

*Nine years after a fateful assassination—*  
**The Cult of Diem**

By ROBERT SHAPLEN



**Decline.** Madame Nu, President Diem's seemingly all-powerful sister-in-law, fans a deck of photographs of Buddhists immolating themselves in protest against the regime's authoritarianism. "Barbeques," she said. With that, public confidence in Diem crumbled a little more. The time: May, 1963.

**A**MONG the ever-increasing scores of graves in Mac Dinh Chi cemetery, the oldest and most prestigious one in Saigon, now spread across several blocks near the American Embassy in the downtown area, are two unmarked slabs of marble around which miscellaneous mourners occasionally place wreaths or scatter a few flowers. Each week fresh pots of blooming plants are set on the tombstones by the gravekeepers, who are paid by members of the family of President Ngo Dinh Diem of South Vietnam and his Rasputinlike

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brother and closest advisor, Ngo Dinh Nhu, both of whom were murdered in midmorning of Nov. 2, 1963, approximately 20 hours after the start of the military coup that overthrew them.

Following the assassination of the two brothers, which took place in an armored car after they were captured in a Catholic church where they had sought refuge, the two shot and bayoneted bodies were originally buried in a corner of the military headquarters compound on the northern edge of the city close to Tan Son Nhut airport. They were placed there as a precaution to avoid further mutilation by anti-Diemist fanatics. At 3 o'clock one morning two years later,

the remains were said to have been secretly brought to the Mac Dinh Chi cemetery. It was believed that the generals who planned and executed the coup did not want the embarrassment of having the ghosts of their two victims permanently haunting them at headquarters, particularly since Saigon at the time was full of rumors of new coups and counter-coups.

Until two years ago, the two graves, originally just small mounds without any marble topping, were scarcely noticed. A handful of relatives and friends of the two men paid homage to them each Nov. 2 and sometimes on Sundays during the year. But on the anniversary of their

deaths in 1970, between 1,000 and 2,000 people, including the wife of President Nguyen Van Thieu — Thieu's father is buried alongside — appeared at the graves in what can be said to have marked the formal beginning of a revival of Diemism in South Vietnam. Last Nov. 2, more than 5,000 mourners visited the graves and attended a requiem mass at the Saigon cathedral that was previously announced in the newspapers by a committee of Diem's admirers. Several thousands more who were simply curious passers-by, and a sprinkling of anti-Diemists as well, helped cause a huge traffic jam.

These reverential demonstrations in behalf of Diem are a manifestation of the psychological and political changes that have taken place in Vietnam in the decade since his death. But in seriously re-evaluating Diem's historic role and analyzing his complicated personality, the ceremonial and nostalgic tributes, in themselves, can be easily misconstrued. They are symbolic and symptomatic performances, typically Vietnamese in their hidden meanings, flagellative and purgative, and their message is one of both longing and admonishment. On the surface, they represent the natural and human inclination to look upon the past more favorably than the present. Under the circumstances of the long and destructive war the Vietnamese have suffered since 1963, and especially

since the large-scale American involvement after 1965, the days of Diem now seem peaceful and golden to many people who feel themselves worse off today than they were before. However, that is not true of all Vietnamese, and if one stands back and regards the image of Diem in a larger historical light, the picture is considerably more complicated.

**D**ISCUSSIONS about Diem nowadays are particularly haunting in the light of the new Communist offensive in South Vietnam, which may well be a climactic one. Many experienced observers believe that had Diem lived the "big war" would never have materialized and the South Vietnamese would not have suffered anywhere near 120,000 dead and 500,000 wounded—100,000 of them permanently incapacitated—or that today there would be 350,000 war orphans. These figures date back to 1961, when the American involvement that has cost us 55,000 lives began on a small but gradually increasing scale, with advisers and funds. By the time of the coup, there were 12,000 advisers in Vietnam, but those who knew Diem best feel that neither he nor Nhu would ever have invited or allowed 550,000 American soldiers to fight in their country, and to permit the devastation caused by air attacks, including bombing and defoliation. There is evidence that shortly

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**Fall.** Diem's body lies in the back of an army personnel carrier—the end of the November, 1963, coup.

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China, the southern part of Vietnam. Diem's efforts to persuade Bao Dai to stick to firm conditions for his return failed and, when the Emperor agreed to come back under terms Diem thought incompatible with nationalism, he again went into seclusion. In August, 1950, he disconsolately left Vietnam, traveled briefly to Japan and the United States en route to Europe. In January, 1951, he returned to America, where he spent most of the next two years at the Maryknoll Seminary in Lakewood, N.J.

