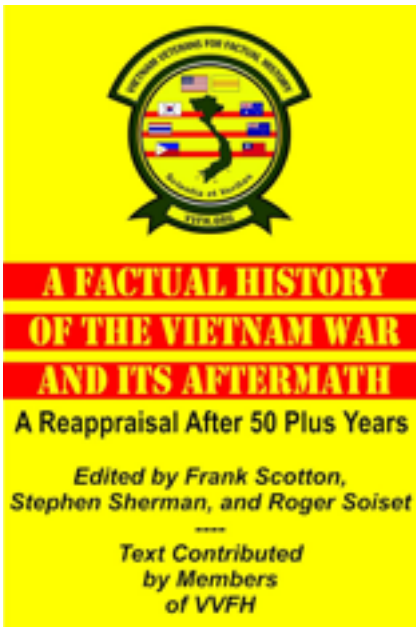
Excerpts from

A Factual History of the Vietnam War and Its Aftermath: A Reappraisal After 50 Plus Years



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Mid to Late 1963 Vietnam:
Choices, Decisions and Consequences

By Rufus Phillips and Frank Scotton, unpublished, June 9, 2018

On May 8, 1963, a Buddhist demonstration was organized in Hue, the old royal capitol, to protest the local government's decision to deny permission for a Buddhist radio address and the display of Buddhist flags on Gautama Buddha's birthday. The ban was supposed to apply to all religious demonstrations but this had been violated just a few days earlier by a Catholic celebration for Archbishop Ngo Dinh Thuc, President Ngo Dinh Diem's older brother. Another Diem brother, Ngo Dinh Can, the nominal behind-the-scenes political power in Central Viet Nam, had ordered the Hue police not to enforce the ban, but in this instance his influence on local officials had been superseded by Archbishop Thuc.

The consequence was that the local Province Chief ordered a Civil Guard unit to break up the demonstration. A grenade went off; the crowed panicked and was fired upon resulting in civilian casualties. Although President Diem quickly appointed Tran Ngoc Chau, a Buddhist, to immediately take office as Mayor of Danang and lubricate Buddhist-Catholic relations in order to limit unrest to Hue, organized protests quickly leapfrogged to Qui Nhon, Nha Trang, and Saigon by the end of the month. Despite Diem's misgivings that communists may have been behind the violence, he offered to talk with the Buddhists. This was taken up by one of the Buddhist leaders and meetings were arranged which resulted in the joint drafting of a reconciliation statement which met Buddhist demands. However, on June 8, just as the statement was about to be released, Ngo Dinh Nhu's wife, Madame Nhu, published a resolution by a women's movement she headed denouncing the attempted reconciliation (few were in doubt that her husband had put her up to it). After Madame Nhu's interference, relations between Diem and Buddhist leaders began rapidly deteriorating. Then, in Saigon on June 11, a prominent Buddhist bonze (Thich Quang Duc) set fire to himself in public and died. A photo of the event achieved world-wide attention and had a profound effect on President Kennedy's attitude. It lent support for the belief, strongly favored by some of his key advisors, that not only Nhu, but Diem, had to go.

American officials, whether resident in Viet Nam, or involved in Washington policy, were appalled by the event. Some saw the situation in humanitarian terms, and others believed such events were completely undermining the Viet Nam war effort. Frank Scotton witnessed government positions in Binh Dinh and Quang Ngai Provinces unraveling. U.S. Ambassador to Saigon, Fredrick Nolting, who had strongly urged Diem to reconcile with the Buddhists and thought the crisis was being resolved, had departed for home leave on May 23. This left no buffer between complete hostility toward Diem from key leaders in the State Department in Washington and President Diem in Saigon.

On June 27, 1963 President Kennedy named Henry Cabot Lodge Jr. to be the new American Ambassador to Viet Nam. The domestic political benefit of that appointment was to make ensuing developments bi-partisan given the expanded commitment that already had operating American helicopter (Army and USMC) units, advisors down to the battalion and province level, and Special Forces in Viet Nam.

Ambassador Lodge did not arrive in Saigon until August 25. Before that, during the night of August 21, combat police backed up by Vietnamese Army Special Forces, some posing as regular soldiers, raided pagodas in Saigon and other important towns. Hundreds of monks and lay practitioners were arrested, and there were fatalities. The consensus of well-informed observers was that Ngo Dinh Nhu had organized the operation on behalf of President Diem so that Ambassador Lodge would face a "new norm" on arrival just a few days later. The Ambassador felt personally offended which affected his whole attitude towards Diem.

Even before formal presentation of Lodge's credentials, a Department of State telegram was drafted, inadequately cleared, and on August 24 sent to Saigon directing Ambassador Lodge to pressure President Diem to remove his brother Ngo Dinh Nhu but also saying that he could contact the generals directly to offer support in a case of a gov-

ernment breakdown. The telegram was principally drafted by Averell Harriman and Roger Hillsman with some contribution by Michael Forrestal. Harriman was Under Secretary of State and previously Assistant Secretary of State for the Far East. Roger Hillsman had been Director of Intelligence and Research for State before replacing Harriman. Harriman had been the American representative at the 1961-1962 Geneva Conference and had negotiated neutrality for Laos, an agreement that in effect completely opened the North Vietnamese occupied part of Laos for the Ho Chi Minh Trail system to funnel troops and weapons into South Viet Nam.

