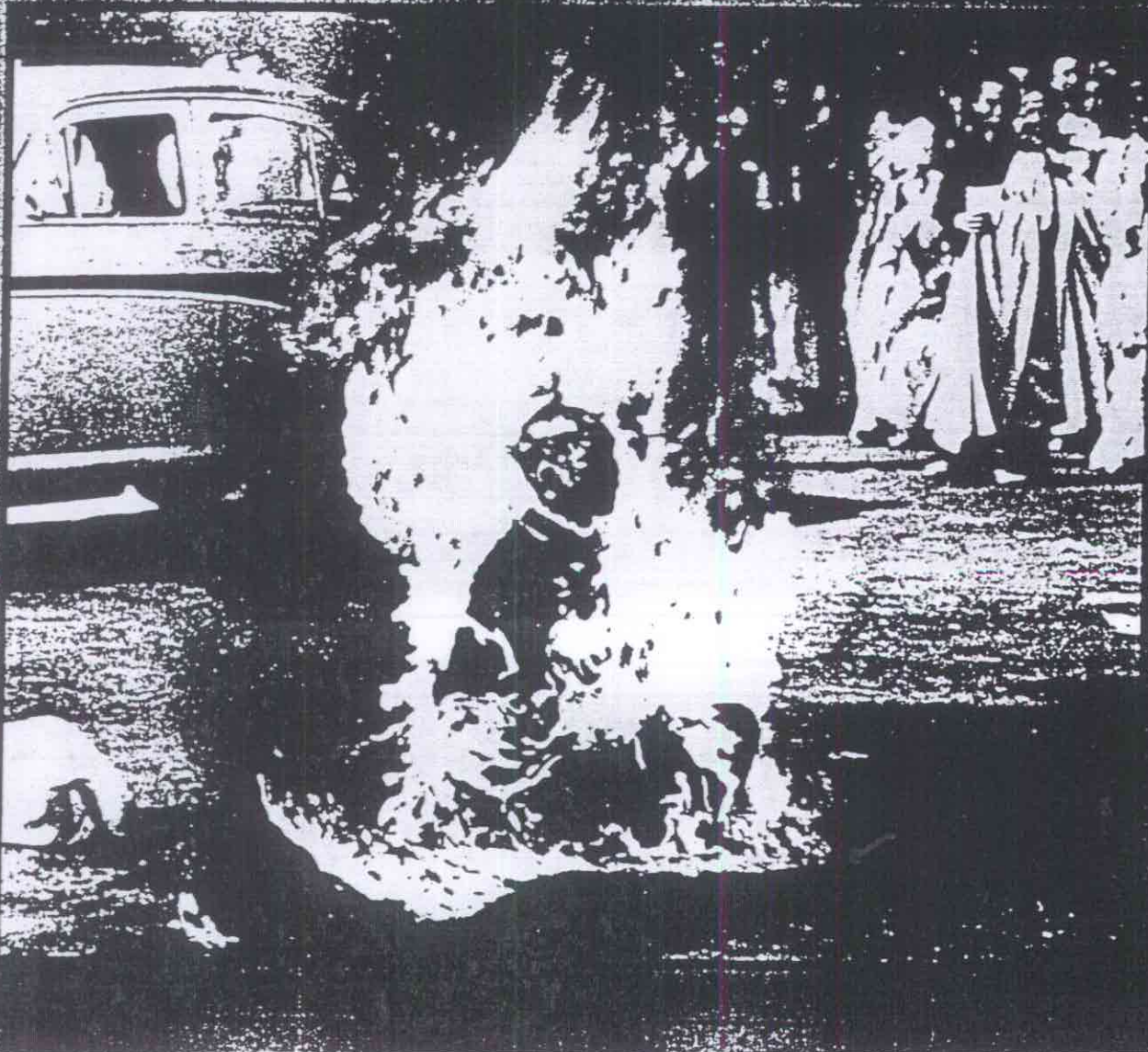


# JFK's Last Ride The Vietnam War

THE PRESIDENT'S LAST RIDE IN THE  
COUNTRY OF THE GREAT SEALAGERS

BY JAMES HAMILTON



As stated in earlier articles of this series, the Bay of Pigs operation mounted by the CIA against Castro and Cuba failed, according to the "Letter to the President" written by General Maxwell Taylor, because the president's assistant, McGeorge Bundy, called General Charles Cabell, the deputy director of Central Intelligence, and ordered him to cancel the major air strike that was designed to destroy the final three combat-capable aircraft in the Cuban Air Force.

These three aircraft were T-33 Lockheed jets which had been located by a U-2 on a reconnaissance flight over Cuba and found to be parked wing-tip to wing-tip on a small airfield at Santiago, Cuba. Their destruction, on the ground, by the Cuban exiles was a foregone conclusion — provided they were hit at sunrise on the morning of the landing by the four modified, hard-hitting B-26s based at Puerto Cabezas, Nicaragua.

Here is another example of the failure of an administration to understand the employment of military power. This time the strategic failure involved conventional equipment. The argument over the Bay of Pigs defeat raged for two years as so-called tacticians gave Monday morning quarterback opinions.

Finally, on January 27, 1963, a report in the *Los Angeles Times* by Marvin Miles came up with a key quote by an important member of the Kennedy administration. He wrote:

"The discussion whether United States air cover was planned for the Bay of Pigs invasion is academic, in our opinion, whereas U.S. failure to properly assess the fighting capabilities of the T-33 jet trainer has serious implications.

"Attorney General Robert Kennedy acknowledged last week that underestimating the T-bird was a major mistake.

"We underestimated what a T-33 carrying rockets could do," he said. "It wasn't given sufficient thought. They caused us a great deal of trouble."

"Three or four of the Lockheed planes, inherited by Fidel Castro after the United States had given them to former Cuban dictator Fulgencio Batista, were flown by Castro pilots against antiquated World War II B-26 bombers manned by refugees."

*Left: Saigon, June 11, 1963 — Thich Quang Duc, a Buddhist monk, was the first of a number of suicides in protest of repressive policies by the CIA-backed Diem government.*

The T-33s shot down 16 of the bombers and sank two of the three vital supply vessels standing nearby offshore.

