagoda, a new place of worship in downtown Saigon that became the GBA’s headquarters after its completion in 1958. Diem’s gestures of support for the GBA recalled the nineteenth-century practices of the Nguyen kings, who had used patronage as a means to co-opt Buddhist groups and thus discourage them from participating in rebellions against the dynasty.⁵⁸

Unfortunately for Diem, the positive effects of his outreach to Buddhists were often diminished by other actions taken by his government

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and some of his subordinates. Although Buddhists were well represented in the cabinet and in the ARVN high command, Catholics came to dominate the middle and lower echelons of the RVN bureaucracy. Some Buddhist civil servants complained of being pressured by Catholic superiors to convert to Christianity. Buddhist groups also encountered resistance and harassment in their dealings with Catholic officials at the provincial and local levels. Such treatment lent credence to the claims of those who insisted that the personalist revolution was a government plot to impose Catholic beliefs and values on non-Catholic Vietnamese.⁵⁹

By the early 1960s, the tensions between Buddhist groups and Catholic officials had become particularly acute in central Vietnam. These tensions emerged despite the efforts of Ngo Dinh Can, who had followed Diem's lead by acting as a patron to local Buddhist leaders and organizations.⁶⁰ Although Can was initially successful in pursuing this strategy, the goodwill dissipated quickly after his older brother Ngo Dinh Thuc became archbishop of Hue in 1960. Unlike Can, who was reclusive and downplayed his Catholic identity, Thuc liked to flaunt his status and authority as a Catholic prelate. In addition, he and his subordinates acted in ways that seemed to confirm Buddhist fears about the government's alleged plans to Christianize the country. Buddhist leaders were dismayed, for example, by Thuc's decision to build a "National Marian Center" in the town of La Vang, near the 17th parallel, and by his vows to turn the area into a Catholic stronghold. They also accused church and local government officials of abusing their authority and forcing Buddhists in the region to convert to Catholicism.⁶¹ In a 1962 letter, the GBA chairman appealed to Diem for help. Although a subsequent investigation by the RVN interior minister blamed "subpar" Catholic officials for provoking the Buddhists, Diem did not act to restrain Thuc or his allies.⁶²

Thuc's hostility and Diem's apparent indifference led some Buddhist leaders to adopt a more confrontational stance toward the government. One such leader was Thich Tri Quang, a thirty-seven-year-old bonze who lived in Hue. An ardent Buddhist nationalist, Tri Quang had briefly supported the Viet Minh during the mid-1940s before eventually concluding that the revolutionaries' ultimate goals were incompatible with the ideals of the Buddhist Revival. During the early 1950s, he participated in the founding of the GBA and worked to build support for its reforms—activities that led the Viet Minh to label him a "reactionary." In 1954, he left his home province in north-central Vietnam and joined the mass mi-

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The monk Thich Tri Quang, prominent leader of the 1963 Buddhist Movement.
(© Christian Simonpietri/Sygma/Corbis)

gration across the 17th parallel into South Vietnam. He settled in Hue, where he frequently consulted with Ngo Dinh Can, who provided him with funds to renovate pagodas and build organizations for Buddhist laypeople.⁶³

Like many of his fellow Buddhists in the central region, Tri Quang became more critical of the government after Thuc took up his new post in Hue in 1960. Although he maintained a relationship with Can, he was deeply offended by Thuc's attempts to win Christian converts in the "heartland" of Vietnamese Buddhism. By early 1963, Tri Quang was seeking to channel the feelings of indignation with Thuc into a popular movement to pressure the government to meet Buddhist demands for policy changes. His efforts included the publication of an open letter calling on ARVN commanders to allow Buddhist chaplains to serve in the army.

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The letter appeared shortly before Wesak Day, the most important Buddhist holiday of the year, when Hue would be crowded with Buddhist worshippers.⁶⁴ In retrospect, it is clear that Tri Quang intended to use the Wesak celebrations on May 8 as an opportunity to mobilize the faithful. But he did not anticipate how government officials would unwittingly facilitate his efforts. Their actions, he later observed, were like “the drop that makes the bowl of water overflow.”⁶⁵

The sequence of events that culminated in the bloody confrontation at the Hue radio station on the evening of May 8 began two days earlier, when Diem’s office dispatched an official telegram to all RVN province chiefs and mayors. The May 6 message imposed a blanket ban on the public display of all religious flags and banners. Buddhists across South Vietnam immediately concluded that the ban was an attempt to disrupt the impending Wesak Day celebrations, which had long featured the flying of elaborate and colorful flags. The Buddhists’ outrage was heightened by the fact that just two days earlier, Catholic groups in Hue and other cities had used religious flags extensively during special ceremonies marking the twenty-fifth anniversary of Ngo Dinh Thuc’s elevation to the rank of bishop.⁶⁶

Ironically, Diem seems to have imposed the flag embargo mainly because he was annoyed with the overzealous character of the commemoration for Thuc. Indeed, Catholics had blatantly flaunted Diem’s previous attempts to regulate flag displays. In a bid to prevent religious flags from becoming symbols of resistance to the government, Diem had previously decreed that such banners could only be flown beneath larger versions of the RVN national flag. According to his subordinates, Diem was frustrated with the failures of both Buddhists and Catholics to observe this requirement; he concluded that a total ban on religious flag displays would be an evenhanded way to compel both groups to respect the primacy of state power. Yet he apparently failed to grasp that imposing such a measure on the eve of the biggest Buddhist holiday of the year was all but certain to provoke accusations of pro-Catholic chauvinism.⁶⁷

Other RVN leaders immediately recognized the problem with the May 6 flag ban. In Hue, Ngo Dinh Can acted swiftly to try to contain Buddhist anger. On the morning of May 7, Can invited Tri Quang and two other bonzes to his home to discuss the previous day’s presidential order. When the monks arrived, Can assured them that he had ordered the police in Hue not to enforce the new ban during the Wesak celebrations. “We can

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hardly afford to let the flag of the largest religion to be suppressed in this manner!" he declared.⁶⁸

In earlier years, when Can's writ had been supreme in Hue, his conciliatory stance probably would have been sufficient to defuse the tension created by Diem's directive. But in the current circumstances he had to take account of the formidable influence of Archbishop Thuc, who had no intention of allowing the ban to be relaxed. While riding through the city in his limousine that afternoon, Thuc was irritated to see that Buddhist preparations for Wesak were continuing as usual. Shortly after Thuc called the central Vietnam regional delegate to complain, police units throughout the city began tearing down all of the flags, banners, and lanterns that the Buddhists had raised.⁶⁹

Tri Quang and his fellow Buddhists wasted no time in responding to what they saw as a campaign of "terrorism" against Buddhism. The following morning, during the traditional Wesak procession through the streets of the city, several Buddhist marchers carried signs denouncing the government's actions. In public remarks during a ceremony at Tu Dam pagoda, Tri Quang referred to the protest signs and declared: "the aspirations of the Buddhists are legitimate and constructive."⁷⁰ That evening, as the crowd gathered outside the Hue radio station, Tri Quang was among the monks who tried to persuade the station manager to broadcast the recording they had made of the morning ceremony—a recording that included Tri Quang's comments about the protest banners. There is no evidence that Tri Quang foresaw the violence that subsequently took place outside the station, nor did he deliberately provoke Dang Si or his men. It is clear, however, that Tri Quang was seeking to turn the feelings of outrage in the city to his advantage. Thus, while Ngo Dinh Diem and especially Ngo Dinh Thuc must bear the largest share of responsibility for the escalating tensions that led to the May 8 incident, Tri Quang's actions also shaped the tragic course of events in Hue.

On the day after the killings at the radio station, a group of monks led by Tri Quang drafted a "Manifesto of the Vietnamese Buddhist Faithful." The document outlined five demands, including a repeal of the flag ban and compensation for the families of the dead victims. But it also implied that the radio station incident was merely the latest episode in an ongoing government campaign to repress Buddhism. The monks specifically referred to Ordinance No. 10, an RVN law that regulated private associations, including religious groups. The manifesto did *not* demand the repeal of Ordinance

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No. 10; instead, it asked that the law be amended to give Buddhist groups the same status as Christian missionary societies, which had been explicitly exempted from the regulations applied to most other groups.⁷¹ Tri Quang and his colleagues defined religious freedom not as an abstract or universal principle but as specific steps that would protect the GBA's ability to pursue its reform agenda—an agenda they believed the government was seeking to undermine. Over the next several months, these Buddhist leaders would go to remarkable lengths to “defend Buddhism from the present danger.” The result was a crisis that took almost everyone in South Vietnam by surprise and further exacerbated the internal divisions within the government and among the members of the Ngo family.

The Death of Thich Quang Duc and the Pagoda Raids

In the aftermath of the May 8 incident, Diem was of two minds over how to respond to the Buddhists' protests. On the one hand, he believed that the monks' complaints were mostly without merit and that any episodes in which Buddhists had been mistreated by Catholic officials were few and far between. He was also convinced that the events of May 8 in Hue—including the deaths at the radio station—had been orchestrated by communist operatives.⁷² On the other hand, he still preferred to try to defuse the incipient crisis through negotiations. On the basis of his prior experience with the GBA and other Buddhist organizations, Diem expected that many Buddhist leaders would prefer compromise to sustained confrontation. He also believed that dialog would be the best way for the government to exploit differences of opinion and personality among Buddhist leaders.

One Buddhist leader who welcomed Diem's offer of talks was Thich Tam Chau, a monk who had served as the vice-chairman of the GBA since 1954. Like Buddhists across South Vietnam, Tam Chau was deeply disturbed by the news of the May 8 incident. But he also knew that Diem had been conciliatory when dealing with the GBA in the past. He therefore sought to pressure the government to resolve the Buddhists' demands quickly. On May 9, Tam Chau issued a “heart letter” in which he called on his fellow Buddhists to “defend the Dharma in orderly, peaceful and nonviolent fashion” and to unite “under the guidance of the GBA.”⁷³ A few days later, he headed a delegation of monks who met with Diem at Independence Palace. While the session was amicable, Diem refused to rescind the May 6 flag ban, insisting that both Buddhists and Catholics had used religious

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banners in “disorderly” ways. The president also maintained that communist operatives had been responsible for the killings in Hue.⁷⁴ Diem’s intransigence on these points prompted Tam Chau to establish an “Intersect Committee for the Defense of Buddhism” comprised of representatives of several Buddhist organizations, with Tam Chau serving as chair. This committee signaled its readiness to continue the talks with the government, while also organizing nonviolent public demonstrations involving Buddhist monks, nuns, and laypeople.⁷⁵

By early June, Tam Chau’s efforts to seek a negotiated settlement appeared ready to bear fruit. After another violent (but nonfatal) clash between security forces and Buddhist demonstrators in Hue on June 1, Diem announced that he had sacked several RVN officials in the central region. Those ousted included Major Dang Si, the officer many blamed for the May 8 deaths. Diem also ordered RVN representatives to begin negotiating in earnest with the Intersect Committee.⁷⁶

By June 5, government officials and the committee had agreed in principle on measures that addressed all five of the Buddhists’ main demands. The draft agreement was supported not only by Tam Chau and other Buddhist leaders in Saigon but also by Thich Thien Minh, a monk who had been sent from Hue to represent the Buddhists of the central region. Although Thien Minh was close to Tri Quang, he was also deemed reliable by Ngo Dinh Can, who described the bonze as his “eyes and ears” inside the Buddhist movement. On June 6, the two sides announced that a deal was imminent. In a radio address that day, Diem seemed to admit that government officials had made mistakes during and after the incident at the radio station.⁷⁷

On June 8, the emerging deal was suddenly cast into doubt by an attack launched by Madame Nhu. A resolution adopted by the Women’s Solidarity Movement—an organization under Madame Nhu’s firm control—harshly denounced the Buddhist movement and its leaders for making “false utterances” against the government. Declaring that “the robe does not make the bonze,” the statement warned that the monks were contesting “the legitimate precedence of the national flag.” Remarkably, the resolution also chided RVN leaders (including, presumably, Diem) for excessive lenience in their dealings with the Buddhists. It called for the immediate expulsion of “all foreign agitators, whether they wear monks’ robes or not.”⁷⁸

It is unlikely that Diem approved or even knew about the Women’s Solidarity Movement resolution before it was issued. A U.S. diplomat who gave

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Diem a copy of the text on the evening of June 8 noted that he “read it line by line as if he had never seen it before.” The embassy later learned that Diem tried to limit the distribution of the resolution in the South Vietnamese media.⁷⁹ But these efforts were undone by Ngo Dinh Nhu, who strongly supported his wife’s actions. A few days after the resolution was issued, Nhu told subordinates that the some of the movement’s participants were engaged in “treasonous plots” on behalf of “international imperialism.” He also threatened to severely punish anyone guilty of “illegal acts.”⁸⁰ While Nhu’s role in the crafting of the incendiary statement remains unclear, he clearly sided with Archbishop Thuc and the other regime leaders who wanted Diem to take a harder line with the protestors. The debate within the regime’s inner circle appeared to be coming to a head.

Madame Nhu’s attack derailed the efforts to end the crisis through negotiations. For Tam Chau and the Intersect Committee, the statement was proof that the regime was acting in bad faith. They concluded that a new and more dramatic form of protest was needed. In a secret meeting at Xa Loi pagoda on the night of June 10, the committee decided to turn to Thich Quang Duc, an older monk from central Vietnam. Two weeks earlier, Quang Duc had volunteered to burn himself to death in public to demonstrate his support for the movement. Although the committee had initially declined this proposal, its members now agreed that circumstances compelled them to accept the bonze’s offer. They also decided that the self-immolation should take place the next morning, in the midst of a previously scheduled monastic procession through the streets of downtown Saigon.⁸¹

As soon as the committee’s secret meeting ended, the young monk who served as its spokesman rushed to the pagoda where Quang Duc resided. “Master, are you still willing to sacrifice yourself, as you previously told the Intersect Committee?” the spokesman asked.

“I am prepared to burn myself as an offering to Buddha and for the purpose of persuading the government to fulfill the five demands,” Quang Duc replied.⁸²

At nine o’clock on the morning of Tuesday, June 11, a group of more than three hundred Buddhist monks and nuns began marching toward Xa Loi from another pagoda several blocks away. Ahead of them, just behind the white police jeep that city officials had sent to escort the marchers, was a

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grey Austin sedan. When the procession reached Le Van Duyet street, the Austin stopped in the middle of an intersection, and the marchers quickly formed a circle around it. Quang Duc emerged from the car, seated himself in the lotus position at the center of the circle, and then sat motionless as another bonze doused him with gasoline. The intersection was eerily silent as a second companion handed Quang Duc a packet of matches. The old monk struck one of the matches and was instantly engulfed in flames. According to witnesses, a “wail of horror” went up from the circle of monks and nuns. Amazingly, Quang Duc did not move or cry out throughout the several minutes it took for him to burn to death. During this time, several monks lay down on the pavement to block the advance of fire trucks that police had summoned to the scene. Another bonze addressed shocked passersby via a microphone and portable loudspeaker. “A Buddhist priest becomes a martyr,” he repeated in both Vietnamese and English.⁸³

Among the witnesses to Quang Duc’s self-immolation was Malcolm Browne, an American journalist who worked for the Associated Press. Buddhist leaders had tipped several foreign reporters the night before that “something very important” would happen during the procession, but Browne was the only one who bothered to get up for the morning event. His photographs of the event captured Quang Duc’s apparently transcendent ability to remain calm even as his body was being consumed by fire. Browne knew that RVN censors would prevent him from transmitting his pictures through official channels. However, he also knew that Chester Bowles, an American diplomat and a principled supporter of freedom of the press, was flying out of Saigon later that day. Bowles readily agreed to carry the film to Manila even though Browne did not tell him what it contained.⁸⁴ As a result, Browne’s images were quickly distributed and published in newspapers and magazines all over the world. His most memorable shot, which depicted Thich Quang Duc seated calmly in a column of fire, still ranks as one of the most famous photographs ever taken.

In the aftermath of Quang Duc’s self-immolation, commentators in Vietnam and elsewhere advanced various explanations of the motives behind his shocking act. Many saw his death as a plea for religious liberty; some interpreted it as an expression of ancient Buddhist beliefs; others sought to connect it to contemporary forms of peace activism, or to portray it as a gesture of protest against U.S. policy in Vietnam. But remarkably few authors analyzed Quang Duc’s own explanation for his actions. In both his

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The self-immolation of Thich Quang Duc, Saigon, June 11, 1963. (AP Photo/Malcolm Browne)

initial letter to Buddhist leaders in late May and in the final testament he wrote on the night before he died, Quang Duc invoked several of the central themes of the Buddhist Revival, including the links between Buddhism and the historical fate of the Vietnamese nation. “When Buddhism prospers, the nation prospers,” he declared. “When Buddhism declines, the nation declines.” Like Tri Quang, Tam Chau, and other leaders of the movement, Quang Duc called on Diem to meet the Buddhists’ demands and to endorse a policy of “religious equality.” Yet he also asked for Buddhism to be “strengthened and protected” and exhorted all Vietnamese Buddhists to unite in defense of their faith. Thus, while Quang Duc’s death appeared to many to constitute a radically new departure, he saw his actions as broadly consistent with the ideas and principles that had defined Vietnamese Buddhist reform agendas for decades.⁸⁵

Quang Duc hoped that his act of self-sacrifice would lead to a speedy resolution of the conflict between the Buddhists and the RVN government. For a brief moment, it seemed that the monk’s death might accomplish this objective. In a radio address delivered shortly after the self-immolation,

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Diem professed to be “deeply grieved” and reiterated his willingness to resolve the crisis through dialog.⁸⁶ Diem’s disquiet was apparently genuine; an RVN official who saw him shortly after the monk’s death reported that his face was “soaked with sorrow.”⁸⁷ In the days after the self-immolation, government and Buddhist representatives redoubled their efforts to reach a negotiated settlement. On June 16, the two sides issued a joint communiqué in which the government indicated that it would ease the ban on religious flags. The Buddhists agreed not to press the government for an immediate admission of responsibility for the May 8 incident, settling instead for a promise of further investigation.⁸⁸

But the June 16 agreement did not turn out to be the breakthrough the negotiators sought. For Buddhist leaders, the joint communiqué could not erase Diem’s earlier failure to distance himself from Madame Nhu’s attacks, nor did it dispel the impression that the Ngos remained hostile to the movement and its objectives. Meanwhile, Diem’s doubts about Buddhist leaders and their motives were growing. Although Diem had always believed that the Buddhists’ accusations were exaggerated or fabricated, he had not previously treated them as especially dangerous or worrisome. But now he began to see the movement as a potential threat. Quang Duc could not have gone willingly to his own death, Diem told his subordinates; the fiery spectacle must have been staged by “crypto-communists” who drugged and manipulated the monk.⁸⁹ As the feelings of mutual suspicion heightened, the prospects for a negotiated deal dimmed. Instead of spurring a resolution of the crisis, Quang Duc’s death marked the moment at which leaders on both sides shifted toward the view that confrontation had become inevitable.

Hopes that the June 16 joint communiqué might lead to an easing of tensions between the protestors and the government were quickly dashed. Hours after the deal was announced, Saigon police clashed with a large crowd of Buddhists who had gathered for Thich Quang Duc’s funeral. The ensuing riot forced Buddhist organizers to postpone the ceremony.⁹⁰ In the weeks after this episode, demonstrations and confrontations were almost daily occurrences in Saigon. On July 7 the Vietnamese novelist Nguyen Tuong Tam killed himself by taking poison at his Saigon home. Well known in Vietnam for a series of novels written under the nom de plume Nhat Linh, Tam had recently learned that the government planned

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to put him on trial for his alleged involvement in the 1960 failed paratrooper coup. In his suicide note, he decried the government's repressive policies. "I kill myself as Thich Quang Duc burned himself to send a warning to those who are trampling on our freedoms," Tam wrote. His funeral attracted thousands of mourners.⁹¹

By early July, most Buddhist leaders were convinced that the government was preparing to unleash a new wave of repression against the movement. Tri Quang, now residing at Xa Loi pagoda in Saigon, told associates that compromise was impossible. He planned to continue protest activities until Diem had been removed from power.⁹² Tam Chau, chairman of the Intersect Committee, had also given up hope for reconciliation. On July 7, he secretly asked Nolting to protect Xa Loi with U.S. military forces, arguing that "nothing will [restrain] our government when it wants to achieve its aim." The embassy turned down the request, but the Buddhists continued to appeal for U.S. support.⁹³

Instead of seeking to calm Buddhist fears about an imminent government crackdown, the palace sought to give the rumors the widest possible circulation. These efforts were coordinated by Ngo Dinh Nhu, who now seemed determined to raise tensions in Saigon to a breaking point. Nhu's hostility was apparent in the pages of the *Times of Viet Nam*, which denounced the Buddhist movement in a series of inflammatory articles that ran below screaming headlines. While the articles were highly critical of Buddhist leaders, they also warned of a secret plan, known as "Operation Flood," in which security forces would occupy Xa Loi and the other pagodas currently being used by demonstrators. In characteristically Machiavellian fashion, Nhu denied that he had anything to do with this "secret" scheme even as he was doing his best to broadcast its existence to the public. In an interview on August 4, Nhu hinted that Operation Flood would be carried out by unnamed anti-Buddhist conspirators who planned first to overthrow the Diem government. "The first action of a new government after carrying out a coup would be to crush Xa Loi," he warned.⁹⁴

As Nhu ramped up his psychological pressure campaign against the Buddhists, Diem's interest in a negotiated settlement seemed to wane. Although he continued to profess his desire for reconciliation, he also complained publicly that the Buddhist leadership had been "overwhelmed" by "extremist political elements" who aimed to overthrow his government.⁹⁵

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“There are Communist Viet Cong in those pagodas,” Diem told an American journalist in early August. “How can I, in the middle of a war, allow these disorders in the streets to go on?”⁹⁶

Despite the palace’s menacing rhetoric, the supporters of the Buddhist movement refused to back down. On August 4, a monk in the city of Phan Thiet became the second protestor to burn himself to death on behalf of the movement. Three more self-immolations followed over the next two weeks. On August 18, thousands of movement supporters gathered for rallies in Saigon and Hue. At Xa Loi pagoda, a crowd of seventeen thousand cheered and chanted antiregime slogans, along with denunciations of Archbishop Thuc. Movement leaders promised to stage even larger demonstrations at the end of the month when Henry Cabot Lodge, the newly appointed U.S. ambassador to South Vietnam, was scheduled to arrive in Saigon.⁹⁷

On the night of August 20, 1963, the Diem regime made good on its insinuations about using force against the movement. Around midnight, the hundreds of monks, nuns, and other movement supporters who were camped out on the grounds of Xa Loi pagoda were jolted awake by the peals of gongs and warning bells. A large detachment of government security forces had surrounded the pagoda and were trying to force their way in. One lay Buddhist leader later described the terror of those trapped inside:

The nuns and the young monks were shouting for help, bells were ringing, the gong was sounding. . . . [The security forces] threw their gas grenades and shot in the air to frighten us and finally all the doors were broken through: the metal doors by breaking window panes and then slipping a hand inside to lift the latch; the wooden doors were broken with axes. Then began the mass arrests.⁹⁸

During the first hours of the crackdown, government security forces raided twelve pagodas in Saigon and detained more than seven hundred people. Similar operations took place in Hue and Da Nang. Although several pagodas suffered heavy damage, the attackers apparently did not inflict any deaths or serious injuries on the occupants during the raids—though some were later tortured.⁹⁹ The detainees included Tam Chau and most of the other senior leaders of the movement. One of the few who

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escaped arrest was Tri Quang, who managed to slip out of Xa Loi during the tumult of the assault. He eluded police for two weeks before making his way to the U.S. embassy, where he requested and received asylum.¹⁰⁰

Around dawn on August 21, the members of Diem's cabinet were summoned to Gia Long Palace for an emergency meeting. Since the president had not informed them in advance about the raids, the ministers did not know who had ordered the operation against the pagodas. They were not even certain that Diem was still in charge of the government. When Diem entered the cabinet room, he proceeded to read a prepared statement from a small card he was carrying. He announced that ARVN commanders had discovered that communist forces were massing near Saigon in preparation for a coup attempt. In response to this threat, Diem explained, he had granted the commanders' request to declare martial law throughout the country and to occupy the pagodas. The army had successfully carried out what Diem referred to as the "first phase". He asked the cabinet to support the government as it proceeded with the "second phase."¹⁰¹

As they listened to Diem read the statement on the card, some of the ministers discerned the hand of Nhu behind his remarks. They knew that the story of an imminent communist coup attempt was almost certainly fabricated, since their daily intelligence briefings had not contained any information about a buildup of enemy forces near the capital. Vu Van Mau, the RVN foreign minister, noticed that Diem's statement included several French phrases—a practice he usually avoided in cabinet meetings, which he preferred to conduct in Vietnamese. The habit of using French terms was more closely associated with Nhu, who liked to use foreign words and phrases to show off his erudition. For Mau, a devout Buddhist who had strongly supported the earlier attempts to negotiate with the Intersect Committee, there was no longer any doubt about who was responsible for the events of the previous night. It was clear that Diem had set aside his earlier reservations and endorsed Nhu's plan to crush the movement by force. It also seemed clear that Nhu's influence over his older brother was now greater than it had ever been—to the point that he was literally putting words into Diem's mouth.¹⁰²

Although rumors about the government's plans to use force against the Buddhists had circulated for weeks prior to the pagoda raids, many in Saigon and Washington still found the thinking behind the crackdown

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difficult to fathom. As one longtime observer of Saigon politics later remarked, it seemed as if Diem and Nhu “had embarked on what was little short of a war against their own people” and had thus set a course for their own destruction.¹⁰³ For many U.S. officials, their dismay over the raids was compounded by feelings of anger and incredulity—anger that the Ngos had disregarded repeated U.S. admonitions to avoid violence, and incredulity over the brothers’ apparent disregard for U.S. and world public opinion. Even Nolting, who had departed Saigon a week before the raids, accused Diem of reneging on a personal promise not to attack the pagodas.¹⁰⁴ Although Nolting quickly reverted to defending the regime, other Americans concluded that the brothers had acted out of desperation, or had simply gone crazy.

In fact, Diem and Nhu were neither desperate nor irrational, nor were they uncomprehending of the criticism levied against them. Their decision to use force against the Buddhists stemmed partly from their rosy assessment of their current fortunes and partly from their belief that their nation-building policies were sound and successful. But their decision was also rooted in their prior experiences, especially in their past dealings with the United States. Several weeks before the raids, Nhu explained the parallels he saw between the current conflict with the Buddhists and the Ngos’ earlier struggles against General Hinh and the Binh Xuyen nine years earlier. In those earlier crises, the advice from U.S. officials “was exactly the same advice given by United States representatives now,” Nhu complained. “They urged conciliation with the sects.” With evident bitterness, he recalled how U.S. leaders had tried to engineer his departure from the country “as if I were an obstacle” to the efforts to rally support for the regime. Nhu acknowledged that the U.S. press, which had largely supported Diem during his first years in power, had become much more critical of the regime by 1963. But he was optimistic that even this problem could be managed and remedied. “If you compare the attitude of the [South] Vietnamese government in 1954 and 1963, you must admit it is more supple now,” Nhu declared. “It pays more attention to United States.”¹⁰⁵

For the Ngo brothers, the lessons of South Vietnam’s recent history were obvious. In 1955, Diem and Nhu had rejected U.S. advice and attacked their opponents with military force—and then watched with satisfaction as the official U.S. position shifted to one of strong support for their regime. In August 1963, the brothers ordered the pagoda raids with those earlier triumphs in mind. Nhu and Diem knew that the crackdown would provoke

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howls of condemnation in Washington and elsewhere around the world. Yet they expected not only to ride out the coming storm of controversy, but to emerge from it stronger and more powerful, just as they had after the Battle of Saigon. Theirs was a strategy born not from desperation but from overweening optimism and their unshakable conviction that they would once again be proved right in the end. More than ever before, Ngo Dinh Diem and Ngo Dinh Nhu believed that the realization of their grand designs for South Vietnam was within their grasp.

9

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In many accounts of the events of 1963, the pagoda raids of August 20–21 marked the moment at which the Diem government sealed its own fate. As many observers noted, the crackdown greatly exacerbated the anger and fear that had been building for months in many parts of South Vietnamese society. A State Department officer who visited Saigon, Hue, and Danang during early September described them as “cities of hate” where both outrage and dread were rampant.¹ At the same time, the raids greatly intensified the crisis in Saigon’s relations with the United States. The pagoda raids provoked an outpouring of international condemnation that raised tensions in the U.S.-RVN alliance to unprecedented levels. The crackdown also furnished the Ngos’ U.S. critics with new opportunities to make the case for a policy of regime change. Given the spiking dissatisfaction with the Diem government in both South Vietnam and Washington, many Vietnamese and Americans concluded that the regime’s downfall was only a matter of time.

The Ngo brothers were well aware of the chorus of denunciation that their recent actions had generated. Nevertheless, they remained as confident as ever in their ability to check any attempt to oust them from power. While the Ngos knew that many leaders and groups inside the RVN military and state bureaucracy were plotting against them, they also knew it would be difficult for these opponents to muster either the unity or the military force

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needed to bring down the government. Coup plots and plotters abounded in Saigon during the summer and fall of 1963, but this very abundance reduced the chances that any single conspiracy would succeed. Similarly, while the Ngos knew that American public opinion was now running strongly against them and that some U.S. officials were advocating their overthrow, they also knew that other U.S. officials continued to see Diem as the Vietnamese leader mostly likely to defeat the NLF. By undermining the former group of U.S. officials and appealing to the latter, the Ngos expected to regain the Kennedy administration's support in short order—just as they had regained Eisenhower's backing in 1955. For Ngo Dinh Diem and Ngo Dinh Nhu, everything during the fall of 1963 was going according to plan.

Counting Coups

In mid-July, several weeks before the pagoda raids, the CIA identified three distinct groups of RVN officials and military officers who appeared to be plotting in earnest against the regime. These three “coup groups” all faced the same difficulty: enlisting the support of key ARVN units and their commanders. Despite the growing discontent with the Diem regime in South Vietnam, securing this support would not be easy. Since 1955, ARVN personnel had taken up arms against Diem on just two occasions: the failed paratroopers' coup of 1960 and an incident in February 1962 when a pair of South Vietnamese air force pilots tried to kill the president by bombing Independence Palace. Neither of these plots had enjoyed broad support within the ARVN officer corps. As all ARVN commanders knew, the palace had made sure that key army units and other security forces (especially those stationed in and around Saigon) remained under the control of regime loyalists. Diem had also taken steps to fortify Gia Long Palace, which was serving as his headquarters while bomb-damaged Independence Palace was being rebuilt. The new security measures included the construction of an underground bunker equipped with secure lines of communication to the provinces—capabilities that had been lacking during the 1960 attempted coup.²

Of the three antiregime plots detected by the CIA in mid-1963, the most advanced and elaborate was the one headed by Dr. Tran Kim Tuyen. Although he was still head of SEPES, Tuyen was by now thoroughly disillusioned with the Ngo brothers and bitter that much of his former power had been transferred to other RVN security agencies. The crowning blow for Tuyen came during the spring of 1963, when Diem allowed the newly

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created CIO to recruit SEPES personnel into its ranks.³ Soon afterward, Tuyen learned that Diem had decided to send him to an overseas diplomatic post—the same fate endured by other RVN officials who had lost the Ngos' confidence.⁴ In response, Tuyen assembled a group of plotters that included both former SEPES operatives and several officers serving in the ARVN's elite airborne and marine brigades. He was also believed to have recruited Colonel Do Mau, the head of the ARVN's powerful Military Security Service. Although Mau was a Can Lao Party member and a longtime Diem supporter, he was upset that he had not yet been promoted to general. When Nhu remarked in passing to Tuyen that "Little old Mau is pretty unhappy!" Tuyen recognized an opportunity to bring the disaffected colonel into his plot.⁵

If his coup succeeded, Tuyen planned to establish a new RVN government with himself at its head.⁶ In early August, the CIA reported that Tuyen had alerted his coconspirators to be ready to launch their uprising no later than August 15. At the last minute, however, he decided that he had not yet lined up enough support to prevail. Despite this setback, he and his supporters assured their U.S. contacts that they had not given up and were merely waiting for a more opportune moment.⁷

The second "coup group" identified by the CIA was under the direction of ARVN Colonel Pham Ngoc Thao, a former Viet Minh intelligence officer who had rallied to the RVN in 1955. Despite serving in a series of high-profile military and administrative positions during the late 1950s and early 1960s, Thao was a "compulsive conspirator" whose true loyalties were difficult to discern.⁸ Although he seemed to have won Diem's trust, many in South Vietnam suspected that he might be a communist operative working under deep cover; others believed that his main aim was to win power for himself. Uncertainty about his real agenda persists even today.⁹

Whatever Thao's larger objectives were, there is no doubt he was conspiring against the government during the summer and fall of 1963. One of his key collaborators was his good friend Huynh Van Lang, the Can Lao member who had built up the party's business network during the mid-1950s before being sidelined by Nhu and Dr. Tuyen. Although Lang still saw himself as a loyal supporter of Diem, he was by now thoroughly disgusted with Nhu, whom he suspected of seeking to displace Diem. Lang believed that he and Thao could use their ties to other disaffected Can Lao members and ARVN officers to build support for a plot that would eliminate Nhu's growing influence in the palace.¹⁰

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For U.S. officials, the last of the three coup groups to emerge in mid-1963 was also the most mysterious. Unlike the Tuyen and Thao cliques, this third group appeared to be composed exclusively of military officers. But in contrast to earlier ARVN conspiracies led by captains and colonels, this one was headed by some of the army's most senior generals. In theory, a putsch led by flag-rank officers was the type most likely to succeed. As a group, the generals appeared to command the stature and moral authority needed to rally the RVN's fractious armed forces against the regime. But to accomplish this, they would have to set aside their deep-seated personal rivalries with each other. Since the CIA did not know how many of the ARVN's nineteen general officers had joined the plot, it was hard to judge whether the plotters would be able to achieve this goal. Only later did the Americans learn that the conspiracy in its initial stages had included just three officers: Lieutenant Generals Tran Van Don and Duong Van Minh, and Major General Le Van Kim.

The resentment that Don, Minh, and Kim felt for the Ngo brothers had been smoldering since 1960, when they had endured the humiliation of being investigated on suspicion of involvement in the paratroopers' failed coup. Don's ire with the palace was compounded in 1962, when he was removed as commander of I Corps and assigned to the post of "Commander of the ARVN"—a newly created position that proved to be as meaningless as those foisted earlier on Minh and Kim. Even before Don's transfer, the three generals were convinced that the Diem regime was beyond salvage and that "only a new coup could bring about change."¹¹ However, they did not begin planning in earnest for a coup until the summer of 1963. According to Don, the three officers were stirred to action during an official visit to Thailand when they realized that "world opinion was violently against the Ngo Dinh Diem government." Back in Saigon at the end of the month, they decided that each of them would try to recruit other officers to join them. To reduce the risk of exposure, they agreed that no one would be identified as the leader of the plot.¹²

Because Don, Minh, and Kim no longer commanded any combat units, it was essential that they gain the support of an officer who did. Following a reorganization of the ARVN command structure in 1962, most regular military forces were attached to one of South Vietnam's four regional army corps, each of which covered a different territorial zone. The plotters concluded that they needed to recruit at least one of the corps commanders

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into the conspiracy. However, Diem and Nhu had made sure to assign those commands to officers they deemed politically reliable. These four favorites were remarkably young to be serving as general officers—all were in their midthirties—and all seemed to have been seduced by the blandishments and promotions the regime had heaped on them.