**DIEM'S** moment came by default. In June, 1953, he left the United States for Europe again, and, after briefly staying at a monastery in Belgium, he took up the nationalist cause once more in Paris. In June, 1954, while the Geneva Conference to end the war was still in progress, Diem was prevailed upon by Bao Dai, who was still Chief of State, to become Prime Minister of South Vietnam. In a ceremony at Cannes, in southern France, Diem swore

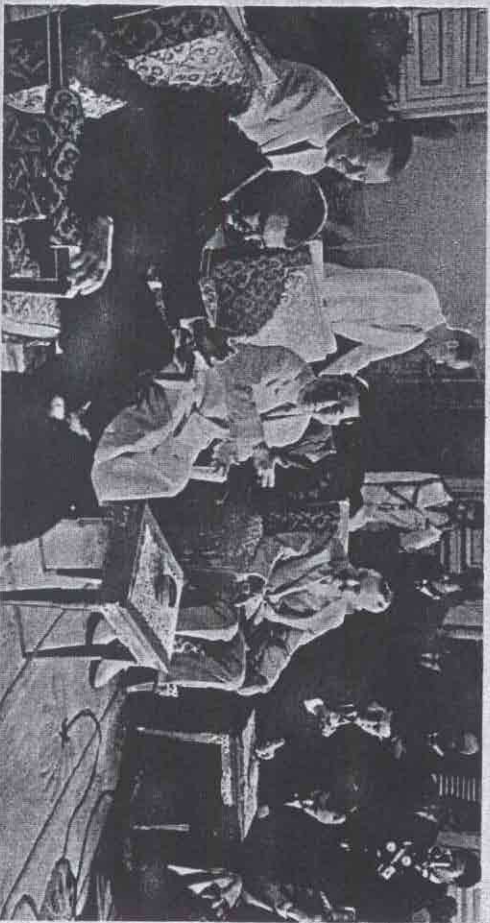
on the Bible not to "betray" Bao Dai. It has been commonly supposed that Diem was Washington's choice for the job. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, who almost single-handedly was about to project the United States into Vietnam to replace the French, undoubtedly approved of him, having been influenced by Cardinal Spellman, with whom Diem had become friendly in the United States, and others; but the fact of the matter is that the French Government picked him for the post, which no one else wanted anyway. The French assumed he would fail in the almost impossible task of saving the South and that they would then be able to pick up the pieces and work out some sort of new arrangement to retain their commercial advantages there, still using Bao Dai as their pliant instrument, and then try to set up a new relationship with the North.

When Diem returned to Saigon on June 25, 1954, riding to the palace from the airport in a curtained car so that none of the thousands of people who lined the route caught even a glimpse of him, he had lost none of the strong man-

darin concepts on which his nationalist aspirations and acquired ideas about Western democracy had been superimposed. Diem's whole concept of government was a tightly knit and formalized Confucian one. Beyond stressing his moral virtues and obligations, in an article called "Democratic Development in Vietnam," which he wrote before

assuming power, he cited as a "basic principle" "the mystique of government"—explaining that "the magistrate in his official capacity must conduct himself as one participating in a religious rite." The "sovereign" was thus due "sacred respect" as "the mediator between the people and heaven as he celebrates the national cult." It is no wonder that Diem, with Nhu's increasing help, projected his own peculiar personality cult in South Vietnam, and it is this cult that still lingers now and is accepted and admired by those who look back on Diem as a legitimate, although designated, leader, whereas President Thieu, an elected one, has unimpressively and unsuccessfully sought to copy Diem's manner and methods and interpret the "democratic mandate."

**T**HE Diem regime can best be divided into two periods, the first, from 1954 to 1959, during which Diem almost alone carried Vietnam from nonidentity and chaos into staidness, bringing not only stability but a Vietnamese instead of French identity; and the second, from 1959 to the time of the coup, when the threat of Communism became



**ALLIES?**—Diem at a September, 1963, meeting in Saigon with Defense Secretary Robert McNamara (left) and Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge. Washington had already given its approval for a coup to remove Diem from office—but not for his murder.

steadily more real and when the ideological and practical experiments that Diem and Nhu engaged in to counteract the Communists proved unsuccessful and drove the country into disarray and then into tyranny and near self-destruction.

Throughout the Diem era—as increasingly since then—events in Vietnam were immediately affected by the complicated and often brief contests for influence and power among the Americans. At the

outset, when there were not so many Americans involved, these contests were primarily personal; in later years they became more bureaucratic, involving thousands of competing American "empires," both in Saigon and Washington. The ultimate effect of all this, as time wore on, was to inhibit rather than help whatever nationalist revolution or evolution of their own the South Vietnamese might have had.

The sharpest personal con-

flict in the early Diem days was between Edward G. Lansdale, who was sent to Vietnam to work with Diem by John Foster Dulles and his brother Allen, the head of C.I.A., and Ambassador J. Lawton Collins, a former general. Lansdale arrived in Vietnam a few days before Diem did and immediately established an extremely close relationship with him. Collins appeared on the scene five months later.

By that time, chiefly under



Lansdale's guidance, Diem had established a small and inexperienced but at least Vietnamese administrative apparatus to replace the old French one. Beyond having to cope with the tremendous problems of reconstructing the war-shattered country and extending his own authority, which at the outset scarcely reached beyond Saigon, Diem had to find new homes for the nearly one million refugees (almost all of them Catholics) who had fled to the South from the North after the Geneva agreements were signed.