Any telegram green-lighting a change of government should have undergone intense discussion and comprehensive review. But on August 24, President Kennedy, the Defense Secretary, and the CIA Director were not in Washington. Harriman and Hillsman basically manipulated telephone calls to obtain sufficient clearances for the telegram to be sent. In Saigon, Ambassador Lodge decided to ignore dealing with Diem about his brother Nhu and directed Lucien Conein, an experienced CIA operative, to contact key Vietnamese generals.

On September 10, there was an opportunity for reconsideration. General Krulak and Foreign Service Officer Mendenhall had just returned from surveying the situation in Viet Nam at President Kennedy's request. A meeting was convened in the White House for the two men to report on their just concluded four day trip to Viet Nam. Attendees included President Kennedy, Secretary of State Rusk, Harriman, Hillsman, Ambassador Nolting, Secretary of Defense McNamara, General Maxwell Taylor, CIA Director McCone, and from Saigon: Rufus Phillips and John Mecklin.

General Krulak briefed the group based on his written report. He stated that the political crisis within the Republic of Viet Nam had not greatly impacted the war and that operations were going well in the Mekong Delta. Mr. Mendenhall presented a sharply contrasting point of view portraying government paralysis and communist expansion in rural areas in Central Viet Nam. President Kennedy famously asked: "The two of you did visit the same country?"

Rufus Phillips was asked to speak and expressed significant disagreement with General Krulak. As head of the USAID Rural Affairs Office he had just visited Long An Province (only a one hour drive southwest of Saigon) where Rural Affairs provincial representative and sharp eyed observer, Earl Young, had witnessed a recent collapse of security in a large number of hamlets. Phillips urged the President to send General Lansdale to Saigon to help Ambassador Lodge resolve the crisis, John Mecklin, on the other hand, said that South Viet Nam was on the point of collapse which only the immediate dispatch of American troops could salvage. The meeting ended in confusion but did bring to the presidential table a fork in the road, whether to continue backing a military coup or try another approach; however the meeting did not produce a decision. In particular, the recommendation to send Lansdale to Saigon was ignored. He did not have the Washington bureaucratic support that would have made such an unconventional step possible. Ironically, Ambassador Lodge did request Lansdale, but wanted him to replace the existing CIA Station Chief, John Richardson, which was absolutely unacceptable to CIA Director McCone.

During the following weeks, rather than working for a political solution to the crisis, Ambassador Lodge ordered Conein to continue moving key ARVN generals towards a coup. On October 27, Lodge traveled to Dalat with his wife for a private meeting with President Diem. Frank Scotton waited at the airfield to inform Ambassador Lodge about possible concerns for their safety if they spent the night in the presidential guest house. During their private discussion, Lodge seemed distracted, and unconcerned about the government civil and military vacuum developing in Central Viet Nam that Scotton described. Then back in Saigon on November 1, during a morning meeting at the Presidential Palace, Diem pulled Lodge aside and told him that he would do whatever President Kennedy wanted, but to give him time. It was too late; that afternoon the generals struck. Diem and his brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu, were murdered the next day in an armored personnel carrier by General Minh's personal bodyguard, Captain Nhung, with the connivance of General Mai Huu Xuan.

Three weeks later, on November 22, the US Special Forces base at Hiep Hoa was attacked and overrun. That was "a first" and an immediate indicator of heightened communist operations. Sergeant Isaac Comacho, who was captured and later escaped, described the attackers, numbering in the hundreds, as well-armed, well-organized, well-led, and eager. Given developments during the following eleven and a half years, we conclude that the six months from early May through early November 1963 were likely more consequential than any other equivalent period.

Could Lansdale have brought about a different, a more constructive rather than destructive result? We cannot say that the probability would have been high, but it might have been possible; and we two in-country observers and field operators believe that prompt return of Lansdale to Viet Nam ought to have been tried. ❖

The Story of Ngo Dinh Diem's Overthrow and Murder.

Another Point of View

By Prof. Nguyên Ngọc Huy; Professor Huy (1924-1990) was the founder of the *Tan Dai Viet Part*y and the author of the 1964 2 volume work in Vietnamese Nationalist political Theory *Dan Toc Sinh Ton*)

A full and accurate account of the 1963 coup d'etat in South Vietnam is certainly difficult to obtain. There were many actors and groups of actors, each with their own stake in the game. The role of American officials is well known, thanks to a profuse bureaucratic documentation. No similar sources exist in the Vietnamese side. The country's authoritarian rulers did not need to explain or to justify their decisions with written documents, while the plotters would have been very foolish to do so. Thus, our understanding of the events of late 1963 comes from the revelations made later by some actors or witnesses.

But with the thick veil of secrecy covering the plots and counterplots of this period, no single participant could have entire knowledge of the play. On the other hand, the natural tendency of everybody to hide weaknesses, and to exaggerate importance makes the accuracy of most of these revelations highly questionable. For those involved in the political activities after Diem's fall, there is another consideration to take into account. The Catholics remained powerful, and after a short eclipse, appeared again on the stage. The most active among them strongly defended Diem's memory, and those who had opposed him risked being considered the Catholics' enemies. But any attempt to gain Catholic sympathy by denying one's activities during the struggle against Diem provoked the hostility of the not less powerful Buddhists. To avoid frictions, the best way for actors in the coup to play a successful role after 1963 was to give a low profile to one's participation in this controversial period, to keep silent, or to hide or twist some facts.

Nguyen Van Thieu succeeded in keeping his name out of the writings about the coup while Duong Van "Big" Minh remained particularly discreet about Diem's death after he himself lost power in January 1964.

This article is an attempt to fill some holes in the story with reports and information provided by Dai Viet Party members, especially concerning Diem's death.