In the northernmost command of I Corps, which covered Hue and the nearby provinces, effective authority lay in the hands of Do Cao Tri, a former paratrooper. Tri had endeared himself to Diem and Nhu by his hard-line response to the Buddhist protests in Hue after the May 8 incident.¹³ II Corps, which included most of the Central Highlands, was under the command of Nguyen Khanh, the officer who had famously vaulted into Independence Palace during the paratroopers' coup of 1960. Both Tri and Khanh were known to be ambitious, and few who knew them believed their loyalty to the regime was nonnegotiable. But Don, Minh, and Kim deemed both commanders too opportunistic to be trusted during the early stages of planning for the coup. They therefore decided to leave Tri and Khanh on the margins of the plot until it had reached an advanced stage.¹⁴

The plotters took an even dimmer view of General Huynh Van Cao, the IV Corps commander, who oversaw all ARVN operations in the Mekong Delta. Cao had risen unusually rapidly through the ARVN's ranks, thanks to Diem's support and a series of battle victories over NLF forces in mid-1962. Since Cao was both a native of Hue and a Catholic, he was widely deemed the most staunchly loyal of all Diem's generals.¹⁵

Having ruled out Tri, Khanh, and Cao, the plotting generals turned to what appeared to be their only remaining option: General Ton That Dinh, the commander of III Corps. Dinh's participation was probably essential for the conspiracy to have any chance of success. As head of III Corps, he controlled most of the regular ARVN forces stationed in the provinces adjacent to Saigon. He was therefore well positioned not only to supply the troops needed to seize the capital but also to block the arrival of loyalist units. Still, to admit Dinh into the plot was risky. Dinh's colleagues considered him talented but also knew that he was "volatile," "erratic," and a heavy drinker.¹⁶ In addition, he was a regime sycophant and a Can Lao Party member who owed his rapid rise through the ARVN ranks mainly to his ability to ingratiate himself with the Ngo brothers. Ngo Dinh Can had arranged for Dinh to be elevated to the command of II Corps in 1959 when he was just thirty-three. By 1962, Diem and Nhu had become sufficiently confident in Dinh to move him to III Corps.¹⁷

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The ARVN general Ton That Dinh, 1963.
(Time & Life Pictures/Getty Images)

Despite Dinh's liabilities, Minh, Kim, and Don concluded that he was indispensable. In late July, Don paid a visit to Dinh at his house in Saigon. Although he apparently did not reveal the coup plans to Dinh during this initial conversation, Don inferred that the younger general's loyalty to Diem was not absolute. He also concluded that he could manipulate Dinh through flattery and appeals to his outsized ego. As Don would subsequently discover, however, Dinh's mercurial personality made him difficult to control. Over the next few months, the conspiracy's fortunes would wax and wane according to Dinh's whims.¹⁸

While Don, Minh, and Kim viewed the recruitment of Dinh as a necessary step, they knew it would not be sufficient to ensure success. To bring down the Diem regime, they also needed the help—or at least the tacit approval—of another key actor in Saigon politics: the U.S. government. Despite Don's later portrayal of the coup as a "Vietnamese affair" in which Americans played only a marginal role, his actions showed that he was anxious to gauge Washington's attitude toward a possible coup. Indeed, he made sure that the Americans were aware of the plot from the outset.¹⁹

Since the early 1950s, the U.S. embassy had commemorated the Fourth of July holiday with a reception attended by U.S. officials and prominent Vietnamese leaders. In 1963, the guest list included Don and several other

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ARVN generals; it also included Lucien Conein, a CIA operative with extensive experience in Vietnam. Conein first arrived in Indochina in 1945 while working for the U.S. Office of Strategic Services. During that mission, he met several future ARVN generals, including Don and Minh, who were then junior officers in the French colonial militia. Conein returned to Vietnam in 1954 as a member of Lansdale's team. His exploits during his second tour included the placement of a large bomb in the refrigerator of the French governor general's residence in Hanoi just before the city was to be handed over to the Viet Minh. (Fortunately for the incoming tenants, the U.S. consul in Hanoi learned of the bomb and ordered it defused.)²⁰ In 1961, Conein began his third stint in Vietnam as the liaison between the CIA's Saigon station and the RVN Interior Ministry. In this capacity, Conein often canvassed his ARVN contacts about their interest in a possible coup. But until the Fourth of July celebration, he had never detected anything more than "isolated dissidence."²¹

During the reception, Don casually suggested that Conein join him for drinks at the nearby Caravelle Hotel. With the crowd at the hotel bar providing cover for their conversation, Don told the American that he was involved in a high-level ARVN plot to remove the entire Ngo family from power. Don declared that all but "one or two" generals had endorsed the plan; he hinted that the coup could be launched soon, perhaps within ten days. He needed to know: "What will the American reaction be if we go all the way?"²²

Neither Conein nor his superiors had an immediate answer for Don. Although the news of Don's plot was quickly relayed to Washington, the Kennedy administration was anything but resolved over how to respond to the proliferation of coup plots in South Vietnam. By July 1963, many U.S. officials—including, apparently, Kennedy himself—had concluded that it was only a matter of time before someone made a new attempt to bring down the Diem regime. But which of Diem's many rivals had both the determination and the means to actually mount a coup? And what were the chances that any particular plot would succeed where all previous ones had failed? For several weeks following Don's conversation with Conein, Washington's attitude toward a coup remained hard to gauge. Only in the wake of the Ngo brothers' crackdown on the pagodas did U.S. policy begin to shift. Even then, administration officials would remain sharply at odds over whether and how the United States should seek regime change in South Vietnam.

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The Non-Coup of Late August

If Don, Minh, and Kim had managed to maintain the secrecy of their plot while making overtures to Dinh and other ARVN officers, they might have been able to muster the forces needed to overthrow the regime relatively quickly. But secrets were hard to keep in Saigon during the summer of 1963. Although the means by which he discovered it are unknown, Ngo Dinh Nhu caught wind of the plot almost as soon as the generals began to recruit their fellow officers. Yet he did not move immediately to disrupt the scheme. Instead of merely blocking the generals, Nhu hoped to enlist them as unwitting participants in the regime's crackdown on the Buddhists. In 1955, the ARVN had been vitally important in the Ngo brothers' triumph over the Binh Xuyen. Nhu believed that the army should also play a central role in his scheme to crush the Buddhist movement. This time, however, he planned to cast the leaders of the ARVN not as conquering heroes but as ambitious and dangerous men who wanted power for themselves.

On July 11, just three days after Don revealed the generals' plot to Coen, Nhu gathered most of the ARVN's senior officers at the headquarters of the JGS, near the Saigon airport. The officers were used to hearing Nhu lecture them on the finer points of personalism and strategic hamlets; but on this day, they were shocked when he suddenly suggested that they should consider organizing a coup against the government. The government had bungled its handling of the Buddhist affair, Nhu declared. To restore order, the ARVN might have to take matters into its own hands. The generals listened in stunned silence as Nhu described the operation he had in mind. The coup should be "lightning fast" and take place in the middle of the night, he explained; it also should occur prior to the arrival of the new U.S. ambassador, Henry Cabot Lodge, who was expected to arrive in Saigon in late August. When asked why he would support a coup against a government headed by his own brother, Nhu blandly replied that he had had a falling out with Diem and had lost all influence within the palace.²³

When they learned of Nhu's remarks at the JGS meeting, U.S. officials speculated that he was seeking to intimidate the generals who were contemplating a coup. But as Nhu himself acknowledged, his comments were aimed at a more subtle—and more manipulative—goal. His actions at the meeting, he later explained, were "a kind of 'psychoanalytic' procedure"

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designed “to surface some of the problems [the generals] had been brooding about inwardly.”²⁴ Nhu’s professions of concern about the generals’ mental health should be taken with a grain of salt, but he clearly aimed to do more than just scare them.

When the pagoda raids took place on the night of August 20–21, it initially seemed as though the generals had taken Nhu’s earlier advice about a coup to heart. The raids were launched in the dead of night, shortly before Ambassador Lodge was scheduled to arrive in Saigon—exactly as Nhu had proposed in the July 11 meeting. Government-controlled newspapers described the occupation of the pagodas as the work of “the Army, with the aid of the police.”²⁵ Saigon also residents noted that the raids were preceded by a proclamation of martial law, and that ARVN regular soldiers had been deployed throughout the city to enforce a nighttime curfew. The officer in charge of implementing the martial law decree was none other than General Don, who had taken over as chief of staff of the RVN Armed Forces, the top post in the South Vietnamese military hierarchy, just hours before the assaults on the pagodas began. There thus appeared to be good reason to believe that Don and his colleagues had secretly planned and carried out the raids and had taken control of the government in the process. On August 21, the U.S. embassy concluded that the generals had taken a “dominant role” in RVN affairs and that Diem’s position was “currently or potentially precarious.”²⁶ Don and his fellow generals had called Nhu’s bluff and seized the reins of power from the Ngos.

Or had they? Over the next three days, U.S. officials collected new information that led them to back away from the theory that the generals were now in charge. On August 23, General Kim made contact with his good friend Rufus Phillips. Kim bitterly denounced Nhu for having “tricked” the army into implementing martial law. He also claimed that senior army commanders had had no advance knowledge of the pagoda raids. According to Kim, the affair had strengthened the generals’ desire to remove the Nhus and perhaps also Diem from power. However, they still wanted assurances of support from the United States before taking action.²⁷

Kim’s version of events was confirmed by General Don during a rambling three-hour conversation with Conein in Don’s office. Don readily admitted that he had been among a group of ten ARVN generals who had met two days before the raids to discuss the use of martial law as a step toward ending the Buddhist protests. But he was adamant that the generals had never contemplated attacking the pagodas. Instead, they had focused

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on the “eventual taking of bonzes who came from outside Saigon and returning them” to their home provinces. According to Don, the generals had presented this proposal to Nhu, who advised them to take it up with Diem. In a meeting during the day on August 20, Diem had approved the generals’ plan, including the declaration of martial law. He had also ordered Don to assume the post of ARVN chief of staff. Don had proceeded to implement the martial law decree; however, he had remained in the dark about the pagoda raids until after they were under way. Don was dismayed that the army had been implicated in the raids. He seemed especially upset that the U.S.-sponsored Voice of America radio network had blamed ARVN commanders for the crackdown. But despite his anger with the Ngos, Don refused to say if the generals planned to move ahead with their coup. “This is the first step,” he declared cryptically. “The secret of what is going to happen is not mine to give.”²⁸

By August 24, the CIA was certain that Nhu, not the generals, had orchestrated the raids.²⁹ Most historians have concurred with this assessment; some scholars, however, have questioned whether the generals were actually as innocent of involvement in the raids as they claimed. These scholars point to the generals’ admission of their support for the declaration of martial law, as well as evidence showing that some ARVN regular units participated in the pagoda operations.³⁰ What actually took place before and during the night of August 20? Why did the generals press for martial law, if they were not involved in the crackdown? And how did Nhu succeed—if only temporarily—in painting the generals as responsible for the raids?

At their meeting with Diem during the day on August 20, Don and his fellow generals told Diem that a declaration of martial law would both defuse the Buddhist crisis and improve the army’s sagging morale.³¹ But Don, Minh, and Kim had another motive for advocating military rule: they believed it would help ARVN leaders gain a measure of control over the government. In addition to more exclusive control over military matters, Don wanted army commanders to have greater say over civilian agencies. “The President has got to change some of his ministers,” Don declared after the raids.³² For the coup plotters, martial law was a way to gather greater power into their own hands—and thus a preliminary step toward their ultimate goal of overthrowing the Ngos.

Unfortunately for the generals, Nhu was aware of their plan to ask for a declaration of martial law, and he cleverly incorporated it into the larger

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stratagem he was designing. Although Nhu did not participate in the generals' planning meetings on the implementation of martial law, several other officers known to be hard-core Ngo family loyalists were present at those sessions.³³ It was therefore easy for Nhu to adjust the timing of the pagoda raids to coincide with the martial law decree, thus making it seem as if the generals had engineered the decree so as to gain a free hand to attack the pagodas. In the aftermath of the raids, Nhu did his best to perpetuate this illusion, telling interviewers that the generals had "forced" a reluctant Diem to permit them to launch the crackdown.³⁴

By framing the generals for the pagoda raids, Nhu hoped to obscure the crucial fact that the operations had been carried out mainly by the South Vietnamese National Police and the ARVN Special Forces—two organizations that operated outside the ARVN's regular chain of command and reported directly to the palace. The ARVN's regular troops played no more than a supporting role in the raids in Saigon. The proof of this is a secret report on the raids sent to Diem by General Ton That Dinh—the commander of III Corps and the one ARVN officer whose cooperation Don and the other plotters had deemed essential to the success of their coup plans. In the hours before the raids, the Ngo brothers successfully recruited Dinh into their scheme by adding the title of acting military governor of Saigon to his other duties. On paper, this move made Dinh the commander of the operations against Xa Loi and the other pagodas in the city. However, since Dinh had just been handed his new assignment, neither he nor the regular army troops under his command were prepared to participate in the raids. This is apparent from Dinh's secret report, which described the raids as a "police security operation" carried out by Special Forces soldiers and National Police troopers, with assistance from a Civil Guard unit. Regular ARVN units were used only to secure communication facilities and other key infrastructure elsewhere in Saigon.³⁵

In Hue, in contrast to Saigon, some regular ARVN units participated directly in the operations against the pagodas. But the orders to those units were not issued by the ARVN's JGS. Instead, they were transmitted directly from the palace to the ranking officer on the scene, General Do Cao Tri. If Tri had any qualms about following orders that did not come via the ARVN's chain of command, he concealed them well. At nine o'clock on the evening of August 20, Tri sent an urgent summons to Dao Quan Hien, the head of the RVN National Police in Hue. When Hien arrived at Tri's office, Tri informed him that they had been directed to occupy the

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pagodas and detain the bonzes and any other protestors who refused to leave. A few hours later, Hien and Tri led a combined force of several hundred police officers and ARVN soldiers against Tu Dam pagoda, the headquarters of the protests in Hue.³⁶ A U.S. official who spoke to Tri on the day after the raids reported that he showed little remorse for the damage his forces had wreaked.³⁷ In a secret report, Tri took credit for what he viewed as a successful operation; the only injuries, he claimed, were those that had been inflicted by the protestors, who threw rocks at his men.³⁸ Like General Dinh in Saigon, General Tri had chosen to back the palace. The collusion of these two officers not only facilitated the execution of the raids but also lent credence to Nhu's attempts to blame the entire crackdown on the ARVN high command.

Nhu's efforts to deflect criticism for the raids onto the ARVN leadership showed that he expected the crackdown on the Buddhists to be controversial. It is unlikely, however, that Nhu predicted the most consequential result the pagoda raids produced in Washington: a shift toward the adoption of a policy of regime change. President Kennedy's advisors were far from united in support of this shift. Indeed, in the days after the raids, the administration became more deeply split over Diem and South Vietnam than it had ever been—a condition that persisted to the end of Kennedy's presidency. Kennedy himself was uncertain how to proceed, and his endorsement of the idea of a coup remained qualified and ambivalent. Nevertheless, the tone and the terms of the administration's internal debate had changed.

The shift in the administration's policy toward a coup was engineered mainly by Roger Hilsman and his fellow soft hawks Averell Harriman and Michael Forrestal. Since his promotion to assistant secretary of state for Far Eastern affairs in May 1963, Hilsman had repeatedly brought up the idea of regime change in meetings and memoranda, to little effect.³⁹ But the news of the pagoda raids presented a new opportunity for Hilsman to advance his arguments. In his judgment, the raids showed that Nhu had adopted "suicidal policies" that were "not only dragging Vietnam down to ignominy and disaster but the United States as well."⁴⁰

On Saturday, August 24, Hilsman and Forrestal drafted a cable with new instructions to Ambassador Lodge, who had arrived in Saigon two days earlier. After noting that there was no longer any doubt that Nhu had masterminded the crackdown, the cable declared that Washington "cannot

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tolerate [a] situation in which power lies in Nhu's hands." Diem should be "given [a] chance to rid himself of Nhu and his coterie"; however, if he refused, "we must face the possibility that Diem himself cannot be preserved." Lodge was authorized to contact ARVN leaders and offer them "direct support in any interim period of breakdown" following a coup.⁴¹

After showing the draft to Harriman, who strongly endorsed it, Hilsman went to find Assistant Secretary of State George Ball. He found him on the ninth hole of the golf course at the Chevy Chase Country Club. In addition to being the senior State Department official in Washington that weekend, Ball was a longtime critic of Diem who had come to regard him as a "weak, third-rate bigot." After reviewing the cable, Ball telephoned Kennedy at his Cape Cod retreat and read parts of it to him over the phone. Kennedy hesitated briefly before giving his approval, on condition that Secretary Rusk and the leadership of the Defense Department also assented. The message was transmitted to Saigon that evening as official telegram number 243.⁴²

The August 24 cable had immediate and dramatic effects in both South Vietnam and Washington. In Saigon, Lodge embraced the proposed change in policy with gusto. Declaring that the chances of Diem agreeing to separate himself from Nhu were "virtually nil," Lodge proposed to go "straight to [the] generals." On August 26, he ordered Conein to inform General Tran Thien Khiem, head of the JGS, that the U.S. government now favored an ARVN move to depose Nhu and possibly Diem as well. While Washington would not participate in a coup, it offered "direct support" if and when the rebellion succeeded. Khiem responded positively to Conein's message and promised to pass it to his colleagues. The next day, Khiem revealed to Conein that Minh and several other generals were planning a coup that would take place within a week. Since one of the coup's first targets would be the headquarters of the staunchly pro-Diem ARVN Special Forces, Khiem wanted the United States to supply an inventory of the ordnance furnished to that site. Conein delivered the requested information the following day. By Wednesday, August 28, the coup envisioned in Hilsman's cable seemed well on its way to becoming reality.⁴³

But back in Washington, some senior administration officials were considerably less enthusiastic about the change in policy than Hilsman and Lodge were. When Kennedy returned to the White House on August 26, he discovered that several of his top advisors were furious over Hilsman's weekend cable and the apparently underhanded way it had been cleared.

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Maxwell Taylor, chairman of the JCS and a longtime advocate of strong support for Diem, later accused Hilsman of making an “end run” around normal policy-making procedures.⁴⁴ John McCone, director of the CIA, voiced concern that “there was no apparent acceptable successor to Diem” in Saigon. Secretaries Rusk and McNamara, who had also been out of town over the weekend and had not reviewed the cable prior to its transmittal, expressed similar misgivings. Former CIA Saigon station chief Colby quipped that the new directive “appears [to] be throwing away [a] bird in hand before we have adequately identified birds in bush, or songs they may sing.”⁴⁵

The dispute over Hilsman’s cable provided the backdrop for an intensive series of NSC meetings on Vietnam during the week of August 26. For six straight days, Kennedy’s advisors convened at the White House, usually with Kennedy himself in attendance. While parts of each session were devoted to hearing the latest reports from Saigon, the participants also debated the likely consequences of a coup. The most strident warnings against regime change were voiced by Nolting, who had just returned to Washington. On August 27, Nolting told Kennedy that the generals lacked “the guts, the *sang-froid*, the drive” that Diem had displayed; he also insisted that Diem had never lied to him and had genuinely tried to conciliate the Buddhists. At the same time, Nolting acknowledged that Nhu had become a liability. He recommended that the U.S. refrain from encouraging a coup for a few weeks; in the meantime, Lodge should try to persuade Diem to impose “political curbs” on Nhu and to undertake the “political liquidation” of Madame Nhu. On August 28, Nolting reiterated this advice, declaring that Diem was the only leader who could be expected to hold “this fragmented, divided country together.” “Even with the Nhuses?” Kennedy asked. Nolting admitted that it might be impossible to separate Diem from Nhu but maintained that it was still worth trying. Nolting’s arguments were backed by McNamara and Taylor and seemed to resonate with Kennedy, who was clearly worried about the effectiveness of a post-Diem government.⁴⁶

In the end, the views of Nolting and the other critics of regime change did not prevail. Although Hilsman was outranked by most of the officials who criticized his cable, he vigorously defended the policy change he had engineered. During the crucial first NSC meeting on August 26, he opened the discussion by stating that “we are all in agreement that Nhu must go”—a shrewd observation that ensured that the idea of a U.S.-backed

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coup would remain on the administration's menu of options. Joining Hilsman in defense of the new policy were Ball and Harriman, both of whom pointedly disagreed with Nolting in front of Kennedy on August 28. From Saigon, Lodge also did his best to keep U.S. support for a coup on track. When he learned that some in Washington were having "second thoughts" about a coup, Lodge solemnly informed the State Department that the die had already been cast: "We are launched on a course from which there is no respectable turning back: the overthrow of the Diem government."⁴⁷

The decisive factor in the NSC discussions was Kennedy's own evolving attitude toward a coup. Although the president was incensed about the way the soft hawks' cable had been cleared and sent—"This shit has got to stop!" he yelled at a chagrined Forrestal—he chose not to countermand the instructions it contained. Indeed, he permitted the embassy's contacts with the coup plotters to continue and even authorized Harkins, the MAC-V chief, to discuss the plot directly with the generals. Kennedy thus acquiesced in the move toward a policy of regime change, even as he left open the possibility of a last-ditch attempt to convince Diem to abandon Nhu. This ambivalent acceptance of the coup option reflected Kennedy's desire to maintain the largest possible room for maneuver in South Vietnam. It also reflected his worry that the prospects for long-term success were slowly dimming. "We're up to our hips in mud out there," he remarked gloomily on August 29. A coup might or might not offer a means to get out of the mud, but for the time being, the president would not rule it out.⁴⁸

With developments in both Washington and Saigon appearing to tilt in favor of a coup, most U.S. officials expected the generals to make good on their promise to strike quickly against the regime. But Ngo Dinh Nhu had no intention of allowing the plotters to put their plans into motion. Having already succeeded in turning the martial law proposal to his own advantage, Nhu now moved to block the coup he had earlier encouraged the generals to undertake.

On August 27, the same day Khiem informed Conein that the coup would take place within a week, Nhu had his first face-to-face meeting with Lodge. The judgments each man made of the other could not have been more different. While Lodge found Nhu "ruthless" and "not wholly rational by our standards," Nhu came away from the session convinced that the regime should cultivate the ambassador as a potential ally. A few days later, Nhu summoned several ARVN generals—including Don, Minh,

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Kim, and Khiem—to his office and informed them that “local CIA personnel” in Saigon were scheming to overthrow the government. Fortunately, Nhu explained, Ambassador Lodge was aware of this problem and would soon remedy it; he declared that Lodge would “fully agree with our concepts and actions” and that the Kennedy administration was ready to publicly indicate its backing for RVN policies and actions. Although Nhu’s remarks were wildly inaccurate, they still gave the generals reason to doubt the depth of the U.S. commitment to a coup.⁴⁹

Nhu also took steps to demonstrate that the regime retained the ability to crush any coup attempt by force. To do this, he turned to General Dinh, the III Corps commander and newly installed military governor of the capital. At a press conference on August 29, Dinh took responsibility for the pagoda raids; he also emphatically defended the crackdown and denied that it had divided the ARVN leadership. For the coup plotters, the implications of this public display were obvious: Dinh had cast his lot with the Ngo brothers. The next day, the U.S. embassy informed General Kim that one of its informants expected the government to arrest several ARVN generals within the next twenty-four hours. Although the arrests did not actually take place, this frightening report suggested that Nhu was aware of the generals’ plot and planned to unravel it.⁵⁰

On Saturday, August 31—exactly one week after Hilsman drafted his controversial cable—Khiem told Harkins that the generals had shelved their plans for a coup. In a separate meeting with Rufus Phillips, General Kim confirmed that the uprising had been called off. Although Khiem and Kim both stressed that they still expected eventually to overthrow the regime, Nhu’s maneuvers had obviously unnerved them. It was also obvious that their confidence in the United States had been shaken. Khiem noted Nhu’s long-standing relationship with the CIA’s Saigon station and wondered aloud if the Ngos might be secretly collaborating with the agency to expose the coup plotters and their plans. General Kim observed that Washington was still publicly backing the Diem government and had so far taken “no overt actions” to back up its secret assurances of support to the generals.⁵¹

Although U.S. official policy had shifted in favor of a coup, that shift had not produced the outcome Lodge, Hilsman, and the regime’s other American critics wanted. Indeed, the chances for a coup now seemed much reduced, at least for the time being. Ngo Dinh Nhu had thus scored another success in his ongoing efforts to manipulate the Ngo family’s

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ever-changing array of allies and opponents. In the weeks ahead, Nhu would press ahead with an even more ambitious series of intrigues, while the Americans and the generals cast about for new ways to loosen the regime's grip on power.

Pressures, Persuasion, and Deadlock

On September 2, just two days after the collapse of the generals' coup, the editors of the *Times of Viet Nam* detonated a new propaganda bombshell. In a front-page article headlined "CIA Financing Planned Coup D'Etat," the paper described an elaborate plot to overthrow the Diem government. According to the article, CIA operatives had been working for months to stoke antigovernment sentiment in South Vietnam. After first exploiting the Buddhist movement for their own ends, the agitators had concocted a plot to force Diem to hand over power to a "military junta." After doling out \$24 million in bribes to RVN government officials and military officers, the agency had informed its collaborators that the coup would be launched on the night of August 28. At the last minute, however, the uprising was called off "because the Vietnamese [government] knew about it and [was] organized to face it and resist to the end."⁵²

On the same day the *Times of Viet Nam* published its sensational charges, Kennedy sat for a televised interview with Walter Cronkite of CBS News. When Cronkite brought up South Vietnam, Kennedy reiterated that he did not intend to end U.S. support for the RVN war effort. However, he also pointedly criticized the Diem regime's crackdown against the Buddhists as "very unwise" and as evidence that "the government has gotten out of touch with the people." Asked if he believed that Diem's government could still remedy the situation, Kennedy said, "I do. With changes in policy and perhaps with personnel I think it can." Yet in his next breath, Kennedy seemed to hint that U.S. patience with the regime was running out: "If it doesn't make those changes, I would think that the chances of winning it would not be very good."⁵³

Despite the obvious differences in tone and content, the *Times of Viet Nam* article and Kennedy's interview both set the stage for a new round of diplomatic and political sparring between Saigon and Washington. Following the collapse of the generals' late August coup, leaders in both governments recalibrated their efforts to steer the ailing alliance in the direction they wanted it to go. As the article and interview suggested, each side aimed to use carefully measured forms of pressure—including threats—to

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compel the other to come to terms. Yet neither government was prepared to abandon the idea of reconciliation. Despite the shrill, heavy-handed qualities of their propaganda, the Ngos expected not merely to repair their damaged American alliance but to achieve a new breakthrough with Washington. Kennedy, although considerably less optimistic about the prospects for reconciliation, was also determined to keep that possibility alive. With allied relations more uncertain and acrimonious than ever, leaders on both sides searched for a way to break the diplomatic deadlock.

As the *Times of Vietnam* article demonstrated, the Ngos' strategy for dealing with Washington after the pagoda raids included plenty of intimidation. In the aftermath of the raids, Americans suspected of criticizing or plotting against the government were monitored, harassed, attacked in print, and even threatened with bodily harm. One longtime Diem supporter who unexpectedly found himself in the regime's crosshairs was Rufus Phillips. In conversations with his palace contacts during late August and early September, Phillips was shocked by the depth of despair many of Diem's senior advisors felt about Nhu and his growing influence. Although Phillips still thought of himself as a loyal supporter of Diem, he now became one of the mission's most vocal advocates of the view that the United States should seek to separate Nhu from Diem. Unfortunately for Phillips, Nhu quickly discovered this. In mid-September, Phillips realized that his house in Saigon was being watched by Nhu's operatives. On October 7, the *Times of Viet Nam* alleged that Phillips was one of the "CIA agents" who had organized the abortive coup of late August. Phillips was incensed and dismayed that he had been "singled out as an enemy."⁵⁴

The regime's public attacks on Phillips and other Americans led some U.S. officials to conclude that the Ngos had opted for a strategy of all-out confrontation with Washington. According to the State Department, the *Times of Viet Nam* articles reflected the palace's "heightened contempt" for the U.S. government. For Colby, the accusations "showed the degree to which the Nhucs and Diem felt themselves trapped."⁵⁵ Other Americans wondered if the brothers had become mentally unstable.⁵⁶ These suspicions were understandable but they overlooked the palace's efforts to balance its intimidatory tactics with more conciliatory gestures. In retrospect, the regime's sticks-and-carrots approach appears contrived and even clumsy. But it was entirely in keeping with the Ngos' prior patterns of dealings with both allies and rivals. It was also in keeping with the objective that

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Diem and Nhu had been pursuing since the beginning of 1963: a renegotiation of the terms of the U.S.-RVN alliance.

Ironically, the palace's desire to conciliate the U.S. government was most clearly apparent in its treatment of Lodge. While the brothers knew the ambassador only by reputation at the time of his appointment, they were optimistic that he could be persuaded to adopt the views and policies favored by his pliable predecessor Nolting. To encourage him in this regard, the Ngos sought to signal their willingness to work with him to repair the strained relations between the allies. They seemed to have no inkling that Lodge's inclinations ran in precisely the opposite direction.

The regime's attempts to win Lodge over began even before he arrived in Saigon. In early August, the *Times of Viet Nam* gave front-page coverage to Lodge's expressions of support for the RVN war effort against the communists. On August 15, just days before the pagoda raids—and in the same issue in which it blasted the Xa Loi demonstrators for trying to bring down the government—the paper printed an effusive editorial about the departing Nolting. Lodge, the editors suggested, would do well to emulate Nolting, even though he would have “mighty big shoes to fill.” During Lodge's first week in Saigon, large photographs of the smiling envoy appeared in the paper almost every day.⁵⁷

In seeking to curry favor with Lodge, the palace went out of its way to distinguish him from those Americans they claimed were engaged in “hostile behavior” against the Diem government. The *Times of Viet Nam*, even before it had printed its allegations about the CIA-orchestrated coup plot, had been careful to separate Lodge from the unnamed “junior officials” who were undermining the “Nolting policy” of cooperation with the Diem government. The editors urged Lodge to curb these rogue officials, noting that he was “not famous for allowing his efforts to be sabotaged by his subordinates.” The editors also made sure that the paper's sensational September 2 article about the CIA's coup scheme ran next to a reprint of an editorial that blasted recent “flip-flops” in U.S. policy and expressed hope that Lodge would “help clear the confusion and resolve the crisis.”⁵⁸

In addition to these public messages aimed at Lodge, the Ngos tried to reach him with private gestures. At his second meeting with Lodge in early September, Nhu unexpectedly floated the possibility that he might retire from government service.⁵⁹ Nhu likely raised the issue to suggest that the Ngos were taking Kennedy's recent call for “personnel changes” seriously. To reinforce this message, Nhu subsequently arranged for some of the

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regime's other controversial figures to leave Vietnam for extended periods of overseas travel. On September 7, Archbishop Thuc departed for Rome to participate in the upcoming session of the Second Vatican Council. Two days later, Nhu personally saw Madame Nhu off at the Saigon airport for the start of a foreign tour to Europe and the United States. After his wife's plane had disappeared, Nhu stood and stared into the sky for several minutes—wondering, perhaps, when the couple's next reunion would be.⁶⁰ A rather less sentimental departure took place on September 12, when Dr. Tuyen reluctantly boarded a flight with orders to travel to Egypt to take up his new post as RVN consul-general. As Tuyen bitterly explained to a CIA contact, Nhu planned to portray his departure, as well as Thuc's and Madame Nhu's, as "grudging concessions" to Lodge and to U.S. demands.⁶¹

The Ngos' appeals to Lodge were accompanied by a broader propaganda campaign to portray U.S.-RVN relations as gradually returning to normal. Throughout September and October, the newspaper *Cach Mang Quoc Gia* maintained an overtly positive tone toward the United States and insisted that U.S. support for the government remained strong.⁶² Even President Kennedy was depicted as supportive of Diem's government. In its coverage of Kennedy's September 2 interview with Cronkite, *Cach Mang Quoc Gia* omitted Kennedy's criticism of the raids and his demand for "personnel changes." Instead, the editors trumpeted Kennedy's promise not to withdraw from South Vietnam; they also approvingly recalled his 1961 pledge to "bear any burden" to support liberty around the world.⁶³ In contrast to their counterparts at the *Times of Viet Nam*, the editors of *Cach Mang Quoc Gia* downplayed the alleged CIA coup plot against the government and did not even mention it until early October.⁶⁴

In hindsight, the Ngos' combination of blatant intimidation with calls for a return to the "Nolting policy" seems ill advised, counterproductive, and even bizarre. Yet Diem and Nhu remained optimistic that their formula was working. In late September, they cautiously welcomed a White House announcement of yet another high-level official mission to South Vietnam. The brothers were happy to see that mission would be headed by Maxwell Taylor and Robert McNamara—two figures known to favor continued support for Diem. Reconciliation, they imagined, could not be far off.

Unfortunately for the Ngos, the Taylor-McNamara mission of late September did not signal Kennedy's readiness to give ground. Rather, it reflected his ongoing efforts to patch up the differences among his feuding

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advisors, as well as his determination to keep as many policy options open for as long as possible. Although the administration no longer faced an immediate decision about a coup, the fierce disagreements that had dominated the emergency NSC meetings of late August continued in the weeks afterward. For Kennedy, the low point may have come on September 10, when he heard diametrically opposite reports from a State Department officer and a Defense Department official who had just returned from a joint fact-finding trip to South Vietnam. While the Defense representative insisted that the “shooting war” was “still going ahead at an impressive pace,” his State Department counterpart described the Ngos’ “reign of terror” and raised the specter of a religious war. Although Kennedy tried to lighten the mood—“The two of you did visit the same country, didn’t you?” he quipped—it was obvious that the split within the administration was wider than ever. The meeting continued with a presentation by Rufus Phillips, who raised hackles by contradicting the optimistic reports of progress in the war and by recommending that Lansdale be sent to South Vietnam to try to get Nhu out of the country. But the response to Phillips paled in comparison to the uproar generated by John Mecklin, an officer in the Saigon embassy. Mecklin advised Kennedy to send U.S. combat forces to South Vietnam to remove Diem from power. “No, no, under no circumstances!” Taylor bellowed.⁶⁵

In the wake of the stormy meeting, Kennedy turned to Hilsman, who drafted a series of papers that identified two distinct tracks along which U.S. policy might proceed. The first track, dubbed “pressures and persuasion,” called for the administration to use selective aid cuts and public expressions of disapproval to push Diem toward acceptance of U.S. demands. The second scenario was the “reconciliation” track, which called for Washington to impose the same requirements on Diem but without the aid cuts or other coercive measures. On September 17, Kennedy endorsed the “pressures and persuasion” track.⁶⁶ On its face, this seemed a triumph for Hilsman and the other officials who advocated taking a hard line with Diem. But the soft hawks were dismayed to learn that Kennedy had coupled his approval of the first approach with a decision to dispatch Taylor and McNamara to Saigon. Harriman angrily predicted that the mission would be a “disaster,” since it was an attempt to send “two men opposed to our policy . . . to carry out [that] policy.”⁶⁷ From Saigon, Lodge also objected.⁶⁸ For Kennedy, however, the selection of Taylor and McNamara seemed a good way to avoid a repetition of the mistakes of late August.

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“The fact of the matter is that Averell was wrong on the [late August] coup,” Kennedy pointedly told Ball. “We fucked that up.”⁶⁹

The Taylor-McNamara mission, which visited South Vietnam from September 24 to October 1, was frustrating for everyone involved. Although the chances for an early resolution of the crisis in U.S.-RVN relations seemed remote, Taylor and McNamara still hoped to secure some concessions from Diem. They were also determined to prove that the ARVN was still winning the war against the communists. Kennedy, in contrast, was less optimistic about the prospects for immediate changes in Diem’s behavior; he therefore stressed that the mission’s first goal was to figure out how to implement the “pressures and persuasion” policy. Other U.S. officials—including Lodge and some of his subordinates—aimed to demonstrate the futility of trying to work with Diem. Of course, none of these approaches corresponded to Diem’s belief that the mission heralded Kennedy’s decision to revert to a policy of strong support for his regime.