By January 1963 the Kennedys realized that the cancellation of that crucial air strike against the T-33s as they sat unsuspectingly on the ground at the Santiago Air Base was the major miscalculation that spelled the defeat of the exile brigade.

As a result of that failure President Kennedy realized, more than he had at any other time, that he could not rely on the CIA to run a military operation and at the same time provide him with all the tactical details essential to an understanding of the prerequisites of victory.

He accepted the departure of the director of Central Intelligence, Allen W. Dulles, his deputy, General Cabell, and the deputy director for plans, the man in charge of clandestine operations, Richard Bissell. JFK vowed to break the CIA into "a thousand pieces."

As Robert Kennedy had said, "The

**By 1963, the CIA (and before it, the OSS) had been in operational control in Indochina for 18 years.**

plans and the recommendations obviously were not adequate." The Kennedy brothers guaranteed that they would not lay themselves open to that problem again. But far away, on the other side of the world, Indochina with all of its pitfalls loomed over Camelot at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue.

In the context of the small operation against Cuba, the Bay of Pigs tactical blunder had, by 1963, become clear. Before long, the Kennedys would realize that the mysteries of a military strategy that was over-hung by the reality of the H-bomb was as much a factor in the theater of operations in Indochina. The CIA was in operational control in Indochina, too, and had been since 1945, although its role was somewhat more diversified and obscure.

By the end of 1961 President Kennedy's military adviser in the White House, General Maxwell Taylor, had visited Vietnam and had rendered an important

report on conditions there. The president accepted most of the Taylor recommendations with the exception of the introduction of U.S. ground forces to help the Diem government with "flood relief."

Also, by the end of 1961, John McCone, appointed to replace Allen Dulles as the director of Central Intelligence, had been to Indochina and around the world on a most highly specialized orientation trip orchestrated by one of the CIA's best, Desmond Fitzgerald.

At this same time it became quite clear to those most active in promoting military activity in Indochina that President Kennedy was not going to accept proposals to introduce U.S. armed forces into Vietnam for military purposes, but that he might approve their use as advisers in a limited partnership with Diem's government.

Since most of the Kennedy clan came from an academic background, they were interested in learning more about the Vietnamese, their lives and their traditional government. With 2,000 years of cultural and political history, Indochina — and particularly that part called Vietnam — was a "traditionalist society." Its basic economic way of life was simple and efficient and was sustained by agriculture and fishing.

One of its most remarkable characteristics was that its peasant communities were cohesive social units that easily managed the behavior of their inhabitants. This social structure was based upon the clan, or "Toc," which consisted of all persons, male and female, of a common ancestry through the male line going back to the fifth ascending generation and forward to the third descending generation. This represented a total of nine generations and a time span of 200 years or more.

Such a clan was headed by the senior male of the principal lineage, and his home served as its headquarters. The clan was sustained by the "cult of ancestors," and principal rites took place in an ancestral hall. As can be imagined, these clans were closely knit and they generally remained in the same area century after century. They were quite isolated, and other than the payment of a head tax and a requirement for limited military service, they had very little contact with any central government.

These rice-growing peasants rarely traveled far from their own village and most personal contact was with neighbors

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of their own clan.

With the exception of Saigon in the South, Hanoi in the North and Hue, the old Imperial capital near the middle, few places in Vietnam could have been considered to be urban. These clusters of families and clans constituted self-contained units of social conservatism that were strongly resistant to external influences. Yet in their quiet way, they set the tone of the war. They had no use for outsiders.

At this time, the total population of Vietnam was approximately 30 million, with 14 million in the South. Of those in the South, about 1,500,000 were Chinese and more than 1,000,000 were recent Catholic "refugees," or invaders from the North. These northern Vietnamese were neither welcomed nor well-assimilated among southern clans.

The southern Vietnamese recognized these invaders, who were mostly of the Catholic faith, by their more Mongoloid or Chinese features. But this was not the problem.

Shortly after establishing the South Vietnamese government under the leadership of Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States transported this enormous tide of northern refugees into the South and just dumped them there. Diem was from a Mandarin background, and from central Vietnam. He was a staunch Catholic who had been an exile in the United States and Europe under the sponsorship of the Catholic Church for many years. His brother, Monseigneur Ngo Dinh Thuc, was the archbishop of Hue. He was the head of a Catholic clergy of 2,000 with four bishops who served in the provincial regions. This meant that President Diem and his government were much closer to the northern "invaders" than to the southern villagers and landowners.

This influx of one million northern Catholics was, without question, one of the most inflammatory causes of hostility throughout South Vietnam. The stable, non-mobile natives were overwhelmed by these new arrivals whom the Diem government favored and settled on their land, into their established way of life and inflexible economic system.

Almost from the start of his regime, in 1955, Diem initiated land reform measures by issuing new land ordinances. By means of magnanimous-sounding actions, the traditional landowners were required

to declare their uncultivated land and, if they failed to bring any unused holdings into production, the government seized the land and used it for the settlement of refugees from the North. In this manner Diem "legally" acquired an enormous amount of land for the resettlement of more than 500,000 "invaders." Such actions made no friends for Diem and became the basis for much of the violent rioting, called "insurgency," that developed in later years.

By 1959 Diem had instituted another idea. He set up "Agrovilles" that were intended to be semi-rural communities in which all families could enjoy the amenities of the town and still have their basic garden property. This is an old idea. In fact one of the underlying, unstated

**"... it became quite clear to those most active in promoting military activity in Indochina that President Kennedy was not going to accept proposals to introduce U.S. armed forces into Vietnam for military purposes. . . ."**

objectives of the 30-year war in Indochina was to bring about the breakup of this ancient and traditional community, or communal, style of living.

The Agroville concept was a failure, primarily because of the continuing friction caused by the burden of the million refugees. Then there was a newer development. A plan for the "pacification" of the southernmost, Mekong Delta region of Vietnam, was proposed to Diem in November 1961, just after General Taylor had left Saigon and returned to Washington.

It was sponsored by R.G.K. Thompson, a British civil servant who had come to Saigon from the position of permanent secretary of defense in Malaya. Diem had issued a request for experienced third party (non-U.S. and non-Vietnamese) officials to assist him with counterinsurgency problems. Thompson came as part of the British Advisory Mission to Sai-

gon. He began by laying out a plan for the "pacification" of the Mekong Delta region.