As a whole, the coup d'etat story can be compared to a suspenseful episode in a well written Chinese historical romance, with a long and severe match of wits between the different protagonists.

Since they helped Ngo Dinh Diem to consolidate his power over South Vietnam in 1955, the Americans were involved in full support of their Vietnamese ally. Some divergence of view already existed between Washington and Saigon before 1963, and the Americans had used pressure tactics against Diem. But neither Ambassador Durbrow's tough way in the last 50's nor Ambassador Nolting's more friendly approach in the early 60's had the least influence on the South Vietnamese President. Nevertheless, American policy was based on the belief that there was no alternative to Diem. In 1963, with Communist forces increasing day by day, American support for Diem seemed more necessary than ever.

The unexpected Buddhist crisis breaking out in 1963 gave great concern to American officials. It allowed them to measure the real size of popular dissatisfaction with Diem's rule. Concurrently, they saw the soldiers' morale eroded in a highly emotional struggle between a Catholic led government and the Buddhist church. Feeling the danger, they urged Diem to take some conciliatory measures to end quickly this bad quarrel. But the Ngo family's misplaced pride and obstinacy did not permit them to make enough concessions to satisfy their opponents. Yet the Americans did not lose their hope of Diem's reform, since as a going-away present for Ambassador Nolting, Diem asserted in an interview with Marguerite Higgins of the New York Herald Tribune on August 14 that "conciliation had been his policy all along and that it was irreversible."

The government's raids on the Buddhist pagodas just a week later came as a real shock to the American officials. Most of them resented it as a betrayal by their ally. And for everybody, the truth appeared in its horrible nudity. It was clear that if Diem went on in this way, the war against the communists could not be won, and the Americans would be condemned in world opinion. But it seemed impossible to convince Diem to change his policy. Given the mood of America at that time, disengagement from Vietnam suggested by Attorney General Robert Kennedy was not seriously discussed. Thus, for the first time, an alternative to Diem was taken into consideration. But changing the Saigon government risked bringing about an uncontrollable adventure while some in the American military thought that a victory was close.

American officials were in a real dilemma, and naturally there were two opposite schools of thought both in Washington and Saigon. Because of this divergence of view, the American government was irresolute.

After a hasty decision to contact the Vietnamese generals and tell them that the U.S. might face the possibility that Diem himself could not be preserved taken under the shock of the pagoda raids, the American government had second thoughts, particularly when Ambassador Cabot Lodge reported at the end of August 1963 that the Vietnamese generals could not organize a coup d'etat immediately.

The absence of a decisive American policy dragged on during the whole month of September. It was only at the beginning of October that the U.S. Embassy in Saigon received the order to use positive pressures to oblige Diem to change his policy, and up to the eve of the November coup d'etat the American government had not firmly resolved to replace Diem.

Although there was a divergence of opinion among them, the American officials in Saigon followed their government policy. But within the frame of the instructions they received, each of them tried to ensure the triumph of their own view. In this competition, Ambassador Cabot Lodge proved to be a skillful maneuverer. He believed that Diem would never agree to change his policy. So, in applying the American government's instructions, he managed to give the Vietnamese generals their full chance. Concurrently, he succeeded in putting the American newsmen on his side and placed American officials opposed to his policy in the role of villains.

For years, the Ngo family (Ngo Dinh Diem as President; Ngo Dinh Nhu as his Advisor; Tran Le Xuan, the wife of Ngo Dinh Nhu and de-facto First Lady of South Vietnam; Ngo Dinh Thuc Catholic Archbishop; and Ngo Dinh Can, a political enforcer in Hue) had enjoyed full support from the Americans, although they never accepted U.S. advice to liberalize the regime. They had eliminated all potential political opposition and ensured that the Americans had no alternative to Diem. So, they ignored American wishes with impunity until 1963. The Ngo's did not even change their mind during the Buddhist crisis. Vietnamese civilian political leaders were paralyzed by severe police control. The generals were treated by the Ngo's with great disdain. Diem had seen them on their knees before him. Although he was concerned with a military coup, Nhu believed that he was skillful enough to handle the generals and could neutralize them whenever necessary. In any case, the Ngo's thought that the generals were unable to challenge the family's rule.

The situation among the plotters was complex. There were several kinds of opponents to the Ngo's.

1. Some plotters had followed Diem before he took power in 1954, and had played an active role in consolidating his rule at the beginning. But because of their disagreement with the Nhu's behavior, and their awareness of the damage caused by the Ngo's policies, they

progressively took to opposition. Their group comprised civilians and soldiers. The most prominent of them were Dr Tran Kim Tuyen and Colonel Do Mau. In September, Tuyen was suspected by Nhu and was sent out of the country, but Colonel Mau remained trusted by the Ngo family right up to the coup.

2. A second group included civilians and soldiers who had rallied to Diem in 1954, when he was appointed Prime Minister by Bao Dai. They also had done their best to help him in his difficult first days in power. But hate for the Nhu and his wife, Mme Nhu, and their bad behavior and policy led them to plot against the regime. Among this group was Vice President Nguyen Ngoc Tho, who was considered harmless by the Ngo's, who worried more about General Duong Van Minh, also of this group.

3. Third, apolitical high ranking military officers who had been more or less disgusted with the activities of the Ngo family's Can Lao Party which they judged disastrous in its interventions in the Army. But before the Buddhist crisis, they remained devoted to their professional duties. With the crisis, Buddhist officers, began to move toward the opposition. When they heard that Nhu was trying to arrange a settlement with the Communists, even Catholic officers joined the plotters.