After arriving in South Vietnam, McNamara and Taylor quickly realized that the chances of finding common ground with Diem were remote. P. J. Honey, a British expert in Vietnamese history and a onetime Diem supporter, told McNamara that Diem could not win the war and would be overthrown soon. Richardson, the CIA station chief, reported that the regime’s security forces were spreading terror throughout Saigon with a wave of nighttime arrests and kidnappings. From another source McNamara learned that the police routinely tortured anyone they deemed an opponent of the regime. He and Taylor also heard testimony from U.S. military advisors that contradicted MAC-V’s claims about progress in the war against the communists. Most startling of all were the remarks of Nguyen Ngoc Tho, Diem’s vice president, who frankly stated that the Viet Cong were broadly popular in the countryside and there were “not more than 20 to 30 properly defended hamlets in the whole country.”⁷⁰

Any remaining hopes for a breakthrough with Diem were dashed during Taylor and McNamara’s meeting with him on September 29. As he often did in such situations, Diem held forth at length about his government’s successes. The Strategic Hamlet Program, he declared, was working. Viet Cong units now resembled a “foreign expeditionary corps” much more than the proverbial Maoist fish swimming among the people. After he had rambled on for nearly two hours, McNamara broke in to express his worry about the ongoing political crisis and the RVN’s loss of public support both in Vietnam and the United States. Among other things,

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McNamara referred to Madame Nhu's public criticisms of the United States, including a recent broadside in which she had described U.S. military advisors as "little soldiers of fortune." Diem seemed unperturbed by McNamara's complaints and rejected each of them in turn. "You could just see it bouncing off him," Taylor later recalled ruefully.⁷¹

Despite Diem's intransigence, neither Taylor nor McNamara was ready to give up on the RVN president. Their official report to Kennedy made no mention of the warnings they had heard about recent communist gains in the countryside. Instead, it affirmed the MAC-V view that the RVN war effort "has made great progress and continues to progress." The report admitted that the "political situation" in South Vietnam was "deeply serious." However, it remonstrated strongly against resumed U.S. encouragement of a coup, on the grounds that the ARVN's senior commanders had "little stomach" for it. Even if the generals were able to overthrow Diem, the report suggested, they might be less effective and even more repressive than Diem was. The report endorsed Kennedy's plan to use aid cuts and other "selective pressures" to try to compel Diem to change his ways.⁷²

At first glance, the Taylor-McNamara report appeared to give Kennedy exactly what he wanted: a middle-of-the-road version of the "pressures and persuasion" policy that could be modified or discarded as he saw fit. Nevertheless, Kennedy was uneasy about some of Taylor and McNamara's recommendations, including several which he feared might limit his future policy options. The president hesitated over two recommendations in particular. First, to give the administration greater leverage with Diem, the report advised Kennedy to publicly announce the Pentagon's prediction that the RVN would defeat the NLF by 1965. Second, Taylor and McNamara believed that the time was right to reveal the imminent first step of the Pentagon's phased withdrawal of U.S. military advisors from South Vietnam. In keeping with the plan devised in mid-1962, Defense Department officials expected to reduce the size of the U.S. advisory force by one thousand men over the next three months. While this reduction represented less than 7 percent of the sixteen thousand advisors currently in Vietnam, Taylor and McNamara believed that such an announcement would serve to rebut critics who claimed that the U.S. commitment to the RVN was too open-ended.⁷³

In the end, Kennedy took McNamara and Taylor's advice and published both the timetable for victory as well as the news of the thousand-man withdrawal. Some authors have seen these decisions as evidence that the

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“Kennedy withdrawal” reflected his unconditional determination to extract the United States from the Vietnam War.⁷⁴ But as recent research has demonstrated, Kennedy’s choices on these matters, like all of the major decisions he made about South Vietnam during the fall of 1963, were carefully hedged and qualified.⁷⁵ In this respect, his response to the Taylor-McNamara report did not mark a significant change in his priorities. Given the profound uncertainties surrounding the Diem government, Kennedy’s first and most important Vietnam policy goal was to maintain maximum room for maneuver for as long as possible. In his mind, no course of action—neither reconciliation with Diem nor support for a coup, neither a U.S. withdrawal nor an intensified U.S. commitment—had been ruled out.

A Separate Peace?

During September and October 1963, an Indian diplomat named Ramchundur Goburdhun hosted a series of private dinners at his residence in Saigon. As chairman of the International Control Commission for Indochina (ICC), Goburdhun knew many foreign ambassadors and government officials in South Vietnam. He was also on good terms with Ho Chi Minh and other senior North Vietnamese leaders, whom he met regularly during official ICC visits to Hanoi. But his closest Vietnamese friend was Ngo Dinh Nhu, whom he had known since the 1930s, when both men were students in France. In Saigon, Goburdhun and his wife socialized frequently with Nhu’s family; they also arranged dinner parties for Nhu at their home.

While many of these gatherings were designed simply to provide Nhu with a chance to converse informally with a particular diplomat or foreign official, the sessions Goburdhun arranged during the fall of 1963 had a different purpose. According to an ARVN captain who worked on Nhu’s security detail, Goburdhun and Nhu were joined at these dinners by just one other guest, a Vietnamese man of medium build with an “intellectual” demeanor. The captain never learned the mysterious guest’s name, but he noticed that the chest pocket of the man’s suit bore a patch with a yellow star on a red field—the flag of the DRV. Although the captain was not privy to the conversations that took place during the dinners, he later overheard Nhu explain to an associate that he had decided to meet with a communist representative because “the Americans are giving us a lot of trouble.” “The northerners are contemplating peace with us,” Nhu remarked. “We should talk peace with the north for a period of time and see what happens.”⁷⁶

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Is the ARVN captain's story credible? Were the fiercely anticommunist Ngo brothers really "talking peace" with their communist archenemies? Throughout the summer and fall of 1963, Saigon was rife with rumors that the palace was negotiating with North Vietnam. Ngo Dinh Nhu encouraged these rumors by confirming that he had received messages from Hanoi via secret channels and by telling U.S. officials and others that he had met with NLF leaders. But because Nhu refused to disclose any details about these exchanges, his statements only deepened the mystery. Years later, several South Vietnamese reported that Nhu had in fact held a series of conclaves with enemy leaders. But none of these accounts has ever been convincingly corroborated by other sources; moreover, many of them were clearly colored by hindsight and by their authors' latter-day agendas. For example, the story of the ARVN captain and the alleged meetings at Goburdhun's house did not appear until 1971, in a sensational book about the Diem regime entitled *How Does One Kill a President?* Because the book was coauthored by Dr. Tran Kim Tuyen, many readers found its claims dubious.⁷⁷

Since 1963, assessments of the conflicting and fragmentary evidence about the alleged contacts between the Ngos and communist representatives have focused on two opposite theories. The first theory holds that the brothers were never serious about an accommodation with their communist rivals. Instead, they aimed to use the threat of a deal with Hanoi to gain leverage with Washington.⁷⁸ The second theory suggests that by 1963 the Ngo brothers were so exasperated with the United States that they were ready to make a separate peace with their enemies. In some versions of this theory, Diem and Nhu were planning a dramatic volte-face in which they would sever ties to Washington, adopt a neutralist foreign policy, and share power with the NLF. According to this view, the Ngos' secret plan was a lost chance for peace that might have prevented the post-1963 escalation of the Vietnam War if only they had lived to implement it.⁷⁹

The arguments over these two theories have largely overlooked a third possibility: Diem and Nhu might have viewed talks with communist leaders neither as a bargaining ploy nor as an opportunity for a compromise peace, but as a chance to proclaim victory over the NLF.⁸⁰ Although many Vietnamese and Americans perceived the regime to be lurching toward its own destruction during the summer and fall of 1963, Diem and Nhu did not. By early September, they believed they had crushed the Buddhist movement and checked the generals' coup plot. They were also optimistic

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about their ability to “manage” Henry Cabot Lodge and repair their strained relations with Washington.⁸¹ Most important of all, they were firmly persuaded that the Strategic Hamlet Program was working and that the NLF, as Nhu put it, had been “practically defeated.”⁸² Given these convictions—and given their faith in their ability to guide Vietnam to its national destiny—it is likely that the brothers would have treated any meetings with communist officials as a prelude to Hanoi’s capitulation. The Ngo brothers had a plan to end the Vietnam War in 1963, but neutralism and compromise were not at all what they had in mind.

On its face, the notion that Diem and Nhu would ever agree to parley with VWP leaders appears utterly inconsistent with their reputations as staunch anticommunists. Since 1954, Diem had seemed determined to have no truck with North Vietnam. In addition to refusing to collaborate with the DRV on national reunification elections, he had repeatedly rebuffed Hanoi’s repeated proposals for talks on issues such as family reunions and postal exchanges. This seemingly absolutist position, along with his frequent denunciations of the “error” of neutralism, hardly seemed to bode well for rapprochement with the north.⁸³

But Diem had not always been so categorical in his dealings with communist leaders. Following his famous 1946 meeting with Ho Chi Minh, Diem remained in contact with senior Viet Minh leaders for at least two years; his interlocutors at that time included Pham Van Dong, later the DRV premier. While Diem’s main objective was to keep the communists guessing about his ultimate objectives, he and Nhu appear to have come away from these exchanges with at least a modicum of respect for their rivals. One of Nhu’s associates remarked privately in 1963 that “the ties between Ho and Dong on the one side and Nhu and Diem on the other are not the relations between enemies, but the ties between friend-enemies [*amis-ennemis*].”⁸⁴ Whatever reasons the Ngos had for avoiding dialog with Hanoi after 1954, they were not avoiding it on principle.

If and when the Ngos were ready to talk, communist leaders were ready to hear what they had to say. In the years after Diem became leader of South Vietnam, Hanoi had floated the possibility of dialog with the Saigon government on several occasions. In 1955, DRV officials tried to coax Diem into negotiations on nationwide elections by offering to make him the vice chairman of a Vietnamese unity government.⁸⁵ Although Diem rejected this, North Vietnamese leaders left open the possibility of future discussions.

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In mid-1962, communist officials tried to signal Diem that negotiations were possible under certain conditions. In July, the NLF stated it would work with “concerned parties” to bring about the neutralization of South Vietnam—an apparent softening of its previous stance that Diem would have to be removed from power before a neutral government could be established in the south.⁸⁶ Two months later, Ho made a point of referring to Diem as a “patriot” during a meeting with ICC representatives in Hanoi. “Shake hands with him for me if you see him,” Ho told Goburdhun.⁸⁷ In May 1963, Ho publicly declared that a ceasefire and talks with Diem’s government were possible once the United States withdrew its military personnel from South Vietnam.⁸⁸ It is likely, of course, that Ho hoped his remarks would exacerbate U.S.-RVN tensions. But even if this was the case, his comments still suggested that some DRV officials were open to talks with Saigon under certain conditions.

The signals emanating from Hanoi during 1962 and early 1963 marked an important preliminary step toward an RVN-DRV dialog. But it fell to foreign diplomats to try to open the first actual channel of communication. Roger Lalouette, the French ambassador to South Vietnam, had been quietly exploring the prospects for such a channel since his arrival in Saigon several years earlier. Diem dismissed Lalouette’s initial inquiries about talks with Hanoi, declaring that it was “too soon for an exchange of views.”⁸⁹ But in the spring of 1963, Lalouette concluded that Diem’s growing frustration with his U.S. allies, in tandem with Hanoi’s recent declarations about a possible ceasefire, had opened a window of opportunity. A north-south dialog, Lalouette believed, could lead to the neutralization of the two Vietnams and to the expulsion of U.S. forces from the south. It might also allow France to regain a measure of the influence in Indochina it had lost after 1954. Throughout the spring and summer, Lalouette worked behind the scenes to facilitate an exchange of messages.⁹⁰

Lalouette’s unlikely collaborator was Mieczyslaw Maneli, a Polish academic who had recently become Warsaw’s representative on the ICC. Maneli shared Lalouette’s interest in an RVN-DRV dialog; moreover, his ICC duties allowed him to shuttle between Saigon and Hanoi. In the north, Maneli spoke often with Pham Van Dong, who told him that Diem would eventually have no choice but to participate in an international conference on the neutralization of Vietnam. In May 1963, Dong asked Maneli to inform Saigon that the DRV wanted to establish cultural and trade ties with the RVN, including the exchange of southern rice for

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northern coal. Since the Polish Foreign Ministry had ordered Maneli not to try to mediate between Hanoi and Saigon, he was initially reluctant to do as Dong asked. But in July, after DRV leaders offered to recognize Diem as the head of a neutralist southern government, Maneli decided to seek an audience with Nhu, whom he had not previously met.⁹¹

Lalouette and other European diplomats in Saigon arranged for Maneli to be introduced to Nhu during an official reception on August 25. A week later, Nhu invited Maneli to Gia Long Palace for a private meeting. Except for a few strange turns in conversation—at one point, Maneli was stunned to hear Nhu declare that the Strategic Hamlet Program would fulfill Marx's famous prediction about the withering away of the state—the session was cordial and uneventful. Nhu claimed to be “studying” Ho Chi Minh's recent ceasefire proposal and denied that he had entered into direct talks with the north. He also declared that his long-term objective was an “independent Vietnam” that would be neutral and have no foreign troops on its soil.⁹²

Meanwhile, Lalouette was working with his colleagues in Paris to secure broader international support for the idea of a neutral South Vietnam. On August 29—just four days before Maneli's private session with Nhu—the French president, Charles de Gaulle, announced that his government was ready to host talks on Vietnam's reunification and neutralization. Although lacking in specifics, de Gaulle's statement was widely viewed in Washington and elsewhere as a criticism of U.S. efforts to maintain South Vietnam as an anticommunist bulwark. Lalouette was optimistic that de Gaulle's offer would encourage Diem and Nhu to respond favorably to Maneli and “to demand the withdrawal of the Americans.”⁹³

But the Ngo brothers had no interest in pursuing de Gaulle's neutralization proposal. They also rejected Maneli as an intermediary. Although Maneli later insisted that Diem and Nhu had embraced his offer to act as a go-between with Hanoi, his secret reports to his superiors in Warsaw tell a different story. In those reports, he noted that Nhu had avoided discussing the de Gaulle initiative. Nhu also failed to offer any proposals that Maneli could take back to Hanoi—possibly because he hoped “that the bridges with the U.S. have not yet been burned.”⁹⁴

The Lalouette-Maneli initiative was effectively killed in mid-September, when Nhu revealed it to the conservative American journalist Joseph Alsop. According to Nhu's version of events, Maneli had delivered a message from Hanoi that “begged” for ceasefire talks. Nhu piously insisted that he turned

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down this request, even though Maneli implored him to reconsider.⁹⁵ Because of the delicate position in which Maneli had placed himself—his meeting with Nhu lay outside the scope of his ICC duties and violated his official instructions from Warsaw—Alsop's column greatly embarrassed the diplomat. His furious superiors insisted that he publish a formal denial.⁹⁶ The hapless Maneli later admitted that he had been manipulated, noting ruefully that Nhu "was playing on many instruments at the same time."⁹⁷

Nhu's rejection of Maneli's proposals stands in stark contrast to the interest the Ngos displayed in a second possible channel of communication with Hanoi. The idea for this second channel apparently originated with Goburdhun, the ICC chair. Like Lalouette and Maneli, Goburdhun believed that recent developments in Vietnam had made a neutralization deal possible. However, he did not expect that the Ngos would be compelled to make a deal with Hanoi because the war was going badly for the RVN; on the contrary, he had been convinced by his friend Nhu that the Strategic Hamlet Program was a success and that DRV leaders realized that their plans to conquer the south had failed. Goburdhun also believed Nhu's assurances about expelling all U.S. military advisors from South Vietnam and adopting a neutralist foreign policy. Under these conditions, Goburdhun concluded, DRV leaders would have no choice but to come to terms with Saigon. To facilitate this outcome, he proposed that the two governments hold secret talks in New Dehli, where both maintained diplomatic missions.⁹⁸

Diem and Nhu's choice to represent the RVN in the proposed New Dehli talks was Tran Van Dinh, a veteran South Vietnamese diplomat. A native of Hue, Dinh was a loyal Diem supporter and a longtime Can Lao member. But he was also a former Viet Minh supporter who had once helped to smuggle weapons to revolutionary forces in Laos during the early stages of the war against the French. Dinh eventually rallied to the Bao Dai government and then rose rapidly through the South Vietnamese diplomatic hierarchy after 1954, thanks to his close ties to the Ngos. He later claimed that a DRV diplomat had approached him in Burma in 1958 to discuss forming a committee on Vietnamese reunification. Nothing came of the proposal, but Diem apparently deemed it significant that the DRV had chosen to communicate through Dinh.⁹⁹

When Goburdhun put forward his proposal for Indian-brokered talks in the spring of 1963, Tran Van Dinh was serving at the RVN embassy in

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Washington. According to Dinh, Diem summoned him to Saigon in September and again in October to discuss the planned talks in New Dehli, which were set to begin in mid-November. "While Hanoi wants a period of real nonalignment, we can profit from it too," Diem told him.¹⁰⁰ Although Diem's remarks to Dinh cannot be confirmed, other sources show that Diem issued orders for Dinh's transfer from Washington to the RVN mission in India.¹⁰¹

Some authors have treated Dinh's story as proof that the Ngo brothers were planning to turn their backs on Washington and forge a separate peace with North Vietnam.¹⁰² But this interpretation is undermined by Dinh's account of Diem's instructions to him. According to Dinh, Diem told him in late October that his first task was to return to Washington, where he would announce that the RVN government and Ambassador Lodge had negotiated agreements regarding "changes in both personnel and policies." However, Dinh was not authorized to provide any actual details about these changes—not even to President Kennedy. Instead, he was to proceed directly to New Dehli, where he would begin talks with DRV representatives on "constructive matters such as trade relations with the South and stopping infiltrations."¹⁰³ The mysterious quality of these instructions aside, they are not consistent with the idea that Diem was anticipating either a rupture in his relations with Washington or an agreement on neutralization with Hanoi. It is more likely that he saw the New Dehli channel as a way to explore the DRV negotiating position while Saigon continued to repair its damaged ties to Washington.

Even if Diem and Nhu were planning to use the New Delhi channel to communicate with Hanoi, they likely did not expect to rely solely on that connection. The Ngos usually preferred to handle high-stakes negotiations with their rivals themselves rather than delegating responsibility to subordinates. As we have seen, the brothers typically viewed such face-to-face negotiations as a means to co-opt, isolate, or otherwise manipulate their rivals. It was precisely because Diem and Nhu believed so strongly in their ability to impose their will on others that they would have insisted on being personally involved in some way in any discussions with communist leaders.

On several occasions during 1963, Nhu told Vietnamese and foreign officials that he had been meeting covertly with prominent NLF leaders. According to him, these discussions took place in his office at Gia Long

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Ngo Dinh Nhu in his office at Gia Long Palace, 1963. (AP Photo/Horst Faas)

Palace, under a flag of truce. In separate conversations with Nolting and with British officials, Nhu explained that he had been seeking to persuade revolutionaries of the “Dien Bien Phu generation” to defect to the RVN.¹⁰⁴ He denied that these contacts constituted a “secret channel” to senior DRV leaders in Hanoi; they were, he insisted, an attempt to weaken the NLF by recruiting some of its most capable commanders.¹⁰⁵

While Nhu claimed that his encounters with NLF leaders took place in Saigon, other sources refer to clandestine meetings elsewhere in South Vietnam. During the late 1960s and early 1970s, South Vietnamese journalists and former Diem government insiders described ultrasecret sessions that allegedly brought Nhu face-to-face with some of the VWP’s most senior cadres, including members of its Central Office for South Vietnam (COSVN). In some accounts, the clandestine conferences were held in remote mountain or jungle locations, so that Nhu could attend

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under the pretense of a hunting trip. In other versions, the rendezvous took place in Hue, Dalat, or Phan Rang. Nhu's interlocutors were variously identified as Nguyen Van Linh, secretary of COSVN; VWP Politburo member Pham Hung; and Tran Buu Kiem, the NLF's future commissioner of foreign affairs.¹⁰⁶

Unfortunately, none of the stories detailing these encounters has ever been convincingly corroborated by other sources. Until the relevant VWP and DRV archival materials are made available to scholars, key questions about these meetings—including whether they actually took place, who participated in them, and what was said—will remain unanswered. It is highly unlikely, however, that the Ngo brothers ever intended to use these meetings as an opportunity to pursue the kind of neutralization agreement that communist leaders wanted to discuss. As their own words make clear, Diem and Nhu were convinced that they were en route to victory. Negotiations would serve not as an avenue to compromise but as a means to compel the DRV to accept their terms for peace. Nhu expected the war to be “greatly advanced” in favor of the RVN by the end of 1963, at which point Saigon and Washington would be able to negotiate with Hanoi “from a position of strength.”¹⁰⁷ Given this attitude, any talks between Nhu and his communist counterparts that did take place in 1963 were not likely to be productive.

Of the many *ex post facto* attempts to explain Nhu's thinking about matters of war and peace during 1963, one of the most illuminating was provided by the woman who knew him best. In an interview with a Paris newspaper in February 1964, Madame Nhu looked back on the events of the previous year. In characteristically bombastic fashion, she denounced those Vietnamese and Americans who had plotted against the Ngos and swore to take vengeance against them. (The family of Henry Cabot Lodge, she predicted, would be punished “until the sixth generation” for his scheming.) Her interviewer was surprised, however, when Madame Nhu readily admitted that her husband had been in contact with NLF leaders in the months before his death. The insurgents had initiated these contacts, she asserted, because they realized that the Strategic Hamlet Program was succeeding and the Ngos were only “two fingers away from victory.” The enemy “knew that we could not only corner him but also bleed him white,” she boasted. Yet she also insisted that Nhu's meetings with enemy leaders had been conducted in a “fraternal” spirit and that thousands of insurgents had accepted the government's offer of amnesty.

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In fact, she remarked, Nhu was so admired by the guerrillas that he had considered going to the maquis to rally them in person.¹⁰⁸

In hindsight, Madame Nhu's claims about mass defections and her husband's popularity with his enemies seem far-fetched, if not downright delusional. But her comments were perfectly in tune with the triumphalist thinking inside Gia Long Palace during 1963. The Ngos believed that their vision of rural social transformation, embodied in the Strategic Hamlet Program, was being realized in the South Vietnamese countryside. They also believed that the ARVN had gained the upper hand over the NLF and that the insurgency was on the verge of defeat. They therefore expected their communist enemies to sue for peace. This expectation only reinforced their conviction that that they would prevail over their other opponents inside South Vietnam, including the Buddhists and the generals, and in their ongoing struggles with the United States. Such thinking did not incline the Ngos to pay heed to those who warned that the fall of their regime was imminent. Ngo Dinh Diem and Ngo Dinh Nhu had never previously opted for compromise in a situation in which they perceived a chance to win outright victory. They were not about to do so now.

The Making of the Generals' Coup

On October 2, Lucien Conein ran into General Don at Tan Son Nhat Airport in Saigon. The encounter was the CIA's first face-to-face contact with any of the coup leaders since the collapse of the late August plot. At a follow-up meeting with Conein that evening, Don revealed that a new coup plan was in the works. He also indicated that General Minh wanted to have a conversation with Conein. Three days later, Minh met with Conein and outlined several scenarios the generals were considering, including the possibility of assassinating members of the Ngo family. Minh also stated that he needed to know the U.S. government's stance toward a coup. Conein's report of the meeting prompted Lodge to ask the White House for authorization to provide Minh with the guarantees he had requested. On October 9, Lodge received an "eyes only" cable from the White House that gave him the response he wanted. "While we do not wish to stimulate [a] coup," the cable declared, "we also do not wish to leave [the] impression that [the] U.S. would thwart a change of government or deny economic and military assistance to a new regime if it appeared capable of increasing [the] effectiveness of [the RVN] military effort."¹⁰⁹

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In comments issued after the generals' coup took place, Lodge portrayed the plot as a "Vietnamese affair" in which Americans played no significant role. The United States, he declared, could not have stopped the coup even if it had tried.¹¹⁰ In retrospect, it is obvious that Lodge was dissembling. As Minh's comments to Conein showed, the U.S. promise not to thwart the generals' plans was crucial to their decision to go ahead with the plot. Even General Don, who echoed Lodge's portrayal of the coup as a "Vietnamese affair," admitted that the pledges of American nonintervention delivered by Conein—and later by Lodge himself—helped reassure the generals at crucial moments.¹¹¹ As a result, Vietnam War historians have mostly agreed that Lodge, Kennedy, and other U.S. leaders bear considerable responsibility for the coup and its consequences.¹¹² Kennedy himself later admitted this responsibility, noting that the White House's directives had urged Lodge "along a course to which he was in any case inclined."¹¹³

Nevertheless, the U.S. role in the coup should not be overstated. While Lodge and other Americans encouraged the generals at key moments, these Americans' actions had little impact on the actual design or implementation of the rebellion. After Conein's meeting with Minh on October 5, the embassy did not discuss the coup again with any of the generals until October 23, by which time planning for the uprising was largely complete.¹¹⁴ During this period, Lodge also pointedly refrained from meeting with Diem or with other senior figures in the regime. As a result, the U.S. embassy had little contact or influence with any the key figures in South Vietnamese politics during the critical weeks leading up to the coup. Both as a military operation and a political event, the coup remained largely a Vietnamese affair, even as Lodge did his best to encourage the generals to move ahead with their plans.

The revival of the generals' coup plot coincided with a new spike in the tensions between the palace and the U.S. embassy. On October 5, Kennedy approved a package of cuts to U.S. economic and military aid programs for the Diem government. These cuts, which Taylor and McNamara had recommended, were the first concrete implementation of Kennedy's "pressures and persuasion" strategy. In addition to continued restrictions on U.S. commodity imports, the administration also suspended aid to the ARVN Special Forces, who had played a key role in the pagoda raids.¹¹⁵ To maximize the psychological impact of the cuts, Lodge decided not to deliver

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the news to Diem in person. Since the departure of the Taylor-McNamara mission, Lodge had avoided asking for an audience with Diem, in the hope that this would eventually force him to request a meeting with the ambassador.¹¹⁶ As a result, Lodge did not see Diem again until the end of October.

Lodge also restricted the CIA's contacts with the palace. In mid-September, Lodge ordered Richardson to cease his weekly meetings with Ngo Dinh Nhu. Lodge's directive was inspired partly by his personal antipathy for Richardson, whom he considered overly sympathetic to the Ngos. Having severed the CIA station's connection to Nhu, Lodge proceeded to engineer Richardson's departure from Vietnam. On October 2, the *Washington Daily News* identified Richardson as the head of the Saigon station and accused him of refusing to follow Lodge's orders. Because his cover had been blown, Richardson's superiors ordered him to leave South Vietnam. Since Richardson had been serving as Nhu's primary liaison to the U.S. mission, Lodge saw Richardson's exposure and forced departure as a way to reinforce the other messages he was sending to the palace. He also hoped to signal the generals that the United States would not stand in the way of a coup.¹¹⁷

Nhu responded to Lodge's moves with pressure tactics of his own. In an interview in early October, Nhu declared that the only U.S. aid South Vietnam needed was helicopters and other material support for the war effort; U.S. advisors, he complained, did not know how to fight guerrillas. "If the Americans were to interrupt their help," he remarked, "it may not be a bad thing at all."¹¹⁸ To his subordinates, he boasted that the government had enough foreign reserves to continue operating "for twenty years" without U.S. aid.¹¹⁹

But Nhu's bravado was belied by his other actions. On October 8, a Vietnamese source informed the CIA station that Nhu was planning to stage a violent anti-American demonstration in Saigon that would culminate in an attack on the U.S. embassy chancery; according to the source, Nhu had concluded that he could not "handle" Lodge after all and therefore had decided to "have him eliminated from the scene." The CIA concluded that the story was likely disinformation, conceived by Nhu as a "psywar gambit." A few days later, Nhu dropped his pretended indifference to the aid cuts, telling reporters that the reductions had "initiated a process of disintegration" in South Vietnam. Around the same time, the *Times of Viet Nam* criticized Kennedy explicitly for the first time, accusing

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him of acquiescing in a State Department–led campaign to undermine the RVN government.¹²⁰ As the Ngo brothers' subsequent actions would demonstrate, they had not given up hope that Lodge and Kennedy would eventually see reason and reconcile with the regime. Still, it was clear that the Ngos were angry about the Kennedy administration's actions.

At the same time Nhu was sparring with Lodge, he and Diem also engaged in a new series of maneuvers involving the generals. These maneuvers centered on Ton That Dinh, the III Corps commander who had surprised the coup plotters with his abject display of loyalty to the regime after the pagoda raids. Realizing that Nhu had blocked their initial attempts to recruit Dinh, General Don and his fellow conspirators decided to take a different tack. They invited Nhu to chair the daily meetings of all of the senior ARVN commanders in the Saigon area, ostensibly so he could be kept up to date on the army's enforcement of martial law. In reality, they hoped to learn more about his plans while also looking for a way to sway Dinh to their side.¹²¹

In early September, Nhu appeared to tip his hand when he encouraged the generals to ask Diem for a role in the government. The proposal was obviously another of Nhu's stratagems; however, Don sensed an opportunity, so he decided to take the bait. On September 5, he and Dinh petitioned Diem to appoint several generals to cabinet posts. As Don anticipated, Diem rejected the proposal; he also angrily denounced Don and Dinh as "men of ambition." After Diem dismissed them, Don played on Dinh's wounded pride. By his refusal to accept their good-faith offer, Don declared, Diem had left the generals with no choice but to overthrow him. Dinh appeared to agree. But the pressure the young general was under was becoming more than he could bear. A few days later, Dinh abruptly departed Saigon for an unscheduled "rest" in the mountain resort of Dalat.¹²²

Don pleaded vainly with Dinh to come back to the capital. Worried that the Ngos might remove Dinh from his command, Don went to the palace to explain that Dinh was merely suffering from a mild case of nerves and would return to duty shortly. To Don's relief, the brothers laughed and assigned another general to assume Dinh's responsibilities temporarily. In late September, Dinh returned to Saigon. Determined to draw Dinh into the plot, Don drafted a second set of reform proposals even more extensive than his initial petition to Diem. Among other things, he asked Diem to appoint Dinh as interior minister. When the president rejected these proposals, Don told Dinh that Diem's decision was

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proof that he did not respect Dinh's abilities. Dinh now appeared thoroughly disillusioned with the regime; even so, the coup plotters did not take any chances. Throughout October, they kept Dinh under continual surveillance. If they suspected that Dinh was going to betray them, they planned to kill him and have his deputy take his place.¹²³

Diem and Nhu were probably aware of these attempts to turn Dinh against them, but they remained confident that they had the emotional officer under control. Among other things, Nhu made Dinh the head of an elaborate secret operation reportedly designed to defeat the plotters through deception. According to accounts pieced together later by journalists, this operation would begin with a false coup, code-named Bravo I. To give this ersatz uprising the appearance of success, Diem and Nhu would flee the city, thus encouraging all of the real coup plotters and their supporters to reveal themselves. At that point, loyal forces under Dinh's command would stage a counter coup, dubbed Bravo II, and defeat the real conspirators.¹²⁴

That Nhu could have devised such a byzantine scheme is certainly plausible, given his taste for intrigue. However, his actual plan for defeating the plotters may have been simpler. According to Tran Van Don, Nhu himself broached the possibility of a pseudo-coup during a meeting with the generals in early October.¹²⁵ General Dinh later confirmed this and insisted that Nhu never intended to carry out a fake coup.¹²⁶ The Bravo I/Bravo II scheme may have been concocted by Nhu as disinformation, for the purpose of discouraging any wavering commanders and units from joining the real coup once it was under way. Whatever Nhu's true intentions were, one thing is certain: he was counting on General Dinh's continued fealty. Once the uprising began, the Ngos expected that Dinh and the forces he commanded would tip the balance back in their favor.

By late October, the coup plans were in place. On October 23, Conein met with Don, who had become alarmed the previous evening when General Harkins had warned him that a colonel on Don's staff was planning a coup. (Lodge had not informed Harkins that the generals' coup was back on.) Conein reassured Don that Harkins had spoken "inadvertently" and that the United States would not thwart any coup that promised a more effective government and war effort. In subsequent meetings with Conein over the next few days, Don first promised but then declined

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to reveal the plotters' blueprint for a postcoup government. He also refused to give any operational details about the coup, though he stated it would take place sometime before November 2. He also indicated that the plotters had decided "that the entire Ngo family had to be eliminated from the political scene in South Vietnam." Promising to give Conein four hours advance warning, Don advised him to remain at home beginning on October 30 so that the generals could reach him.¹²⁷

Although Diem and Nhu apparently never learned the details of the generals' plot, they were aware that a coup attempt was imminent. On October 30, Rufus Phillips arrived at Gia Long Palace for what would turn out to be his last meeting with Diem. The president had summoned Phillips after receiving a message from him in which Phillips complained about the conspiracy accusations published by the *Times of Viet Nam*. Diem, who seemed remarkably serene and philosophical during the meeting, apologized to Phillips and said he had not known of the article before it appeared. Toward the end of the conversation, Diem pulled thoughtfully on his cigarette, looked straight at Phillips, and asked "Do you think there will be a coup?" Phillips had not been involved with the embassy's contacts with the coup plotters since August. But he knew better than most the depth of the generals' dissatisfaction with the regime. And like everyone else in Saigon, he was aware that the city was awash in rumors of rebellion. "I am afraid so, Mr. President," Phillips answered.¹²⁸

In retrospect, the most revealing moves the Ngo brothers made during late October were those pertaining to the United States. In response to an invitation from the palace, Lodge and his wife joined Diem on Sunday, October 27, for an overnight visit to Dalat. While the official purpose of the trip was to mark the opening of South Vietnam's new atomic research center, Diem's real objective was to connect with the ambassador. Much of the trip was by helicopter, and Diem took the opportunity to point out various rural development projects along the route. Lodge was impressed with the aerial tour; he was less pleased about his after-dinner conversation with Diem, which covered the recent U.S. aid cuts, the government's repression of the Buddhists, and Diem's complaints about CIA intrigues. As Lodge's memorandum of the discussion demonstrates, the two men spent the evening talking past each other. Lodge asked repeatedly for a gesture that would "favorably impress U.S. opinion." But Diem wanted

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only to discuss possible changes to U.S. policies. Lodge was puzzled that Diem replied several times to his entreaties by saying "I am not going to be used" and concluded that he had misspoken. In fact, Diem was expressing his long-standing conviction that his critics were driven by neo-colonial motives.¹²⁹ For Lodge, the trip showed that Diem was "simply unbelievably stubborn" and "cut off from the present." Diem, in contrast, returned to Saigon in a buoyant mood. He happily told his secretary that relations with Washington were finally on the mend.¹³⁰

Diem's belief that he was on the verge of a breakthrough with Lodge continued almost to the very end of his dealings with the ambassador. During the morning of Friday, November 1, Lodge and Diem met again at Gia Long Palace, in conjunction with an official visit by the head of the U.S. military's Pacific Command. Diem used the occasion to repeat the complaints he had made in Dalat about the U.S. aid cuts and CIA plotting against his government. But in a brief private discussion with Lodge afterward, Diem became more earnest and conciliatory. He offered to provide the embassy with a list of the Americans he believed were plotting against the government; he also hinted that he would meet a key U.S. demand by gradually reopening the universities in Saigon that had been closed since the crackdown on the pagodas. Knowing that Lodge was scheduled to go to Washington for consultations, Diem implored him to speak to Colby and Nolting. Both men, Diem insisted, could testify about Nhu's good-faith efforts to respond to the unfair criticisms against him. According to Lodge, Diem concluded with a personal appeal to Kennedy:

Please tell President Kennedy that I am a good and a frank ally, that I would rather be frank and settle questions now than talk about them after we have lost everything. . . . Tell President Kennedy that I take all his suggestions very seriously and wish to carry them out[,] but it is a question of timing.

In contrast to his reaction to Diem at Dalat, Lodge took these remarks as a hopeful sign. "If the U.S. wants to make a package deal," he cabled to Washington, "I would think we were in position to do it."¹³¹

Authors sympathetic to Diem have portrayed his final meeting with Lodge as proof of his flexibility and therefore as a missed opportunity for compromise.¹³² In contrast, Diem's critics have dismissed his remarks as a ploy to deceive Lodge about his real intentions.¹³³ But Diem's words were

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neither of these; rather, they were part of the larger design he and Nhu had been pursuing since launching the crackdown on the Buddhists more than two months earlier. As they stood on the threshold of yet another showdown with their rivals, the Ngo brothers did not doubt for a moment what the outcome would be. They would defeat the generals, just as they had outwitted General Hinh in 1954, the Binh Xuyen in 1955, and the paratroopers in 1960. They were certain that the Buddhists no longer posed a threat to their government and that their archrivals in Hanoi would soon be forced to sue for peace. At such a moment, Diem saw no need for either compromise or deception. When Lodge, Kennedy, and other senior U.S. leaders realized that the regime was on its way to yet another triumph, Diem believed, they would come to accept the wisdom and necessity of what he had done. Americans could be stubborn and hardheaded, and some of them were untrustworthy and duplicitous, but there were invariably some who could see reason. The Americans would come around in the end, just as they always had.

A few minutes before noon on November 1, shortly after Diem's meeting with Lodge ended, Ngo Dinh Nhu received a phone call. ARVN Brigadier General Van Thanh Cao had just been summoned to a lunch for all high-level army officers in Saigon. The event, hosted by General Don, was to take place at the headquarters of the ARVN JGS, at the Saigon airport. Cao found the last-minute scheduling of the lunch suspicious, and had called Nhu to warn him. Nhu told Cao not to worry; he had the situation well in hand.¹³⁴ Within hours, Nhu would discover that his estimate of the situation was badly mistaken. But at the moment Cao called, Nhu was as confident as ever in his ability to stay one step ahead of the plotting generals, and in his plan to snuff out the rebellion he knew was about to begin. For the Ngo brothers, victory had never seemed so close at hand.