"Pacification" is a word that has a special meaning in some quarters. Although it may be confused with "pacify," i.e., to calm, or "pacifism," i.e., opposition to war, this is not what it meant in Indochina. There it had a deadly meaning.

"Pacification" became a term drenched in blood. Borrowed from the French commandoes in Algeria by U.S. Army Special Forces activists, to "pacify" an area meant to hit it as hard as possible in order that it would be reduced to rubble and, therefore, "pacified." "Pacification" became the battle cry of the dreaded Phoenix program operated under the direction of the CIA in later years.

Thompson may not have had that in mind when he sold the idea to Diem, but Thompson, who had plenty of experience with "pacification" in the years of rebellion in Malaya, preached a program that could go either way.

Thompson traveled to Washington and gave briefings on the subjects of: a) British methods of putting down the rebellion in Malaya and b) his plan for the "pacification" of the Mekong Delta by the creation of Strategic Hamlets.

These discussions were highly confidential. They centered on basic issues, and matters of fundamental concern to the Vietnamese.<sup>1</sup>

There has been a movement, concealed at all times from the public, to uproot and destroy the existing and traditional system of communal society. The activists of this movement, who have applied their pressure all over the world, feared the strength of the peasant and the ways of peasant life. They much prefer a society of dependent consumers. Indochina was one of their prime targets during the post-World War II era.

Around the world and from ages past, "The peasantry consists of small agricultural producers who with the help of simple equipment and the labour of their families produce mainly for their own consumption and for the fulfillment of obligations to the holders of political and economic power."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The author was assigned to the Office of the Secretary of Defense when Thompson made his visits there and attended his presentations.

<sup>2</sup> Theodore Shanin, "Peasants and Peasant Societies," London, 1976, as presented by John Berger in the "Historical Afterword" of his excellent book, *Pig Earth*, Pantheon Books, New York, 1979.

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This meant that there were two opposite views with respect to the development of Strategic Hamlets. To some, they were an attempt to permit the indigenous population to return to a way of life that had been interrupted by World War II. To others, the Strategic Hamlet was a place where the hundreds of thousands of refugees from the North could be settled, or where the residents of certain embattled areas could be protected from their local enemies somewhat in the style of the old Indian palisades of early American times.

At the same time, there was another movement in Asia, little noticed in the West, that supported the concept of the "commune" or independent village. Mao Tse-tung had come to power in China in 1949 and had adapted Marxism to Chinese conditions by placing the peasantry in the revolutionary vanguard, rather than the urban proletariat. This was why so many world leaders feared Mao and his work. The independence and dominance of the peasantry had been traditional in Indochina. Then, in 1957, Mao Tse-tung launched the "Great Leap Forward." This revolutionary concept, actually a step backward in time, was an unsuccessful attempt to decentralize the economy, chiefly by establishing a nationwide system of people's communes. This move flew in the face of Soviet communism, which — despite its Orwellian name — is actually an anti-commune system or a commune-annihilator system.

The play of this strange mix of ideas was not lost on the various members of the Kennedy administration. Thompson's briefings were well attended and hotly discussed. From the start it was made clear that Thompson's charter would be limited to matters of "civic action" (another new term that became a buzzword).

The play on words, Orwellian style, had much to do with the way war-making policy developed in Vietnam. Whereas "civic action" meant just that when used in the context of Thompson's proposal, in other areas of the vast Pentagon universe "civic action" had been adopted by the Army's Special Warfare section as an increment of what it called "unconventional warfare."

In Thompson's basic plan, the main government target with the Strategic Hamlet program would be to offer an attractive and constructive alternative to



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*As Ngo Dinh Nhu's attacks on South Vietnamese villagers and Buddhists increased, so did his unpopularity.*

communist appeals. As noted above, the very choice of words assured that his concept would be received quite differently by various groups and interests.

Thompson's strategy, as taken from the successful campaigns in Malaya, was what he called "clear and hold" operations. An area would be cleared of opposition, i.e., "pacified," and then, with the Strategic Hamlet, it would be held safely as the natives returned to their normal ways. The object of the Strategic Hamlet, as he proposed it, was to protect the villagers.

President Diem bought this British proposal and it was, on the whole, enthusiastically received in Washington. A plan entitled "A Strategic Hamlet Concept for South Vietnam," drawn up in the State Department, was well received by General Taylor and forthwith presented to President Kennedy.

It was at this time that the term "oil spot" entered the military vocabulary. This new concept not only eschewed "clear and hold" but optimistically proposed that once an area had been cleared and held, by the construction of a Strategic Hamlet, the pacified area would increase, like an oil spot on calm water.

These new concepts moved forward and before long everyone on the Vietna-

mese "desks" was talking Strategic Hamlets, oil spots, and clear and hold. Then General McGarr, the senior Army man in Saigon, decided to move ahead with a "test area" where he could establish this new type of "pacification infrastructure."

By that time, early 1962, Diem saw Strategic Hamlets as a national program in which he could install his ambitious brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu, as the central figure. He had been assured by that time that the U.S. government would provide the financial support needed, along with U.S. military "advisers."

Up until this time, during the 17 years of U.S. support of the conflict, any U.S. military personnel sent to Vietnam had been placed under the operational control of the CIA, with the exception of those assigned to the regular MAAG (Military Assistance Advisory Group). As these new "advisers" came upon the scene, their own concept of tactics as applied to what they found in Vietnam could more accurately be described as "close with and destroy the enemy." This distinction, when compared to the Thompson concept that had been approved by the president, became an important factor as the years marched on.

Meanwhile, there were many within the Kennedy administration who began

to doubt the advisability of continuing blind support of the Diem regime. Diem made little effort to make his government more popular, and unrest among the people, because of the burden of the northern refugees, kept the pot boiling.

John Kenneth Galbraith, then ambassador to India and prone to exercise his writing skills on any subject, wrote to his friend, the president:

"In my completely considered view . . . Diem will not reform either administratively or politically in any effective way.

"That is because he cannot. It is politically naive to expect it. He senses that he cannot let power go because he would be thrown out."

Despite such thoughts that ran through the administration, the test program, "Operation Sunrise," was launched in Binh Duong Province on March 22, 1962. The "clear and hold" aspects of the tactical situation were understood, but when it was learned that a new Strategic Hamlet was to be constructed the whole project came to a halt.