4. Fourth, were some senior military officers who would be involved in the 1963 struggle against the Ngo's and had already been against them in 1955, during the confrontation between Diem and General Nguyen Van Hinh. These officers had rallied to Diem only after his victory and only thought to challenge his power again when his position was shaken by the Buddhist crisis. Among them, General Tran Thien Kiem enjoyed the confidence of the Ngo's since he had been one of the military commanders who had helped save the regime in the abortive coup of 1960; General Tran Van Don was apparently on good terms with the Nhu's; General Nguyen Khanh was still trusted by them as well; General Do Cao Tri was not considered dangerous since he had been sent into the 1st Military Regions, far to the north from Saigon. Nhu kept an eye on General Mai Huu Xuan and suspended General Le Van Kim, who was considered to have had some links with Lt Colonel Vuong Van Dong, one of the effective leaders of the aborted 1960 coup.

5. Fifth, in the Army the hard core of opposition to the Ngo family was formed by officers who had not stopped opposing Diem's rule since 1954. Most of them were members of the political parties. They were highly suspected by the Ngo's who kept them in the lower ranks and barred them from authoritative posts. They have not been mentioned in histories written about the coup. But they played the most important role in this event. Because the high ranking officers were too cautious and refused to take a great risk, they moved slowly and could not contact low level commanders whose participation at the crucial moment in the conspiracy to overthrow Diem's government would be a key factor in its success. Moreover, the different senior military leaders did not trust each other. The dangerous mission to confirm the real feelings of the eventual participants was generally confided to the politically involved junior officers, who pressed their superiors to go resolutely forward.

6. Sixth, another important but not-yet-mentioned role was played by the nationalist political parties which had contributed to every plot against Diem's regime. The man who in 1957 shot at Diem at a fair in the Central Highlands was linked to the Cao Dai religion. Some officers of the Dai Viet Party had participated in the abortive coup of 1960, and one of the two pilots who bombed the Independence Palace in 1962 was a member of the VNQDD. Given their fierce opposition to Diem, it would be rather surprising if they remained uninvolved in 1963. In fact, they were in the fighting ranks from the very beginning of the crisis. Lay political party members joined the Buddhists and strengthened the Buddhist organization. In her pleading in favor of the Ngo's, Marguerite Higgins accused the Buddhists of being manipulated by the communists. There were, of course, communists infiltrated into the Buddhist movement, but they were counterbalanced by the nationalists who prevented the struggle against Diem from becoming an anti-American cause. Politically committed junior military officers, as above mentioned, stimulated and helped the generals to prepare the coup d'etat. The liaison between the different anti-Diemist elements was mostly due to party members working in intelligence. The VNQDD and the Dai Viet had indeed a long history of struggling for independence and freedom. They had greatly suffered under the repressive policy of the French, the communists and Bao Dai; and remained clandestine without the possibility of becoming mass organizations. Still, they remained active and succeeded in building an efficient network of cadres. The Dai Viet had infiltrated the Diem and Nhu governing apparatus. Their men were at a low level and could not influence the Ngo's policy, but they could give valuable information to their opponents. In this mosaic, Pham Ngoc Thao occupied a particular place. A high ranking intelligence officer of the communists during the anti- French war, he rallied to the Ngo's after the Geneva agreements through Archbishop Thuc; and enjoyed for a moment the confidence of both Diem and Nhu. But many Vietnamese suspected him to be still faithful to the communists, and to work concurrently for the CIA. He was a perfect figure of an adventurer, eating out of several bowls at the same time.

With this great variety in their origins and political backgrounds the plotters were very embarrassed at the beginning by their lack of mutual trust. The Ngo family secret police apparatus could not be underestimated. One must live in a dictatorial regime to know how dangerous and difficult is organization of an effective coup d'etat against its rulers. Moreover, South Vietnam was at war against the communists and needed full support from the Americans. To avoid a deterioration of the situation profitable to the communists, any planned coup d'etat had to succeeded quickly, it must not break the unity of the Army or cause too many deaths, and last, but not least, it must be accepted by the Americans.

So, the plotters had to maneuver to win Nhu's confidence, or at least, to lull his distrust. They must gather the greatest forces possible, and concurrently avoid any leak about the coup. They needed also to convince the Americans to accept an alternative to Diem; but could not give them too much information, because they feared betrayal and concurrently wanted to preserve their independence.

Under these conditions, the plotters' cards were not easy to play. At the beginning, the different groups worked separately. Most of them did not pass the stage of pure deliberations, and only two had some chance to reach their aims by an effective implementation.

The first of these groups was primarily led by Dr Tran Kim Tuyen helped by Pham Ngoc Thao and Colonel Do Mau. This group included some young officers of different military units, some agents of Tuyen's intelligence service and some cadres of the Ministries of Information and Civic Action. But by their functions in Diem's government, these people were more capable of discovering the plotters and preventing a coup than of overthrowing the present rulers themselves. They could not enlarge their forces because the other plotters suspected Tuyen to be an agent provocateur. In fact, Tuyen's stature did not allow him to replace Diem as ruler, and it was highly probable that he planned only to put Nhu aside and to replace Nhu in a renewed Diem government. This solution fitted perfectly with the American wishes and Tuyen certainly received the blessings of his friends in the CIA. But he did not succeed in implementing his plans. Moreover, he became suspect to Nhu who asked Diem to appoint him as Consul General at Cairo.

After Tuyen's departure, this group was led by Pham Ngoc Thao and Do Mau. It contacted the American through Thao, and the other Vietnamese plotters mostly through Colonel Do Mau.