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Less than an hour after General Cao's phone call to Nhu, the palace received confirmation that the long-anticipated coup was underway. Shortly before one o'clock in the afternoon, Saigon Deputy Mayor Nguyen Huu Phuoc was telephoned by a colleague who worked for the RVN National Police. The police headquarters building had been surrounded by soldiers; there was no doubt that the uprising had begun. Phuoc, an ARVN officer who had been devoted to Diem since first meeting him in 1954, ran to his office at Saigon's City Hall, just two blocks from Gia Long Palace. For the next few hours, Phuoc called his contacts around the city, collecting information about the coup, which he then passed on to the palace. It quickly became clear that the situation was not unfolding as the Ngos expected. Around two o'clock, Phuoc received a call from Nhu. "Dinh has betrayed us!" Nhu exclaimed, his voice full of anger and contempt.¹

The generals' coup of November 1–2, 1963, like the paratroopers' attempted coup almost exactly three years earlier, was a very near thing. As late as the morning of November 1, the Ngos still could have prevented the rebellion from taking place. A few hours before the uprising began, Diem ordered an ARVN ranger battalion to move into Saigon and take up defensive positions around the palace and the nearby post office. The coup leaders, who had not anticipated such a move, were forced to negotiate with the battalion's commander to persuade him to withdraw. If the brothers had summoned

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larger numbers of loyal troops from the Mekong Delta or elsewhere before the coup started, the generals almost certainly would have been forced to put their plans on hold. But Diem and Nhu opted to let the coup go ahead, confident that General Dinh would crush the rebellion.²

Unfortunately for the Ngos, the generals had learned the lessons of the 1960 coup better than they had. The paratroopers' uprising, in the end, had been little more than a mutiny. The 1963 coup, in contrast, quickly gained broad support throughout the ARVN officer corps. In addition to gaining Dinh's cooperation, the plotters had also secured last-minute pledges of support from General Do Cao Tri and General Nguyen Khanh, the I Corps and II Corps commanders. This meant that General Huynh Van Cao of IV Corps was the only corps commander still loyal to Diem when the rebellion began. Cao's efforts to mount a rescue mission were stymied by one of Dinh's deputies, who used forged orders to take command of the ARVN division that controlled the strategic ferry crossing over the Mekong River at My Tho. Unable to get his troops across the river, Cao capitulated.³

In Saigon, the palace had been counting on assistance from Colonel Le Quang Tung, the Ngo family stalwart who commanded the ARVN's Special Forces. However, General Dinh had persuaded Diem to send several of Tung's battalions out of Saigon prior to the coup. As a result, rebel troops quickly overran Tung's headquarters and captured him during the first hours of the uprising. Tung, who was loathed by ARVN officers for his craven loyalty to Nhu, was taken to the coup leaders' command post at the ARVN JGS compound. That evening, he was executed by General Minh's bodyguard, and his body was buried on the grounds of the compound.⁴

Diem and Nhu's last line of defense was the ultraloyal Presidential Guard, a force of several hundred men deployed around Gia Long Palace and the nearby Cong Hoa barracks. It quickly became clear that the Guard was heavily outnumbered by the larger numbers of troops and tanks the generals had deployed into the city from the surrounding provinces. Among the forces now pouring into the city were several units and commanders who had helped to rescue Diem in 1960 but who had now joined the attempts to overthrow him.⁵

When the coup began, Diem and Nhu retreated to the newly built bunker under the Gia Long Palace courtyard. The secure communication system Diem had installed was working exactly as planned—except that no one was responding to the palace's calls for assistance. Diem's aide-de-camp,

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The Gia Long Palace bunker that Ngo Dinh Diem and Ngo Dinh Nhu used when the ARVN generals' coup of November 1, 1963, began, as seen in 2008. (Photo by author)

an ARVN captain named Do Tho, later recalled that Diem calmly smoked and drank tea as the afternoon's events unfolded. Nhu, in contrast, seemed increasingly agitated.⁶ Around four o'clock, Diem spoke by phone with General Don at JGS headquarters. Diem professed a willingness to negotiate and invited the coup leaders to come to the palace. Don, recognizing this as an attempt to replay the delaying tactics Diem had used in 1960, told Diem that he had to surrender and resign. If he did not, the palace would come under attack. About forty-five minutes later, Don and several other generals called back to warn the Ngos that they would bomb the palace if the brothers did not give themselves up immediately. When Minh called again to repeat the warning, Diem hung up on him, infuriating Minh and prompting him to order an air strike on the palace. Unfortunately for the generals, however, the troops responsible for subduing the Presidential Guard units at the Cong Hoa barracks were meeting stiffer

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resistance than expected. The assault on the palace was put on hold until the barracks could be secured.⁷

In between his conversations with the generals, Diem reached Lodge at the U.S. embassy. When Lodge came on the line, Diem immediately demanded to know the U.S. attitude toward the coup. The ambassador, with characteristic prevarication, claimed to be “not acquainted with all the facts.” He also lamely asserted that “the U.S. government cannot possibly have a view” since it was currently 4:30 in the morning in Washington. Diem, perhaps sensing that Lodge was dissembling, was insistent:

Diem: . . . you must have some general ideas. After all, I am a Chief of State. I have tried to do my duty. I want to do now what duty and good sense require. I believe in duty above all.

Lodge: You have certainly done your duty. As I told you only this morning, I admire your courage and your great contributions to your country. No one can take away from you the credit for all you have done. Now I am worried about your physical safety. I have a report that those in charge of the current activity offer you and your brother safe conduct out of the country if you resign. Had you heard this?

Diem: No. (pause) You have my telephone number.

Lodge: Yes. If I can do anything for your physical safety, please call me.

Diem: I am trying to reestablish order.⁸

While there is no record of what Diem said to Nhu or anyone else about this conversation after it ended, his choice of words during the exchange with Lodge still spoke volumes. In his meeting with Lodge that morning, Diem had held out the possibility of a fresh start in U.S.-South Vietnam relations, even as he refused to give ground on Washington's demands. Now, with his government hanging in the balance, he realized that Lodge—and by implication the Kennedy administration—had rejected his appeals for reconciliation. Indeed, Lodge was urging him to give up power and flee the country. Confronted with this unpleasant truth, his mind perhaps reeling, Diem's response was both pithy and revealing: *I am trying to reestablish order*. For Ngo Dinh Diem, the reestablishment of order remained what it had always been: the first principle of governance, and an essential

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condition for the realization of his personal and national missions. He had never wavered on this point before, and he could see no reason why he should start now.

Around eight o'clock that evening, Diem and Nhu slipped out of Gia Long Palace. Contrary to later reports, they did not escape via an underground tunnel. They simply exited through a side door and climbed into a waiting car. To minimize the chances of detection, the driver eschewed the presidential limousine in favor of a Citroën "Deux Chevaux," a four-seater economy car that was a common sight on the streets of Saigon. At the advice of Captain Tho, Diem donned a pair of mirrored Rayban sunglasses. With a jeep of bodyguards following behind, the car threaded its way across the city to the Chinese district of Cho Lon. The convoy stopped first at a government-run youth activity center, where they were met by Nguyen Huu Phuoc, the Saigon deputy mayor who had spoken to Nhu earlier by phone, as well as a small detail of officers from Nhu's Republican Youth movement. The entourage then proceeded to the home of Ma Tuyen, a Chinese businessman and longtime ally of the regime.⁹

On arriving at Ma Tuyen's house, Diem indicated that he, Nhu, and Captain Tho would continue on alone, and that the other men should disperse. As Phuoc prepared to leave, Nhu pulled him aside. "Can you take the president and me to the highlands?" he asked. Phuoc answered without hesitation that he could. Nhu turned to Diem and proposed that they leave the city. Diem became angry. "If you want to go you can go. I'm not going anywhere. I'm going to the JGS headquarters to talk to the generals. Presidents don't run away." Nhu was chagrined, but seemed to acquiesce.¹⁰

At the palace, the Presidential Guard was continuing to resist the rebels. By midnight, the coup forces had seized the Cong Hoa barracks and were preparing for an all-out assault on the palace, believing that Diem and Nhu were still inside. The defenders held out until dawn before surrendering. Shortly before six o'clock in the morning, Dinh called Don to report that the palace had fallen but Diem and Nhu were nowhere to be found. Not long afterward, the JGS received a call from Do Tho. The brothers were in Cholon and were prepared to surrender. At first, Diem insisted that he and Nhu be granted formal military honors, but when the generals balked, he decided to settle for a promise of safe passage into foreign exile. At 6:45, Diem called back and revealed his current location:

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Cha Tam Catholic church in Cho Lon. Minh immediately dispatched a convoy including two M-113 armored personnel carriers to pick the brothers up and escort them back to JGS headquarters.¹¹

According to Captain Tho, when the convoy arrived at the church, an ARVN colonel got out of a jeep and approached the brothers, accompanied by a major and a captain. The colonel said something to Diem and Nhu and then indicated that they were to go with the other officers. When the major and the captain told the brothers to climb into one of the armored personnel carriers, Nhu became angry at what he took to be a sign of disrespect. "This is the president, I am the president's advisor. You send this vehicle to pick up the president?" One of the officers answered, "We've been given orders to conduct an escort. Right now, there is no president." Nhu was furious, but Diem calmed him down and persuaded him to get into the vehicle. The major returned to the jeep at the front of the convoy. The captain—Nguyen Van Nhung, an aide to General Minh—climbed up on top of the armored vehicle and dropped down into the chamber through the hatch on top. When the convoy began to move, Diem and Nhu tried to stand up inside the vehicle. Captain Nhung and his men tied the brothers' hands behind their backs to force them to stay seated.¹²

From its formation to its dissolution, the alliance between Ngo Dinh Diem and the United States was defined by the politics of nation building. The alliance was shaped in particular by contests over development—that is, by the interactions and clashes among a variety of American and Vietnamese visions of South Vietnam's postcolonial destiny. As the Vietnam War escalated in the years after 1963, many Americans began to refer to nation building and counterinsurgency programs in South Vietnam as the "other war," a misleading designation that seemed to suggest that development was auxiliary to the main business of war-fighting. Americans also came to see nation building in South Vietnam as an exclusively American enterprise, something the United States tried (and ultimately failed) to impose on indifferent RVN leaders and a resistant South Vietnamese population. Against these representations, I have argued here that nation building in South Vietnam during 1954–1963 was a field of competition and contestation in which both Americans and Vietnamese advanced diverse ideas and agendas. I have also demonstrated how conflicts over development and nation building played a central role in the origins and early history of the Vietnam War.

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The most obvious way the politics of nation building shaped the history of the U.S.-Diem alliance was in the collisions between Diem's vision of South Vietnam's transformation and the development ideas promoted by his U.S. advisors. In the mid-1950s, American development experts including Wesley Fishel, Wolf Ladejinsky, and Edward Lansdale were hopeful that Diem would endorse their prescriptions for administrative reform, rural reconstruction, and counterinsurgency. They were encouraged in this belief by Diem himself, who, despite his concern about creeping American neocolonialism, accepted U.S. aid and advice as a necessary risk. It soon became clear, however, that the conceptual and cultural divide between the two sides was wider than it had first appeared. The problems did not derive merely from the Ngo brothers' abstruse and confusing pronouncements about the merits of the personalist revolution. They were also rooted in specific, practical disagreements between the Ngos and the Americans over the meaning of key concepts such as democracy, community, security, and social change. Such disagreements did not mean that every U.S.-RVN nation-building initiative was bound to fail, or that the alliance was doomed from the beginning. The two sides' respective visions of development were not so dissimilar as to make collaboration impossible. Nevertheless, the differences between them were real and substantial and were a key cause of the strains that were evident even in the alliance's earliest days.

The politics of nation building were also apparent in the contests among Americans over the means and ends of nation building in South Vietnam. Even before Diem came to power in 1954, Americans in Vietnam frequently disagreed with one another and with their counterparts in Washington over how best to pursue U.S. objectives in Indochina. These internal American debates have often been explained by reference to bureaucratic rivalries or the personal ambitions of particular U.S. officials. Such motives were often evident in the interactions among U.S. diplomats, soldiers, intelligence officers, and aid experts. Nevertheless, these interactions also reflected conceptual differences over the meaning and nature of development. American thinking about development and modernization during the 1950s and early 1960s was not merely a function of Cold War geostrategic imperatives, nor was it the expression of a single intellectual trend or ideological impulse. While some Americans embraced the gleaming high modernist vision presented in Rostow's *Stages of Economic Growth*, others preferred the low modernist "village approach" extolled in *The*

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Ugly American. Many more, perhaps, were somewhere in between these two ideological poles. The diversity of views could be seen, for example, in the range of American responses to the Ngos' Strategic Hamlet Program—an undertaking that could be imagined by reference to many different development discourses, theories, and models.

Last but not least, the politics of nation building in South Vietnam was defined by the interactions and rivalries among Vietnamese leaders and groups. Nationalism in twentieth-century Vietnam was nothing if not a contested and fragmented phenomenon. The sheer diversity of ways of imagining Vietnam's postcolonial destiny was apparent as early as the 1920s and has been a defining quality of Vietnamese political life ever since. In light of this, the fate of Diem's government and its nation-building endeavors did not hinge merely on his ability to articulate a coherent and credible alternative to the vision of revolutionary development espoused by his communist rivals in North Vietnam. Diem's destiny also turned on his willingness to grapple with the range of nationalist imaginings within South Vietnam—especially those espoused by other noncommunist leaders and groups. Diem's shortcomings in this regard were the most glaring and most consequential of all his weaknesses.

In the end, the alliance between the United States and Ngo Dinh Diem was unmade in the same place and manner in which it was created: within the crucible of South Vietnam's revolutionary politics. The nation-building designs pursued by both the U.S. and RVN governments during these years were grand and often grandiose, as the projects conceived by political leaders and development experts tend to be. Yet these designs did not founder simply because of the sweep and scale of their designers' ambition. They were also undermined by numerous and repeated U.S. and RVN failures to accommodate the diverse revolutionary aspirations that existed within South Vietnam and that resisted subordination to a single ideological formulation. In various ways, this pattern of failure endured in South Vietnam throughout the massive U.S. military intervention of the late 1960s, down to the last days of the Republic in the 1970s. The pattern also persisted in transposed form in the reunified Vietnam that the Vietnamese Communist Party ruled after 1975. In addition, memories of these failures linger on in the United States, albeit in different cultural, political, and social forms. Vietnamese and Americans are still engaged in the politics of nation building. They will be for a long time to come.

ABBREVIATIONS

PUBLISHED COLLECTIONS OF GOVERNMENT DOCUMENTS

NOTES

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

ABBREVIATIONS

ARVN	Army of the Republic of Vietnam
BCCGT, TTLTQG ₂	Files of the Ministry of Public Works and Postal Services (Bộ Công Chính Giao Thông và Bưu Điện), Vietnam National Archives No. 2
CAOM	Centre des archives d'outre-mer, Aix-en-Provence, France
CBVNCH	Công Báo Việt Nam Cộng Hòa
CĐCN	<i>Con Đường Chính Nghĩa</i>
CF, 1950–1954	<i>Confidential U.S. State Department Central Files: Indochina Internal Affairs, 1950–1954</i>
CF, 1955–1959	<i>Confidential U.S. State Department Central Files: Indochina Internal Affairs and Foreign Affairs, 1955–1959</i>
CMQG	<i>Cách Mạng Quốc Gia</i> (Saigon newspaper)
DDRS	Declassified Documents Reference System, Primary Source Media, online edition
DH	<i>Diplomatic History</i>
DRV	Democratic Republic of Vietnam
ELP, HIA	Edward Geary Lansdale Papers, Hoover Institution Archives
FRUS	U.S. Department of State, <i>Foreign Relations of the United States</i>
FP, MSUA	Wesley R. Fishel Papers, Michigan State University Archives

ABBREVIATIONS

GSL	General Sciences Library, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam
ICC	International Control Commission for Indochina
ICP	Indochinese Communist Party
IMCSH	Interministerial Committee on Strategic Hamlets (Ủy Ban Liên-Bộ đặc trách về Ấp Chiến Lược)
JAH	<i>Journal of American History</i>
JAS	<i>Journal of Asian Studies</i>
JCWS	<i>Journal of Cold War Studies</i>
JFKL	John F. Kennedy Presidential Library, Boston, Massachusetts
JGS	Joint General Staff
JSEAS	<i>Journal of Southeast Asian Studies</i>
JVS	<i>Journal of Vietnamese Studies</i>
LBJL	Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library, Austin, Texas
LOC	Library of Congress, Washington, DC
MAAG	Military Advisory Assistance Group
MAC-V	Military Assistance Command, Vietnam
MAE	Archives of the Ministère des Affaires étrangères, Paris, France
MAS	<i>Modern Asian Studies</i>
MSUG	Michigan State University Group
MSUVAG, MSUA	Michigan State University Vietnam Advisory Group Collection, Michigan State University Archives
NARA	National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland
NSC	National Security Council
NSF, JFKL	National Security Files, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library
NYT	<i>New York Times</i>
PA	<i>Pacific Affairs</i>
PAVN	People's Army of Vietnam
PP (DOD ed.)	<i>The Pentagon Papers: The Defense Department History of United States Decisionmaking on Vietnam</i>
PP (Gravel ed.)	<i>The Pentagon Papers</i> , Senator Gravel ed.
PP (NYT ed.)	<i>The Pentagon Papers as Published by the New York Times</i>
PTT, TTLTQG2	Files of the Office of the Prime Minister (Phủ Thủ Tướng), Vietnam National Archives No. 2
PTTĐN, TTLTQG2	Files of the Office of the President, First Republic (Phủ Tổng Thống Đệ Nhất), Vietnam National Archives No. 2
RVN	Republic of Vietnam

ABBREVIATIONS

SDECE	Service de Documentation Extérieure et de Contre-Espionnage
SEPES	Service Études de Politiques et Sociales
SF: SEA	<i>Confidential U.S. State Department Special Files: South- east Asia</i>
SHAT	Société Historique de L'Armée de la Terre, Vincennes, France
SPCE	Collection of the Service de Protection du Corps Expédi- tionnaire, Centre des archives d'outre-mer
SVN	State of Vietnam
TOVN	<i>Times of Viet Nam</i>
TTLTGQ ₂	Vietnam National Archives No. 2 (Trung Tâm Lưu Trữ Quốc Gia Số 2), Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
USOM	United States Operations Mission
VLC, MAE	Viêtnam-Lao-Cambodge Series, Archives of the Ministère des Affaires étrangères
VNA	Vietnam National Army
VP	<i>Vietnam Presse</i>
VVA, TTU	Vietnam Virtual Archive, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, Texas
VWP	Vietnam Workers' Party
WLP	<i>The Wolf Ladejinsky Papers</i> , microform (Ottawa: Interna- tional Development Research Centre, 1976)
WP	<i>Washington Post</i>

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- Con Đường Chính nghĩa: Độc lập dân chủ: Hiệu triệu và diễn văn quan trọng của Tổng Thống Ngô Đình Diệm.* 8 vols. Saigon: Bureau of Press Information, Office of the Presidency, 1956–1963.
- Công Báo Việt Nam Cộng Hòa.* Saigon: Nha Tổng thu-ký, Phủ tổng-thống, 1955–1963.
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NOTES

Introduction

1. Denis Warner, *The Last Confucian: Vietnam, Southeast Asia, and the West* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1964), 90; Joseph Buttinger, *Vietnam: A Dragon Embattled*, vol. 2 (New York: Praeger, 1967), 850–851; Georges Chaffard, *Indochine: Dix Ans D'Indépendance* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1964), 32–34; and Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History*, 2nd rev. ed. (New York: Penguin Books, 1997), 234.
2. Edward Lansdale, *In the Midst of Wars: An American's Mission to Southeast Asia* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), 154–157.
3. Edward Lansdale, quoted in Michael Charlton and Anthony Moncrieff, *Many Reasons Why: The American Involvement in Vietnam* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978), 55.
4. Lansdale's story about Diem's speeding limousine first appeared in Robert Shaplen, *The Lost Revolution: The Story of Twenty Years of Neglected Opportunities in Vietnam and of America's Failure to Foster Democracy There* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), 103. For other accounts, see Philippe Devillers and Jean Lacouture, *End of a War: Indochina 1954* (New York: Praeger, 1969), 333 n. 4; Cecil Currey, *Edward Lansdale: The Unquiet American* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1988), 152; Ellen Hammer, *A Death in November: America in Vietnam, 1963* (New York: Dutton, 1963), 56; Zalin Grant, *Facing the Phoenix* (New York: Norton, 1991), 101; David L. Anderson, *Trapped by Success: The Eisenhower Administration and Vietnam, 1953–1961* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 57.

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5. Tạ Chương Phùng to SVN Prime Minister, 23 Jun 1954; and Tạ Chương Phùng to SVN Prime Minister, 24 Jun 1954; both in folder 3914, PTT, TTLTCQ2. For Nhu's activities in the weeks leading up to Diem's return, see Debord, "Mouvement NGO DINH DIEM," 16 Jun 1954, SPCE 23, CAOM.
6. Ngô Đình Diệm, "Hiệu-triệu quốc-dân khi về tới Saigon, ngày 25-6-1954," in CĐCN, 1:16.
7. Gelot, "Réception du Président NGO DINH DIEM," 26 Jun 1954, SPCE 23, CAOM; Debord, "Accueil réservé à M. Le Président NGO DINH DIEM," 26 Jun 1954, SPCE 23, CAOM; Director General of the National Police to the Office of the Delegate for the Southern Region, 25 Jun 1954, folder 3914, PTT, TTLTCQ2; *Saigon Mới*, 28 Jun 1954; Chaffard, *Indochine*, 33-34.
8. In this book, I follow convention in using "South Vietnam" to refer both to the Republic of Vietnam, which was the Saigon-based state that Diem founded in 1955, and to the portions of Vietnam's territory lying below the 17th parallel, which the RVN sought to administer and control during the Vietnam War era. "North Vietnam" will refer to the communist-controlled Democratic Republic of Vietnam and to Vietnamese territory above the 17th parallel. The terms "southern Vietnam," "central Vietnam," and "northern Vietnam" will refer to the regions known during the colonial era as Cochinchina, Annam, and Tonkin and since 1954 as Nam Ky, Trung Ky, and Bac Ky.
9. The most concise and eloquent statement of the "containment thesis" is still George Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975*, 4th ed. (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2003); see pp. 53-87 for the formation of the U.S.-Diem alliance. For other accounts in which geostrategic motives and the imperatives of the "domino theory" have primacy of place, see George Kahin, *Intervention: How America Became Involved in Vietnam* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1987); and Ronald H. Spector, *Advice and Support: The Early Years, 1941-1960* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, 1983). For accounts that leaven the imperatives of containment with other explanatory factors, see Robert Schulzinger, *A Time for War: The United States and Vietnam, 1941-1975* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); and Anderson, *Trapped by Success*. For historians who believe that the "domino theory" was valid and U.S. intervention in Vietnam was strategically justified, see Michael Lind, *Vietnam, the Necessary War: A Reinterpretation of America's Most Disastrous Military Conflict* (New York: Free Press, 1999); and especially Mark Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954-1965* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).
10. Andrew Rotter, *The Path to Vietnam: The Origins of the American Commitment to Southeast Asia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989); Lloyd C. Gardner, *Approaching Vietnam: From World War II through Dienbienphu* (New York: Norton, 1988). Other important works in this vein include Marilyn

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- Young, *The Vietnam Wars* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991); and Gabriel Kolko, *Anatomy of a War: Vietnam, the United States and Modern Historical Experience* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985).
11. Seth Jacobs, *America's Miracle Man in Vietnam: Ngo Dinh Diem, Religion, Race and U.S. Intervention in Southeast Asia, 1950-1957* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004); James T. Fisher, *Dr. America: The Lives of Thomas A. Dooley, 1927-1961* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997). See also Loren Baritz, *Backfire: Vietnam—The Myths That Made Us Fight, the Illusions That Helped Us Lose, the Legacy That Haunts Us Today* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1985).
 12. Fredrik Logevall, *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999). Other works stressing the contingency of early U.S. decisions on Vietnam include Mark Atwood Lawrence, *Assuming the Burden: Europe and the American Commitment to War in Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); and Kathryn Statler, *Replacing France: The Origins of American Intervention in Vietnam* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2007).
 13. Key works about China's involvement in the war include Odd Arne Westad, ed., *77 Conversations between Chinese and Foreign Leaders on the Indochina War, 1964-1977* (Washington, DC: Cold War International History Project, 1998); Chen Jian, "China's Involvement in the Vietnam War, 1964-1969," *China Quarterly* 142 (June 1995): 357-387; Qiang Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars, 1950-1975* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Ang Cheng Guan, *Vietnamese Communist Relations with China and the Second Indochina Conflict, 1956-1962* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1997). On Russia's role, see Ilya Gaiduk, *Confronting Vietnam: Soviet Policy toward the Indochina Conflict, 1954-1963* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003). For works that examine French and British involvement in Indochina, see Logevall, *Choosing War*; Lawrence, *Assuming the Burden*; Peter Busch, *All the Way with JFK? Britain, the US, and the Vietnam War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); and Statler, *Replacing France*.
 14. Lawrence, *Assuming the Burden*, 5.
 15. David Elliott, *The Vietnamese War: Revolution and Social Change in the Mekong Delta, 1930-1975* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2003); Kim Ngoc Bao Ninh, *A World Transformed: The Politics of Culture in Revolutionary Vietnam, 1945-1965* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002); Christopher E. Goscha, *Thailand and the Southeast Asian Networks of the Vietnamese Revolution, 1885-1954* (London: Curzon Press, 1999); Goscha, "The Maritime Nature of the Wars for Vietnam (1945-75): A Geo-Historical Reflection," *War and Society* 24, no. 2 (November 2005): 53-92; Sophie Quinn-Judge, "The Ideological Debate in the DRV and the Significance of the Anti-Party Affair,

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- 1967–68,” *Cold War History* 5, no. 4 (2005): 479–500; Balazs Szalontai, “Political and Economic Crisis in North Vietnam, 1955–1956,” *Cold War History* 5, no. 4 (2005): 395–426; Liên-Hằng T. Nguyễn, “The War Politburo: North Vietnam’s Diplomatic and Political Road to the Tết Offensive,” *JVS* 1, nos. 1–2 (2006): 4–58; Robert K. Brigham, *Guerrilla Diplomacy: The NLF’s Foreign Relations and the Viet Nam War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998); Pierre Asselin, *A Bitter Peace: Washington, Hanoi and the Making of the Paris Agreement* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina University Press, 2002).
16. Philip Catton, *Diem’s Final Failure: Prelude to America’s War in Vietnam* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2002); Jessica Chapman, “Staging Democracy: South Vietnam’s 1955 Referendum to Depose Bao Dai,” *DH* 30, no. 4 (September 2006): 671–703; Matthew Masur, “Exhibiting Signs of Resistance: South Vietnam’s Struggle for Legitimacy, 1954–1960,” *DH* 33, no. 2 (March 2009): 293–313; Geoffrey Stewart, “Hearts, Minds and Công Dân Vụ,” *JVS* 6, no. 3 (Fall 2011): 44–100; Stan Tan, “‘Swiddens, Resettlements, Sedentarizations, and Villages’: State Formation among the Central Highlanders of Vietnam under the First Republic, 1955–1961,” *JVS* 1, nos. 1–2 (2006): 210–252; Jessica Chapman, “The Sect Crisis of 1955 and the American Commitment to Ngô Đình Diệm,” *JVS* 5, no. 1 (2010): 37–85.
 17. See, for example, James Carter, *Inventing Vietnam: The United States and State Building, 1954–1968* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).
 18. In Vietnam, the main collections I have drawn on are the RVN official records held at the Vietnam National Archives No. 2 in Ho Chi Minh City, as well as the rich trove of RVN-era newspapers, magazines, pamphlets, and other published sources held at the nearby General Sciences Library. See Edward Miller and Matthew Masur, “Saigon Revisited: Researching South Vietnam’s Republican Era (1954–1975) at Archives and Libraries in Ho Chi Minh City,” Cold War International History Project, October 2006, www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/Saigon-Masur_Miller.pdf.
 19. Robert McMahon, review of *Approaching Vietnam*, by Lloyd Gardner, *American Historical Review* 94 (December 1989): 1505–1506.
 20. Edward Miller and Tuong Vu, “The Vietnam War as a Vietnamese War: Agency and Society in the Study of the Second Indochina War,” *JVS* 4, no. 5 (Fall 2009): 1–16.
 21. Matthew Connelly, “Taking Off the Cold War Lens: Visions of North-South Conflict during the Algerian War for Independence,” *American Historical Review* 105, no. 3 (June 2000): 739–769. On the problem of the Cold War in interpretations of the Vietnam War, see Edward Miller, “War Stories: The Taylor-Buzzanco Debate and How We Think about the Vietnam War,” *JVS* 1, nos. 1–2 (November 2006): 453–484.

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22. In this book, the term *nation building* refers not only to state-building activities and processes but also to those activities and processes aimed at identity-building goals—what one author refers to as the “two faces” of nation building. Andrea Kathryn Talentino, “The Two Faces of Nation-Building: Developing Function and Identity,” *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 17, no. 3 (2004): 557–575. As many scholars have noted, these two aspects of nation building are often intertwined in practice, even in cases where one appears to grow out of the other; see Charles Tilly, “Reflections on the History of European State-Making,” in *Formation of National States in Europe* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975), ed. Tilly, 3–83. My approach contrasts with the view that nation building is merely a particular form of state building; see Francis Fukuyama, *State Building: Governance and World Order in the 21st Century* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), 99–104.
23. David Ekbladh, *The Great American Mission* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009); Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Nick Cullather, *The Hungry World: America’s Cold Battle against Poverty in Asia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).
24. Greg Brazinksy, *Nation Building in South Korea: Koreans, Americans and the Making of a Democracy* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007); Bradley R. Simpson, *Economists with Guns: Authoritarian Development and US-Indonesian Relations, 1960–1968* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008); Amanda Kay McVety, “Pursuing Progress: Point IV in Ethiopia,” *DH* 32, no. 3 (June 2008): 371–403.
25. Nick Cullather, “Development? Its History,” *DH* 24, no. 4 (2000): 641–653; Nils Gilman, *Mandarins of the Future: Modernization Theory and Cold War America* (Washington, DC: 2004); Ron Robin, *The Making of the Cold War Enemy: Culture and Politics in the Military-Industrial Complex* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001); David C. Engerman et al., *Staging Growth: Modernization, Development and the Global Cold War* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003); Michael Latham, *Modernization as Ideology: American Social Science and “Nation Building” in the Kennedy Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000). For a useful review of this and other recent scholarship on modernization in postwar American social science, see Joel Isaac, “The Human Sciences in Cold War America,” *Historical Journal* 50, no. 3 (2007): 725–746.
26. Michael Adas, *Dominance by Design: Technological Imperatives and America’s Civilizing Mission* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).
27. David Biggs, “Americans in An Giang: Nation Building and the Particularities of Place in the Mekong Delta, 1966–1973,” *JVS* 4, no. 3 (Fall 2009): 139–172.

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28. Bernard Fall, *The Two Viet-Nams: A Political and Military Analysis*, 2nd rev. ed. (New York: Praeger, 1968), 235.
29. Jacobs, *America's Miracle Man in Vietnam*, 26. For the "pulled his own strings" formula, see Karnow, *Vietnam*, 251; see also Harry Maurer, *Strange Ground: An Oral History of Americans in Vietnam, 1945-1975* (New York: Holt, 1989), 80.
30. Warner, *Last Confucian*; Fall, *Two Viet-Nams*, 236; and Jean Lacouture, *Vietnam: Between Two Truces*, trans. Konrad Kellen and Joel Carmichael (New York: Random House, 1966), 19. Perhaps the most thoroughly Orientalized portrait of Diem was the one painted by the journalist Frances FitzGerald; see *Fire in the Lake: The Vietnamese and the Americans in Vietnam* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1972), 72-137, especially 130-134. For more recent arguments in this vein, see Herring, *America's Longest War*, 59; and Neil Jamieson, *Understanding Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 234-235. The classic text on Orientalism is Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978). For a helpful analysis of how the agency of Asians has been displaced onto the presumed "essences" of Asian culture, see Ronald Inden, *Imagining India* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 1-48.
31. Anthony Trawick Bouscaren, *The Last of the Mandarins: Diem of Vietnam* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1965); Frederick Nolting, *From Trust to Tragedy: The Political Memoirs of Frederick Nolting, Kennedy's Ambassador to Diem's Vietnam* (New York: Praeger, 1988), 29-30; William Colby, *Lost Victory: A Firsthand Account of America's Sixteen-Year Involvement in Vietnam* (Chicago: Contemporary Books, 1989), 71; Ellen Hammer, *A Death in November: America in Vietnam, 1963* (New York: Dutton, 1987), 81. For an account that celebrates Diem's embrace of Vietnam's "authoritarian culture" and insists that his harsh rule was adored by "power-minded villagers," see Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken*, xiv, 153.
32. Westad, *Global Cold War*, 79-86; Catton, *Diem's Final Failure*, 39.
33. Shaun Kingsley Malarney, "Culture, Virtue, and Political Transformation in Contemporary Northern Viet Nam," *JAS* 56, no. 4 (1997): 899-920; William Duiker, "Ho Chi Minh: Myth and Reality," in *Naissance d'un Etat-Parti: Le Viet-Nam depuis 1945*, ed. Christopher Goscha and Benoît de Treglode (Paris: Les Indes Savantes, 2004), 117-134.
34. Bui Diem, the former RVN ambassador to the United States, described South Vietnamese and Americans as "two peoples quite apart in terms of civilization, mentality, international status and geographic position"; see Stephen Hosmer et al., *The Fall of South Vietnam: Statements by Vietnamese Military and Civilian Leaders* (Santa Monica: RAND, 1978), 79. This idea is elaborated in George Herring, "'Peoples Quite Apart': Americans, South Vietnamese, and the War in Vietnam," *DH* 14, no. 1 (Winter 1990): 1-23.

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35. David Halberstam, *The Making of a Quagmire* (New York: Random House, 1965), 209.
36. Ngo Dinh Nhu, quoted in Catton, *Diem's Final Failure*, 25. For the most famous latter-day application of this phrase, see Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996).
37. David Kaiser, *American Tragedy: Kennedy, Johnson and the Origins of the Vietnam War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000).

1. *Man of Faith*

1. Diem and Nhu's bodies were originally buried in Saigon but were exhumed and moved to Lai Chieu in 1980; Phạm Cường, "Kể chuyện đời mộ ở Sài Gòn nhân Lễ Vu Lan," *VietNamNet Online Newspaper*, 18 Aug 2005, <http://vnn.vietnamnet.vn/psks/2005/08/480325/>, accessed September 22, 2012. On commemorations at Diem's gravesite during the 1970s, see Robert Shaplen, "The Cult of Diem," *NYT*, 14 May 1972.
2. For such claims, see Frances FitzGerald, *Fire in the Lake: The Vietnamese and the Americans in Vietnam* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1972), 136; Seth Jacobs, *Cold War Mandarin: Ngo Dinh Diem and the Origins of America's War in Vietnam, 1950-1963* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006), 188-189.
3. Bernard Fall, *The Two Viet-Nams: A Political and Military Analysis* (New York: Praeger, 1963), 236.
4. For the claim that Diem was actually born in 1897 rather than 1901, see Chính Đạo [Vu Ngu Chieu], *Cuộc Thánh Chiến Chống Cộng* (Houston: Văn Hoá, 2004), 12-17.
5. Anne Miller, "And One for the People: The Life Story of President Ngo Dinh Diem (Part 1)," unpublished manuscript drafted c. 1955, 46, folder 2, box 5, Pike Collection, VVA, TTU. Miller based this biography on conversations with Diem, his family members, and close aides. She was prevented from publishing it by the Ngo family, despite the fact that it was overwhelmingly laudatory; Fall, *Two Viet-Nams*, 479 n. 1.
6. "Thượng Thư Micae Ngô Đình Khả," in Lê Ngọc Bích, *Nhân Vật Công Giáo Việt Nam Thế Kỷ XVIII-XIX-XX* (Saigon: Lưu Hành Nội Bộ, 2006), 103-104; Trinh Van Thao, *L'École Française En Indochine* (Paris: Karthala, 1995), 31-32; and Gouvernement Général de L'Indochine, *L'Annam Scolaire: De l'enseignement traditionnel annamite à l'enseignement moderne franco-indigène* (Hanoi: Gouvernement général de l'Indochine française, 1931), 96-101.
7. David Marr, *Vietnamese Anticolonialism, 1885-1925* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 156-184; Vinh Sinh, introduction to Phan Châu Trinh, *Phan Châu Trinh and His Political Writings*, trans. Vinh Sinh (Ithaca, NY: SEAP, 2009), 1-55.

