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FACING THE BRINK

6. The Fall of Diem

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THE COUP AGAINST the Diem family arose from exasperation within their own country at the high-handedness and ruthlessness of mandarin rule. One of the most knowledgeable and respected observers of Vietnamese affairs, P. J. Honey of the University of London, holds that Diem had demonstrated by 1956, two years after he took charge of South Vietnam's new independent government, that he intended to establish an authoritarian regime which would tolerate no political dissent.

Honey argues that the U. S. should have used the leverage of its aid at that point to insist upon liberalizing policies and a genuine move toward democracy. But the State Dept., and particularly Walter Robertson, then Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs, was deferring in those days to the wisdom of the mandarins who ruled Formosa and South Korea, as well as South Vietnam.

Political expediency dictated a course of permitting Diem to follow his own thesis that democracy could not be imposed from the top upon his emerging nation. "Why try to humiliate and defame us," Diem asked his critics, "while we are fighting a terrible war for our survival and for the defense of a vital border of the free world?"

The weakness of the Diem thesis was revealed in May, 1963, by the prolonged and troublesome Buddhist reaction to a Diem government order barring the public display of religious flags. The protesters took to the streets and their demonstrations intensified the dispute that had already begun in Washington over Diem's political wisdom.

The State Dept. was now in the hands of New Frontiersmen who maintained that the developing world must grow from the same foundations of personal freedom which sustain the developed world, at least in the West.

This viewpoint was argued most vociferously by three officials: Averell Harriman, a flinty veteran of public life who then directed Far Eastern Affairs and whose capacity to listen when he seemed to be dozing had earned him the nickname of "the crocodile"; Roger Hilsman, a bluntly spoken graduate of West Point who had fought guerrillas in Burma, became an academic specialist on Asia and was director of the State Dept.'s Bureau of Intelligence at the end of 1962; and Michael Forrestal, the brilliant son of the first Secretary of Defense, who had left a New York law firm to join the White House staff as liaison between the President and Harriman, an old family friend. "You will be my ambassador to Averell," President Kennedy told Forrestal.

These three men, especially Harriman, began in 1962 to press their fears that the apparent military progress in reclaiming South Vietnam from the insurgent Communist guerrillas was being undermined by the people's lack of sentiment for the Diem government.

THE BUDDHISTS WERE RESPONDING to extremists and the dissents from this leadership by more stable fig-



NGO DINH NHU
Could he be trusted?

ures were little noted in the rush of attention and headlines to the drama stirred by the activists. Later, as Americans came to know the characters in the Buddhist movement better, they recognized that the zealous monks were pursuing political power in a crafty, ruthless way.

But Diem and his brother Nhu had given enough cause for grievance to allow the protests in the summer of 1963 to assume an air of legitimacy. They were avidly reported by a small group of young American newspapermen who had been totally disenchanted by the autocratic ways of the Diem regime.

The publicly-murdered Buddhists would notify these reporters to be in a certain place at a certain time and there another immolation would occur to stir fresh indignation around the world.

The raids on Buddhist pagodas late in August brought the emotionalism in Washington to a new peak. There were emergency meetings and the State Dept. issued a strong statement charging the South Vietnamese government with violating its own assurances that it was pursuing a policy of reconciliation with the Buddhists.

The Nhus had clearly acted to present new Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge on his arrival with an accomplished suppression of the insurgent monks. The strategy was attributed to Diem's younger brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu, who had become embittered by the pressures from Washington. Some 100 priests, students and Boy Scouts were reported to have been killed in the attack and 1,000 Buddhists were said to be under arrest.

THE U. S. GOVERNMENT'S OUTLOOK was gloom on Saturday morning, Aug. 24, 1963, when Harriman, Hilsman and Forrestal sat down to draft a fresh cable of instructions to Lodge. He had requested orders on how to respond to some high Vietnamese generals who sought out Americans after the raids to say they were not responsible and to warn that Nhu was plotting to kill them all and to make a deal with the Communists.

They seemed to want to know how

Washington would react to a coup—similar plots in the past had been flatly discouraged by American officials. But the logic and disturbing sequence of events had drained the last of Harriman's and Hilsman's patience. On that day, Aug. 24, they sent Lodge an historic cable with the instructions: "Do not abort."

This meant that Lodge would flash a green light to the plotting script. It was a bold step and the objective toward which Harriman and Hilsman had been driving for months. It was also a remarkably crucial decision for a Saturday meeting unattended by any officials of Cabinet rank.