The latter had known Diem in the former days of colonial rule, when Diem was a young chief of province in Central Vietnam, while Mau served in the Civil Guard. He paid great respect to Diem, and was one of the most effective activists who had helped Diem win and then consolidate his power in the critical years of 1954-1955. But, if he had agreed with the Ngo's as to their repressive policy against the Binh Xuyen and the religious sects, he disapproved of their treatment of the old nationalist parties. He considered the VNQDD and the Dai Viet members as patriots and preferred to work with them against the communists than to fight them as enemies. As chief of the redoubtable Military Security, he could cause great damage to the nationalist parties' networks in the Army, but in fact, he tried to cover the officers belonging to these parties by ignoring the reports about them. When he was led to conspire against the regime, he succeeded in lulling Nhu, who ignored until the last minute the real influence of his opponents in the Army.

The second group of effective plotters comprised the senior generals led by Duong Van Minh or Big Minh. He was the most prominent among the officers of the Vietnamese Army who had rallied to Diem in 1954, and consequently, had played an important role then in consolidating Diem's power at that time. But he could not tolerate Ngo Dinh Nhu and his wife's arrogance. So, when the Ngo's had succeeded in establishing a solid government, they began to put him aside, and he was notoriously known as a dissatisfied person. This background allowed Big Minh to win the support of both kind of plotters: those who had backed Diem in 1954-1955, and those who had been always against him.

At the beginning of his fall from grace, Big Minh was sent to the U.S. for a stay in Fort Leavenworth with a group of Vietnamese officers. One of them, Major Huynh Van Ton, a member of the Dai Viet Party, took that opportunity to discuss with him the political problems of Vietnam, and encourage him to oppose the Ngo's. Other military members of this well-established party knew Minh directly, and had close relations with one of Minh's friends, Colonel Nguyen Van Quan. So, when Big Minh decided to associate with the plot against Diem, he was supported immediately by the Dai Viet Party network in the Army.

Do Cao Tri, Le Van Kim, Tran Van Don and Mai Huu Xuan, the generals who had also served in the French Army during the Viet Minh War, were also with Minh at the beginning. But none of them could mobilize combat units for a coup. Minh and Kim did not have troop commands. Tri was in the remote 1st Military Area. The A Quang Trung Training Camp for Recruits commanded by Xuan could not provide enough forces for a coup. Although he was acting Chief of the Joint General Staff, Don had less power to mobilize troops than General Tran Thien Khiem, his executive officer.

Because he had saved Diem- in the abortive coup of 1960, Khiem was suspected by the other generals. But in fact, he had opposed Diem for a long time. He became affiliated with the Dai Viet Party in 1954, when he was a young officer in Hue and had been more or less involved in the Ba Long maquis organized in 1955 by this Party's Executive Committee for Central Vietnam. After the failure of this enterprise, he was removed to the south and had no more contact with the party. To win the Ngo's confidence, he joined the Ngo's Can Lao Party and carefully cultivated the Nhu's' friendship. In the abortive 1960 coup, he brought his troops up to Saigon to observe the situation and threw his forces on the Ngo's side only when he was convinced that the coup led by Nguyen Chanh Thi and Vuong Van Dong would not succeed. So, Khiem managed to climb the military hierarchy and to be trusted by the Ngo's. Concurrently, he tried to make friends with the CIA chiefs. With his background, Khiem was not far from Tuyen and Mau's group. But estimating that this group did not have the ability to succeed in overthrowing Diem's government, he maintained relations with it, but did not engage himself seriously in its plot.

Thanks to their network in the police, the Dai Viets succeeded in keeping close contact with Ha Thuc Ky, the chairman of the Dai Viet Party's Executive Committee for Central Vietnam then in jail, and knew Khiem's affiliation to the party. Although Khiem was no longer close to the Party and rather played a personal game, the Dai Viet officers believed that he was really against the Ngo's. They helped to reduce Minh's suspicion over Khiem, who was then contacted by the senior generals and so was brought into their group, with his close friend, Colonel Nguyen Van Thieu.

Another general wrongly considered at the time as being pro Diem was Nguyen Khanh. In fact, Khanh was a friend of the Dai Viet officer, the above mentioned Major Huynh Van Ton, with whom he had family ties. Both had participated in an until now unrevealed plot against Diem in 1955. Although Khanh was later trusted by the Ngo's, he remained close to Ton, and joined Minh's group when the senior generals were convinced by Dai Viet officers that Khanh was not really loyal to the Ngo's as they had thought.

With Khiem's collaboration, the senior generals could mobilize forces for a coup. But in the late summer of 1963, before the raids on the pagodas, they feared they would encounter the hostility of the Americans who were still supporting Diem.[1] On the other hand, they were conscious that while General Ton That Dinh, the commander of the 3rd Army Corps and the Saigon Military Area, remained loyal to Diem, they could not avoid a bloody and indecisive struggle with fighting in the streets of Saigon. Because of these considerations, they often hesitated, and preferred to wait and see, instead of risking a coup that would not have a great chance of success.

Nhu's raids on the pagodas helped them end their quandary. Through their contacts, the generals knew that the U.S. government would now accept an alternative to Diem. At the beginning of September, some American officials had second thoughts and, until the end of October, they preferred to press Diem to change his policy, rather than stimulate a coup. But Ambassador Cabot Lodge did not let the Vietnamese generals know this. So, the plotters were convinced by several signs that they had the green light to overthrow Diem.