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8. Vu Dinh Huynh, “Uncle Ho Visits the Central Prison,” in George Boudarel and Nguyen Van Ky, *Hanoi: City of the Rising Dragon*, trans. Claire Duiker (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002), 90–91. Kha was reportedly briefly imprisoned for his protest; see Ngo Dinh Thuc, “Autobiographie de Mgr. Pierre Martin Ngo-Dinh-Thuc, Archeveque de Huê,” *Einsicht*, special issue (1982): 14–15.
9. Ngo Dinh Thuc, “Autobiographie,” 16.
10. Miller, “And One for the People,” 164–174.
11. James T. Fischer, “‘A World Made Safe for Diversity’: The Vietnam Lobby and the Politics of Pluralism, 1945–1963,” in *Cold War Constructions: The Political Culture of United States Imperialism*, Christian G. Appy, ed. (Boston: UMASS Press, 2000), 229; Miller, “And One for the People,” 292–293.
12. “Cựu Tổng Thống ở miền Nam: Gioan Baotixita Ngô Đình Diệm (1901–1963),” in Lê Ngọc Bích, *Nhân Vật Công Giáo*, 151–155. On Diem’s “energetic” crackdown, see Ngo Dinh Thuc to Admiral Jean Decoux, 21 Apr 1944, in Lê Cung, *Phong Trào Phật Giáo Miền Nam Việt Nam Năm 1963*, rev. and expanded ed. (Hue: Nhà Xuất Bản Thuận Hóa, 2005), 340–343.
13. See, for example, Ai Minh, *Thân Thế và Sự Nghiệp Ngô Tổng Thống* (Saigon: n.p., 1955), 12–13; see also Pham Thanh Nghi, *Dao-Duc Cach-Mang cua Chi-Si Ngo-Dinh-Diem* (Saigon: n.p., 1956), esp. 3–8; and Miller, “And One for the People,” 322–326, 335–347.
14. Charles Keith, “Catholic Vietnam: Church, Colonialism and Revolution, 1887–1945” (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 2008).
15. Charles Keith, “Annam Uplifted: The First Vietnamese Catholic Bishops and the Birth of a National Church, 1919–1945,” *JVS* 3, no. 2 (2008): 128–171; Nguyễn Thế Anh, “The Vietnamese Monarchy under French Colonial Rule, 1884–1945,” *MAS* 19, no. 1 (1985): 147–162; Bruce McFarland Lockhart, *The End of the Vietnamese Monarchy* (New Haven, CT: Council on Southeast Asian Studies, 1993), 70.
16. Ngo Dinh Thuc, “Autobiographie,” 18.
17. Lockhart, *End of the Vietnamese Monarchy*, 68–86.
18. On Diem’s postresignation intrigues at court, see *ibid.*, 84–92. On Ngô Đình Thục’s ordination and tour, see Keith, “Annam Uplifted,” 153–158.
19. On Phan’s revolutionary career, see Marr, *Vietnamese Anticolonialism*. See also Phan Bội Châu, *Overtured Chariot: The Autobiography of Phan-Bội-Châu*, trans. Vĩnh Sinh and Nicholas Wickenden (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1999), 1–37. On Phan’s years in Hue, see Anh Minh Ngô Thành Nhân, *Cụ Sào-Nam: 15 Năm Bị Giam Lông ở Huế* (Hue: Anh-Minh, 1956).
20. Anh Minh Ngô Thành Nhân, *Cụ Sào-Nam*, 53; Ai Minh, *Thân Thế và Sự Nghiệp*, 17; and Fall, *Two Viet-Nams*, 239–240; Minh Hùng, *Đời một Tổng-Thống* (Saigon: n.p., 1971), 32.

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21. Cuong Tu Nguyen, “A Critical Reading of Phan Bội Châu’s Selective Commentary on the *Analec*ts,” in Quang Dien Nguyen, ed., *Confucianism in Vietnam* (Ho Chi Minh City: Vietnam National University and Ho Chi Minh City Publishing House, 2002): 21–41.
22. Peter Zinoman, *The Colonial Bastille: A History of Imprisonment in Vietnam, 1862–1940* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), esp. 200–239; see also Hue-Tam Ho Tai, *Passion, Betrayal and Revolution in Colonial Saigon: The Memoirs of Bao Luong* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010).
23. David Marr, *Vietnam, 1945: The Quest for Power* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 13–69; Eric Jennings, *Vichy in the Tropics: Pétain’s National Revolution in Madagascar, Guadeloupe and Indochina, 1940–1944* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), 130–198.
24. Trần Mỹ-Vân, *A Vietnamese Royal Exile in Japan: Prince Cường Để* (1882–1951) (London: Routledge, 2005), 159–177; Ralph Smith, “The Japanese Period in Indochina and the Coup of 9 March 1945,” *JSEAS* 9, no. 2 (1978): 268–301; and Kiyoko Kurusu Nitz, “Independence without Nationalists? The Japanese and Vietnamese Nationalism during the Japanese Period, 1940–45,” *JSEAS* 15, no. 1 (1984): 108–133.
25. SESAG Intelligence Bulletin, no. 2303, 10 Mar 1948, 10 H 4201, SHAT.
26. Vinh Sinh, “Komatsu Kiyoshi and French Indochina,” *Moussons* 3 (2002): 57–86; Nitz, “Independence without Nationalists?,” 119; Cường Để, *Cuộc Đòi Cách Mạng Cường Để* (Saigon: Tôn Thất Lê, 1957), 137–138; Trần Mỹ-Vân, *Vietnamese Royal Exile*, 32–67, 166, 170.
27. Sûreté report no. 2995-SP/C, Perroche to Résident Supérieur en Annam, 4 Apr 1943, folder 37, Papers of Admiral Jean Decoux, Fonds privés, CAOM; François Guillemot, “Révolution Nationale et Lutte pour L’Indépendance au Viêt-Nam: L’Échec de la Troisième Voie ‘Đại Việt,’ 1938–1955” (doctoral thesis, École Pratiques Des Hautes Études, Paris, 2003), 206–207; Nitz, “Independence without Nationalists?,” 117.
28. Masaya Shiraishi, “The Background to the Formation of the Tran Trong Kim Cabinet in April 1945: Japanese Plans for Governing Vietnam,” in *Indochina in the 1940s and 1950s: Translation of Contemporary Japanese Scholarship on Southeast Asia*, ed. Takashi Shiraishi and Motoo Furuta (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992), 2:113–141. Stein Tønnesson argues that Diem’s refusal of Bao Dai’s offer was a ploy to increase his leverage, and that Diem became angry when he realized that the offer would not be made again; see Stein Tønnesson, *The Vietnamese Revolution of 1945: Roosevelt, Ho Chi Minh and De Gaulle in a World at War* (Oslo: International Peace Research Institute, 1991), 285.
29. Huynh Kim Khanh, *Vietnamese Communism, 1925–1945* (Ithaca, NY: SEAP, 1982); Marr, *Vietnam*, 1945.

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31. For the view of Diem as politically isolated: John Mecklin, *Mission in Torment: An Intimate Account of the U.S. Role in Vietnam* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1965), 31; George Herring, *America’s Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950–1975*, 4th ed. (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2003), 59; and Ross Marlay and Clark Neher, *Patriots and Tyrants: Ten Asian Leaders* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 1999), 119. For the principled refusal: Ái Minh, *Thân Thể và Sự Nghiệp*, 14–25; Huy Tuấn and Hoài Thịnh, *Thể Hiện Nhân Vị của Ngô Tổng Thống* (Saigon: Tân Dinh, 1956), 22–23; Phuc Thien, *President Ngo-Dinh-Diem’s Political Philosophy* (Saigon: Review Horizons, 1956), 13–16; *President Ngo Dinh Diem* (Saigon: Press Office of the Presidency of the Republic of Viet-Nam, 1957), 5–7.
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33. See SESAG Intelligence Bulletins nos. 15431, 2053, and 1821 cited in the preceding note; see also “Fiche de Renseignements concernant M. Tran Trung Dung,” n.d., 10H 4195, SHAT.
34. “M. Ngo Dinh Diem, Nouveau President du Conseil Vietnamien,” June 1954, file 157, Sous-série Indochine, Série Asie-Océanie, 1944–1955, MAE; Miller, “And One for the People,” 449–555.
35. Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (New York: Penguin Books, 1997), 232–233; Marguerite Higgins, *Our Vietnam Nightmare* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), 157–158; Robert Shaplen, *The Lost Revolution: The Story of Twenty Years of Neglected Opportunities in Vietnam and of America’s Failure to Foster Democracy There* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), 110; and Miller, “And One for the People,” 560–565. For Ho’s reluctance to keep Diem in detention, see Boudarel and Nguyen Van Ky, *Hanoi: City of the Rising Dragon*, 90–91.
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37. Nguyễn Văn Châu, “Ngô Đình Diệm en 1963: Une Autre Paix Manquée” (M.A. thesis, University of Paris VII, 1982), 38–39.
38. Trần Thị Liên, “Les catholiques et la République Démocratique du Viêt-Nam (1945–1954): Une approche biographique,” in Goscha and Tréglodé, *Naissance d’un État-Parti*, 253–276, esp. 269–272.

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40. Lockhart, *End of the Vietnamese Monarchy*, 165–171; Hammer, *Struggle for Indochina*, 208–216.
41. Philippe Devillers, *Histoire du Viêt-Nam de 1940 à 1952* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1952), 420; Bảo Đại, *Le Dragon D'Annam* (Paris: Plon, 1980), 190; Hopper to SecState, 20 Dec 1947, in *FRUS 1947*, 6:152–155.
42. Devillers, *Histoire du Viêt-Nam*, 425–429.
43. Ngô Đình Diệm, “Lời tuyên bố của Chí-sĩ Ngô-đình-Diệm ngày 16 tháng 6 năm 1949,” in *CĐCN*, 1:221–222.
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45. Christopher Goscha, “Courting Diplomatic Disaster? The Difficult Integration of Vietnam into the Internationalist Communist Movement (1945–1950),” *JVS* 1, nos. 1–2 (2006): 59–103.
46. Diem learned of the assassination orders from the French, who said they could not protect him; see Heath to Acheson, 28 Jul 1950, 751G.00/7–2850, in *CF*, 1950–1954.
47. Trần Mỹ-Vân, *Vietnamese Royal Exile in Japan*, 213–214; Demaree Bess, “Bright Spot in Asia,” *Saturday Evening Post*, 15 Sep 1956, 130; Gullion to Acheson, 24 Jan 1951, in *FRUS 1951*, 6:359–361.
48. “Memorandum on Ngo Dinh Diem,” 28 Aug 1950, enclosure to Report, Spinks to DepState, 2 Sep 1950, 751G.00/9–250, RG 59, NARA; “Memorandum of Conversation with Mr. Wesley Fishel Concerning Prince Cuong De and Ngo Dinh Diem,” Dallas Coors, 8 January 1951, 794.00/1-851, RG 59, NARA. On Fishel’s early career, see Joseph Morgan, “Wesley Fishel and Vietnam: ‘A Special Kind of Friend,’” in *The Human Tradition in America since 1945*, ed. David Anderson (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 2003), 47–68.
49. DepState to Saigon, 28 Sep 1950, in *FRUS 1950*, 6:884–886.
50. DepState to Saigon, 16 Jan 1951, in *FRUS 1951*, 6:348. See also MemCon, 15 Jan 1951, 751G.00/1-1551, RG 59, NARA.
51. D. M. Coors, “Conversation with Mr. Ngo Dinh Diem, prominent Vietnamese Catholic Leader,” 26 Jul 1951, 751G.00/7-2651, in *CF*, 1950–1954.
52. Gibson to Heath, 23 Sep 1952, lot 58-D-266: Records of the Office of Southeast Asian Affairs, SF: SEA, 1944–1958; George W. Allen, *None So Blind: A Personal Account of the Intelligence Failure in Vietnam* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2001), 77.
53. Joseph Morgan, *The Vietnam Lobby: The American Friends of Vietnam, 1955–1975* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 1–14; Seth Jacobs, *America’s Miracle Man in Vietnam: Ngo Dinh Diem, Religion, Race and U.S. Intervention in Southeast Asia, 1950–1957* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 26–46.

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54. Ngo Dinh Diem, “Indo China,” memorandum of July 1951, enclosed to Edna Kelly (D-NY) to Sen. Mike Mansfield (D-MT), 20 July 1951, Mike Mansfield Papers, series IV, box 221, folder 14, University of Montana—Missoula, MT.
55. Jacobs, *America’s Miracle Man in Vietnam*, 60–87.
56. Telcon 1302, 24 Jan 1951, in *FRUS* 1951, 6:359–361.
57. See, for example, Ngo Dinh Diem, “Recent Developments in Indochina,” address delivered at the fifth annual meeting of the Far Eastern Association, Cleveland, 1 Apr 1953; and “Talk by Mr. Ngo Dinh Diem before Southeast Asia Seminar, Cornell University,” 20 Feb 1953, copies of both in Cornell University Library.
58. Paul L. Dressel, *College to University: The Hannah Years at Michigan State, 1935–1969* (East Lansing: University Publications, Michigan State University, 1987), 276–277.
59. Wesley Fishel to MacDonald Salter, 14 Mar 1952, folder 14, box 1184, FP, MSUA.
60. William O. Douglas, *North from Malaya: Adventure on Five Fronts* (New York: Doubleday, 1953), 147–210.
61. Other guests included Edmund Gullion, who had met Diem while working at the U.S. mission in Saigon in 1950; Gene Gregory, another former mission staffer who introduced Diem to Douglas and who later became the editor and publisher of a pro-Diem Saigon newspaper known as *Times of Vietnam*; and Hoang Van Doan, bishop of Bac Ninh in northern Vietnam. Author interview with Gene Gregory, Ho Chi Minh City, March 2002; Douglas to Diem, 8 May 1953, box 1716, William O. Douglas Papers, LOC.
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63. Don Oberdorfer, *Senator Mansfield: The Extraordinary Life of a Great American Statesman and Diplomat* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Books, 2003), 177.
64. Dillon to DepState, 24 May 1954, in *FRUS* 1952–1954, 13(2):1608–1609.
65. *TOVN Weekly*, 17 Mar 1956, 7; and Georges Chaffard, *Indochine: Dix ans d’indépendance* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1964), 30.
66. Cao Văn Luận, *Bên Giòng Lịch Sử, 1940–1965* (Saigon: Trí-Dũng, 1972), 180–189.
67. Chaffard, *Indochine*, 27–30; and “Ngo Dinh Luyen,” undated biographical summary, file 22, subseries Sud-Viêtnam, VLC, MAE; Tôn Thất Thiện, “Cụ Diệm ở Paris, 1953–1954,” *Nguyệt San Chính Việt*, No. 11 (Nov. 2007), 96–101.
68. “Ngô Đình Nhu,” in *Souverains et Notabilités D’Indochine* (Hanoi, 1943), 62; “Curriculum Vitae of Mr. Ngo Dinh Nhu,” undated, box 2, John Donnell Collection, VVA, TTU.

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70. Intelligence Report no. 3661, 21 May 1948, and SESAG Intelligence Report no. 3019, 19 Apr 1948, both in 10 H 4201, SHAT.
71. Gene Gregory interview.
72. Emmanuel Mounier, *Personalism*, trans. Philip Mairet (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1952), 103–105.
73. *Ibid.*, esp. 17–19 and 103–105. See also John Hellman, *Emmanuel Mounier and the New Catholic Left* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981).
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75. Nguyen Thai, "The Government of Men in the Republic of Vietnam," (Ithaca, NY: n.p., 1962), 139; "Biographical Data on the Reverend Father Nhuyen-Phuc Buu-Duong," International Exchange Project, 1959, folder 19, box 06, Pike Collection, VVA, TTU.
76. Fr. Fernand Parrell, "De L'Emploi des Armes Spirituelles, ou, 43 ans de Vie Missionnaire au Viet Nam," unpublished memoir, Bibliotheque Asiatique de la Société des Missions Etrangères de Paris, 96–97. For a participant's account of the Dalat seminar, see Huỳnh Văn Lang, *Nhân Chứng Một Chế Độ* (Westminster, CA: author, 2000), 1:283–298.
77. On the journal, see Huỳnh Văn Lang, *Nhân Chứng Một Chế Độ*. For the modeling of the seminar on the Semaines Sociales see Parrell, "De L'Emploi des Armes," 97.
78. Ngô Đình Nhu, "Sự góp sức của người Công-giáo vào hòa-bình ở Việt-Nam," *Xã Hội*, Feb 1953, 5, 14, 18–22.
79. *Ibid.*, 21. Nhu's "creaky house" remark was a critical reference to the work of Tran Trong Kim, the intellectual who had briefly served as prime minister of Vietnam in 1945. For Kim's contributions to 1930s debates on Confucianism, see Shawn McHale, *Print and Power: Confucianism, Communism, and Buddhism in the Making of Modern Vietnam* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004), 77–83.
80. Ngô Đình Nhu, "Cần-Lao Nhân-vị Cách-Mạng Đảng (Le parti travailliste personnaliste révolutionnaire)," in Huỳnh Văn Lang, *Nhân Chứng Một Chế Độ*, 2: 212; cf. Edward Lansdale, *In the Midst of Wars: An American's Mission to Southeast Asia* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1972), 340–341.
81. Edmund F. Wehrle, *Between a River and a Mountain: The AFL-CIO and the Vietnam War* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 33–41.
82. Parrell, "De L'Emploi des Armes Spirituelles," 96–98.
83. "Tổng Liên-Đoàn Lao-Động V.N.," *Xã Hội*, Feb 1953, 31, 34; "Bản kiến-nghị của Liên-Hiệp nghiệp đoàn Trung-Việt gọi Tổng-Liên Đoàn Lao Động V.N.," *Xã Hội*, Jul 1953, 16.

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84. See, for example, Debord, Intelligence Note no. 2870/C/SG-1, "Activités de la 'Confédération vietnamienne du Travail Chrétien' (CVTC): Position à l'égard du Président NGO DINH DIEM," 2 Jul 1954, SPCE 23, CAOM. By 1954, Buu was so disillusioned with the Ngos that he briefly considered an accommodation with the Viet Minh; see Intelligence Bulletin no. 510, "Sud Viet-Nam politique," 7 Jul 1954, folder "Syndicats-1954," 10 H 4207, SHAT; see also Commandement Forces Terrestres du Sud Vietnam (CFTSV) Report no. 6423/2, "Activités de la CVTC," 9 Jul 1954, 10 H 4207, SHAT.
85. Wehrle, *Between a River and a Mountain*, 40.
86. *TOVN Weekly*, 25 Feb 1956, 9.
87. Dân Sinh, "Tìm hiểu tổ-chức hợp-tác-xã," *Xã Hội*, 15 Sep 1953, 23; Dân Sinh, "Mục-đích và Phương-pháp huấn-luyện," *Xã Hội*, 10 Nov 1953, 33-34; Dân Sinh, "Màu sắc tổ-chức hợp-tác-xã các nước," *Xã Hội*, 10 Nov 1953, 28-29.
88. Ngô Đình Nhu, "Sự góp sức của người Công-giáo vào hòa-bình."
89. Nguyễn Văn Châu, "Ngô Đình Diệm en 1963," 35.
90. Hammer, *Struggle for Indochina*, 281-286, 300-301.
91. Guillemot, "Révolution Nationale," 628-632.
92. Kidder to DepState, 22 Sep 1953, 751G.00/9-2253, RG 59, NARA. For published accounts, see *Tiếng Dội*, 8 Sep 1953; *Le Monde*, 8 Sep 1953; and Donald Lancaster, *The Emancipation of French Indochina* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), 275-277. For Nhu's announcement, see Phong Thủy, "Ý-nghĩa và Giá-trị cuộc Đại-Hội Đoàn-Kết Ngày 6-9-53," *Xã Hội*, 15 Sep 1953, 2.
93. *Vietnam Presse*, 12-17 Oct 1953 (issue nos. 31-36); *Le Monde*, 17-20 Oct 1953.
94. See Diem's letter in *Le Monde*, 25-26 Oct 1953, 3. See also Sturm to DepState, "Press Conference Held by Protagonists of 'National Congress' of Early September 1953," 16 Oct 1953, 751G.00/10-1653, in *CF*, 1950-1954.
95. Dillion to Dulles, 14 Oct 1953, 751G.00/10-1453, in *CF*, 1950-1954; Smith to Saigon and Paris, 14 Sep 1953, 751G.00/9-1453, in *CF*, 1950-1954. The meeting took place on October 12.
96. *Vietnam Presse*, 27 Oct 1953, issue no. 45; *Le Monde*, 28 Oct 1953, 2; Dillion to Dulles, 28 Oct 1953, 751G.00/10-2853, in *CF*, 1950-1954.
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98. Bao Dai, *Le Dragon D'Annam*, 328; Dillion to DepState, 24 May 1954, in *FRUS* 1952-1954, 13(2):1608.
99. Chaffard, *Indochine*, 19-20, 26-29; Robert Scheer and Warren Hinkle, "The 'Vietnam Lobby,'" *Ramparts*, Jul 1965, 16-24.
100. For allegations of CIA involvement, see Chester Cooper, *The Lost Crusade: America in Vietnam* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1970), 120; on Dulles's purported role, see Townsend Hoopes, *The Devil and John Foster Dulles* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1973), 251; Marilyn Young, *The Vietnam Wars, 1945-1990* (New York:

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101. Thomas Ahern, *CIA and the House of Ngo: Covert Action in South Vietnam, 1954–63* (Washington, DC: Center for the Study of Intelligence, 2000), 24.
 102. David Anderson, *Trapped by Success: The Eisenhower Administration and Vietnam, 1953–1961* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 41–64, esp. 52–55.
 103. One author frankly admits that “Dulles’s role in securing Diem’s appointment is difficult to determine” but still insists that Dulles’s actions were “certainly important and possibly decisive” to the outcome (Jacobs, *America’s Miracle Man in Vietnam*, 54–55).
 104. Bao Đại, *Le Dragon D’Annam*, 329.
 105. Ngô Đình Diệm, “Tuyên bố khi nhận lập Chánh-phủ (Ba-Lê, 16-6-1954),” in *CĐCN*, 1:13–15.

2. *New Beginnings*

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2. Heath to SecState, 9 Dec 1951, in *FRUS* 1951, 6:558–559.
3. I am using the term “development” as it has been used since at least the early twentieth century: to refer to the myriad visions, models, and narratives used to imagine human social improvement. “Development” here is a more general term than “modernization.” Although the two terms were often used interchangeably between the 1930s and the 1970s, in practice “modernization” typically referred to the particular way of thinking about development associated with modernization theory. See David Ekbladh, *The Great American Mission: Modernization and the Construction of an American World Order* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 11–13; and Nick Cullather, *The Hungry World: America’s Cold War Battle against Poverty in Asia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 3–10.
4. Elizabeth Borgwardt, *A New Deal for the World: America’s Vision for Human Rights* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005); Robert Latham, *The Liberal Moment: Modernity, Security and the Making of Postwar International Order* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).
5. James Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 90, 196–201, 270–273.
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7. Frederick Cooper, *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 140–142.
 8. Jess Gilbert, “Low Modernism and the Agrarian New Deal,” in *Fighting for the Farm: Rural America Transformed*, ed. Jane Adams (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 129–146.
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 10. Ekbladh, *Great American Mission*, 1–2.
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 13. Nathan, *History of the China International Famine Relief Commission*, 58.
 14. Ekbladh, *Great American Mission*, 37–38.
 15. Shamsur Rahman, “UNRRA, China and the United States: Efforts to Achieve China’s Reconstruction through International Cooperation,” in *Sino-American Relations since 1900*, ed. Priscilla Roberts (Hong Kong: Centre of Asian Studies, 1991), 313–348; Ekbladh, *Great American Mission*, 116–121.
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 18. Joseph A. Yager, *Transforming Agriculture in Taiwan: The Experience of the Joint Commission on Rural Reconstruction* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988); *The Joint Commission on Rural Reconstruction, 1948–1968* (Taipei: JCRR, 1968); Nick Cullather, “‘Fuel for the Good Dragon’: The United States and Industrial Policy in Taiwan, 1950–1965,” *DH* 20, no. 1 (Winter 1996): 1–25. On the “New Deal synthesis,” see Michael Hogan, *The Marshall Plan: America, Britain and the Reconstruction of Europe, 1947–1952* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 22–23, 101, 136.
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 22. Stanley Andrews, oral history interview, 31 Oct 1970, Truman Presidential Library, 33–34, www.trumanlibrary.org/oralhist/andrewss.htm, accessed September 24, 2012.
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 25. For recent examinations of the origins and rise of modernization theory, see Michael Latham, *Modernization as Ideology: American Social Science and “Nation Building” in the Kennedy Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), chapter 1, and especially Gilman, *Mandarins of the Future*. On Parsons, see Robert Bierstedt, *American Sociological Theory: A Critical History* (New York: Academic Press, 1981), 389–442.
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 27. Talcott Parsons, *The Social System* (New York: Free Press, 1951), 5–6. On the connections between modernization theory and high modernism, see Gilman, *Mandarins of the Future*, 9–12.
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52. Heath to Dep State, 10 Oct 1954, in *FRUS* 1952-1954, 13(2): 2128-2130; Heath to Dulles, 11 Oct 1954, 2131; Heath to Dulles, 10 Oct 1954, 751G.00/10-1054, in *CF* 1950-1954.
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55. Intelligence bulletin no. 829, 22 Oct 1954, SPCE 24, CAOM.
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64. J. Lawton Collins, *Lightning Joe: An Autobiography* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1979), 379–381; Memcon, 30 Oct 1954, in *FRUS* 1952–1954, 13(2):2194–2195; Dulles to Heath, 1 Nov 1954, in *FRUS* 1952–1954, 13(2):2202.
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67. Kidder to Dulles, 5 Jan 1955, 751G.13/1–555, in *CF*, 1955–1959; Sheehan, *Bright Shining Lie*, 129–130; Debord to Commissioner General, no. 28/C/SP/1, 4 Jan 1955, SPCE 24, CAOM. On Diem’s later trip to Hue, see Kidder to Dulles, 30 Jan 1955, 751G.13/1–3055, in *CF*, 1955–1959; and Protecser Hué to Dirprotec Saigon, 30 Jan 1955, SPCE 24, CAOM. On the “atmosphere,” see Kidder to DepState, 7 Feb 1955, in *FRUS* 1955–1957, 1:78–79.
68. Collins to Dulles, 20 Nov 1954, in *FRUS* 1952–1954, 13(2):2272; Collins to Dulles, 29 Nov 1954, in *FRUS* 1952–1954, 13(2):2317; Kenneth Young, Memcon, 7 Dec 1954, in *FRUS* 1952–1954, 13(2):2351; Lansdale, *In the Midst of Wars*, 195.
69. Diem and Chanoff, *In the Jaws of History*, 86–88. Some historians suggest that Quat could have been more successful than Diem; see Seth Jacobs, *America’s Miracle Man in Vietnam: Ngo Dinh Diem, Religion, Race, and U.S. Intervention in Southeast Asia, 1950–1957* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 4; Anderson, *Trapped by Success*, 118.

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70. Debord to Commissioner General, intelligence bulletin no. 123/C/SP/1, 12 Jan 1955, SPCE 24, CAOM; bulletin no. 224/C/SP/1, 19 Jan 1955, SPCE 24, CAOM; CIA field report [author's name redacted], "Further Information Concerning Government Moves against the Bình Xuyên," 10 Jan 1955, CK3100313304, DDRS.
71. Kidder to DepState, 17 Dec 1954, in *FRUS* 1952-1954, 13(2):2396-2397.
72. Collins to SecState, 5 Jan 1955, in *FRUS* 1955-1957, 1:17.
73. Fall, *Two Viet-Nams*, 245-246. For scholars who cited Fall's figures and depicted Lansdale as the paymaster, see Joseph Buttinger, *Vietnam: A Dragon Embattled* (New York: Praeger, 1967), 2:1101 n. 28; FitzGerald, *Fire in the Lake*, 79; Kahin, *Intervention*, 83; Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (New York: Viking Press, 1983), 238; and Currey, *Edward Lansdale*, 172-173.
74. Ahern, *CIA and the House of Ngo*, 69 n. 26.
75. Decree 973/QP, 9 Oct 1954, folder 14685, PTT, TTLTQG2.
76. According to SVN documents, Soai, Phuong, and Ngo collectively received 18.6 million piasters per month to cover salary and other expenses for their militias during 1954; in addition, Phuong and Ngo each received 3.6 million piasters to maintain village "self-defense forces" (*tự vệ dân quân*). See Hồ Thông Minh to Diệm, 17 Jan 1955, 154 VP/QP/M; Hồ Thông Minh to Diệm, 20 Dec 1954, 1974 VP/QP/M, both in folder 14685, PTT, TTLTQG2. Phuong and Soai also demanded additional funds to cover "specific obligations"; see Memorandum on "Vietnamese Government Confidential Funds," [author's name redacted], 20 Jan 1955, CK3100538206, DDRS.
77. Decrees 1197/QP and 1199/QP, 31 Dec 1954, folder 14685, PTT, TTLTQG2; see also "Vietnamese Government Plans for Action in South Vietnam," 30 Dec 1954, folder 87, box 05, Central Intelligence Agency Collection, VVA, TTU.
78. On Diem's negotiations with General Ngo, see Nguyễn Giác Ngộ to Diệm, 15 Nov 1954, 3326/CHT, folder 14685, PTT, TTLTQG2; see also Hồ Thông Minh to Diệm, 4 Feb 1955, 307-VP/QP/M; and Lê Văn Đức to VNA Chief of Staff, 9 Feb 1955, 397-VP/QP/M; both in folder 14683, PTT, TTLTGQ2.
79. The two commanders were Nguyen Van Hue (formerly Soai's chief of staff) and Nguyen Day. Kidder to Dulles, 17 Jan 1955, 751G.00/1-1755, in *CF*, 1955-1959; Général Renucci, CFTSV/2eme Bureau intelligence bulletin of 31 Jan 1955, 10H 4195, SHAT.
80. Diệm to Nguyễn Thành Phương, 23 Jan 1955, 27/PTT/ĐL, folder 1262, PTT, TTLTGQ2. (See identical letter to Soái in same folder.) For the 2-million-piaster payments, see Decree 33/QP, 21 Jan 1955, and Letter 779-VP/QP/M, 15 Mar 1955, both in folder 14685, PTT, TTLTQG2.
81. On Thế's early life, see Sergei Blagov, *Honest Mistakes: The Life and Death of Trình Minh Thế (1922-1955): South Vietnam's Alternative Leader* (Huntington, NY: Nova Science, 2001), 1-37. On his military exploits, see Nhị Lang, *Phong Trào Kháng Chiến Trình Minh Thế: Hồi Ký Ký Sự* (Boulder, CO: Lion Press,

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- 1984). For his break with the Cao Dai, see Heath to DepState, 6 Jul 1951, 751G.00/7–651, in *CF*, 1950–1954.
82. Graham Greene, *The Quiet American* (London: Heinemann, 1955).
83. Lansdale, *In the Midst of Wars*, 189–194. Despite persistent claims to the contrary, Lansdale was *not* the real-life model for the character of Alden Pyle in Greene’s novel; see Jonathan Nashel, “Lansdale and Greene,” in *The Quiet American: Text and Criticism*, ed. John Clark Pratt (New York: Penguin Books, 1996), 313–328.
84. “Lansdale Team’s Report,” 59. For the claim that Lansdale brokered the Diem-Thé alliance, see FitzGerald, *Fire in the Lake*, 449 n. 10; Anderson, *Trapped by Success*, 85; and Nashel, *Edward Lansdale’s Cold War*, 59–60.
85. Heath to DepState, 22 Jul 1954, 751G.00/7–2254, Heath to Dulles, 7 Aug 1954, 751G.00/8–754, both in *CF*, 1950–1954; intelligence note no. 3126 C/SG-1, 20 Jul 1954, SPCE 23, CAOM; Nhị Lang, *Phong Trào Kháng Chiến Trình Minh Thê*, 210–218, 238–241; Kidder to Dulles, 31 Jan 1955, 751G.00/1–3155, in *CF*, 1955–1959. On the initial cash payment to Thé in September 1954, see Ahern, *CIA and the House of Ngo*, 41–42; on Lansdale’s misunderstanding of his role, see 67.
86. Collins to Dulles, 18 Feb 1955, 751G.5/2–1855, in *CF*, 1955–1959.
87. SDECE intelligence bulletin no. 134, 12 Feb 1955, 10 H 4195, SHAT; see also Biên Bản Hội Đồng Nội Cách 11.2.1955, 1262, PTT, TTLTQG2.
88. Kidder to Dulles, 8 Mar 1955, 751G.00/3–855; Collins to Dulles, 751G.00/3–2255; both in *CF*, 1955–1959.
89. Ngô Đình Diệm, “Tuyên bố về việc các đoàn-thể võ-trang gọi kiến-nghị đòi cải-tổ Chánh-phủ ngày 24-3-1955,” in *CĐCN*, 1:102–105; “Free Translation of Message from Prime Minister Diem to Vietnamese Ambassador, Washington,” 24 Mar 1955, Records of the Office of Southeast Asian Affairs (lot 58-D-266), in *SF: SEA*, 1944–1958.
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91. Collins to Dulles, 29 Mar 1955, in *FRUS* 1955–1957, 1:158–159; Collins to Dulles, 30 Mar 1955, in *FRUS* 1955–1957, 1:159–163.
92. U.S. Air Force Attaché (Saigon) to Air Force Chief of Staff, 30 Mar 1955, Records of the Office of Southeast Asian Affairs (lot 58-D-266); and U.S. Navy Attaché (Saigon) to Commander of Naval Operations, 30 Mar 1955, lot 58-D-266, both in *SF: SEA*, 1944–1948; U.S. Army Attaché (Saigon) to Dulles, 30 Mar 1955, 751G.00/3–3055, in *CF*, 1955–1959.
93. Robert Scigliano, *South Vietnam: Nation under Stress* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1963), 21.
94. Ngô Đình Nhu, quoted in Hồ Hữu Tường, unpublished interview of 10 Aug 1966 with Walter Slote and Milton Sacks. Thanks to Hue-Tam Ho Tai for supplying a copy of this source.

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96. Nguyen Long Thanh Nam, *Hoa Hao Buddhism in the Course of Vietnam's History*, 120.
97. Kidder to Dulles, 30 Mar 1955, 751G.13/3–3055, in *CF*, 1955–1959; Collins to DepState, 31 Mar 1955, in *FRUS* 1955–1957, 1:171–174.
98. Collins to Dulles, 31 Mar 1955, in *FRUS* 1955–1957, 1:168–171.
99. Jacobs, *America's Miracle Man in Vietnam*, 172–216; see also Anderson, *Trapped by Success*, 117–119.
100. Lansdale, *In the Midst of Wars*, 203–207, 253–256; Arthur Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience of the French and the Americans: Nationalism and Communism in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 284–293; and Mark Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954–1965* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 45–50.
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102. Lansdale, *In the Midst of Wars*, 204.
103. *Ibid.*, 259.
104. Dulles to Collins, 1 Apr 1955, in *FRUS* 1955–1957, 1:179–180.
105. Achilles to Dulles, 2 Apr 1955, 751G.00/4–255, in *CF*, 1955–1959; Dulles to Dillon, 3 Apr 1955; Collins to Dulles, 7 Apr 1955, in *FRUS* 1955–1957, 1:193–194, 1:215–218.
106. Anderson, *Trapped by Success*, 109–110; Sebald to Dulles, 23 Apr 1955; Davis to Hensel, 25 Apr 1955; Young to Robertson, 30 Apr 1955; all in *FRUS* 1955–1957, 1:280–284, 284–287, 337–339; telegrams 3828 and 3829, Dulles to Dillon, 27 Apr 1955, both in *FRUS* 1955–1957, 1:294–298; Dillion Anderson, “South Vietnam—‘General Joe Collins’ Comments,” 22 Apr 1955, document no. CK3100209302, DDRS.
107. “Divers incidents à SAIGON CHOLON,” GENECHIEF SAIGON to DEF-NAT PARIS, 20 Apr 1955, file 158, Indochine, Asie-Océanie 1944–1955, MAE. See also Army Message MC 965-55, US Army Attaché Saigon to Army Chief of Staff, 20 Apr 1955, Records of the Office of Southeast Asian Affairs (lot 58-D-266), in *SF: SEA, 1944–1958*; and Kidder to Dulles, 20 Apr 1955, 751G.00/4–2055, in *CF*, 1955–1959.
108. Intelligence bulletin no. 630/NTNH/FAHA/795/E, folder 4343, 19 Apr 1955, PTTDN, TTLTQG2.
109. Dillon to Dulles, 4 May 1955, 751G.00/5–255, in *CF*, 1955–1959; William M. Gibson, memorandum, 21 Apr 1955, in *FRUS* 1955–1957, 1:272–276.
110. Kidder to Dulles, 30 Apr 1955, 751G.00/4–3055, in *CF*, 1955–1959.