Diem saw Strategic Hamlets as a means to institute basic democracy in Vietnam, where nothing like that had ever existed before. Then he added his own Eastern flavor to the Strategic Hamlet concept:

"Through the Strategic Hamlet program the government intends to give back to the hamlet [read "commune" in Mao Tse-tung's model] the right of self-government with its own charter and system of community law. This will realize the ideas of the constitution on a local scale which the people can understand."

To underscore how different Diem's concept was from that of the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Lyman Lemnitzer, we need to see a line from the Pentagon:

"... the Strategic Hamlet program promises solid benefits, and may well be the vital key to success of the pacification program."

An assistant secretary of state, Averill Harriman, added to the weight of these issues:

"The government of Vietnam has finally developed and is now acting upon an effective strategic concept."

The undersecretary of state, George Ball, commented "... on the progressive development of strategic hamlets throughout South Vietnam as a method of combating insurgency and as a means of bringing the entire nation under control of the government."

And the secretary of defense, Robert McNamara, added:

"... the Strategic Hamlet program was the backbone of President Diem's program countering subversion directed against his state."

Nothing could underscore more clearly the conflict that existed on the two sides of the ocean. Diem saw the institution of "basic democracy," "self-government," and "community law." Everyone on the other side of the Pacific was talking about "warfare" of one kind or another. "Strategic Hamlets" had entered the Orwellian world of "pacification."

The new program at Binh Duong got off to a bad start. Only 70 families could be persuaded to volunteer for resettlement, a sign that those families were most likely northern Catholic refugees. The other people who had been herded forcibly into the hamlet were all supposed to have been paid for their former land and

**"... to 'pacify' an area meant to hit it as hard as possible in order that it would be reduced to rubble and, therefore, 'pacified.' 'Pacification' became the battle cry of the dreaded Phoenix program operated under the direction of the CIA. . . ."**

for their labor in building this new Strategic Hamlet. In this first hamlet alone, \$300,000 provided through the U.S. mission in Saigon never reached the families. (One thing we must all realize about the Vietnam war is that it created many millionaires.)

By the time the hamlet was settled, it was discovered that most of the military-age males had disappeared.

Startling figures reveal what this Strategic Hamlet program really was. First there was the massive forced movement of more than one million northern Catholics to the South. This disrupted northern families and overburdened the South. Then the Strategic Hamlet program further disrupted more than 5,000,000 southerners. These planned, insidious programs did as much to destabilize Indo-

china as the warfare that they caused. Although "communism" or the threat of communism was the usual excuse for the escalation of the war, the real "subversion" and "rioting" was directly related to these mass movements of a once stable and immobile population.

During February 1963 a report was given to the president that was drawn to appear cautiously optimistic. It was based upon the expectation that all of the materials needed to complete the program would be delivered during the year, and that it was nothing more than the slow delivery of materials that had been delaying the success of the Strategic Hamlet program.

In fact there was little support for this optimism. There is no way that such a revolutionary program could have been forced upon these ancient, land-oriented people. They were uprooted from their ancestral plots of land and thrust, forcibly, into these new hamlets whether or not the area around them was hospitable for them and their farming methods.

Many considered these new hamlets to be the equivalent of concentration camps. Whereas they were planned as safe havens for the residents to help them protect themselves from raiding parties of starving hordes, then called "the Viet Cong," they actually became prisons for the inhabitants who dared not leave these hamlets because of pressure from the government.

The government provided food in vast quantities, medicine, and small arms ammunition for the inhabitants of these Strategic Hamlets. Because of the enormous number of starving, homeless people wandering around the country, it was inevitable that they would direct their attacks at these well-supplied hamlets. It got so bad that the new hamlet residents would have to leave the hamlet at night as swarms of bandits pillaged the stockpiles. They were afraid to live there because they were unable to withstand the ever-present threats from the outside.

Diem's idea of "pacification" with its "new democracy" and other good things never had a chance. Meanwhile his brother Nhu began emphasizing government control of the peasantry at the expense of "pacification" as it was understood in Washington.

At this stage of the development of this major thrust by the Kennedy administration in Vietnam serious doubts began to be felt as to whether the Diem government

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ment was "winning the war," or even capable of doing so.

Keep in mind that it is difficult to think back to the Vietnam situation of 1961 and 1962 in terms of what we saw in Vietnam between 1965 and 1975. In 1962, what we now call "the Vietnam War" was a relatively low-level military activity. All of the "combat" that in any way involved U.S. armed forces and U.S. personnel was as a result of the "advisory" role approved by the president.

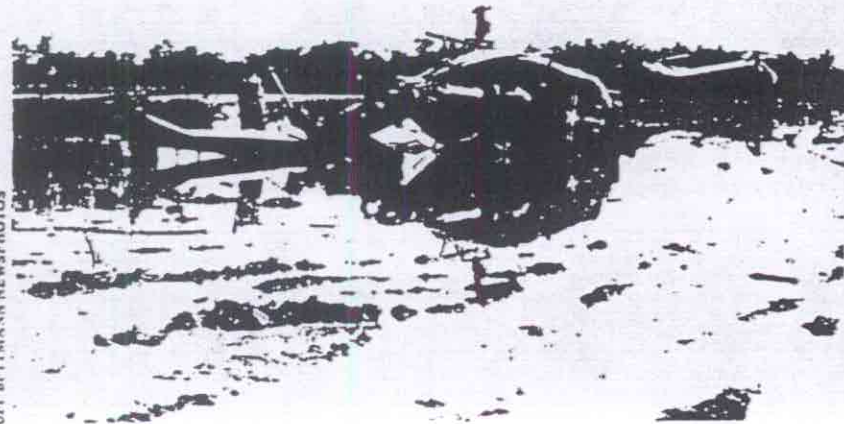
To certain military observers it may have been safe to say that the military war was going well, and even safe to predict a time when Diem's forces — with strong U.S. support — would be victorious. On the other hand there was so much poor planning, corruption, and alienation of the native, indigenous peasants because of the burden of the one million or other Catholic refugees, that it appeared that there was no way that Diem could win and that a Diem-controlled government would be a serious handicap. By the end of 1962, this latter position prevailed in the White House and even in some areas of the Pentagon and the State Department.