One, President Kennedy in a televised interview in September called for a change of policy and perhaps of "personnel" in the Saigon government. Two, the suspension of economic aid which the plotters had asked from American officials as proof of U.S. determination to replace Diem, was ordered in October. Three, Richardson, the chief of the CIA in Saigon and considered too close to the Nhu's, was removed. Four, a not less important sign for the generals was a radical change in the Vatican policy. Rightly or wrongly, the Vietnamese regarded the Catholic Church as the oldest, the best informed and the most skillful political establishment in the world. From their view, it would prefer to be on good terms with any government, but in a hard competition, it always managed to stay on the side of the winners. In the Buddhist crisis, the Vatican did not support Diem. On the contrary, it publicly dissociated itself with his policy, and ordered Archbishop Thuc to leave the country. This decision eased the conscience of the Catholic plotters, and it reinforced the conviction that it was really the beginning of the end for the Ngo family.

The greatest concern of the Vietnamese generals which kept them from making a coup against Diem despite pressure from the junior officers, was losing American support for the war against the communist enemy backed by Russians and Chinese. So, once they thought they had the green light from the Americans to overthrow Diem, the generals went forward resolutely. Officially, Minh was in charge of the military plans, Kim with the political ones, while Don received the mission to contact the Americans. In fact, the key role was played by the cautious Khiem. He succeeded in joining the two groups of plotters into one, and greatly increased their collaborative chance of success.

With regard to the role of General Ton That Dinh, written histories of the coup generally considered his conversion to the plot to be a result of Don's brilliant personal interactions. The truth seems more complex. Dinh's mother was a Buddhist nun and her remonstrances after the raids on the pagodas would have had some effect on him. Besides Don, Do Mau tried also to win Dinh for the anti-Diemist cause. Dinh was certainly shocked when after the raids on the pagodas, he asked to be appointed as Minister of Interior and met with a contemptuous refusal from the Ngo's. Do Mau then exploited this circumstance. He explained to Dinh that if he remained loyal to Diem, he had no chance of becoming an important personage, and risked being condemned by the whole population in the case of Diem's fall; but that, if joining the plotters, he could ensure himself a brilliant future. As an intelligence officer, Mau had at his service some fortunetellers who helped him effectively persuade Dinh to abandon Diem's cause.[2]

But whether Dinh was more influenced by Mau or by Don, the fact was that he joined the plotters. Although he was not entirely trusted by them, and was considered to be still wavering until the last day, he did not betray them and contributed greatly to the success of the coup.

The coup was set for November 1st. At that time, the senior generals had to act quickly. Other impatient officers, not in their circle of conspirators, were also plotting against the regime. They had no chance to succeed, and their abortive coup would give the Ngo's a pretext to move against the high-ranking officers and remove them from power. Nhu himself was planning with Dinh a phony coup with this intention.

But the generals were now ready and the events happened as they had planned. On October 29, with Nhu's approval, Dinh ordered the Special Forces faithful to the Ngo's to move out of the capital. At the same time, Mau made a false report about a Viet Cong build up outside Saigon to get Diem and Nhu to send other loyal units far from them. The coup itself began on November 1st with arrests of the officers who refused to collaborate with the plotters. The arrests were made at a noon meeting in the Joint General Staff headquarters, while the coup units were deploying around Saigon. At the beginning, Nhu believed that the moves of these troops were part of the phony coup he had planned with Dinh. When he realized that it was a genuine coup against the regime, it was too late for the Ngo's. They tried in vain to call the unit commanders throughout the country to come to their aid. An attempt to mobilize the regime's civilian organizations and its paramilitary youth formation also failed.

Only two high ranking officers loyal to the Ngo's were executed, and some coup participants were killed when they attacked the Gia Long Palace. The cost in blood was really minimal. This was a success for the plotters: they had won in this long and dangerous match of wits against Nhu.

In fact, the generals were far less brilliant than Nhu. But they were well served by circumstances. The Ngo's were hated by the majority of the population; they were abandoned progressively by their followers and at the final moment, they were even betrayed by some of their closest collaborators, so that the few remaining loyal ones could be neutralized by the plotters at the time of the coup. Nhu's Machiavellian scheme sometimes had a boomerang effect on his own forces: the rumors he had launched about an eventual settlement with the communists used to blackmail the Americans had rather pushed the anti-communist military officers into joining the coup effort. Like a too self-confident Gulliver, Nhu was lulled and tied down by a multitude of Lilliputians whom he had long treated with too great a disdain.

In the afternoon of November 1st, when he was convinced that no loyal units could come and help them in the Gia Long Palace, Nhu proposed his last plan to Diem. According to the plan, the two brothers would leave Saigon by different ways, one to the 2nd Army Corps area at Dalat, and the other, to the 4th Army Corps in the Mekong Delta. Nhu still believed that they could mobilize Generals Nguyen Khanh and Huynh Van Cao, those two regional commanders, with all their troops in support of the family and its regime. Diem, who had always had Nhu near him since assuming power, was frightened at the idea that he would be separated from his brother in this moment of extreme crisis. He said: "We have always been together during these late years, how could we be separated in this critical hour?". Nhu explained: "We will have more chance to succeed, if we take different ways. Moreover, they dare not kill one of us in case of being captured, as long as the other remains free". But Diem seemed unconvinced, so Nhu concluded sadly: "If such is your will, we will go together".

The brothers left the Gia Long Palace at about 7 p.m. Histories of the coup generally assert that they went through a secret tunnel linked to the sewer system. But according to one of my friends, Major Nguyen Thanh Luong, an officer in charge of the maintenance of both Independence and Gia Long Palaces after the coup, the so-called secret tunnel leads only to a disguised door opening on the rear courtyard inside the palace enclosure. So, the two brothers in fact left the palace in a normal fashion, by a gate on the Le Thanh Ton street side, and in a small Citroen. At that moment, the palace was not yet surrounded by the coup units; it was dark enough to allow the two brothers to get quickly into their car without being seen; and the car itself was so unpretentious as to be unnoticed in the streets.