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111. Kidder to Dulles, 24 Apr 1955, 751G.00/4-2455, in *CF*, 1955–1959; see also U.S. Army Attaché Saigon to Dulles, 28 Apr 1955, 751G.00/4-2855, in *CF*, 1955–1959.
112. Ngô Đình Diệm, “Trung cầu ý-kiến quốc-dân sau việc phản trắc của Bình Xuyên, 23-4-1955,” in *CĐCN*, 1:108–113; Lansdale, *In the Midst of Wars*, 277–278; Kidder to Dulles, 24 Apr 1955, 751G.00/4-2455, in *CF*, 1955–1959.
113. Kidder to Dulles, 27 Apr 1955 (Tel 4844), 751G.00/4-2755; and Kidder to Dulles, telegram 4845, 27 Apr 1955 (Tel 4845), 751G.00/4-2755; both in *CF*, 1955–1959.
114. Anderson, *Trapped by Success*, 111.
115. Kidder to Dulles, 28 Apr 1955, in *FRUS* 1955–1957, 1:303–305.
116. Kidder to Dulles, 28 Apr 1955, 751G.00/4-2855; and U.S. Army Attaché Saigon to Army Chief of Staff, 28 Apr 1955, 751G.00/4-2855, both in *CF*, 1955–1959; O’Daniel to Carney, 29 Apr 1955, in *FRUS* 1955–1957, 1:324–325.
117. Dulles to Dillon, 27 Apr 1955, in *FRUS* 1955–1957, 1:301.
118. See, for example, Anderson, *Trapped by Success*, 111–113.
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120. Robert Shaplen, *The Lost Revolution: The Story of Twenty Years of Neglected Opportunities in Vietnam and of America’s Failure to Foster Democracy There* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), 122–123.
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3. Lê Văn Dương et al., *Quân Lực Việt Nam Cộng Hòa* (Saigon: Trung-tâm Ấn-loát Ấn-phẩm Quân-đội, 1972), 423–426; *Time*, 15 Nov 1963, 41–42.
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 12. On the founding of the NRM, see Hoppenot to Minister for the Associated States, “Activités du Mouvement de la Révolution Nationale,” 26 Jan 1956, file 7, subseries Sud Vietnam, CLV, MAE.
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27. The relevant decree is in folder 1262, PTT, TTLTGQ2.
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1. Wolf Ladejinsky, "Field Trip Observations in Central Vietnam," 2 Apr 1955; "Field Trip in Southern Vietnam," 29 Apr 1955; and "A Meeting with President Ngo Dinh Diem," 1 Jun 1955; all in *Agrarian Reform as Unfinished Business: The Selected Papers of Wolf Ladejinsky*, ed. Louis Walinsky (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 217-243. Ladejinsky arrived in South Vietnam under a cloud of controversy, having been recently fired from his post in Japan; see Mary S. McAuliffe, "Dwight D. Eisenhower and Wolf Ladejinsky: The Politics of the Declining Red Scare, 1954-1955," *Prologue* 14, no. 3 (Fall 1982): 109-127.
2. Wolf Ladejinsky, "Agrarian Reform in the Republic of Vietnam," in *Problems of Freedom: South Vietnam since Independence*, ed. Wesley Fishel (New York: Free Press of Glencoe, 1961), 153-175, esp. 147. For "land to the tiller," see *CMQG*, 3 Aug 1955.
3. William Bredo et al., *Land Reform in Vietnam* (Menlo Park, CA: SRI, December 1968) (hereafter *SRI Report*). See also William Tater, "Impact of Land Reform on Pacification: A Quantitative Appraisal of Land Reform in Vietnam" (Ph.D. diss., University of Southern California, 1970), chap. 2; and Robert Sansom, *The Economics of Insurgency* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1970), 57-58. The total amount of farmland in South Vietnam in 1961 was 3.5 million hectares; see U.S. House of Representatives, HR No. 1142, "Land Reform in Vietnam" (Washington: GPO, 1968), 3.
4. Alfred McCoy, "Land Reform as Counter-Revolution: U.S. Foreign Policy and the Tenant," *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* 3, no. 1 (Winter-Spring 1971): 14-49, esp. 31-36; Serge Thion, "Les Réformes agraires d'inspiration américaine au Sud Viêt-Nam," in *Histoire de l'Asie du Sud-Est: Révoltes, réformes, révolutions*, ed. Pierre Brocheux (Lille: Presses Universitaires de Lille: 1981), 125-138; George McTurnan Kahin, *Intervention: How America Became Involved in Vietnam* (New York: Knopf, 1986), 98-99; Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (New York: Viking Press, 1983), 246; and Marilyn Young, *The Vietnam Wars, 1945-1990* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), 56-57.
5. Many of South Vietnam's wealthiest landlords strenuously protested Diem's agrarian reform policies, especially Ordinance 57; see Ladejinsky to USOM Director, "Group Meeting of Big Landlords of South Vietnam," 18 Mar 1955, document no. III-33, *WLP*; *TOVN Weekly*, 7 Jul 1956; J. Price Gittinger, "Progress in South Vietnam's Agrarian Reform (II)," *Far Eastern Survey* 29,

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- no. 2 (Feb 1960), 17–21. Much of this resistance was led by Nguyen Van Tam, a former SVN premier and rival to Diem; see David Biggs, *Quagmire: Nation-Building and Nature in the Mekong Delta* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2011), 160.
6. Tel 92, 9 Jul 1956, in *FRUS* 1955–1957, 1:715–718.
7. *Land reform* here refers to redistribution of existing landholdings to make land tenure more equitable. *Resettlement* refers to the transfer of people to new locales for the purpose of creating new communities. I use *agrarian reform* and *rural development* to refer generally to social reform efforts in rural areas; in addition to land reform and resettlement, these efforts could include rent reduction, credit reform, agricultural extension work, etc.
8. The U.S. Operations Mission (USOM-Saigon) was the agency within the U.S. embassy that oversaw all American economic aid for South Vietnam, including aid for rural development.
9. David Elliott, *The Vietnamese War: Revolution and Social Change in the Mekong Delta, 1930–1975* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2003), 1:166, 180–181; Tel 92, 9 Jul 1956, in *FRUS* 1955–1957, 1:715–718.
10. *SRI Report*, 13.
11. William Colby Oral History, 2 Jun 1981, folder 13, box 04, William Colby Collection, VVA, TTU. Quotation p. I-22.
12. John Donnell, “Politics in South Vietnam: Doctrines of Authority in Conflict” (Ph.D. diss., University of California at Berkeley, 1964), 118–121, 579–581; see also Catton, *Diem’s Final Failure*, 46. For Ladejinsky’s attempts to connect land reform programs in Asia to American mythologies about land and expansion in nineteenth-century North America, see Wolf Ladejinsky, “Agrarian Revolution in Japan,” in *Agrarian Reform as Unfinished Business*, 287.
13. Pierre Gourou, *Les paysans du delta tonkinois: Etude de géographie humaine* (Paris: Les Editions d’Art et D’Histoire, 1936), 171–223, esp. 196–198.
14. Andrew Hardy, *Red Hills: Migrants and the State in the Highlands of Vietnam* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2003), 74–85, esp. 79.
15. Biggs, *Quagmire*, 104–125; Oscar Salemink, *The Ethnography of Vietnam’s Central Highlanders: A Historical Contextualization* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2003), 87–97.
16. On DRV resettlement programs after 1954, see Hardy, *Red Hills*, chaps. 6–9.
17. *TOVN*, 28 Jan 1956.
18. Ngô Đình Diệm, “Diễn-văn nhân dịp khánh-thành đập Đồng-Cam, Tuy Hòa,” 17 Sep 1955, in *CĐCN*, 2:151–162; see also Vu Van Thai, “Vietnam’s Concept of Development,” in Fishel, *Problems of Freedom*, 69–73.
19. Memcon, 10 May 1957, in *FRUS* 1955–1957, 1:807–811.

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20. See, for example, *Minh Tân*, 1 Feb 1958; see also *TOVN Magazine*, 25 Feb 1956; “Community Development and Self-Help,” *TOVN Weekly*, 6 Sep 1958.
21. Nguyễn Hữu Châu, “Thông tư căn bản về vấn đề phát-triển cộng-đồng,” doc. no. 106-TTP/NKH, 13 Oct 1956, printed in *Phát-Triển Cộng-Đồng* (Saigon: RVN Office of the Presidency, n.d.), 70–73.
22. Ngô Đình Diệm, “Diễn-văn đọc trong cuộc lễ trao chứng-khoản ruộng đất cho các tá-diên trở thành chủ ruộng,” 4 Jul 1958, in *CĐCN*, 4:81–82.
23. For Thái’s account, see Daniel Ellsberg, “Working Notes on Vietnam No. 8: U.S. Support of Diem: Comments by Vu Van Thai,” RAND Corporation doc. D-19128-ARPA/AGILE, Jul 1969, 18–19, <http://www.ellsberg.net/documents/Diem.pdf>, accessed October 12, 2012.
24. Report no. 1860-DTCC/55/VP, “Plan de mise en culture d’une zone de 70,000 Ha. de terre,” 25 Nov 1955, folder 21467, PTTĐN, TTLTQG2; Jordan to Lavergne, “Longxuyen Rachgia Resettlement Project,” 6 Dec 1955, E.1456, box 13, RG 469, NARA. Ladejinsky was not briefed on the project until December 13; see Nguyễn Văn Thòi to Diệm, letter no. 1860/38-DTCC/VP, 10 Jan 1956, folder 21468, PTTĐN, TTLTQG2. On the Cai San toponym see Biggs, *Quagmire*, 161.
25. Barrows to Nguyen Huu Chau, 23 Dec 1955, folder 10016, PTTĐN, TTLTQG2.
26. Secto 50, 1 Mar 1955, in *FRUS 1955–1957*, 1:101–102.
27. David Biggs, “Problematic Progress: Reading Environmental and Social Change in the Mekong Delta,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 34, no. 1 (2003): 77–96; on the original *casier tonkinois*, see Biggs, *Quagmire*, 116–122; on its relation to Cai San, see 162. See also “Tonkinese Settlement in Cochinchina,” in *Studies of Migration and Settlement: Translation Series*, no. T-109 (Washington, DC: M Project, 1945), 1.
28. VP, 18 Feb 1956.
29. Nguyễn Văn Thòi, RVN Minister of Agrarian Reform, Reports on the Cai San project, 14 May 1956 and 6 Jul 1956, folder 10016, PTTĐN, TTLTQG2; Ladejinsky to Diem, “The Cai San Refugee Development Project,” doc. no. III-38, WLP.
30. TOVN, 30 Jun 1956; Ladejinsky, “Developments in Cai San,” doc. no. III-39, WLP; see also Nguyễn Văn Thòi, reports cited in previous note. For Diem’s accusation of sabotage, see Gilbert Jonas, “Memorandum of a Recent Meeting with Ngo Dinh Diem,” 2 Jul 1959, folder 25, box 1207, FP, MSUA.
31. Ladejinsky, “Cai San Refugee Development Project.”
32. *TOVN Weekly*, 30 Jun 1956.
33. Nguyễn Văn Thòi, report of 14 May 1956, cited in note 29.

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34. *TOVN Weekly*, 30 Jun 1956.
35. Nguyễn Văn Thôi to Diệm, letter no. 1860/38-DTCC/VP, 10 Jan 1956, folder 21468, PTTĐN, TTLTQG2; D. C. Lavergne, "General Situation Report on the Caisan Recultivation & Resettlement Project," 1 Jun 1956, attachment to TOICA A 1131, in box 13, E 1456, RG 469, NARA.
36. Adler to Nichols, 31 Aug 1956, box 4, Mission to Vietnam: Resettlement and Rehabilitation, RG 469, NARA; "Report of Meeting on October 3, 1956 at 10:00," box 3, Mission to Vietnam: Resettlement and Rehabilitation, RG 469, NARA.
37. Phiếu trình kê quả Đầu Tiên cuộc Điều-Tra về hà-lạc và gian lận ở Khu Định-cư Cái Sắn," 8 Oct 1956, 10454, PTTĐN, TTLTQG2.
38. *TOVN Weekly*, 30 Jun 1956.
39. *Nghiên cứu một cộng đồng liên xã Khu Cái Sắn* (Saigon: Học Viện Quốc Gia Hành Chánh, 1973), 47–50; A. Terry Rambo, *Searching for Vietnam: Selected Writings on Vietnamese Culture and Society* (Melbourne: Trans Pacific Press, 2005), 17.
40. "535 Refugees in South Vietnam Turn the Earth in Vital Project," *NYT*, 11 Feb 1956.
41. Barrows to Lavergne, "Visit of Vice President to Cai San," 2 Jul 1956, box 1, Mission to Vietnam: Resettlement & Rehabilitation, RG 469, NARA; "Cai San and Agrarian Reform," Ladejinsky to Diem, 18 Oct 1956, doc. no. III-42, WLP.
42. Ngô Đình Diệm, "Diễn-văn khai-mạc Hội-chợ Triển-Lãm Ban-Mê-Thuật," 22 Feb 1957, in *CĐCN*, 3:94–97.
43. On the prior use of dinh dien by Nguyen dynasty leaders, see Nguyễn Thông, "Dinh Điền Biều Văn," in *Nghề nông cổ truyền Việt Nam qua thư tịch Hán Nôm*, ed. Nguyễn Đồng Chi (Hà Nội: Nxb. Giáo dục, 1994), 76–87.
44. "Project De Developpement Economique Centre P.M.S.," n.d., folder 10455, PTTĐN, TTLTQG2.
45. In July 1955, the government commissioned two French hydrological experts to assess these old plans: "Rapport de Mission D'Études A' Amenagement Hydro-Agricole au Việt-Nam," n.d., file 312, BCCGT, TTLTQG2.
46. Stan Tan, "'Swiddens, Resettlements, Sedentarizations, and Villages': State Formation among the Central Highlanders of Vietnam under the First Republic, 1955–1961," *JVS* 1, nos. 1–2 (2006): 210–252, esp. 210.
47. Bùi Văn Lương, "Báo Cáo về Hoạt-Động của Phủ Tổng-Ủy Dinh Điền Nhân dịp Kỷ Niệm Lệ-Tam Chu-Niên Chấp-Chánh của Ngô Tổng Thống," 21 Jun 1957, folder 10807, PTTĐN, TTLTQG2.
48. Memcon, 10 May 1957, in *FRUS* 1955–1957, 1:809; and Tel 444, Durbrow to SecState, 30 Aug 1957, in *FRUS* 1955–1957, 1:841–844. See also Bùi Văn Lương's report of 21 Jun 1957 cited in previous note.

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49. "The Work of Land Development in Vietnam up to June 30, 1959" (Saigon: Commissioner General for Land Development, 1959), folder 71, box 1194, FP, MSUA; Diệm, "Diễn-văn đọc trong cuộc lễ trao chứng-khoản ruộng đất," 81.
50. Land Development Commission, "Phúc Trình về hoạt-động của Phủ Tổng-Ủy Dinh Điền trong năm 1957," 11 Feb 1958, folder 10807, PTTĐN, TTLTQG2.
51. William Henderson, "Opening of New Lands and Villagers: The Republic of Vietnam's Land Development Program," in Fishel, *Problems of Freedom*, 136.
52. *SRI Report*, 89.
53. Biggs, *Quagmire*, 174-181; Frakes to Hackett, "Plaine Des Joncs Project Proposals," 7 Dec 1956, box 6, E 1455, RG 469, NARA.
54. "The Rich Southern Highlands," *TOVN Weekly*, 26 May 1956. On Dinh Điền Thuong and the acculturation of the highlanders, see Tan, "'Swiddens, Resettlements, Sedentarizations, and Villages,'" esp. 216-226. On Diem's policies toward the highlanders in general, see Gerald Hickey, *Free in the Forest: Ethnohistory of the Vietnamese Central Highlands, 1954-1976* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1982), chaps. 1 and 2; and Salemkink, *Ethnography of Vietnam's Central Highlanders*, 187-194.
55. John Montgomery, *The Politics of Foreign Aid: American Experience in Southeast Asia* (New York: Praeger, 1962), 73.
56. RVN Land Development Commission, Report on Meeting with USOM representative Fippin, 2 May 1957, folder 10455, PTTĐN, TTLTQG2.
57. Lavergne to Hackett, 11 Dec 1956, E.1455, box 6, RG 469, NARA.
58. Biggs, *Quagmire*, 175-177, 184-185.
59. Moorman, "Report on Recent FAO Activities," 1 Jun 1957; Hoàng Ngọc Thân, "Excursion de Mr. MOORMAN avec les techniciens Vietnamiens et Américains à Pleiku," 20 Jun 1957; both in folder 10809, PTTĐN, TTLTQG2.
60. Montgomery, *Politics of Foreign Aid*, 75.
61. For Hickey's report, see MSUVAG, "Preliminary Research Report on the High Plateau," Jun 1957, folder 5, box 677, MSUVAG, MSUA. For the fallout from the report, see Gloria Emerson, *Winners and Losers: Battles, Retreats, Gains, Losses and Ruins from a Long War* (New York: Random House, 1976), 282-284. Hickey later recalled that Wolf Ladejinsky denounced the report as "the worst ever issued" by the MSUG; see Gerald Hickey, *Window on a War: an anthropologist in the Vietnam conflict* (Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 2002), 66-67.
62. "Considerations Involved in Continued U.S. Aid Support to Economic Land Development," 22 Oct 1957, folder 10809, PTTĐN, TTLTQG2.
63. Montgomery, *Politics of Foreign Aid*, 79.
64. *Ibid.*, 77-78, 80.
65. Henderson, "The Republic of Vietnam Land Development Program," 123; Montgomery, *Politics of Foreign Aid*, 73-74.

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66. Ngo Dinh Nhu, quoted in *Le Journal D'Extrême Orient*, 3 Jun 1958.
67. "Considerations Involved in Continued U.S. Aid Support to Economic Land Development."
68. Durbrow to SecState, 16 Feb 1960, in *FRUS* 1958–1960, 1:283–286.
69. MemCon, 25 Apr 1959, in *FRUS* 1958–1960, 1:188–190; Tel 2345, 6 May 1959, 751G.5/5–659, in *CF*, 1955–1959; Tel 2408, 14 May 1959, in *FRUS* 1958–1960, 1:194–195.
70. South Vietnamese rice production and the RVN's balance of payments improved as U.S. aid totals declined during 1958–1960; see United States Operations Mission to Vietnam, *Annual Statistical Bulletin No. 4: Data through 1960* (May 1961), vi, xx–xxi; see also Carter, *Inventing Vietnam*, 147–148.
71. Elliott, *Vietnamese War*, 1:166–168.
72. The regime's attempts to find the "right" balance between incentives and coercion was reflected in the volatility of Ngo Dinh Nhu's views on such subjects; see Thomas Ahern, *CIA and the House of Ngo: Covert Action in South Vietnam, 1954–63* (Washington, DC: Center for the Study of Intelligence, 2000), 124, 131.
73. Ngô Đình Diệm, Double-Seven Day Address of 7 Jul 1959, in *CĐCN*, 5:107–112, esp. 110. On the derivation of "agroville," see Joseph J. Zasloff, "Rural Resettlement in Vietnam: An Agrovillage in Development" (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of State, 1962), 9 n. 1.
74. Diem, quoted in Memorandum of Meeting on 28 Dec 1955, in *FRUS* 1955–1957, 1:611. See also official letter no. 5409-BNV/CT-16-M, IntMin to Province Chiefs, 14 Jul 1959, folder 6350, PTTĐN, TTLTQG2.
75. "Viet Nam's Agrovillages," *TOVN Magazine*, 12 Mar 1960.
76. Ngô Đình Diệm, "Điển-văn đọc trong lễ khánh thành Khu Trù Mật Vị Thanh-Hòa Lộ," 12 Mar 1960, in *CĐCN*, 6:93.
77. Quách Tòng Đức, "Khu Trù Mật," *Nghiên-Cửu Hành-Chánh* 3, no. 10 (Oct 1959): I–XII.
78. "Khu Trù Mật," n.d., folder 8, box 6, Donnell Collection, VA, TTU; Zasloff, "Rural Resettlement in Vietnam," 1–2.
79. Catton, *Diem's Final Failure*, 65; Zasloff, "Rural Resettlement in Vietnam," 6–8.
80. Nguyễn Khắc Nhãn, "Policy of Key Rural Agrovillages," *Asian Culture* 3, nos. 3–4 (Jul–Dec 1961), 31–33.
81. For the layout of the Vi Thanh-Hoa Luu agrovillage, see *Xây Dựng Mới* 8 (Jun 1960): 3–12. See also Despatch 436, 6 Jun 1960, in *FRUS* 1958–1960, 1:485–489.
82. Diệm, "Điển-văn đọc trong lễ khánh thành Khu Trù Mật Vị Thanh-Hòa Lộ," 95.
83. Tel 426, 6 Jun 1960 in *CĐCN*, 1:486.
84. Zasloff, "Rural Resettlement in Vietnam," 15–16.

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85. Ibid., 20–25.
86. Nguyễn Khắc Nhân, “Policy of Key Rural Agrovilles,” 13; Zasloff, “Rural Resettlement in Vietnam,” 18–20; Memcon, 26 Sep 1960, Enclosure to Desp 149, 7 Oct 1960, 751K.5/20–760, folder 14, box 02, Douglas Pike Collection, VVA, TTU.
87. Tel 2622, 10 Mar 1960, in *FRUS* 1958–1960, 1:325–328.
88. “Notes on Hamlets,” n.d., folder 12, box 06, John Donnell Collection, VVA, TTU; John C. Donnell and Gerald Hickey, “The Vietnamese ‘Strategic Hamlets’: A Preliminary Report,” Rand Corporation Report RM-3208 (Classified Version), Aug 1962, available at the website of the Defense Technical Information Center, <http://handle.dtic.mil/100.2/AD340001>, accessed October 15, 2012.
89. Diệm, “Diễn-văn đọc trong lễ khánh thành Khu Trù Mật Vị Thanh-Hòa Lộ,” 94.
90. “The Miracle of Vị Thanh,” *TOVN Magazine*, 21 Jan 1962. A 1963 RVN publication put the total number of agrovilles at 25 and the total population at 45,841; see *Thành Tích Chín Năm Hoạt Động của Chính Phủ VNCH* (Saigon: Mai Linh, 1963), 738.
91. Tel 2885, 8 Apr 1960; Enclosure to Despatch 426, 6 Jun 1960; Desp 149, 7 Oct 1960, all in *FRUS* 1958–1960, 1:378–379; 1:487; 1:589–591.
92. Zasloff, “Rural Resettlement in Vietnam,” 30.
93. Memcon, 26 Sep 1960, Enclosure to Desp 149, 7 Oct 1960, 751K.5/20–760, folder 14, box 02, Douglas Pike Collection, VVA, TTU; Tel 1466, 16 Mar 1961, in *FRUS* 1961–1963, 1:50.
94. Catton, *Diem’s Final Failure*, 93–95.
95. Letter 4237-TBA/KH/5, Lâm Văn Phát to Head of the Special General Staff at the Presidency, 13 Aug 1960, folder 6348, PTTĐN, TTLTQG2.

6. Countering Insurgents

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2. For official party accounts of Hà Minh Tri (alias “Mười Thương”) and his exploits, see “Chuyện về người chiến sĩ an ninh Mười Thương,” 2 Jan 2010, available at the website of Công An Nhân Dân newspaper, (CAND), www.cand.com.vn, accessed September 15, 2012; and Nguyen Hung Linh and Hoang Mac, *Lực Lượng chống Phản Động: Lịch Sử Biên Niên, 1954–1975* (Hanoi: Nhà Xuất Bản Công An, 1997), 63–64. See also Robert S. McNamara et al., *Argument without End: In Search of Answers to the Vietnam Tragedy* (New York: Public Affairs, 1999), 200.
3. David Elliott, *The Vietnamese War: Revolution and Social Change in the Mekong Delta, 1930–1975* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2003), 1:164–165.

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4. Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (New York: Viking Press, 1983), 252; Thomas L. Ahern, Jr., *Vietnam Declassified: The CIA and Counterinsurgency* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2010), 26–27.
5. Robert Shaplen, *The Lost Revolution: The U.S. and Vietnam, 1946–1966*, rev. ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), 113.
6. Philip Catton, *Diem's Final Failure: Prelude to America's War in Vietnam* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2002), 46–47; MemCon, 5 Apr 1957, in *FRUS 1955–1957*, 1:774.
7. MemCon, 28 Dec 1955, in *FRUS 1955–1957*, 1:602–603.
8. Trần Văn Đôn, *Việt Nam Nhân Chúng: Hồi ký chánh tri* (Los Alamitos, CA: Xuân Thu, 1989), 100–104; Tôn Thất Đình, *25 Năm Bình Nghiệp* (San Jose, CA: Chanh Dao, 1998), 128–132, 149–161.
9. MemCon, 9 May 1957, in *FRUS 1955–1957*, 1:794–799; MemCon, 10 May 1957 in *FRUS 1955–1957*, 1:807–811.
10. On RVN operations in Laos, see Võ Văn Minh et al., *Quan Khu 4: Lịch Sử Kháng Chiến Chống Mỹ Cứu Nước, 1954–1975* (Hanoi: Nhà Xuất Bản Quân Đội Nhân Dân, 1994), 14–17; see also Tel 229, Nolting to DepState, 14 Aug 1961, in *FRUS 1961–1963*, 1:280; and Edward Miller, “The Diplomacy of Personalism: Civilization, Culture, and the Cold War in the Foreign Policy of Ngo Dinh Diem,” in *Connecting Histories: Decolonization and the Cold War in Southeast Asia, 1945–1962*, ed. Christopher Goscha and Christian Ostermann (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), 386–388.
11. Memcon, 27 Jan 1956, in *FRUS 1955–1957*, 1:610–614.
12. Anne Miller “And One for the People: The Life Story of President Ngo Dinh Diem (Part 1),” unpublished manuscript drafted c. 1955, 46, folder 2, box 5, Pike Collection, VVA, TTU, 359–373.
13. *Ibid.*, 371. Diem’s remarks were likely inspired by Proverbs 1:7: “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and discipline.”
14. Circular 115-a/TTP/VP, 24 Oct 1956, included in “The Role of the Province Chief in South Viet-Nam,” 24 October 1968, Folder 20, Box 03, Glenn Helm Collection, VVA, TTU.
15. See, for example, Bernard Fall, *Street Without Joy* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1994; orig. published 1961), 343–345; Andrew Krepinevich, *The Army and Vietnam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 21; Ronald H. Spector, *Advice and Support: The Early Years, 1941–1960* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, 1983), 268–274; Michael Shafer, *Deadly Paradigms: The Failure of U.S. Counterinsurgency* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), 244–245; and Neil Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 1988), 49–55, 59, 106–108.

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16. Robert K. Brigham, *ARVN: Life and Death in the South Vietnamese Army* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2006), 5–6.
17. Memcon, 28 Dec 1955, in *FRUS*, 1955–1957, 1: 605; see also Samuel T. Williams, Paper on Guerrilla Operations, in *ibid.*, 606–610. On U.S. counterinsurgency doctrine during the 1950s, see Andrew J. Birtle, *U.S. Army Counterinsurgency and Contingency Operations Doctrine, 1942–1976* (Washington: Center of Military History, 2006), Chapters 3–4.
18. Spector, *Advice and Support*, 320–325; William Rosenau, *U.S. Internal Security Assistance to South Vietnam: Insurgency, Subversion and Public Order* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 60–76; David Anderson, *Trapped by Success: The Eisenhower Administration and Vietnam, 1953–1961* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 147–148; John Ernst, *Forging a Fateful Alliance: Michigan State University and the Vietnam War* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1998), 78–80.
19. Spector, *Advice and Support*, 321–322; Rosenau, *U.S. Internal Security Assistance*, 65–66; David Halberstam, *The Making of a Quagmire* (New York: Random House, 1965); *PP* (Gravel ed.), 2:138.
20. Only about twenty thousand of the sixty-eight thousand men slated for inclusion in the Guard were northerners; see “Biên-bàn phiên họp dự-bị về việc thống nhất tổ-chức các lực-lượng Bình-trị Bắc-Trung-Nam,” Mar 1955, folder 3991, PTTĐN, TTTLQG2; see also Tel 3162, 3 Feb 1955, in *FRUS* 1955–1957, 1:76–78.
21. “Note au subject de la reorganization du Corps de Milice dénomé GARDE CIVILE,” Mar 1955, folder 3991, PTT, TTTLQG2; 250/TBA/VP/TM, Trần Tư Oai to Diệm, 25 Feb 1957, folder 4698, PTTĐN, TTTLQG2; “Organization of the Civil Guard,” 2 Nov 1957, folder 12, box 638, MSUVAG Records, MSUA; Lê Khương, “Đề Án Xin Viện Trợ Mỹ niên khóa 1958, 1959,” 6 Mar 1958, folder 1404, PTTĐN, TTTLQG2; Rosenau, *U.S. Internal Security Assistance*, 69.
22. Howard W. Hoyt et al., “Work Plan: Police Administration,” 29 Aug 1955, Cornell University Library.
23. Rosenau, *U.S. Internal Security Assistance*, 5.
24. Michigan State University Police Advisory Staff, “Organization of the Law Enforcing Agencies of the Republic of Vietnam,” Apr 1956, iv, 9–10, Harvard Law School Library; John Montgomery, *The Politics of Foreign Aid: American Experience in Southeast Asia* (New York: Praeger, 1962), 66. Rosenau, *U.S. Internal Security Assistance*, 62.
25. Hoyt to Fishel, 14 Sep 1956, folder 58, box 637, MSUVAG, MSUA; “GVN Proposed Civil Guard Statute,” 7 Nov 1957, folder 30, box 1197, Fishel Papers, MSUA.
26. Spector, *Advice and Support*, 322.

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27. Rosenau, U.S. *Internal Security Assistance*, 70; Williams to Lansdale, 9 May 1960, in *FRUS 1958–1960*, 1:442–445.
28. Smuckler to MSUG Coordinator, 5 Jun 1958, folder 68, box 627, MSUVAG, MSUA.
29. Lâm Văn Phát to Special General Staff, 13 Aug 1960, folder 6348, PTTĐNCH, TTLTQG2.
30. Desp 278, 7 Mar 1960, in *FRUS 1958–1960*, 1:318; Lemnitzer to Taylor, 12 Oct 1961, *PP* (Gravel ed.), 2: 650–651.
31. Geoffrey Stewart, “Revolution, Modernization and Nation-Building in Diệm’s Vietnam: Civic Action, 1955–1963” (Ph.D. diss., University of Western Ontario, 2009); see pp. 66–85 on the origins of the commission. See also Stewart, “Hearts, Minds, and Công Dân Vụ: The Special Commissariat for Civic Action and Nation-Building in Ngô Đình Diệm’s Vietnam,” *JVS* 6, no. 3 (2011): 44–100.
32. Lansdale himself was the most enthusiastic American proponent of the RVN Civic Action program, which he claimed was compatible with his ideas about psywar and counterinsurgency. But his proposals were resisted by USOM officials, who doubted the program’s utility. Lansdale, *In the Midst of Wars*, 207–213; Rufus Phillips, *Why Vietnam Matters* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2009), 74–77, 85–86.
33. Stewart, “Hearts, Minds, and Công Dân Vụ,” 86–94; “Civic Action and Community Development,” 22 Mar 1957, folder 3, box 638, MSUVAG, MSUA.
34. Edward Lansdale, “Civic Action,” 6 Sep 1955, folder 58, box 1191, FP, MSUA.
35. Stewart, “Hearts, Minds and Công Dân Vụ,” 66–67.
36. Elliott, *Vietnamese War*, 1:188–189.
37. Jeffrey Race, *War Comes to Long An: Revolutionary Conflict in a Vietnamese Province* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), 26.
38. CBVNCH, 28 Jan 1956, 199–200; CBVNCH, 25 Aug 1956, 2047–2049.
39. A 1960 RVN report put the number of communists arrested since 1954 at 48,200, while a 1961 publication suggested that the combined total of arrests and deaths at the hands of security forces was above 60,000; see Georges Chaffard, *Indochine: Dix ans d’indépendance* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1964), 168–169; and *Seven Years of the Ngo Dinh Diem Administration, 1954–1961* (Saigon: Information Printing Office, 1961), 182–185. Such figures seem roughly consistent with information collected by USOM police advisors, who found in 1963 that suspected communists made up about 70 percent of the nearly thirty thousand people held in South Vietnamese prisons; see USOM Public Safety Division, “The Rehabilitation System of Vietnam: A Report,” 1 Oct 1963 (Microfilming Corp. of America, 1976), 15–16.
40. “A Party Account of the Situation in the Nam Bo Region of South Vietnam from 1954–1960,” folder 01, box 01, Douglas Pike Collection: unit 6, VVA, TTU.

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41. Military History Institute of Vietnam, *Victory in Vietnam: The Official History of the People's Army of Vietnam, 1954-1975*, trans. Merle Pribbenow (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002), 44; Nguyễn Việt Tá et al., *Miền Đông Nam Bộ Kháng Chiến, 1945-1975* (Hanoi: Nhà Xuất Bản Quân Đội Nhân Dân, 1993); author interview with Phạm Xuân An, 11 Jan 2005, Ho Chi Minh City.
42. Elliott, *Vietnamese War*, 1:180-195; Race, *War Comes to Long An*, 46-48, 65-67; USOM Public Safety Division, "Rehabilitation System of Vietnam," 15; Memorandum for the Record, 22 Sep 1958, folder 15, box 681, MSUVAG, MSUA.
43. USOM PSD, "Rehabilitation System of Vietnam," 18-28; Jeremy Kuzmarov, "Modernizing Repression: Police Training, Political Violence and Nation-Building in the 'American Century,'" *Diplomatic History* 33, no. 2 (2009): 216.
44. Race, *War Comes to Long An*, 67; Elliott, *Vietnamese War*, 392; Le Ly Hayslip, *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places* (New York: Doubleday, 1989), 82-84; "Political Prisoners in Vietnam Tell of Torture," *NYT*, 9 Nov 1963.
45. USOM PSD, "The Rehabilitation System of Vietnam," 29.
46. *Saigon Post*, 24 Jun 1964; "Saigon's Zoo is a haven of calm in a nervous, war-torn capital," *NYT*, 4 Dec 1966; Nguyễn Huồng, "Đại tá tình báo Nguyễn Minh Vân: Những hồi ức khốc liệt," 30 Apr 2011, <http://tuanvietnam.vietnam-net.vn/2011-04-25-dai-ta-tinh-bao-nguyen-minh-van-nhung-hoi-uc-khoc-liet>, accessed October 17, 2012).
47. For the text of Law 10/59, see Luther Allen and Pham Ngoc Anh, *A Vietnamese District Chief in Action* (Washington, DC: USAID, 1963), 69-71. On the "Elimination of Traitors" campaign, see Race, *War Comes to Long An*, 82-84; Carlyle A. Thayer, *War by Other Means: National Liberation and Revolution in Viet-Nam, 1954-1960* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1989), 142-145.
48. Desp 441, 30 Jun 1959, 751G.5/6-3059, in *CF*, 1955-1959.
49. Elliott, *Vietnamese War*, 1:198; *PP* (Gravel ed.), 1:338; Desp. no. 1, Saigon to Dept State, 1 Jul 1959, in *FRUS* 1958-1960, 1:213-217.
50. See, for example, "General Giap's Document," in John Gerassi, *North Vietnam: A Documentary* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1968), 162-181.
51. Cao Van Vien and Dong Van Khuyen, *Reflections on the Vietnam War* (Washington, DC: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1980), 23.
52. Elliott, *Vietnamese War*, 1:212-257.
53. David Hunt, *Vietnam's Southern Revolution: From Peasant Insurrection to Total War* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2008).
54. For detailed accounts of the coup based on interviews with key participants, see William J. Rust, *Kennedy in Vietnam: American Vietnam Policy, 1960-63* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1985), 1-20; and Langguth, *Our Vietnam*. For Chi's account of the coup, see Nguyễn Chánh Thi, *Việt Nam, Một Trôi Tâm Sự* (Los Alamitos, CA: Anh Thu, 1987), 115-157.