As the reader may recall from an earlier article in this series, helicopters were introduced into Vietnam in December 1961. Between December 1961 and March 1963 more than \$2 billion in U.S. assistance had been spent in support of the Diem government. By March 1963 the number of U.S. armed forces "advisers" in Vietnam had been increased to 12,000 and there had been 62 American deaths.

Up to March 1963, 20 of the helicopters in action in Vietnam had been destroyed by enemy fire, and 60 helicopters had been destroyed as a result of mechanical trouble; 25 of the 62 Americans who had died there had been killed in helicopter action.

March 1963 was a turning point in the long warfare in Vietnam.

During that month the rules of engagement were officially modified to permit Americans to fire at the enemy if they felt themselves "endangered" without having to wait to receive enemy fire. As President Kennedy said at that time, "We are engaged in a civil conflict and a battle with communism." He had dispatched "advisers" to Vietnam, but he fully recognized the reality of the situation and



UPI REITMANN NEWSPHOTOS

Two Americans died and four others were injured when these two helicopters were shot down in Vietnam on January 3, 1963. Such episodes caused JFK to evaluate the U.S. presence in Vietnam and to determine that all forces should be withdrawn.

**"There has been a movement, concealed at all times from the public, to uproot and destroy the existing and traditional system of communal society. The activists of this movement . . . much prefer a society of dependent consumers. Indochina was one of their prime targets during the post-World War II era."**

the position they were in.

Faced with the ambiguities of this situation and the misunderstandings of each other on both sides of the Pacific, there arose a feeling within the Kennedy administration that the war should be turned over to Ngo Dinh Diem entirely, or, failing that, that Diem should be replaced. By mid-summer 1963 Diem had become more intractable and the latter view dominated.

It was in this uncertain atmosphere that the next crisis erupted. On May 8, 1963, a mass meeting was held in Hue, the ancient Imperial capital of Vietnam, to commemorate Buddha's birthday. The government saw this demonstration as a challenge and the Catholic deputy province chief ordered his troops to fire on the mob. Nine people were killed and many injured. The following day, in Hue, more than 10,000 people demonstrated in protest of the killings. On May 10 a manifesto was delivered by the Buddhists to the government in Saigon and on May 30, about 350 Buddhist monks demonstrated in front of the National Assembly in Saigon.

Then, as feelings rose to a fever pitch, Madame Nhu, by now "The Dragon Lady" in the press of the world, exacerbated the problem by announcing that the Buddhists were infiltrated by communists.

Three days later, the press was alerted to be at a main downtown intersection at noon. On June 11, they were horrified to witness the first immolation suicide of a Buddhist monk in protest to Diem's treatment of his people. Thich Quang Duc's shocking death alarmed the world and electrified Vietnam.

Shortly after midnight on August 21, Ngo Dinh Nhu's U.S.-trained Special Forces shock troops along with combat police invaded Buddhist pagodas in Saigon, Hue and other coastal cities and arrested hundreds of Buddhist monks. Nhu had decided to eliminate Buddhist

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opposition in his own way. More than 1,400 Buddhists, primarily monks, were arrested — many had been wounded or injured.

At the same time, President Kennedy had dispatched a new ambassador, the veteran Henry Cabot Lodge, to Saigon. After a brief stop in Tokyo, Lodge arrived in Saigon at 9:30 p.m. on August 22, 1963. This date marked the beginning of the most explosive and ominous 90 days in modern U.S. history.

On November 1, 1963, Ngo Dinh Diem and his brother Nhu were killed; on November 22, 1963, President John F. Kennedy died.

On that final date, November 22, 1963, the government of the United States was taken over by a super-power group<sup>1</sup> that wanted an escalation of the warfare in Indochina, and a continuing military buildup in generations to come. In the space of a few days the trends and policies of the Kennedy administration were changed abruptly by the new Johnson administration to assure the achievement of these new goals. The warfare in Vietnam would go on to become a major military disaster — but at a good price.

On the same day Henry Cabot Lodge arrived in Saigon, certain Vietnamese generals began talking with U.S. CIA contacts to determine what the reaction might be to a military coup d'etat against the Diem regime. In particular, they were opposed to Ngo Dinh Diem's brother Nhu, who was the head of the Strategic Hamlet program, and his wife.

Nhu had developed and controlled the CIA-trained Vietnamese Special Forces and had hand-picked the generals who commanded the military units around Saigon. None of the plotters wished to attack that strength. Ambassador Lodge sent a message to Washington, noting the disaffection with the Diem regime and particularly with the Nhus, but underscoring that the Saigon generals were still strongly with the Diems.

<sup>1</sup> As described by the late R. Buckminster Fuller in his book, *Critical Path*, this group consists of "vastly ambitious individuals who [have] become so effectively powerful because of their ability to remain invisible while operating behind the national scenery."

Winston Churchill used the term High Cabal in referring to this group. He recognized the group's existence and its supremacy.



*In September 1963, the author spent a week studying intelligence reports from Vietnam with Admiral Harry Felt (above), commander in chief of U.S. forces in the Pacific. The admiral believed intelligence reports from Vietnam, generally originated by the CIA, were of little tactical value.*

At about this same time, Admiral Harry Felt, the commander in chief of the Pacific Command, called Washington in support of a strong stand against the Nhus, both Diem's brother and his outspoken wife.

Although Admiral Felt, as the senior military commander in the Pacific, was not directly responsible for activities in Vietnam, because of the dominant CIA role there he followed all developments closely and had his own eyes and ears on the scene.

Shortly after his call to Washington, this author, then the chief of special operations in the Joint Chiefs of Staff section known as the Special Assistant for Counterinsurgency and Special Activities (SACSA), was called to Hawaii.

**"August 22, 1963 . . .  
marked the beginning of  
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After a long discussion with Admiral Felt, I was asked to sit at a table in his office as members of his staff brought stacks of intelligence messages into the office for analysis.

I stayed in his office for the entire week, reviewed hundreds of messages and letters, and had many talks with the admiral and his staff. He was vitally concerned with the intelligence situation. He believed that intelligence gathering in Vietnam was very bad and that commanders, both Vietnamese and American, were being forced to make decisions without knowing what the actual situation was and what was going on. It was particularly true at that time when there was so much controversy over the status of the actual military situation, the seriousness of Nhu's deplorable attacks on the Buddhists, and the ensuing discussions about the overthrow of the Diem government or, at least, the overthrow of the Nhus.