It happened that the driver was a member of the Dai Viet Party, a cadre trained at the Nha Trang Training School when Nguyen Ton Hoan, leader of the party, was Secretary of State for Youth and Sports under Bao Dai. This man was mobilized in the Army, obtained the grade of Captain in the armored corps, and was detached to serve in the Ngo's' youth organization led by Cao Xuan Vy, who had asked him to be at Ma Tuyen's home in Cholon. (Ma Tuyen was a Chinese businessman.) Then the driver was ordered to help Vy to find some trucks disguised as trading vehicles to bring the Ngo brothers up to the Highlands, or down to the Mekong Delta.

Diem and Nhu did not get the vehicles they required. Moreover, at Ma Tuyen's home, they were finally convinced that neither Khanh nor Cao could be mobilized in their favor, and so, they decided to surrender on the morning of November 2. When they contacted the victorious generals by phone for the first time for this purpose, they did not reveal to them that they were at Ma Tuyen's home, probably to avoid eventual trouble in the future for this foreign friend who remained loyal to them until the last minute.

Then they went to a nearby church to pray before calling the generals a second time to offer their surrender and indicating where they were.

The two brothers were killed in the vehicle bringing them from the church to the Joint General Staff headquarters. Concerning their death, some points have not yet been made clear. Historians generally have asserted tentatively that General Mai Huu Xuan, the officer in charge of the convoy sent to pick up Diem and Nhu, had ordered or permitted these murders. Marguerite Higgins made Big Minh responsible without knowing the details.

Some Vietnamese sources hinted that the Ngo brothers were killed by the Dai Viets. This is not true. The Dai Viets had been allied with Nhu against Bao Dai before the Geneva Agreements, and consequently had indirectly helped Diem come to power in 1954. But since Nhu then quickly showed intention to build an authoritarian regime on his own, the Dai Viets opposed the Ngo's immediately. The clash between the Dai Viets and the Ngo family occurred even before the Ngo's repressed the Binh Xuyen bandit gang and the religious sects. The Dai Viets suffered great damage under Diem's rule. Yet the Ngo's had only jailed and not killed Dai Viet party members, as they did with others who supported them at first in 1954-1955 but later went into opposition. Most of the leading Dai Viet leaders and cadres were still alive in November 1963. So, the Dai Viets considered Diem and Nhu as adversaries rather as enemies. They appreciated Diem's honesty and Nhu's intelligence and regarded both of them as patriots. They tried to overthrow them, not to murder them, particularly after the brothers had already lost the game. But by ant ironic twist of fate, the Dai Viets were present at the deaths of Diem and Nhu.

One Dai Viet had driven Diem and Nhu to Cholon on November 1st; another was in the convoy charged to fetch them in Cholon the following day. He was Major Duong Hieu Nghia, also an officer of the armored corps. Thanks to him, the Dai Viets learned exactly what happened that day.

It may seem surprising, but it is true that the decision about the Ngo brothers' fate had been taken by the coup leaders even before their victory. Nhu was almost unanimously hated, and his assassination was one of the alternatives presented by Big Minh in his meeting with an American representative on October 5. Diem, on the contrary, still enjoyed some esteem among the plotters, who knew moreover that Diem's murder would not please the Americans. Had they stayed in the Gia Long Palace the Ngo brothers, or at least Diem, would certainly have been kept in safety and sent abroad. But they chose to escape from the Palace with the hope of going through the country and mobilizing loyal units against the coup units. This attempt aroused great concern among the generals. We can imagine their consternation when after the capture of the Palace, they did not find Diem and Nhu in it. They became fully aware of the danger of a Diem and a Nhu still alive, and eventually serving as poles to attract all the dissatisfied forces challenging the generals' authority. So, Tran Van Huong was right when he told Marguerite Higgins that the generals had killed Diem and Nhu "to prevent a spectacular comeback" of the Ngo's if they were alive.[3] The apolitical generals did not pay great attention to this eventuality at that moment, and would not support Diem being killed, but those who had been more or less involved in politics, were certainly conscious that Diem could not be allowed to live. Nevertheless, none of the generals dared say out loud what he had in mind. In a formal meeting, if there had been one, where the decision would be taken after deliberations, even by a secret vote, there would not at have been majority to kill Diem.

Because he was going to be leader of the new regime, General Minh was naturally the most concerned by the problem, and had to solve it quickly. Knowing well his colleagues' views and temperament, he did not call for a formal meeting to decide the issue, but proceeded with a more private consultation tour among the high ranking officers in small groups, on the morning of November 2. Minh knew that Nhu's death would be accepted easily, but that for Diem, he had to maneuver. During his consultation tour, the apolitical officers gave him carte blanche without voicing any precise idea about what should happen. Among the politicized officers, some, like Mai Huu Xuan, frankly told Minh that Diem could be suppressed; the others, guessing Minh's real intention, were happy to have that goal achieved without formally assuming personal responsibility, and so left Minh free to decide.

So, the decision was made by Big Minh, but after he had ensured himself that he would not be publicly disavowed by his colleagues. But although he must give a precise order for the execution, he did not want to bear fully the responsibility of killing Diem, especially because Ambassador Cabot Lodge had phoned the generals and insisted that Diem be allowed to live.