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55. Langguth, *Our Vietnam*, 108–111. Tuyen’s actions during the early stages of the coup are detailed in “Phức Trình của Trung-Úy Lương Đình Chi thuộc Bộ Chỉ-Huy Viễn Thông QĐVNCH về việc chống bọn phản loạn Thi-Đông vừa qua,” Nov 1960, folder 6531, PTTĐNCH, TTLT2.
56. McGarr to Felt, 12 Nov 1960, in *FRUS* 1958–1960, 1:648; McGarr to Felt, 13 Nov 1960, in *FRUS* 1955–1957, 1:657–659.
57. Elliott, *Vietnamese War*, 1:234–235; *PP* (Gravel ed.), 1:333–336; Desp 278, Durbrow to DepState, 7 Mar 1960, in *FRUS* 1958–1960, 1:317.
58. Williams to Myers, 20 Mar 1960, in *FRUS* 1958–1960, 1:342–344; Military History Institute of Vietnam, *Victory in Vietnam*, 59.
59. Elliott, *Vietnamese War*, 1:241–270.
60. Robert Hanyok, *Spartans in Darkness: American SIGINT and the Vietnam War* (Washington DC: Center for Cryptologic History, 2002), 64.
61. Tran Van Don, *Our Endless War: Inside Vietnam* (San Rafael, CA: Presidio Press, 1978), 76.
62. Spector, *Advice and Support*, 333–335; Desp 251, 16 Feb 1960, in *FRUS* 1958–1960, 1:283–286.
63. Đỗ Mậu, *Việt-Nam máu lửa quê hương tôi* (Hương Quê, 1986), 399; Trần Văn Đôn, *Việt Nam Nhân Chứng*, 149–151.
64. For the Vietnamese text of the manifesto, see *Bách Khoa*, no. 165, 15 Nov 1963, 93. Contrary to later allegations, the embassy did not contribute to the writing of the manifesto: Tel 2981, 19 Apr 1960, in *FRUS* 1958–1960, 1:404–406; Thomas Ahern, *CIA and the House of Ngo: Covert Action in South Vietnam, 1954–63* (Washington, DC: Center for the Study of Intelligence, CIA, 2000), 134.
65. Tel 1019, 11 Nov 1960, in *FRUS* 1958–1960, 1:634; see also Karnow, *Vietnam*, 252. For Thi’s admission that he wanted to level the palace, see Nguyễn Chánh Thi, *Việt Nam*, 130–131, 153–154; see also Rust, *Kennedy in Vietnam*, 17–18; and Ahern, *CIA and the House of Ngo*, 142. For Dong’s account, see Vương Văn Đông and Nguyễn Huy Lợi, “The Coup d’état of November 11, 1960: The Beginning of a Journey,” paper presented at the tenth annual conference of the Vietnam Center, Texas Tech University, October 2003.
66. Rust, *Kennedy in Vietnam*, 12–14.
67. Gerald Hickey, *Window on a War: an anthropologist in the Vietnam conflict* (Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 2002), 65–67.
68. Rufus Phillips, email communication with author, February 2003.
69. Desp 57, 26 Aug 1955, 751G.13/8–2655, in *CF*, 1955–1959.
70. “Saigon 23126 doesn’t answer,” *Time*, 15 Nov 1963, 41–42.
71. Don, *Our Endless War*, 78.
72. Đôn, *Việt Nam Nhân Chứng*, 148.
73. Desp 57, 26 Aug 1955, 751G.13/8–2655, in *CF*, 1955–1959.
74. Đôn, *Việt Nam Nhân Chứng*, 148.

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75. “La situation au SUD-VIETNAM,” 30 Nov 1960, 9 Q4 337, SHAT; Đôn, *Việt Nam Nhân Chứng*, 156.
76. “Quelques aspects de la situation interieure au Sud-Vietnam,” 5 Jan 1961, 9 Q4 337, SHAT; Đôn, *Việt Nam Nhân Chứng*, 156.
77. Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie*, 122–123.
78. Tel 2884, 7 Apr 1960 and Tel 3196, 13 May 1960, in *FRUS* 1958–1960, 1:375–377, 453–457.
79. Tel 624, 16 Sep 1960 and Desp 157, 15 Oct 1960, in *FRUS* 1955–1957, 1:575–579, 598–604.
80. Lansdale to O'Donnell, 20 Sep 1960, in *FRUS* 1958–1960, 1:579–585.
81. Mark Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954–1965* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 105–108; Arthur Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience of the French and the Americans: Nationalism and Communism in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 413–415; and William Colby and James McCargar, *Lost Victory: A Firsthand Account of America's Sixteen-Year Involvement in Vietnam* (Chicago: Contemporary Books, 1989), 74–75. Some of Durbrow's American critics accused him of further alienating Diem by engaging in blatantly offensive behavior in front of him; see Phillips, *Why Vietnam Matters*, n4, 331.
82. Durbrow to SecState, 15 Oct 1960, in *FRUS* 1958–1960, 1:595–596.
83. Ahern, *CIA and the House of Ngo*, 140–143; Rust, *Kennedy in Vietnam*, 8–19; Tel 1049, 12 Nov 1960, in *FRUS* 1958–1960, 1:649–650.
84. Tel 1151, 4 Dec 1960, in *FRUS* 1958–1960, 1:707–711.

7. *Limited Partners*

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2. Robert McNamara, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* (New York: Times Books, 1995), 30.
3. John F. Kennedy, Inaugural Address, 20 Jan 1961, in *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: John F. Kennedy* (1961; reprint, Washington, DC: GPO, 1962), 1.
4. Andrew J. Birtle, *U.S. Army Counterinsurgency and Contingency Operations Doctrine, 1942–1976* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, U.S. Army, 2006), chap. 6; “wholly new kind of strategy” quotation on p. 225.
5. Roger Hilsman, *To Move a Nation: The Politics of Foreign Policy in the Administration of John F. Kennedy* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967), 424–427.

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6. David Milne, *America's Rasputin: Walt Rostow and the Vietnam War* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2008), chaps. 1–2; Nils Gilman, *Mandarins of the Future: Modernization Theory in Cold War America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 160–164, 190–202.
7. Walt W. Rostow, “Countering Guerrilla Attack” (1961), in *Modern Guerrilla Warfare: Fighting Communist Guerrilla Movements, 1941–1961*, ed. Franklin Mark Osanka (New York: Free Press of Glencoe, 1962), 464–471.
8. Birtle, *U.S. Army Counterinsurgency*, 238.
9. Milne, *America's Rasputin*, 96.
10. Bradley Simpson, *Economists with Guns: Authoritarian Development and U.S.-Indonesian Relations, 1960–1968* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008), 62–86; Gilman, *Mandarins of the Future*, 185–190.
11. John Newman, *JFK and Vietnam: Deception, Intrigue and the Struggle for Power* (New York: Warner Books, 1992), 3–7; Howard Jones, *Death of a Generation: How the Assassinations of Diem and JFK Prolonged the Vietnam War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 23–26; Cecil Currey, *Edward Lansdale: The Unquiet American* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1988), 226–230.
12. Hilsman to Rusk, undated memo, folder 12, box 3, Roger Hilsman Papers, JFKL.
13. Andrew Preston, *The War Council: McGeorge Bundy, the NSC and Vietnam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 106–107.
14. William Rust, *Kennedy in Vietnam: American Vietnam Policy, 1960–63* (New York: Da Capo, 1985), 74–75.
15. Hilsman, quoted in Preston, *War Council*, 106.
16. Milne, *America's Rasputin*, 9–10.
17. Preston, *War Council*, 88–128.
18. Tran Van Don, *Our Endless War: Inside Vietnam* (San Rafael, CA: Presidio Press, 1978), 76.
19. Nguyen Van Chau, “Ngô Đình Diệm en 1963: Une Autre Paix Manquée” (M.A. thesis, University of Paris VII, 1982), 94.
20. Thanh's downfall, which was engineered by Dr. Tuyen of SEPES, led to his reassignment to the post of RVN ambassador to Tunisia. Another high-profile casualty was Deputy Defense Minister Tran Trung Dung, who resigned in October 1960 to protest the growing involvement of the Can Lao in the ARVN; see Thomas P. H. Dunlop, “Biographic Note: Senator Tran Trung Dung, from a conversation during dinner, July 5, 1974,” Saigon Post Files, US Embassy, Saigon, Classified Chronological Files, RG 84, NARA; and “Alternative leadership in South Vietnam,” 11 Sep 1963, CK3100116607, DDRS.

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21. *TOVN Magazine*, 3 Jun 1961; “Thông Điệp của Tổng Thống VNCH về dịp Tết Tân Sửu,” in *CĐCN*, 7:35–36; and Đoàn Thêm, *Hai Mươi Năm Qua: Việc Từng Ngày, 1945–1964* (Los Alamitos, CA: Xuân Thu, 1986), 297.
22. Lemnitzer to JCS, 8 May 1961, in *FRUS 1961–1963*, 1:126–127; William Colby and James McCargar, *Lost Victory: A Firsthand Account of America’s Sixteen-Year Involvement in Vietnam* (Chicago: Contemporary Books, 1989), 116; Dennis Duncanson, *Government and Revolution in Vietnam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), 255–256; SDECE intelligence report, “Orientation Générale des Services Speciaux pour 1963–1964,” 16 Jul 1963, 10 T 976, SHAT.
23. *TOVN Magazine*, 22 Apr 1961.
24. “Paper Prepared by the Country Team Staff Committee,” 4 Jan 1961, in *FRUS 1961–1963*, 1:1–12; Durbrow to DepState, 13 Feb 1961, in *FRUS 1961–1963*, 1:31–32; Philip Catton, *Diem’s Final Failure: Prelude to America’s War in Vietnam* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002), 79–80; see also Jones, *Death of a Generation*, 35.
25. INR report, “A Critique of US Policy in Laos and South Vietnam,” 17 Apr 1961, quoted in “Vietnam, 1961–1968 as Interpreted in INR’s Production” (Washington, DC: INR, 1969), 6.
26. Memorandum, Rostow to Kennedy, 10 May 1961, in *FRUS 1961–1963*, 1:131–132; see also Milne, *America’s Rasputin*, 91–95.
27. “A Program of Action to Prevent Communist Domination of South Vietnam,” enclosure to memorandum, Gilpatric to Kennedy, 3 May 1961, in *FRUS 1961–1963*, 1:92–115.
28. Ibid. For Kennedy’s response, see NSAM no. 52, 11 May 1961, in *FRUS 1961–1963*, 1:132–134; see also Jones, *Death of a Generation*, 42–55.
29. Nolting to Bell, “Problems Involved in Implementation of Section 303 Military Assistance Programs,” 30 Mar 1950, RG 59, entry 1393 (storage location 250/49/28/01), NARA.
30. Frederick Nolting, *From Trust to Tragedy: The Political Memoirs of Fredrick Nolting, Kennedy’s Ambassador to Diem’s Vietnam* (New York: Praeger, 1988), 2, 23.
31. Nolting to DepState, 14 Jul 1961, in *FRUS 1961–1963*, 1:212–214.
32. Nolting to DepState, 13 May 1961, in *FRUS 1961–1963*, 1:136–138; see also Jones, *Death of a Generation*, 61; Nolting, *From Trust to Tragedy*, 20–22.
33. Diem to JFK, 15 May 1961, PP (DOD ed.), 11:155; and Diem to JFK, 9 Jun 1961, 11:167–173. See also “Vice President Johnson’s Talk with President Diem after Dinner May 12,” 15 May 1961, box 1, Classified Papers: Far East Trip, 1961, Vice Presidential Security File, LBJL.

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34. For the “Joint Program”—also called the Staley-Thuc plan, after the American and Vietnamese leaders of the team that developed it—see Special Financial Groups to Diem and JFK, 14 Jul 1961, in *FRUS 1961-1963*, 1:221-223; see also Kennedy to Diem, 5 Aug 1961, in *FRUS 1961-1963*, 1:263-267; and Nolting to DepState, 8 Aug 1961, in *FRUS 1961-1963*, 1:273.
35. Nolting to DepState, 20 Sep 1961, in *FRUS 1961-1963*, 1:305-306; Nolting to DepState, 1 Oct 1961, in *FRUS 1961-1963*, 1:316-317.
36. Jones, *Death of a Generation* 93-107 (p. 104 for “cloud of doom”); Rust, *Kennedy in Vietnam*, 44-49; Nolting to DepState, 18 Oct 1961, in *FRUS 1961-1963*, 391-392; and Taylor to DepState, 27 Oct 1961, in *FRUS 1961-1963*, 1:442.
37. Taylor to JFK, 3 Nov 1961, in *FRUS 1961-1963*, 1:477-532; esp. 481 and 491-495. For “other activities,” see Taylor to DepState, 25 Oct 1961, in *FRUS 1961-1963*, 1:430.
38. Milne, *America’s Rasputin*, 96; Jones, *Death of a Generation*, 114-134; David Kaiser, *American Tragedy: Kennedy, Johnson, and the Origins of the Vietnam War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 105-121; and “Notes on the NSC Meeting,” 15 Nov 1961, in *FRUS 1961-1963*, 1:607-610.
39. Preston, *War Council*, 101-107.
40. Nolting to DepState, 18 Nov 1961; Nolting to DepState, 22 Nov 1961; and CIA information report, 28 Nov 1961, all in *FRUS 1961-1963*, 1:642-644, 649-652, 689-691. See also “Saigon Daily Attacks Long-immune U.S.,” *WP*, 25 Nov 1961, and “Criticism of U.S. Aid Mounts in S. Vietnam,” *WP*, 28 Nov 1961.
41. Nolting to DepState, 25 Nov 1961; CIA information report, 29 Nov 1961; Nolting to DepState, 3 Dec 1961; all in *FRUS 1961-1963*, 1:666-668, 692-693, 708-712; see also Tel 756, Saigon to SecState, 4 Dec 1961, CK3100191354, DDRS.
42. Reports in Saigon newspapers in mid-November hopefully suggested that U.S. troops would soon arrive in South Vietnam; Nolting to DepState, 16 Nov 1961, in *FRUS 1961-1963*, 1:618-619.
43. Rufus C. Phillips, Memorandum for the Record, 8 Jun 1963 (copy provided to the author by Mr. Phillips). For the “psychological shock,” see Lansdale to Taylor, 21 Oct 1961, in *FRUS 1961-1963*, 1:411-416. For an illuminating discussion of Nhu’s fears that the United States would first increase its involvement in South Vietnam and then “cut and run,” see Catton, *Diem’s Final Failure*, 158.
44. Thomas Ahern, *CIA and the House of Ngo: Covert Action in South Vietnam, 1954-63* (Washington, DC: Center for the Study of Intelligence, CIA, 2000), 136, 138; Colby and McCargar, *Lost Victory*, 99-100; Catton, *Diem’s Final Failure*, 86-97.

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45. Author interview with Nguyễn Hữu Phước, 7 Jan 2006, Manville, New Jersey.
46. IMCSH Minutes no. 12, 4 May 1962, 26–27; copies of these minutes are available in the Pike Collection, VVA, TTU. See also Catton, *Diem's Final Failure*, 93–94.
47. Catton, *Diem's Final Failure*, 90–91, 96–97; Peter Busch, *All the Way with JFK? Britain, the US, and the Vietnam War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 115–124; MemCon, June 24, 1960, in *FRUS*, 1958–1960, 1:504–505; Edward Miller, “The Diplomacy of Personalism: Civilization, Culture, and the Cold War in the Foreign Policy of Ngô Đình Diệm,” in *Connecting Histories: Decolonization and the Cold War in Southeast Asia, 1945–1962*, ed. Christopher Goscha and Christian Ostermann (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), 392–393. On the “fenced hamlets” (*ấp rào*), see IMCSH Minutes no. 2, 23 Feb 1962, 6–7.
48. Roger Trinquier, *Modern Warfare: A French View of Counterinsurgency*, trans. Daniel Lee (New York: Praeger, 1964), 4.
49. *Ibid.*, 29–35, 71–80. Trinquier used the terms “village” and “hamlet” interchangeably; this differed from Vietnamese practice, where a hamlet (*ấp*) was an administrative subunit of a village (*xã*).
50. “From Strategic Hamlets to Self-Defense Village,” (translated from Vietnamese), n.d., folder 05, box 02, Vladimir Lehovitch Collection, VVA, TTU. Other sources confirm that this document was written by Nhu in mid-1962 and translated by USOM; see George Kahin, *Governments and Politics of Southeast Asia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1964), 445 n. 3; Rufus Phillips, *Why Vietnam Matters: An Eyewitness Account of Lessons Not Learned* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2008), 112.
51. *TOVN Magazine*, 25 Feb 1962.
52. IMCSH Minutes no. 1, 12 Feb 1962, 7.
53. On the importance of social and political transformation vis-à-vis increased living standards, see IMCSH Minutes no. 16, 21. On the “triple revolution,” see IMCSH Minutes no. 17, 18; see also Ngô Đình Diệm, Double-Seven Day Address, 7 July 1962, in *CĐCN*, 8:122–128. On the importance of “popular self-sufficiency” in the program’s official rhetoric, see Catton, *Diem's Final Failure*, 119.
54. IMCSH Minutes no. 16, 13 Jul 1962.
55. “From Strategic Hamlets to Self-Defense Village.”
56. “The Strategic Hamlet and Military Policy,” *TOVN Magazine*, 28 Oct 1962, 38–39; IMCSH Minutes no. 19, 31 Aug 1962, 4–9.
57. IMCSH Minutes no. 3, 2 Mar 1962, 18–19; Nhu, “From Strategic Hamlets to Self-Defense Village,” 45.
58. IMCSH Minutes no. 16, 13 Jul 1962, 21.
59. *Ibid.*, 22, 27.

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60. Ngo Dinh Nhu, "Industrialization: Prerequisite to Self-Sufficiency," *TOVN Magazine*, 5 May 1963.
61. "Translation of Decree Establishing Interministerial Committee for Strategic Hamlets," 3 Feb 1962, folder 12, box 6, Donnell Collection, VVA, TTU; Catton, *Diem's Final Failure*, 91-97.
62. Hoang Van Lac, "Blind Design," in *Prelude to Tragedy: Vietnam, 1960-1965*, ed. Harvey Neese and John O'Donnell (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2001), 70-71. For Nhu's frustration at the committee's inability to understand his thinking, see IMCSH Minutes no. 21, 14 Sep 1962, 21.
63. Memcon, 10 Sep 1962, in *FRUS 1961-1963*, 2:622-633.
64. Thomas Ahern, *Vietnam Declassified: The CIA and Counterinsurgency* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2010), 39-76; see also Colby and McCargar, *Lost Victory*, 85-86, 99-103.
65. Roger Hilsman, "A Strategic Concept for South Vietnam," 2 Feb 1962, in *FRUS 1961-1963*, 2:73-90; for Hilsman's attempt to fit the hamlet program into the Malayan model, see *To Move a Nation*, 429-435.
66. Phillips, *Why Vietnam Matters*, 106-111.
67. Rufus Phillips, "A Report on Counter-insurgency in Vietnam," 31 Aug 1962, folder 3, box 9, Hilsman Papers, JFKL; Phillips, *Why Vietnam Matters*, 113-117.
68. Phillips, "Report on Counter-insurgency in Vietnam"; Phillips, *Why Vietnam Matters*, 117-120.
69. *Ibid.*, 114, 122-125.
70. *Ibid.*, 135-137; USOM Office of Rural Affairs, "USOM Provincial Representatives Guide," Dec 1962, folder 15, box 2, Larry Flanagan Collection, VVA, TTU.
71. "Notes on Strategic Hamlets," n.d., folder 3, box 3, Pike Collection: unit 02, VVA, TTU.
72. Phillips, *Why Vietnam Matters*, 337 n. 18.
73. Nhu, "From Strategic Hamlets to Self-Defense Village"; "Status of the Free Election Principle in Strategic Hamlets on 28 November 1962," 29 Nov 1962, box 197, NSF, JFKL.
74. Douglas Pike, *Viet Cong: The Organization and Techniques of the National Liberation Front* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1967), 67.
75. Douglas Blaufarb, *The Counterinsurgency Era: U.S. Doctrine and Performance, 1950 to the Present* (New York: Free Press, 1977), 111; Duncanson, *Government and Revolution in Vietnam*, 317-318.
76. Phillips, *Why Vietnam Matters*, 137.
77. *Ibid.*, 129, 134-135, 335 n. 13; Rufus Phillips, "Financing and the Future of the Counter-Insurgency Effort in Vietnam," 30 Apr 1963, box 40, folder 1079, ELP, HIA.

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78. Phillips to Brent, 1 May 1963, in *FRUS* 1961–1963, 3:256–258; “Notes on: ‘Notes on Strategic Hamlets’ and on New Life Hamlets,” 15 Aug 1964, folder 1592, box 61, ELP, HIA; “Some Comments on the Counter-Insurgency Program of Vietnam and USOM,” n.d., folder 1308, box 46, ELP, HIA; Phillips, “Financing and the Future of the Counter-insurgency Effort in Vietnam.”
79. Catton, *Diem’s Final Failure*, 141.

8. Mixed Signals

1. Lý Tong Bá, *Hồi ký 25 năm khói lửa của một tướng cầm quân tại mặt trận* (San Marcos, CA: author, 1995), 58. David Elliott, *The Vietnamese War: Revolution and Social Change in the Mekong Delta, 1930–1975* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2003), 1: 385–395.
2. Philip Catton, *Diem’s Final Failure: Prelude to America’s War in Vietnam* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas), 133; Military History Institute of Vietnam, *Victory in Vietnam: The Official History of the People’s Army of Vietnam, 1954–1975*, trans. Merle Pribbenow (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002), 109–110.
3. R. K. G. Thompson, memorandum, 11 Mar 1963, folder 14, box 3, Roger Hilsman Papers, JFKL.
4. Harold P. Ford, *CIA and the Vietnam Policymakers: Three Episodes, 1962–1968* (Langley, VA: History Staff, Center for the Study of Intelligence, Central Intelligence Agency, 1998), 19.
5. Catton, *Diem’s Final Failure*, 136.
6. Rufus Phillips, Memcon, 30 Apr 1963, folder 1079, box 40, ELP, HIA.
7. Jeffrey Race, *War Comes to Long An: Revolutionary Conflict in a Vietnamese Province* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), 131–134, 192–193; Catton, *Diem’s Final Failure*, 163–183; John C. Donnell and Gerald Hickey, “The Vietnamese ‘Strategic Hamlets’: A Preliminary Report,” Rand Corporation report RM-3208 (classified version), Aug 1962, available at the website of the Defense Technical Information Center, <http://handle.dtic.mil/100.2/AD340001>, accessed October 19, 2012. John O’Donnell, “The Strategic Hamlet Program in Kien Hoa Province, South Vietnam: A Case Study of Counter-Insurgency,” 11 May 1965, in *Southeast Asian Tribes, Minorities and Nations*, ed. Peter Kunstadter (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1967), chap. 18.
8. Elliott, *Vietnamese War*, 1:395–406.
9. Neil Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 1988), 201–266; David Toczek, *The Battle of Ap Bac, Vietnam: They Did Everything but Learn from It* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2001), 65–108. For the view that the battle was actually an ARVN

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- victory, see Mark Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954-1965* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 186-205.
10. On ARVN gains in central Vietnam, see Lu Lan, "The People's War or War on the People?," in *Prelude to Tragedy: Vietnam, 1960-1965*, ed. Harvey Neese and John O'Donnell (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2001), 147-149; and Military History Institute of Vietnam, *Victory in Vietnam*, 112.
 11. "Indication of Planning for the Reoccupation of North Vietnam," 20 Nov 1962, box 197, NSF, JFKL.
 12. "Comments of President Diem on the Situation in Southeast Asia," 14 Nov 1962, box 197, NSF, JFKL; Memcon, 21 Oct 1962, in *FRUS 1961-1963*, 2:707-716.
 13. Sheehan, *Bright Shining Lie*, 120-125; Toczec, *Battle of Ap Bac*, 46; David Kaiser, *American Tragedy: Kennedy, Johnson, and the Origins of the Vietnam War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 181-185. On the circulation of these rumors prior to Ap Bac, see Heavner, "Visit to Vietnam, October 18-November 26, 1962," 11 Dec 1962, in *FRUS 1961-1963*, 2:776-777.
 14. Thomas Ahern, *CIA and the House of Ngo: Covert Action in South Vietnam, 1954-63* (Washington, DC: Center for the Study of Intelligence, CIA, 2000), 163.
 15. ARVN General Staff, "Báo cáo trận đánh Ấp Bắc ngày 2/1/63 của VC," 20 Apr 1963, folder 8141, PTTĐN, TTLTQG2.
 16. CMQG, 8, 9, and 14 Jan 1963.
 17. CIA Intelligence Report, "Views of Ngo Dinh Nhu on the War, Americans in South Vietnam and Critics of the Diem Regime," 6 Mar 1963, box 197, NSF, JFKL.
 18. Warren Unna, "Viet-Nam Wants 50% of GIs Out," WP, 12 May 1963.
 19. Rufus Phillips, Memcon with Ngo Dinh Nhu, 7 May 1963, folder 1080, box 40, ELP, HIA.
 20. Nolting to DepState, 5 Apr 1963, in *FRUS 1961-1963*, 3:207-213.
 21. "Vietnam and Southeast Asia: Report of Senator Mike Mansfield et al. to the Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate," 88th Congress, 1st Session (Washington, DC: GPO, 1963), 8.
 22. RVN Foreign Ministry Report no. 188/CT/MC/M, "Tờ Trình Kính Đề Tờng Thống Việt Nam Cộng Hòa về Phản Ứng ở Hoa Kỳ đối với bản phúc trình của Thượng Nghị Sĩ MANSFIELD," 12 Mar 1963, folder 9379, PTTĐN, TTLTQG2; CMQG, 26 Mar 1963.
 23. Memorandum for the Record, 12 Apr 1963, in *FRUS 1961-1963*, 3:222-225. See also CMQG, 3 May 1963.
 24. TDCSDB-3/654,285, 22 Apr 1963, in *FRUS 1961-1963*, 3:246-247.
 25. IMCSH, no. 43, 5 Apr 1963.
 26. "Ngo Dinh Nhu's Statements on Withdrawal of U.S. aid," 20 Apr 1963, box 197A, NSF, JFKL.

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27. Lodge to DepState, 7 Oct 1963, in *FRUS 1961-1963*, 4:385-386.
28. Nolting to SecState, 21 Feb 1963, box 197, NSF, JFKL; Nolting to DepState, 28 Mar 1963, in *FRUS 1961-1963*, 3: 183-184; Bolting to DepState, 5 Apr 1963, in *FRUS 1961-1963*, 3:207-213.
29. Rufus Phillips, "Before We Lost in South Vietnam," in Neese and O'Donnell, *Prelude to Tragedy*, 28.
30. Rufus Phillips, *Why Vietnam Matters: An Eyewitness Account of Lessons Not Learned* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2008), 148; emphasis in original.
31. Rufus Phillips, memorandum, 30 Apr 1963, folder 1079, box 40, ELP, HIA.
32. Phillips to Lansdale, 4 May 1963, folder 1079, box 40, ELP, HIA.
33. "Views of Ngo Dinh Nhu on the Mansfield Report, and on American Aid and Presence in South Vietnam," 2 Apr 1963, box 197A, NSF, JFKL; "Comments on Ngo Dinh Nhu on Decreasing the Number of Americans in South Vietnam and on American Aid," 24 Apr 1963, box 197A, NSF, JFKL.
34. "Address by Madame Nhu at the Ceremony Commemorating the Trung Sisters," *TOVN Magazine*, 3 Mar 1963, 3; Nolting to DepState, 13 Apr 1963, in *FRUS 1961-1963*, 3:225-226.
35. Charles Mohr, "The Queen Bee," *Time*, 9 Aug 1963. Madame Nhu later wrote about this episode in an unpublished memoir; author email correspondence with Monique Demery, 26 Apr 2011.
36. Bernard Fall, *The Two Viet-Nams: A Political and Military Analysis* (New York: Praeger, 1964), 265; Robert Scigliano, *South Vietnam: Nation under Stress* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1963), 44-45.
37. Nguyen Thai, *Is South Vietnam Viable?* (Manila: Carmelo and Bauerman, 1962), 181-184.
38. See, for example, "Dainty Emancipator," *Time*, 26 Jan 1959.
39. Anne Raffin, *Youth Mobilization in Vichy Indochina and its Legacies, 1940 to 1970* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2005), 210-214; *TOVN Magazine*, 18 Mar 1962.
40. Sully himself suggested this following his expulsion; see Francois Sully, "Vietnam: Two Views, Official . . . and Unofficial," *Newsweek*, 24 Sep 1962.
41. Unna, "Viet-Nam Wants 50% of GIs Out."
42. Hilsman to Nolting, 16 May 1963, cited in *FRUS 1961-1963*, 3:295 n. 4; Fredrik Logevall, *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 5.
43. *TOVN*, 10 May 1963; *CMQG*, 10 May 1963.
44. On the "Kennedy withdrawal," see Marc J. Selverstone, "It's a Date: Kennedy and the Timetable for a Vietnam Troop Withdrawal," *DH*, 34 (2010): 485-495; see also James G. Blight, Janet M. Lang, and David A. Welch, *Virtual JFK*:

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- Vietnam If Kennedy Had Lived* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2009), chap. 4.
45. Lalouette to MAE, “Interview de N. NGO DINH NHU par le correspondant du WASHINGTON POST,” 22 May 1963 (Subseries: Sud-Viêtnam), VLC, MAE; Rusk to Saigon, 17 May 1963, in *FRUS 1961–1963*, 3:309 n. 3.
 46. *Press Interviews with President Ngo Dinh Diem and Political Counselor Ngo Dinh Nhu* (Saigon: Republic of Vietnam, 1963).
 47. Catton, *Diem’s Final Failure*, 157–160; Nolting to Thuan, 10 May 1963, in *FRUS 1961–1963*, 3:289–290.
 48. Phillips, *Why Vietnam Matters*, 147–151; Phillips, Memcon with Ngo Dinh Nhu; Office for Rural Affairs/USOM, “Rural Affairs Meeting with Counselor Nhu on 29 May 1963,” 8 Jun 1963 (copy provided to the author by Mr. Rufus Phillips).
 49. For eyewitness accounts of the May 8 incident, see Vũ Văn Mẫu, *Sáu Tháng Pháp Nạn 1963* (Garden Grove, CA: Giao Điểm, 2003), 78–80, 125–130. See also Pham Van Luu, “The Buddhist Crises in Vietnam, 1963–1966” (Ph.D. diss., Monash University, 1991), 30–45.
 50. Quốc Tuệ, *Công Cuộc Tranh-Đấu của Phật-Giáo Việt-Nam từ Phật-Đàn đến Cách-Mạng 1963* (Bagneux, France: Chùa Khánh Anh, 1987), 45; Ellen Hammer, *A Death in November: America in Vietnam, 1963* (New York: Dutton, 1987), 113–114.
 51. David Halberstam, *The Making of a Quagmire* (New York: Random House, 1965), esp. chaps. 13 and 14; Sheehan, *Bright Shining Lie*, book 4; Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (New York: Viking Press, 1983), chap. 8; Seth Jacobs, *Cold War Mandarin: Ngo Dinh Diem and the Origins of America’s War in Vietnam, 1950–1963* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006), 142–154.
 52. Jerrold Schecter, *The New Face of Buddha: Buddhism and Political Power in Southeast Asia* (New York: Coward-McCann, 1967), chaps. 8–10; Dennis Duncanson, *Government and Revolution in Vietnam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), 327–341; Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken*, chap. 9.
 53. Frances FitzGerald, *Fire in the Lake: The Vietnamese and the Americans in Vietnam* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1972), 131–132; Pierre Gheddo, *The Cross and the Bo-Tree: Catholics and Buddhists in Vietnam*, trans. Charles Underhill Quinn (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1970), chap. 5.
 54. Robert Topmiller, *The Lotus Unleashed: The Buddhist Peace Movement in South Vietnam, 1964–1966* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2002); Chan Khong, *Learning True Love: How I Learned and Practiced Social Change in Vietnam* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1993).
 55. The remainder of this chapter is based on research on the 1963 Buddhist movement that I have presented in more detail elsewhere; see Edward Miller,

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- “Religious Revival and the Politics of Nation Building: Re-interpreting the 1963 ‘Buddhist Crisis’ in South Vietnam,” MAS, forthcoming in 2013.
56. Important recent studies of the Buddhist Revival include Elise Anne Devido, “‘Buddhism for This World’: The Buddhist Revival in Vietnam, 1920 to 1951, and Its Legacy,” in *Modernity and Re-Enchantment: Religion in Post-revolutionary Vietnam*, ed. Philip Taylor (Singapore: ISEAS, 2007), 250–296; Shawn McHale, *Print and Power: Confucianism, Communism and Buddhism in the Making of Modern Vietnam* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2004), 157–164; Thien Do, “The Quest for Enlightenment and Cultural Identity: Buddhism in Contemporary Vietnam,” in *Buddhism and Politics in Twentieth-Century Asia*, ed. Ian Harris (London: Pinter, 1999), 254–280. For works by participants in the revival, see Thích Thiện Hoa, *50 Năm Chấn Hưng Phật Giáo Việt Nam*, vol. 1 (Saigon: Viện Hóa Đạo, 1970); Trí Quang, *Tăng-già Việt-Nam* (Los Angeles: Trung Tâm Văn Hoá Phật Giáo Việt Nam, 1986); and especially Nguyễn Lang [Thích Nhất Hạnh], *Việt Nam Phật Giáo Sử Luận*, vol. 3 (1988; reprint, Hanoi: Nhà Xuất Bản Văn Học, 2000).
 57. Editorial in *Phật Giáo Việt Nam*, no. 1 (1956): 3–5. On the founding of the GBA, see Mai Thọ Truyền, *Le Bouddhisme au Viêt-Nam* (Saigon: Xá Lợi Pagoda, 1962), 32–33, 50; on the rise of a Buddhist nationalist narrative, see Cuong Tu Nguyen, *Zen in Medieval Vietnam: A Study and Translation of the Thiện Uyển Tập Anh* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1997), 21–23.
 58. Nguyễn Thê Anh, “L’engagement politique du Bouddhisme au Sud Viêt-Nam dans les années 1960,” in Alain Forest *et. al.*, *Bouddhismes et sociétés Asiatiques: Clergés, sociétés et pouvoirs* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1990), 111–124, esp. 114; Pham Van Luu, “The Buddhist Crises in Vietnam,” 19–20; Cao Van Luận, *Bên-Giòng Lịch-Sử Việt Nam, 1940–1975*, rev. ed. (Sacramento, CA, 1983), 235; Alexander Woodside, “Vietnamese Buddhism, the Vietnamese Court, and China in the 1800s,” in *Historical Interaction of China and Vietnam: Institutional and Cultural Themes*, ed. Edgar Wickberg (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1969), 11–24.
 59. Lê Cung, *Phong Trào Phật Giáo Miền Nam Việt Nam 1963*, rev. ed. (Hue: Nhà Xuất Bản Thuận Hóa, 2005), 45–46; “The Buddhist Movement in Vietnam and Its Difficulties with the Present Government”, Apr 1961, folder 01, box 06, John Donnell Collection, VVA, TTU; *The Violation of Human Rights in South Viet-Nam: Report of the United Nations Fact-Finding Mission to South Vietnam* (New York: United Nations General Assembly, 1963), 97.
 60. Author interview with Thích Giác Đức, Newton, Massachusetts, October 2003.
 61. Nguyễn Lang, *Việt Nam Phật Giáo Sử Luận*, 3:1036–1037; see also Thích Nhất Hạnh, *Vietnam: Lotus in a Sea of Fire* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967), 26–27.