The President, McNamara, CIA chief McCone and Rusk were all out of town for the weekend. Forrestal merely telephoned Kennedy in Hyannisport and read the cable to him. Kennedy may have misunderstood the purport of the cable but offered no objections.

A storm gathered on Sunday, however, as the extent of Hilsman's activities on the previous day became evident. He had summoned the UPI's State Department correspondent, Stewart Hensley, and put out a sharp background statement blaming the pagoda raids squarely upon Nhu's secret police and warning that the U. S. might sharply reduce its aid unless President Diem discharged the men responsible for the attacks.

The Voice of America, at Hilsman's urging, picked up the Hensley story and relayed it. In Vietnamese, to the Far East on Sunday, Lodge saw the transcript only a few hours before he was scheduled to present his credentials as ambassador at the palace and he was angered that he had not been consulted.

"Jack Kennedy wouldn't approve of doing things this way," he told his USA aide, John Mecklin. "This certainly isn't his way of running a government."

By Monday, John Kennedy's Administration had, as he phrased it, "fallen apart" over the cable. It had ignited the simmering split in the government. McNamara, McCone and Taylor were fur-



AVERELL HARRIMAN
A cable to Lodge.

cus. Kennedy quickly summoned a meeting of his key advisers.

The agitation at the meeting was compounded with surprise that nothing had happened in Saigon. The fuse had been lit—why hadn't the bomb exploded? The fact was that Lodge, having received his instructions, asked aides to take soundings among seven Vietnamese generals who had exhibited enthusiasm for a coup.

The reports came back that the generals were wary and reluctant to move. They had been discouraged for so long from taking any step that might disrupt the conduct of the war against the Viet Cong that they found it hard to believe that the Americans were willing to approve a coup d'etat.

The generals' mood, conveyed to Washington by Lodge in a cable which arrived on Wednesday, Aug. 28, stimulated proposals to reverse the instructions of Aug. 24. He said, "It's not too late—we can still back out." Kennedy was plainly tempted. But he recognized that if he withdrew his readiness to accept a coup, he would lose his credibility to the generals, who might yet prove to be a last resort against Diem's obduracy.

The tense meetings in Washington dragged on through the week without any further decision by the President. He went away on Friday to Hyannisport and at a Saturday meeting Secretary Rusk, who had so far taken no strong position on the issue, called with a slight flourish for an opinion from Vice President Johnson. "I don't believe in this cloak and dagger stuff," the Vice President growled. "I think we should try to live with what we've got."

To Johnson's credit, he never brought up this judgment publicly in complaint against the mess which fell upon him after both Diem and Kennedy had been killed. Harriman and Forrestal lost their influence when Johnson became President, but he did not continue to argue the most point as to who was right at this crucial turning point.

Harriman later regained his status. By the end of 1966, Johnson was saying that if Harriman were 10 years younger, he would make him Secretary of State.

TO ASSIST HIS VIEW OF THE SITUATION, Kennedy dispatched several observers to Vietnam. Marine Gen. Victor H. Krulak, of the counter-insurgency task force, Rufus Phillips, an experienced AID man, and John A. Mendenhall, an old Vietnam hand, went out together.

Krulak returned to report at a small NSC meeting in the Cabinet room that the military effort was proceeding splendidly with no damage from the demonstrations. Phillips and Mendenhall reported that the political dissent threatened to unravel the whole effort against the Communists.

"Have you three been to the same place?" Kennedy asked immediately. On Sept. 24, he sent Robert McNamara to learn what was going on. When the Secretary reappeared in the Cabinet room on Oct. 2, he had completely reversed his espousal of the Pentagon position.

He said he found that there were serious political problems and that the war against the Communists could not succeed unless they were resolved.

The denouement was inevitable from that point. Lodge took no pains to hide his distaste for the Diem family, and to Nhu's CIA-trained special forces was sent on Oct. 18, and Kennedy instructed Lodge to control the situation as long as he could but not to block the coup when it developed. Diem was frozen into a rigid posture and he made no conciliatory moves until he met with Lodge on Nov. 4.

"Tell me what you want me to do and I will do it," Diem said. "If you don't know what you want me to do, cable Washington for instructions and then tell me. I will do whatever you want me to do."

The proud old man's capitulation had come too late and there was little that Lodge could say. Within 24 hours the palace fell to the generals and Diem and his brother had been slain.

Tomorrow:
Dean Rusk

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