Before his round of one-on-one consultations, Big Minh had called one of his trusted aides, Captain Nguyen Van Nhung, and told him: "I will give you publicly the order to go and fetch Diem and Nhu. At that moment, look at my hand. If you see only one finger raised, you kill Nhu only but if you see two fingers raised, you finish Diem too."

After the Ngo brothers had revealed where they were, General Mai Huu Xuan was given the mission to organize a convoy to go and fetch them. Xuan brought Colonel Duong Ngoc Lam with him. But Big Minh also ordered Captain Nhung to join the convoy. At that moment, Major Duong Hieu Nghia remarked that Big Minh discreetly raise two fingers of his right hand at the level of his belly.

Colonel Lam later told Marguerite Higgins that some young Vietnamese officers had asked him for permission to shoot Nhu, but he refused, and that he personally escorted the two brothers to an armored personnel carrier, with a lie he also declared that when "they climbed into the back of the vehicle, no Vietnamese officer was with them, and the only other Vietnamese in the vehicle was the driver."[4]

Lam's assertion was clearly aimed to demonstrate that Diem's murder was due to uncontrollable soldiers acting without orders, and that in any case, he was not responsible. This high ranking officer was probably kept in ignorance of the fate reserved for Diem, but his version defied logic. It would be surprising that prisoners of such importance were left alone, without a guard. Moreover, the fact that the two brothers were put into an armored personnel carrier had in itself a great significance which has not been remarked on by historians. If they had decided to let Diem and Nhu go abroad, the generals would have sent a more comfortable and more presentable civilian car to fetch them. It would be scandalous to transport the fallen President to Tan Son Nhut Airport in an armored personnel carrier.

In fact, General Xuan and Colonel Lam left Diem and Nhu when they approached the convoy. The deposed President's aide was told to give the Ngo brothers' suitcase to General Xuan and to go home by his own means. By then Diem and Nhu were near the armored personnel carrier with Major Duong Hieu Nghia and Captain Nguyen Van Nhung facing them. The two brothers expected to be treated with greater consideration and thought that they would at least be driven back in a civilian and comfortable car. So, they were astonished to see only military vehicles in the convoy. Nhu asked in a grouchy mood: "Where is the car for us?" Major Nghia showed them the armored personnel carrier and answered: "Here it is." Nhu then asked angrily: "You use such a vehicle to drive the President?" Nghia retorted coldly: "There is no more Mr. President." He added: "We soldiers in the armored corps always use this kind of vehicle; it is perhaps time for you to taste it once to know how it is." Nhu became calmer: "How do we get in?" Nghia showed the two brothers the hole in the back of the vehicle and said: "Bend your head and climb up through this hole, just like we do."

When the two brothers were in the vehicle, its back door was closed, and Nghia went back to his jeep at the head of the convoy while Captain Nhung and his aides climbed up the armored personnel carrier and got into the vehicle by its top opening. The convoy started off.

The two brothers wanted to stand up, probably to be seen from the outside. To keep them quiet and sitting, Nhung and his men tied their hands behind their back. Nhu protested, but Diem calmed him with some words. From this moment, Nhu kept silent, while Diem did not stop praying. They were shot down when the convoy was in Hong Thap Tu street, between its intersections with Cao Thang street and Le Van Duyet street. The soldiers in the vehicle, who hated Nhu, stabbed his corpse many times.

Three months later, General Minh was overthrown in his turn. His bodyguards were arrested and interned in the paratroop headquarters. Nhung (promoted Major after the November 1963 coup) was among them. The day after his arrest, he was found dead, hanged in his cell. The official version given to General Minh said that he committed suicide. But according to other sources, he was killed by soldiers still faithful to Diem. We must note that the paratroop commander at that moment was General Cao Van Vien, one of the four high ranking officers who had refused to join the plotters at the noon meeting on November 1st, and who had been arrested, but later released and appointed again as commander of the paratroops at Khiem's request.

It appears now that some officials in the U.S. government were not really determined to overthrow Diem, and in any case, certainly did not want to see him killed. The Diem overthrow and murder [according to this interpretation. ED] were due only to the Vietnamese generals. The Americans did not push them to make their coup, they just abstained from restraining them. In this drama, the CIA agents in Vietnam were well-informed thanks to their relations with plotters such as Dr Tran Kim Tuyen, Pham Ngoc Thao, and General Tran Thien Khiem, before the service opening direct contact with Generals Tran Van Don and Duong Van Minh. They served their government by keeping it well informed of what the Vietnamese wanted to do, and at most, sought to replace Nhu with Tran Kim Tuyen. But they failed to detach Diem from Nhu, and to prevent Diem's murder when his obstinacy made the coup inevitable and his flight from Gia Long Palace terrified the victorious generals.[5] ❖

Endnotes

1. *The Pentagon Papers*, The Senator Gravel edition, Beacon Press, Boston, Vol. II, p.p.201-276.

2. See Joseph Buttinger, *Vietnam, A Dragon Embattled*, op. cit., p.1004 (The plotters even bribed a fortune teller to help persuade Dinh that a great political future lay ahead of him).

3. Marguerite Higgins, *Our Vietnam Nightmare*, op. cit. p. 215

4. Marguerite Higgins, *Our Vietnam Nightmare*, op. cit. p. 218.

5. Not mentioned in either of these accounts is Thich Tri Quang, leader of the 1963 Buddhist "crisis" whose nefarious role in this event and later protests against the succeeding Saigon governments over the next several years is aptly recounted in Geoffrey Shaw; *The Lost Mandate of Heaven* (2015) as well as the relevant volumes of FRUS.