At this same time, as the U.S. government debated the pros and cons of getting rid of the Diems, there was another unusual development. It became necessary to meet with leaders of the various factions who would support a coup. At the same time, such meetings had to be held secretly for the protection of both parties. Certain CIA agents were selected for this task. One of the men designated for this delicate responsibility was one of the most enigmatic characters of the 30-year war. This was Lucien Conein.

Conein was serving in Vietnam, in 1963, as a U.S. Army lieutenant colonel. He was not actually in the U.S. Army, but was a CIA agent who was assigned to Indochina under the cover of a military officer. Conein had been born in France. He then grew up and was educated in the United States. During World War II his duties with the OSS took him to China where he worked with U.S. Army Major General Gallagher, who operated with the nationalist leader of Indochina — Ho Chi Minh.

At the time of the Japanese surrender, it became necessary to fill the vacuum of leadership in Indochina, in Hanoi specifically, for the purpose of rounding up the Japanese troops still there and to provide a rallying point for the people of Indochina who had been under French colonization and later Japanese occupation. General Gallagher was sent to Hanoi for this purpose and took with him Ho Chi Minh, Colonel Vo Nguyen Giap and the French-speaking Conein. This was 1945.

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In early 1954, when Allen Dulles created the Saigon Military Mission (SMM) for the purpose of infiltrating CIA agents into Indochina under the cover of the U.S. military, he chose his most experienced Far East agent, Edward G. Lansdale, to be in charge of that unit. Among those on the SMM team was Lucien Conein. While Lansdale spent most of his time in Saigon with the fledgling Diem administration, Conein was in Hanoi.

This is no place to detail the amazing activities of the SMM, and of Lansdale and Conein, but their activities were enlarged to include the mounting of "dirty tricks" against the Vietminh who were led by Ho Chi Minh, and at times against the French. It has always seemed rather strange that the same man who had arrived in Indochina with Ho Chi Minh and his friends and associates should be the one who was sent back to Hanoi to employ his clandestine skills against the same Ho Chi Minh. Questions have arisen: "Did the SMM really work against the Vietminh, or did it work against the French? And why?"

At the same time, it was the SMM that was the active instigator of the incredible movement of more than one million Tonkinese to the South, where they were turned loose in that newly created bit of real estate called South Vietnam. The SMM arranged for the U.S. Navy to transport most of these Catholic Tonkinese to the Saigon area and for the CIA airline proprietary organizations under CAT Airlines to move most of the rest.

By all standards it was the movement of these Catholic Tonkinese from the North to the South into that totally unorganized "nation" that became the paramount cause of the so-called "rioting," "subversion" and overpowering difficulties confronted by the Diem regime.

All of this took place from 1954 to 1963. Then we find it was this same Lucien Conein who had been designated as the go-between for the anti-Diem plotters — principally General Duong Van Minh and newly installed U.S. Ambassador Lodge. But all of this was not the work of an individual. During these years, since 1945, Conein was one of the most important agents of the OSS and later the CIA. His orders came from that U.S. government source.



API/WIDE WORLD PHOTOS

*The McNamara/Taylor report, presented to the president on October 2, 1963, recommended that the war in Vietnam be turned over to the Vietnamese. It was prepared by General Victor H. Krulak (above) and his staff, which included the author, in close coordination with Robert Kennedy.*

In 1963, nearly 20 years after Conein arrived in Hanoi, this same agent was being employed to encourage the apparatus being formed to eliminate Diem, the man whom the CIA had installed as leader of the new government of the South. This certainly raises a number of questions.

Why did the U.S. government arm and equip Ho Chi Minh in 1945? Why did the United States shift its allegiance and support the French in their losing struggle against this same Ho Chi Minh only a few

**"On . . . November 22, 1963, the government of the United States was taken over by a super-power group that wanted an escalation of the warfare in Indochina, and a continuing military buildup in generations to come."**

years later? Why, after creating the Diem government, did the U.S. shift again and encourage those who planned to overthrow it? And, more importantly, after creating an enormous military force in Indochina, why did the U.S. government fail to go ahead and defeat this same Ho Chi Minh when it had the means to do so? The answers to these and related questions remain buried in closed files.

Negotiations leading to the overthrow of Diem, particularly to elimination of the Nhu's, continued through the month of August 1963, but were not conclusive. An August 31 message from Ambassador Lodge, however, came close to outlining the series of events that became the approved plan. It had become clear that the war could not be won with the Diem regime. The Vietnamese people were not with him.

These analyses failed to consider the impact of the one million Tonkinese Catholic "refugees" on the people of South Vietnam and of Diem's callous disregard for the welfare of the indigenous population. They never seemed able to understand why the situation, political and military, was much worse in the far South, the Mekong Delta region, than it was on the North and Central regions. After all, if the Vietminh were behind the Viet Cong, how did it happen that the people farthest from North Vietnam were the most hostile to the Diem government and those nearest to the North Vietnamese were the most peaceful? The answer never surfaced. Most of the one million refugees had been dumped into the southern districts, south of Saigon. That was the reason.

Under the burden of these and other questions, President Kennedy set up a train of events that became most important and that revealed his own views on the future of the Vietnam situation.

He dispatched to Vietnam Major General Victor H. Krulak, a Marine officer who was in charge of the Joint Chiefs of Staff's Special Assistant for Counterinsurgency and Special Activities. Accompanying Krulak was a senior Foreign Service officer, Joseph Mendenhall.

What most people in Washington had not noticed was that of all the senior officers in the Pentagon at that time, Krulak had become closest to Bobby Kennedy, and through him, to the president. This was not only an official closeness. It was on a personal basis and a case of mutual understanding. They could work together.

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## JFK's Plan to End The Vietnam Warfare

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Krulak and Mendenhall made a whirlwind, four-day tour of Vietnam and returned with views so opposite from each other that during the NSC meeting of September 10, President Kennedy asked, "You two did visit the same country, didn't you?" This kind of public small talk about their trip concealed the real significance of what Krulak actually accomplished for the president. This unfolded with the next decisions from the White House.