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62. Letter 30-THPG/HC, Thích Tịnh Khiết to Ngô Đình Diệm, 28 Feb 1962; and unnumbered report, Bùi Văn Lương to Ngô Đình Diệm, 18 Jun 1962; both in folder 7941, PTTĐN, TTLTQG2.
63. For Trí Quang's own account of his career, see Thích Trí Quang, "Tiểu Truyện Tự Ghi," accessed <http://www.buddhismtoday.com/viet/pgvn/nguoi/002-triquang.htm>, accessed October 20, 2012; for his relationship with Cần, see Schecter, *New Face of Buddha*, 156. For the Việt Minh assessment of Trí Quang's "reactionary" outlook, see Translated document no. 8602/2-R, 11 Oct 1951, box 10, H 4202, SHAT; see also Lodge to DepState, 21 Feb 1967, DOS airgram A-459, POL 27 VIET S, Central Files 1967-1969, RG 59, NARA.
64. "Thư của Thượng-Tọa Hội Trưởng Hội Phật-Giáo Trung-Phần gởi Đại-Tướng Lê Văn Tỵ," *Liên Hoa Nguyệt San* (Special Vesak Day ed., 1963), 2.
65. Thích Trí Quang, "Cuộc Vận-Động Của Phật-Giáo Việt-Nam," *Hải Triều Âm*, 30 Apr 1964, 4.
66. Telegram no. 9195, 6 May 1963, printed in Lê Cung, *Phòng Trào Phật Giáo*, 355; CMQG, 9 Apr 1963, 1; *TOVN Magazine*, 5 May 1963, 1.
67. *Violation of Human Rights in South Vietnam*, 27-28, 80.
68. Trí Quang, "Cuộc Vận-Động Của Phật-Giáo Việt-Nam." Also present at this meeting was Bùi Văn Lương, RVN interior minister; see *Violation of Human Rights in South Viet-Nam*, 60-61.
69. Chief of National Police (Huế) to Director of the National Police for the Central Highlands and Central Region, 10 May 1963, telegram no. 249-VP/M, quoted in Lê Cung, *Phòng Trào Phật Giáo*, 150; Hammer, *Death in November*, 109-110; Trần Văn Đôn, *Việt Nam Nhân Chứng* (Los Alamitos, CA: Xuân Thu, 1989), 162.
70. Quốc Tuệ, *Công Cuộc Tranh-Đấu*, 42-43; Phạm Văn Minh, *Vietnamese Engaged Buddhism: The Struggle Movement of 1963-1966* (Westminster, CA: Văn Nghệ, 2002), 186-187.
71. "Bản Tuyên-Nghôn của Tín-Đồ Phật-Giáo Việt-Nam," printed in Quốc Tuệ, *Công Cuộc Tranh-Đấu*, 49-50. For Ordinance No. 10, see CBNCH, 19 Aug 1950, 434-437.
72. Cabinet Meeting Minutes no. 247-TTP/ĐL/M, 13 May 1963, folder 60, PTT, TTLTQG2.
73. Thích Tâm Châu, *Bạch Thư về vấn-đề Chia rẽ Của Ấn-Quang với Việt-Nam Quốc-Tự* (Montréal: Từ Quang, 1994), 14-17, 37-39; Hoang Lac and Ha Mai Viet, *Blind Design: Why America Lost the Vietnam War* (Sugarland, TX, 1996), 121.
74. Quốc Tuệ, *Công Cuộc Tranh-Đấu*, 66-67; *Violation of Human Rights in South Viet-Nam*, 94-95; Lê Cung, *Phòng Trào Phật Giáo*, 177-178. VP, 17 May 1963; and Nolting to DepState, 18 May 1963, in *FRUS 1961-1963*, 3:309-312.
75. CMQG, 22 May 1963, 1; Quốc Tuệ, *Công Cuộc Tranh-Đấu*, 73-74.

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76. Tel 1090, 1 Jun 1963, box 197A, NSF, JFKL; Saigon to SecState, 4 Jun 1963, in *FRUS 1961–1963*, 3:349–351.
77. Tel 1107, 5 Jun 1963, and Trueheart to DepState, 6 Jun 1963, in *FRUS 1961–1963*, 3:356–358, 359–360; *CMQG*, 6 and 8 Jun 1963. Cẩn’s “eyes and ears” comment were related to the author by Đào Quang Hiền (interview with author, Fairfax, Virginia, 2007). Hiền’s account is corroborated by a secret report that he wrote in September 1963 and that cites information provided by Thiện Minh; see Đào Quang Hiền, “Phiếu Trình những bằng cớ về những tay của người Mỹ trong cuộc tranh-đấu của Phật-Giáo vừa qua,” 16 Sep 1963, folder 8502, PTTĐN, TTLTQG2.
78. “Solidarity Movement calls for Defense of VN. Buddhism,” *TOVN Magazine*, 9 Jun 1963, 1–2.
79. Trueheart to DepState, 9 Jun 1963; and Trueheart to DepState, 10 Jun 1963; in *FRUS 1961–1963*, 3:366–369, 371–373. After a short delay, the resolution did appear in the Vietnamese-language press; *CMQG*, 11 Jun 1963.
80. IMCSH Minutes, Meeting no. 53, 14 Jun 1963.
81. Thích Đức Nghiệp, “Vụ Tự Thiêu của Hòa Thượng Thích Quảng Đức,” in *Bồ Tát Quảng Đức; Ngọn Lửa và Trái Tim*, ed. Lê Mạnh Thát (Ho Chi Minh City: Nhà Xuất Bản Tổng Hợp TP HCM, 2005), 394–399.
82. *Ibid.*, 397.
83. Malcolm Browne, *The New Face of War* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965), 175–180; Halberstam, *Making of a Quagmire*, 211; Thích Đức Nghiệp, “Vụ Tự Thiêu.”
84. Author interview with Malcolm Browne, Thetford, Vermont, Oct 2009.
85. Thích Quảng Đức to the Commissioner of the Clergy in the Southern Vietnamese Sangha, 27 May 1963, printed in Quốc Tuệ, *Công Cuộc Tranh-Đấu*, 94–96; Thích Quảng Đức, “Lời Nguyện Tâm Huyết,” both printed in Quốc Tuệ, *Công Cuộc Tranh-Đấu*, 94–96 and 100–101. For a discussion of these texts and Quảng Đức’s lifelong commitment to the Vietnamese Buddhist Revival, see Miller, “Religious Revival and the Politics of Nation Building.”
86. *TOVN*, 12 Jun 1963, 1.
87. Vũ Văn Mẫu, *Sáu Tháng Pháp Nạn*, 277.
88. Quốc Tuệ, *Công Cuộc Tranh-Đấu*, 138–142; *Violation of Human Rights in South Viet-Nam*, annex 16.
89. Truong Vinh-Le, *Vietnam, Où est la vérité?* (Paris: Lavauzelle, 1989), 86–87.
90. Charles Joiner, “South Vietnam’s Buddhist Crisis: Organization for Charity, Dissidence, and Unity,” *Asian Survey* 4, no. 7 (Jul 1964): 915–928.
91. Neil Jamieson, *Understanding Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 113–114, 135–159, 176–213; 241–244. For the suicide note, see Nhật Thịnh, *Chân dung Nhất-Linh: Hay thân thể sự nghiệp Nguyễn-Tuòng Tam* (Saigon: Sống Mới, 1971), 198.

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92. CIA information report TDCS-3/552,770, 8 Jul 1963, in *FRUS* 1961–1963, 3:473–478. CIA operatives were in direct contact with Trí Quang at this time; see Nolting to DepState, 28 Jul 1963, in *FRUS* 1961–1963, 546–547.
93. Trueheart to DepState, 9 Jul 1963, in *FRUS* 1961–1963, 3:478–479.
94. TOVN, issues of 8, 15, 18, and 19 Aug 1963. For Nhu's comments, see Nicholas Turner, "Diem's Brother Drops Hint of Viet-Nam Coup," WP, 4 Aug 1963, 15.
95. Ngô Đình Diệm, quoted in an interview with Edward Neilan, 6 Aug 1963, printed in *Press Interviews with President Ngo Dinh Diem*, 6–7.
96. Ngô Đình Diệm, quoted in Marguerite Higgins, *Our Vietnam Nightmare* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), 172.
97. Thích Thiện Hoa, 50 *Năm Chấn Hưng Phật Giáo Việt Nam*, 104; Malcolm Browne, "17,000 Rally Against Diem in Saigon," WP, 19 Aug 1963, A1; *Violation of Human Rights in South Viet-Nam*, 35–6.
98. Mai Thọ Truyền, testimony recorded in *Violation of Human Rights in South Vietnam*, 99.
99. For ARVN general Trần Văn Đôn's report on the raids, see Special intelligence bulletin 187/TTM/2/5/M, 23 Aug 1963, folder 8527, PTTĐN, TTLTQG2. Đôn reported that around thirty security personnel were injured during the operations. Later, UN investigators documented injuries and hospitalizations among protestors but no deaths; see *Violation of Human Rights in South Viet-Nam*, 125–126, 182–186.
100. Anne Blair, *Lodge in Vietnam: A Patriot Abroad* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995), 52–53.
101. Vũ Văn Mẫu, *Sáu Tháng Pháp Nạn*, 399–403.
102. *Ibid.*, 402.
103. Denis Warner, *The Last Confucian* (New York: Macmillan, 1963), 234.
104. Frederick Nolting, *From Trust to Tragedy: The Political Memoirs of Frederick Nolting, Kennedy's Ambassador to Diem's Vietnam* (New York: Praeger, 1988), 121.
105. Nhu, quoted in Schechter, *New Face of Buddha*, 183–184.

9. The Unmaking of an Alliance

1. Mendenhall to Hilsman, 9 Sep 1963, in *FRUS* 1961–1963, 4:144.
2. CIA Information Report TDCS-3/552,770, 8 Jul 1963, in *ibid.*, 3:473–478. For Diem's account of the 1962 bombing and the conclusions he drew from it about dissent within the military, see Memorandum for the Record, 1 Mar 1962, in *ibid.*, 2:187–193.
3. SDECE intelligence report, "Situation Actuelle du Service d'Études Politiques et Sociales," 12 Jul 1963, 10 T 976, SHAT; CIA information report [identifier redacted], 18 May 1963, CK3100202585, DDRS.

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4. Truehart to SecState, 6 Jul 1963, box 198, NSF, JFKL. See also A. J. Langguth, *Our Vietnam: The War, 1954–1975* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000), 210.
5. CIA information report, “Plans and Activities of Tran Kim Tuyen’s Coup Group,” 21 Aug 1963, CK3100319205, DDRS; Robert Shaplen, *The Lost Revolution: The Story of Twenty Years of Neglected Opportunities in Vietnam and of American’s Failure to Foster Democracy There* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), 197–200; Hien Anh, “The Coup D’Etat of November 1, 1963,” unpublished mimeograph translation of a series of articles that appeared in the Saigon newspaper *Lap Truong*, August 1971 (copy in author’s possession), 15–19.
6. “Plans and Activities of Tran Kim Tuyen’s Coup Group.”
7. CIA information report TDCS DB-3/655,932, “Coup D’Etat plans by Tran Kim Tuyen,” 7 Aug 1963, CK3100111396, DDRS.
8. Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (New York: Viking Press, 1983), 39.
9. For the claim that Thảo was a communist “master spy,” see Truong Nhu Tang, *A Viet Cong Memoir* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985), 42–62. Although Thảo, who was assassinated in 1965, was later claimed by VWP officials as a communist double agent, the VWP has only provided vague descriptions of his alleged espionage—a striking contrast to their treatment of other famous communist spies.
10. Author interview with Huỳnh Văn Lang, New Canaan, Connecticut, December 2008.
11. Trần Văn Đôn, *Việt Nam Nhân Chứng: Hồi ký chánh tri* (Los Alamitos, CA: Xuân Thu, 1989), 164; William Rust, *Kennedy in Vietnam* (New York: Scribner, 1985), 78.
12. Don, *Our Endless War: Inside Vietnam* (San Rafael, CA: Presidio Press, 1978), 84–85.
13. CIA Current Intelligence Memorandum, “Cast of Characters in South Vietnam,” 28 Aug 1963, CK3100361480, DDRS. Tri was not officially installed as I Corps commander until August 1963.
14. Don, *Our Endless War*, 94.
15. Neil Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 1988), 76–78, 90; Don, *Our Endless War*, 96. Cao was so loyal to Diem that he refused for several years after 1963 to believe that he was dead; see Rust, *Kennedy in Vietnam*, 49.
16. William Colby and James McCargar, *Lost Victory: A Firsthand Account of America’s Sixteen-Year Involvement in Vietnam* (Chicago: Contemporary Books, 1989), 116; Karnow, *Vietnam*, 317–318.
17. For Dinh’s account of his relations with the Ngo brothers and his involvement in the Can Lao Party, see Tôn Thất Đình, *20 Năm Bình Nghiệp* (San Jose, CA: Chánh Đạo, 1998), esp. chapt. 11.

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18. Đôn, *Việt Nam Nhân Chúng*, 167–168.
19. Don, *Our Endless War*, 84–85.
20. Denis Warner, *Certain Victory: How Hanoi Won the War* (Kansas City: Sheed Andrews and McMeel, 1978).
21. For Conein's own account of his career, see "Testimony of Lucien Conein," Hearing Held before the Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities, 20 Jun 1975, box 47, Church Committee Records, JFK Assassination Collection, NARA.
22. For Conein's recollection of the meeting with Đôn at the Caravelle, see "Testimony of Lucien Conein," 20; see also Anne Blair, *Lodge in Vietnam: A Patriot Abroad* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995), 41; Thomas Ahern, *CIA and the House of Ngo: Covert Action in South Vietnam, 1954–63* (Washington, DC: Center for the Study of Intelligence, CIA, 2000), 169; Karnow, *Vietnam*, 300; DCI Briefing document, 9 Jul 1963, National Security File: Country File, box 51, folder: Cuba, JFKL; see also CIA information report TDCS-3/552,822, "Military Plan for Overthrow of the Diem Regime," 8 Jul 1963, CK3100202590, DDRS.
23. See Rice to Rusk, 15 Jul 1963, in *FRUS* 1961–1963, 3:488–491; see also CIA information report TDCS DB-3/655,517, 12 Jul 1963, CK3100202592; and TDCS DB-3/655,523, 13 Jul 1963, CK3100202600; both in DDRS.
24. Ahern, *CIA and the House of Ngo*, 169–170.
25. *TOVN*, 21 Aug 1963, 1.
26. Saigon to DepState, 21 Aug 1963, in *FRUS*, 1961–1963, 3:595–597.
27. Lodge to DepState, 24 Aug 1963, in *FRUS*, 1961–1963, 3:613–614.
28. Saigon Station to CIA, 24 Aug 1963, in *FRUS*, 1961–1963, 3:614–620.
29. CIA Current Intelligence Memorandum, "Review of Recent Developments in South Vietnam," 26 Aug 1963, CK3100145268, DDRS. The CIA's conclusions were based on corroborating testimony from high-placed palace insiders; see Tel 316, 24 Aug 1963, CK3100305387, DDRS; and Saigon to DepState, 24 Aug 1963, in *FRUS*, 1961–1963, 3:611–612.
30. The most extreme statement of this theory is Mark Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954–1965* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 231–236; see also Blair, *Lodge in Vietnam*, 34–35.
31. Saigon Station to CIA, 24 Aug 1963, in *FRUS*, 3:614–620; Don, *Our Endless War*, 89. Don's account was corroborated by General Khiem; see Tel 292, 21 Aug 1963, CK3100191325, DDRS. For Diem's account of the meeting, see *The Violation of Human Rights in South Viet-Nam* (New York: United Nations General Assembly, 1963), 40–41.
32. Saigon Station to CIA, 24 Aug 1963, in *FRUS* 1961–1963, 3:617; see also Felt to JCS, 25 Aug 1963, in *FRUS* 1961–1963, 632.

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33. CIA information report, "Background on the Establishment of Martial Law," 23 Aug 1963, CK3100319216, DDRS; CIA information report TDCS DB-3/656/252, 24 Aug 1963, CK3100367650, DDRS. The Ngo family loyalists who participated in these meetings included General Cao, the IV Corps commander, as well as Colonel Lê Quang Tung, commander of ARVN Special Forces, and Colonel Nguyễn Văn Ý, director-general of the National Police.
34. *Violation of Human Rights in South Viet-Nam*, 46.
35. Report 0289/QĐIII/VPTL, Gen. Tôn Thất Đính to RVN President, 22 Aug 1963, folder 8527, PTTĐN, TTLTQG2. A copy of this report (with Đính's new title typed below the letterhead) is printed in Lê Cung, *Phong Trào Phật Giáo Miền Nam Việt Nam 1963*, rev. ed. (Hue: Nhà Xuất Bản Thuận Hóa, 2005), 378-381.
36. Author interview with Đào Quan Hiền, Fairfax, Virginia, October 2007. Hiền recalled that the operation at Tù Đầm was carried out by approximately one hundred police commandos and two hundred ARVN soldiers; all of the soldiers were from Trí's First Infantry Division.
37. Hue to Sec State, 21 Aug 1963, CK3100354880, DDRS.
38. Commander of 1st ARVN Infantry Division (Đỗ Cao Trí) to ARVN Joint General Staff and General Staff at the Presidency, 19:40 p.m. on 21 Aug 1963, secret telegram no. 745/A2/M, folder 8527, PTTĐN, TTLTQG2; for Trí's reports on operations in Đà Nẵng and other parts of I Corps, see his telegrams 2707 and 2721, both sent 22 Aug, in the same folder.
39. Forrestal to Harriman, 8 Feb 1963, folder 15, box 3, Hilsman Papers, JFKL; DepState to Saigon, 11 Jun 1963, in *FRUS 1961-1963*, 3:381-383; DepState to Saigon, 14 Jun 1963, tel 1219, in *FRUS 1961-1963*, 3:394-395; Hilsman to Nolting, 23 Jul 1963, tel 112, in *FRUS 1961-1963*, 3:523-524; Hilsman, memorandum, 6 Aug 1963, in *FRUS 1961-1963*, 3:554-556.
40. Roger Hilsman, *To Move a Nation: The Politics of Foreign Policy in the Administration of John F. Kennedy* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967), 485.
41. DepState to Saigon, 24 Aug 1963, in *FRUS 1961-1963*, 3:628-629; Rust, *Kennedy in Vietnam*, 112-114; Andrew Preston, *The War Council: McGeorge Bundy, the NSC, and Vietnam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 122-123.
42. George Ball, *The Past Has Another Pattern: Memoirs* (New York: Norton, 1982), 370-372; David Kaiser, *American Tragedy: Kennedy, Johnson, and the Origins of the Vietnam War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 229-232; Howard Jones, *Death of a Generation: How the Assassinations of Diem and JFK Prolonged the Vietnam War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 314-317.
43. CAP 63461, 25 Aug 1963, in *FRUS 1961-1963*, 3:634-635; Saigon Station to CIA, 26 Aug 1963, in *FRUS 1961-1963*, 3:642-643; Saigon Station to CIA, 26,

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- 27, and 30 Aug 1963, in *FRUS 1961-1963*, 3:643, 653-655, and 4:42. Another CIA operative was sent to General Nguyễn Khanh; see Rust, *Kennedy in Vietnam*, 118-119.
44. Memorandum, V. H. Krulak, 24 Aug 1963, in *FRUS 1961-1963*, 3:630-631; Maxwell Taylor, *Swords and Plowshares* (New York: Norton, 1972), 60-61.
 45. Harold Ford, *CIA and the Vietnam Policymakers: Three Episodes, 1962-1968* (Langley, VA: History Staff, Center for the Study of Intelligence, CIA, 1998), 28-39; the McCone and Colby quotations at 34 and 32, respectively. See also John Prados, *William Colby and the CIA: The Secret Wars of a Controversial Spymaster* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2009), 105-131.
 46. Jones, *Death of a Generation*, 318-347; John Newman, *JFK and Vietnam: Deception, Intrigue, and the Struggle for Power* (New York: Warner Books, 1992), 351-356; Kaiser, *American Tragedy*, 234-247. Kennedy's tape recordings of the meetings on August 26, 27, 28, and 29 can be found at the National Security Archive, www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB302/index.htm, accessed October 20, 2012.
 47. Hilsman's observation is on the recording of the August 26 meeting; Ball's and Harriman's criticisms of Nolting are on the August 28 recording. For Lodge's statement, see Saigon to DepState, 29 Aug 1963, in *FRUS 1961-1963*, 4:20-22; see also Rust, *Kennedy in Vietnam*, 124-125.
 48. Richard Reeves, *President Kennedy: Profile of Power* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993), 567; DepState to Saigon, 29 Aug 1963, in *FRUS 1961-1963*, 4:32-33. Kennedy's "hips in mud" comment and his approval of Harkins's contacts with the generals are on the recording of the August 29 NSC meeting.
 49. Saigon to DepState, 27 Aug 1963, in *FRUS 1961-1963*, 3:651-653. For Nhu's comments, see Saigon Station to CIA, 2 Sep 1963, in *FRUS 1961-1963*, 4:90-92.
 50. "Transcript of the Press Conference of General Ton That Dinh on August 29, 1963," *TOVN Magazine*, 1 Sep 1963, 7-10; Saigon Station to CIA, 30 Aug 1963, in *FRUS 1961-1963*, 4:36-38.
 51. Harkins to Taylor, 31 Aug 1963, in *FRUS 1961-1963*, 4:64-66; Saigon Station to CIA, 2 Sep 1963, in *FRUS 1961-1963*, 4:86-88.
 52. "CIA Financing Planned Coup D'Etat," *TOVN Magazine*, 2 Sep 1963.
 53. John F. Kennedy: "Transcript of Broadcast with Walter Cronkite Inaugurating a CBS Television News Program," 2 Sep 1963, American Presidency Project (online), ed. Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=9388, accessed September 14, 2012.
 54. Rufus Phillips, *Why Vietnam Matters: An Eyewitness Account of Lessons Not Learned* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2008), 195-199 and 344 n. 4.
 55. Hughes to Rusk, "State of Mind of the Nhush," 6 Sep 1963, in *FRUS 1961-1963*, 4:123; Ahern, *CIA and the House of Ngo*, 185-186. For Colby's remarks, see Rust, *Kennedy in Vietnam*, 130.

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56. Saigon to DepState, 29 Aug 1963, in *FRUS 1961–1963*, 4:18–19; “Possible Rapprochement between North and South Vietnam,” 26 Sep 1963, in *FRUS 1961–1963*, 4:298. Some State Department officials believed palace rumors that Nhu was addicted to opium; see Hughes to Rusk, 15 Sep 1963, in *FRUS 1961–1963*, 4:214; see also Ellen Hammer, *A Death in November: America in Vietnam* (New York: Dutton, 1987), 231; and Don, *Our Endless War*, 54.
57. TOVN, issues of 15, 24, 27, and 28 Aug 1963.
58. TOVN, issues of 30 Aug and 2 Sep 1963.
59. Saigon to DepState, 2 Sep 1963, in *FRUS 1961–1963*, 4:84–85.
60. Author interview with Malcolm Browne, Thetford, Vermont, October 2009.
61. “Tran Kim Tuyen Predicts Dire Prospects for the Diem Regime in South Vietnam,” 24 Sep 1963, available at <http://www.foia.cia.gov>, accessed October 20, 2012.
62. CMQG, 30 Aug 1963.
63. CMQG, 5 Sep 1963.
64. CMQG, 4 Oct 1963.
65. Memcon, 10 Sep 1963, in *FRUS 1961–1963*, 4:161–167; Phillips, *Why Vietnam Matters*, 183–186.
66. Roger Hilsman, memorandum, 16 Sep 1963, in *FRUS 1961–1963*, 4:221–230; White House to Lodge, 17 Sep 1963, in *FRUS 1961–1963*, 4:252–254.
67. White House to Saigon, 17 Sep 1963, in *FRUS 1961–1963*, 4:252–254; Memcon, 17 Sep 1963, in *FRUS 1961–1963*, 251.
68. Saigon to DepState, 11 Sep 1963, in *FRUS 1961–1963*, 4:171.
69. Kennedy quoted in Kaiser, *American Tragedy*, 264.
70. McNamara Report, 26 Sep 1963; “Report of McNamara’s 27 September 63 Interview with Richardson,” n.d.; Saigon to DepState, 30 Sep 1963; all in *FRUS 1961–1963*, 4:293–295, 301–303, 321–323; Robert McNamara, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* (New York: Times Books, 1995), 73–75; Kai Bird, *The Color of Truth: McGeorge Bundy and William Bundy, Brothers in Arms: A Biography* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998), 256–258.
71. Memcon, 29 Sep 1963, in *FRUS 1961–1963*, 4:310–321; Rust, *Kennedy in Vietnam*, 143.
72. Taylor and McNamara to JFK, 2 Oct 1963, in *FRUS 1961–1963*, 4:336–346.
73. *Ibid.*, 338.
74. For works in this vein see Jones, *Death of a Generation*, 377–384; Gareth Porter, *Perils of Dominance: Imbalance of Power and the Road to War in Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 165–179; and James Galbraith, “Exit Strategy,” *Boston Review*, Oct/Nov 2003.
75. Marc J. Selverstone, “It’s a Date: Kennedy and the Timetable for a Vietnam Troop Withdrawal,” *DH* 34 (2010): 485–495.

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76. Lương Khải Minh [Trần Kim Tuyên] and Cao Vị Hoàng [Cao Thế Dung], *Làm Thế Nào để Giết một Tổng Thống?* (Saigon: Đình Minh Ngọc, 1970), 607–609.
77. One of Tuyên's more unlikely claims was that the May 8 incident had been orchestrated by a CIA officer who aimed to bring down the Diệm regime; see *ibid.*, chap. 8.
78. "Possible Rapprochement between North and South Vietnam," 26 Sep 1963, in *FRUS 1961–1963*, 4:295–298; Kaiser, *American Tragedy*, 256–257; Geoffrey Warner, "The United States and the Fall of Diem, Part I: The Coup That Never Was," *Australian Outlook* 28, no. 3 (Dec 1974): 245–258, esp. 249.
79. Fredrik Logevall, *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 6–7; Stanley Karnow, "Lost Chance in Vietnam," *New Republic*, 2 Feb 1974; Nguyễn Văn Châu, "Ngô Đình Diệm en 1963: Une Autre Paix Manquée" (M.A. thesis, University of Paris VII, 1982), 101–104; and Truong Vinh Lê, *Vietnam, Où est la vérité?* (Paris: Lavauzelle, 1989), 316–317. For the claim that the Ngos had agreed in principle to a neutralization deal with the north, see Francis X. Winters, *The Year of the Hare: America in Vietnam, January 25, 1963–February 15, 1964* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1997), 99; and Porter, *Perils of Dominance*, 126–127.
80. Philip Catton, *Diem's Final Failure: Prelude to America's War in Vietnam* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002), 196.
81. Saigon Station to CIA, 2 Sep 1963, in *FRUS 1961–1963*, 4:91.
82. Catton, *Diem's Final Failure*, 196.
83. "Bản tuyên-cáo của Chánh Phủ Việt-Nam Cộng Hòa ngày 26 tháng năm 1958 về vấn đề thống nhất lãnh thổ," in *CĐCN*, 4:41–51; "Thông Điệp của Tổng Thống Việt Nam Cộng Hòa đọc ngày Lễ Song Thất 1961," in *CĐCN*, 7:115.
84. Nguyễn Văn Châu, "Ngô Đình Diệm en 1963," 102.
85. Robert McNamara, James Blight, and Robert Brigham, *Argument Without End: In Search of Answers* (New York: Public Affairs, 1999), 200.
86. *PP* (Gravel ed.), 1:341–342.
87. Hammer, *Death in November*, 221–222; see also "Possible Rapprochement between North and South Vietnam."
88. *New Times* (Moscow), May 29, 1963.
89. Lalouette to MAE, 29 Jan 1962, tel 103, 9 Q4 337, SHAT.
90. Warner, "The United States and the Fall of Diem, Part I," 248–249; Marianna P. Sullivan, *France's Vietnam Policy: A Study in French-American Relations* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1978), 67–71; Hammer, *Death in November*, 220–223.
91. Mieczyslaw Maneli, *War of the Vanquished*, trans. Maria de Görgey (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), 112–131. The authoritative analysis of the "Maneli affair" is Margaret K. Gnoinska, "Poland and Vietnam, 1963: New Evidence on Secret

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- Communist Diplomacy and the ‘Maneli Affair,’” CWHIP Working Paper no. 45, March 2005, available at www.wilsoncenter.org, accessed September 14, 2012; for Dong’s proposals, see Maneli to Spasowski, 31 May 1963, 59–60.
92. Saigon Station to CIA, 2 Sep 1963, in *FRUS* 1961–1963, 4:89–90; Maneli, *War of the Vanquished*, 143–150; Maneli to Spasowski, 4 Sep 1963, in Gnoinska, “Poland and Vietnam,” 66–67.
 93. Logevall, *Choosing War*, 12–16; Yuko Torikata, “Reexamining de Gaulle’s Peace Initiative on the Vietnam War,” *DH* 31, no. 5 (2007): 909–938. For Lalouette’s optimism, see Maneli to Spasowski, 2 Sep 1963, in Gnoinska, “Poland and Vietnam,” 64.
 94. Mieczyslaw Maneli, “Vietnam, ’63 and Now,” *NYT*, 27 Jan 1975; Karnow, “Lost Chance in Vietnam.” For “non-concreteness,” see Maneli to Spasowski, 4 Sep 1963, in Gnoinska, “Poland and Vietnam,” 66–67.
 95. Joseph Alsop, “Very Ugly Stuff,” *WP*, 18 Sep 1963.
 96. Gnoinska, “Poland and Vietnam,” 18–22.
 97. Maneli quoted in Arthur Schlesinger, *Robert Kennedy and His Times* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1978), 719.
 98. Gnoinska, “Poland and Vietnam,” 6, and Maneli to Spasowski, 24 Apr 1963, in *ibid.*, 55–56; Maneli, *War of the Vanquished*, 118–120.
 99. On Dinh’s career, see Warner, *Certain Victory: How Hanoi Won the War*, 91. See also CIA information report, 9 Dec 1960, in *FRUS* 1958–1960, 1:726; Porter, *Perils of Dominance*, 123; and Nguyen Tien Hung and Jerrold Schecter, *The Palace File* (New York: Harper and Row, 1986), 75–76.
 100. Hammer, *Death in November*, 269–70. For Dinh’s fictionalized account of his experiences in Saigon in 1963, see Tran Van Dinh, *No Passenger on the River* (New York: Vantage Press, 1965).
 101. Memcon, Sarris conversation with Dang Duc Khoi, 18 Sep 1963, box 519, W. Averell Harriman Papers, LOC.
 102. Winters, *Year of the Hare*, 99; Hung and Schecter, *Palace File*, 75–76; Porter, *Perils of Dominance*, 126–127; Karnow, “Lost Chance in Vietnam.”
 103. Hammer, *Death in November*, 268–270.
 104. Frederick Nolting, *From Trust to Tragedy: The Political Memoirs of Frederick Nolting, Kennedy’s Ambassador to Diem’s Vietnam* (New York: Praeger, 1988), 117–118; Logevall, *Choosing War*, 6.
 105. Saigon Station to CIA, 6 Sep 1963, in *FRUS* 1961–1963, 4:126.
 106. In addition to *Làm Thế Nào để Giết một Tổng Thống?*, see the serialized account published in the newspaper *Hòa Bình* during August and September 1970. See also Hung and Schecter, *Palace File*, 75; Colby, *Lost Victory*, 102–103; and Porter, *Perils of Dominance*, 126.
 107. Saigon Station to CIA, 6 Sep 1963, in *FRUS* 1961–1963, 4:126.
 108. *Le Nouveau Candide*, 6–13 Feb 1964, 5.

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109. “Contacts with Vietnamese Generals, 23 August through 23 October 1963,” 23 Oct 1963, CK3100385029, DDRS; Saigon Station to CIA, 5 Oct 1963, in *FRUS 1961–1963*, 4:365–367; “Testimony of Lucien Conein”; CIA to Lodge, 9 Oct 1963, in *FRUS 1961–1963*, 4:393.
110. Lodge to DepState, 30 Oct 1963, in *FRUS 1961–1963*, 4:484; “Transcript of Interview with Ex-Ambassador Lodge on his Return from Vietnam,” *NYT*, 30 Jun 1964, 14.
111. Don, *Our Endless War*, 84–85, 98–99.
112. PP (Gravel ed.), 2:207; Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken*, 273–274; Jones, *Death of a Generation*, 421–423; Blair, *Lodge in Vietnam*, 24–70; Rust, *Kennedy in Vietnam*, 148–149.
113. Kennedy, recording of 4 Nov 1963, quoted in Kaiser, *American Tragedy*, 277.
114. “Contacts with Vietnamese Generals, 23 August through 23 October 1963.”
115. DepState to Lodge, 5 Oct 1963, in *FRUS 1961–1963*, 4:371–379.
116. Lodge to JFK, 19 Sep 1963, in *FRUS 1961–1963*, 4:262.
117. Lodge to Rusk, 13 Sep 1963, in *FRUS 1961–1963*, 4:205. Rust, *Kennedy in Vietnam*, 148–149; Ahern, *CIA and the House of Ngo*, 187–189, 193–195; William Colby oral history, 2 Mar 1982, Colby Collection, VVA, TTU; Don, *Our Endless War*, 98.
118. Saigon to DepState, 7 Oct 1963, in *FRUS 1961–1963*, 4:385–386.
119. “Views of Ngo Dinh Nhu on Possible Reduction in Foreign Aid,” 12 Sep 1963, available at <http://www.foia.cia.gov>, accessed October 20, 2012.
120. CIA information report, “South Vietnamese Government Plans for an Assault on the U.S. Embassy Chancery,” 9 Oct 1963, available at <http://www.foia.cia.gov>, accessed October 20, 2012; “Events and Developments in South Vietnam, 5–18 October,” 19 Oct 1963, CK3100205392, DDRS; *TOVN Magazine*, 11 Oct 1963.
121. Trần Văn Đôn, *Việt Nam Nhân Chúng*, 179.
122. *Ibid.*, 180–181.
123. *Ibid.*, 181–182; Lodge to DepState, 29 Oct 1963, in *FRUS 1961–1963*, 4:451. For the generals’ expectation that Diem would turn down their demands, see “Account of the Vietnamese Generals’ Coup of 1–2 November 1963,” n.d., box 47, Church Committee Records on the JFK Assassination, RG 46, NARA.
124. Shaplen, *Lost Revolution*, 204–205; Karnow, *Vietnam*, 318–20; Rust, *Kennedy in Vietnam*, 167.
125. Trần Văn Đôn, *Việt Nam Nhân Chúng*, 182.
126. Tôn Thất Định, 20 *Năm Binh Nghiệp*, 436.
127. Lodge to DepState, 29 Oct 1963, in *FRUS 1961–1963*, 4:450–451.
128. Phillips, *Why Vietnam Matters*, 201–2. Contrary to what some authors have suggested, Phillips was not a CIA operative in 1963, nor was his comment to Diem an attempt to compromise Conein’s contacts with the generals, of which

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- he was unaware; cf. Tim Weiner, *Legacy of Ashes: The History of the CIA* (New York: Random House, 2008), 252.
129. The French expression Diem used was “Je ne vais pas servir.” While Lodge (and some historians) translated this literally as “I am not going to serve,” such a rendering misses its colloquial meaning, which connotes a refusal to be used or manipulated.
 130. Saigon to DepState, 28 Oct 1963, in *FRUS 1961–1963*, 4:442–446.
 131. Lodge to DepState, 1 Nov 1963, in *FRUS 1961–1963*, 4:517.
 132. Hammer, *Death in November*, 280–284; Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken*, 266; McNamara, *In Retrospect*, 82–83; Phillips, *Why Vietnam Matters*, 202.
 133. Jones, *Death of a Generation*, 420.
 134. Hoang Lac and Ha Mai Viet, *Blind Design: Why America Lost the Vietnam War* (Sugarland, TX, 1996), 162.

Conclusion

1. Author interview with Nguyễn Hữu Phước, 7 Jan 2006, Manville, New Jersey. According to Phước, Nhu referred to Đình as *thằng*, a classifier used to refer to children or someone deemed a social inferior.
2. “Account of the Vietnamese Generals’ Coup of 1–2 November 1963,” n.d., box 47, Church Committee Records on the JFK Assassination, RG 46, NARA, 13.
3. *Ibid.*, 10–11; Trần Văn Đôn, *Việt Nam Nhân Chúng: Hồi ký chánh tri* (Los Alamitos, CA: Xuân Thu, 1989), 191–208, 218–226.
4. “Account of the Vietnamese Generals’ Coup,” 13; William J. Rust, *Kennedy in Vietnam: American Vietnam Policy, 1960–63* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1985), 169.
5. “Account of the Vietnamese Generals’ Coup,” 13.
6. Đỗ Thọ, *Nhật Ký Đỗ Thọ: Tùy viên một Tổng Thống bị giết* (Saigon: Đồng Nái, 1971), 175.
7. “Account of the Vietnamese Generals’ Coup,” 16–17; Trần Văn Đôn, *Việt Nam Nhân Chúng*, 221–223. Rust, *Kennedy in Vietnam*, 166–167.
8. Lodge to DepState, 1 Nov 1963, in *FRUS 1961–1963*, 4:513.
9. Đỗ Thọ, *Nhật-ký Đỗ Thọ*, 162, 169; author interview with Nguyễn Hữu Phước.
10. Author interview with Nguyễn Hữu Phước. Phước later concluded that Nhu wanted to go to Dalat, where some of his children were staying while their mother was out of the country.
11. Trần Văn Đôn, *Việt Nam Nhân Chúng*, 228–230; Đỗ Thọ, *Nhật-ký Đỗ Thọ*, 152–154; “Account of the Vietnamese Generals’ Coup,” 23.
12. Đỗ Thọ, *Nhật-ký Đỗ Thọ*, 221–225; Nguyen Ngoc Huy, “Ngo Dinh Diem’s Execution,” *Worldview Magazine*, Nov 1976, 39–42.

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