One week later, on September 17, Kennedy announced that he was sending Secretary McNamara and General Taylor, at that time the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, on another fact-finding mission to Vietnam. Ambassador Lodge did not like the idea but the president was adamant. The trip was announced on September 21. The two men left on September 23 and were back in Washington on October 2, with a massive report for the president.

On September 29, McNamara, Taylor, General Paul Harkins, Lodge, and Felt had met with President Ngo Dinh Diem. The next day most of them met privately with the Vietnamese vice president, Tho. Tho was able to inform them about the failure of the Strategic Hamlet program and of the broad-based peasant disaffection with the Diem government.

These were the last top-level meetings with President Diem and from that date his days in Saigon were numbered. The decision to remove him had been made. But it had been planned to take effect quite differently than has generally been reported.

McNamara and Taylor left Saigon and returned to Honolulu for a one-day stop "to prepare their report." This was an interesting ingredient of such an official, top-level trip. They had spent a lot of time traveling. They met people on an unbroken schedule all day long and into the night. And then, when they returned to Washington they stepped off the helicopter on the White House lawn carrying a huge, leather-bound, fully illustrated official report to the president containing all that they had done during the trip written during their spare time.

That's impossible, yet it happened then and it has happened on other occasions. Let's see how this magic is performed.

When Krulak was sent to Saigon, the



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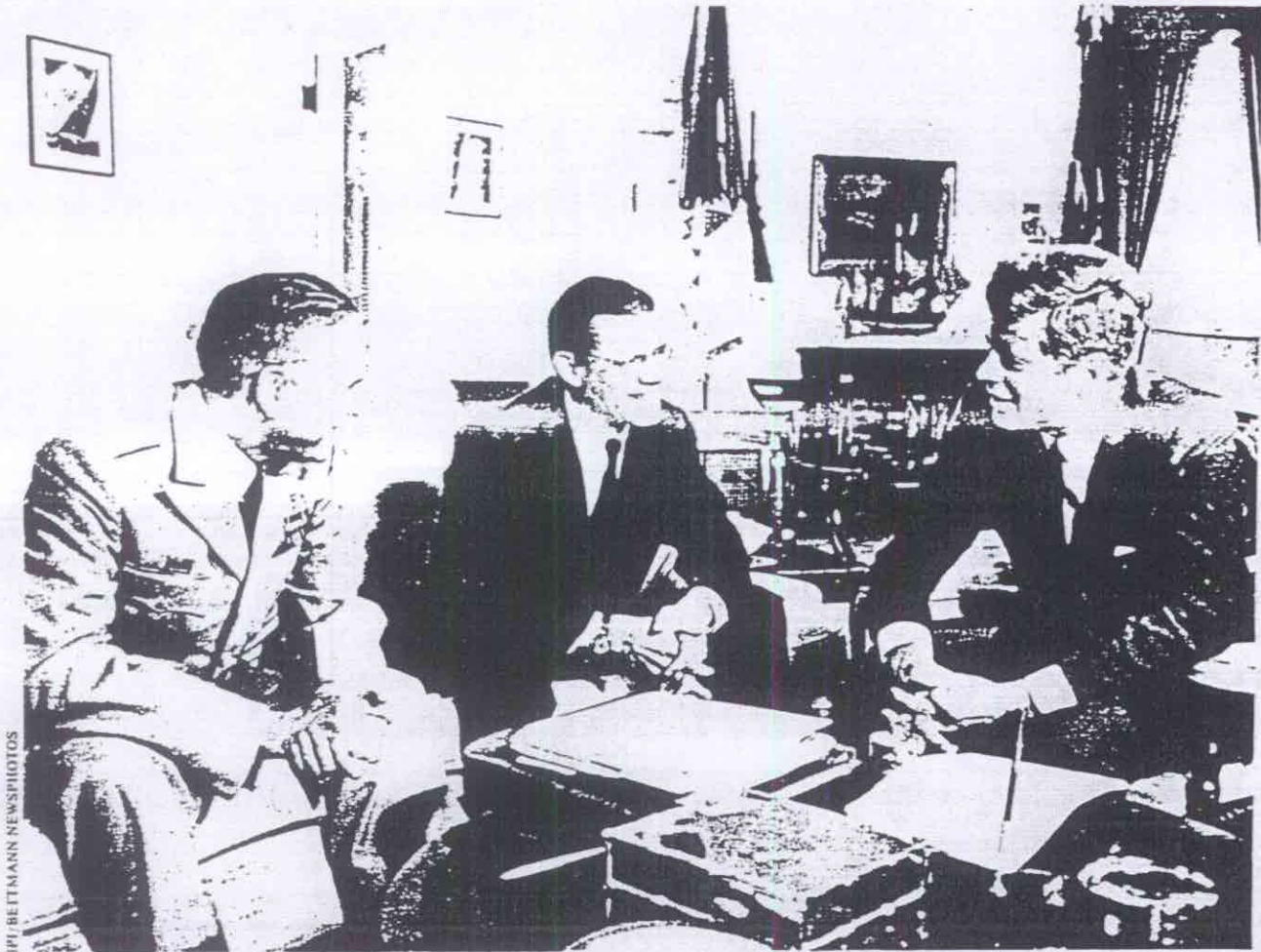
Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara and General Maxwell Taylor, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, return to Washington from Vietnam on October 2, 1963. Their report to the president stated: "This is a Vietnamese war and the country and the war must, in the end, be run solely by the Vietnamese."

The McNamara Taylor report stated: "essential functions now performed by U.S. military can be carried out by Vietnamese by the end of 1965. It should be possible to withdraw the bulk of U.S. personnel by that time."

president knew that he would come home with all the current data essential for final decision-making. But the president wanted to move the decision level up to the top. Therefore, he sent McNamara.

While McNamara and Taylor were touring Vietnam, the president, Bobby Kennedy and General Krulak were setting down the outline of their report aided by frequent contact with McNamara in Saigon via "back-channel" communications of the highest secrecy that would contain precisely the major items desired by the president in the manner in which he wanted them. This report was written and produced in the Pentagon by Krulak and members of his SACSA staff.

Krulak is a brilliant man and an excel-  
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UPI/BETTANN NEWSPIOTOS

*Left to right) General Taylor, Secretary of Defense McNamara, and President Kennedy during their October 2, 1963, meeting. The report to the president recommending U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam is located in the large leather binder under the tile folders.*

## JFK's Plan to End The Vietnam Warfare

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lent writer. He set up a unit in his office the author was one of its members to write this report. We had cots set up and teams of secretaries working around the clock. The report was filled with maps and illustrations throughout. It was put together and bound in leather with gold-leaf lettering for President Kennedy. As soon as it was completed, it was flown to Hawaii to McNamara and Taylor so that they might study it during their eight-hour flight to Washington and present it to the president as they stepped out of the helicopter on the White House lawn.

Let no one be misled. That McNamara-Taylor report to Kennedy of October 2, 1963, was, in fact, Kennedy's own production. It contained what he believed and what he planned to do.

**"National Security Action Memorandum Number 263, October 11, 1963 . . . decreed 'the implementation of plans to withdraw 1,000 U.S. military personnel by the end of 1963.'"**

This report, entitled "Memorandum for the President, Subject: Report of McNamara-Taylor Mission to South Vietnam," and the decisions that it produced, played a most important part in the lives of Diem and his brother, President Kennedy and his brother, and most of us the American public because of events that it set in motion. Some of its most significant items were:

- "[The Vietnamese were to] . . . complete the military campaign in the Northern and Central areas by the end of 1964, and in the Delta by the end of 1965 . . . to include a consolidation of the Strategic Hamlet program."

- ". . . train Vietnamese so that essential functions now performed by U.S.

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military can be carried out by Vietnamese by the end of 1965. It should be possible to withdraw the bulk of U.S. personnel by that time."

• "... the Defense Department should announce in the very near future presently prepared plans to withdraw 1,000 military personnel by the end of 1963."

Then, to reveal the trend of the president's decision to remove the Diems from power:

• "... MAP and CIA support for designated units, now under Colonel Tung's control... will be... transferred to the field." (Colonel Le Quang Tung led the CIA-trained Saigon Special Forces loyal to Nhu.)

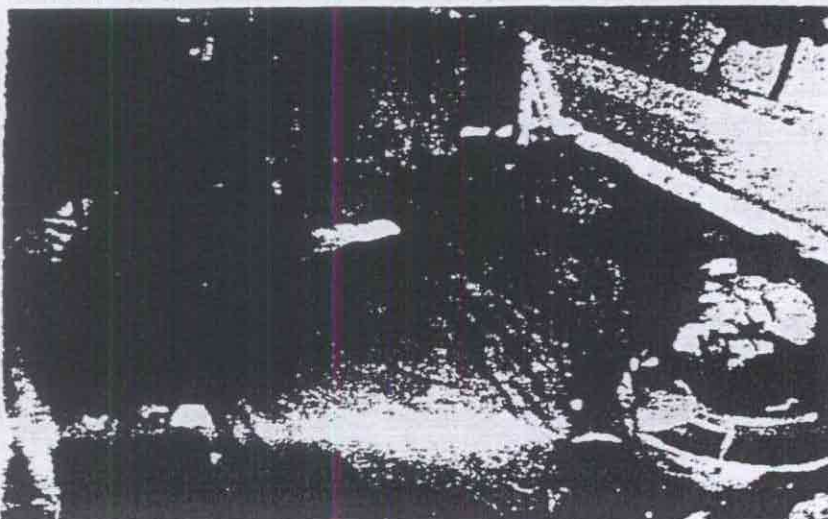
• "This is a Vietnamese war and the country and the war must, in the end, be run solely by the Vietnamese."

With this report in hand, President Kennedy had what he wanted. It contained the essence of decisions he had to make. He had accomplished this by his plan to send Krulak to Saigon first and then with the "official" McNamara and Taylor visit.

All of this was made formal with the issuance of National Security Action Memorandum Number 263, October 11, 1963, particularly that section that decreed "the implementation of plans to withdraw 1,000 U.S. military personnel by the end of 1963."

Plans continued for the removal, not the death, of the Diems. Madame Nhu had left Saigon on September 9 to attend the World Parliamentarians Conference in Belgrade, Yugoslavia, with plans to extend the trip to Europe and the United States. With the intercession of the Vatican and the papal delegate in Saigon, Diem's brother, the Archbishop Thuc, left Vietnam and traveled to Rome.

These detailed plans carefully included arrangements for the departure of President Diem and his brother by commercial airliner from Saigon for Europe. This was the most delicate part of the removal plan. The two men actually were driven to the Tan Son Nhut airport and boarded the Super-Constellation plane waiting for them. Then, for some totally unexplained and unaccountable reason, President Diem and his brother turned and left the plane, while the few witting Americans on the scene looked on, stunned by their action.



The dead Ngo Dinh Diem (right) and his brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu.

"... for some totally unexplained and unaccountable reason, President Diem and his brother turned and left the plane, while the few witting Americans on the scene looked on, stunned by their action."

The brothers walked back to their limousine, which had not yet pulled away from the airport ramp, entered it and drove back into Saigon and to the Presidential Palace at high speed. There they found themselves alone. Their longtime household and palace guards had fled as soon as they realized the Diems had gone. Without the Diems they were all marked men.

They were alone. They had no troops at their call. All anyone in the government knew was that they were going on a trip. There was no fighting as would have been normal had the plotters made the move against the Diems.

This is how their removal was planned,

and this is how close it came to success. But they had returned to an empty palace.

The stark realization struck the Diem brothers. They were alone and deserted in a hostile land.

A tunnel had been dug, for just such purposes, from the palace and under the river to Cholon. They ran through the tunnel, to what they thought would be safety, and ended up in the hands of their enemies. They were thrown into a small military van and, enroute to some unknown destination, they were murdered.

*This is the 17th in a series of articles detailing the events that led up to the Vietnam War and explaining how these events were orchestrated by clandestine forces.*

*L. Fletcher Prouty, a retired U.S. Air Force colonel, worked closely with intelligence services for more than 30 years. A pilot during World War II, Colonel Prouty rose through the Defense Department chain of command to a point where all CIA military activities were channeled through him.*

*Between 1955 and 1963, Colonel Prouty served as chief of special operations for the Joint Chiefs of Staff and in a similar capacity with the Office of Special Operations of the Office of the Secretary of Defense, and headed the Special Operations Office for the U.S. Air Force. All of these positions were charged with the military support of the clandestine operations of the CIA.*