Under the anarchic circumstances that prevailed during the first year of Diem's regime, it was inevitable that plots to unseat him would arise. A particularly significant plot *manqué* produced a bitter and prolonged engagement of force between Diem's forces, and the 2,500 troops of the Binh Xuyen, a gangster-like organization that controlled gambling and prostitution in the city and that, with the approval of both the French and Bao Dai, ran the police. The fight took place during the first few months of 1955 and directly involved the struggle between Lansdale and Collins. Collins and Diem never got along, and Collins

wanted to replace him, in the midst of the Binh Xuyen fight. But when Collins was in Washington to press the point, and had just persuaded Eisenhower and State Department officials, the Binh Xuyen made the second of its two major attacks and Diem's troops surprisingly held their own and then drove the remnants of the gangster group into its marshland base around Saigon. With the support of Lansdale and Gen. John (Iron Mike) O'Daniel, the head of the new American Military Assistance and Advisory Mission, Diem's position was saved and Collins was reversed.

During the height of the Binh Xuyen crisis, Bao Dai had sent Diem a cable asking him to resign and return to France. Despite his earlier pledge not to "betray" the

Emperor, Diem was persuaded by Lansdale to ignore the summons. In October, 1955, in a referendum organized and manipulated by Nhu, who outdid himself, Diem unseated Bao Dai as Chief of State, winning by the overwhelming and unnecessarily rigged and humiliating margin of 5,722,000 votes for himself to 63,000 for Bao Dai. A few months later he became President instead of Chief of State.

**A** YEAR after the referendum, in October, 1956, the Constitution of the First Republic was promulgated. Despite the fact that many Vietnamese still consider it the best one the country has ever had, it had some signal weaknesses, perhaps the greatest of which was the "special powers" set forth in the final article giving the President more encompassing powers than even the French Governors General or the Emperors ever had. While the document provided for separation of powers, Diem's right to rule by decree in any emergency was tantamount to the "divine right" he believed he deserved in his own conception of holding the heavenly mandate.

The other major shortcoming of the Constitution, which was directly attributed to Nhu, was the introduction of the theme of *personalisme*, a mystic doctrine that blended Western and Eastern thought and attempted to define, in vague terms, the philosophic and spiritual responsibility of the individual in the new controlled democratic society. It embraced French Catholicism and certain more general aspects of Christian as well as Confucian thought, and it included elements of Marxism as well. In essence, it was a convenient pseudo-philosophical mixture of moral precepts that Nhu tried to rationalize

for authoritarian government under a benevolent cover. No one, however, who talked to Nhu about *personalisme*, including myself, ever really understood what he meant by it.

"The *personaliste* conception holds that freedom in an underdeveloped society is not something that is simply given or bestowed," he told me. "It can be achieved only through militancy and vigilance . . .

*Personalisme* stresses hard work, and it is the working class, the peasants, who are better able to understand the concept than the intellectuals . . .

It is those who participate physically and selflessly in the fight against Communism who are the most privileged, then those who courageously serve the interest of the villages without profit, and finally those who engage diligently in productive labor for their own as well as their villages' benefit."

This was all well and good, and Nhu and Diem subsequently sought to apply these principles in the organization of large regroupment centers to combat Communism called *agrovilles* and then, afterward, to the smaller strategic hamlets, which were surrounded by barbed wire and moats and were supposed to be self-contained and self-defending units. In these experiments, which were the forerunners of today's still largely untested and fragile pacification program in South Vietnam, Diem and Nhu failed to consider the practical problems of security as well as motivation.

Whatever they intended by *personalisme*, the key to the error of their ways can be found in the creation by Nhu in 1956 of his private political organization, the Personalist Labor Revolutionary party, called Can Lao. The Can Lao, whose members were said to total between 50,000 and 60,000 but may have been considerably fewer was, in effect, Nhu's private political intelligence network. He used it mainly to detect anyone he suspected of being a Communist or an opponent of the regime. Though it seldom held meetings and was loosely constructed its very existence served to inspire both fear and awe. By carefully selecting his own henchmen, including seven bureau chiefs, Nhu was able not only to eliminate anyone he disliked or mistrusted but to build his own paramilitary political machine in the countryside. This served both to stifle any opposition and to inhibit any dynamic sense of village and hamlet growth that his *personaliste* theories propounded. One simply did



as one was told, or one found oneself discarded or arrested.

**T**HE fact that Diem abolished local village elections in 1956—the same year he refused to go through with the Geneva plans for holding a referendum with North Vietnam over the unification issue—was another ominous note. Diem made his decision on the grounds of security—he was afraid the Communists might win as much as a fourth of the votes—but most Vietnamese nationalists thought he should have faced the issue squarely, that it would have been better to confront an overt rather than a covert Communist challenge, or at least a combination of the two rather than the purely covert one already being set in motion at the time.

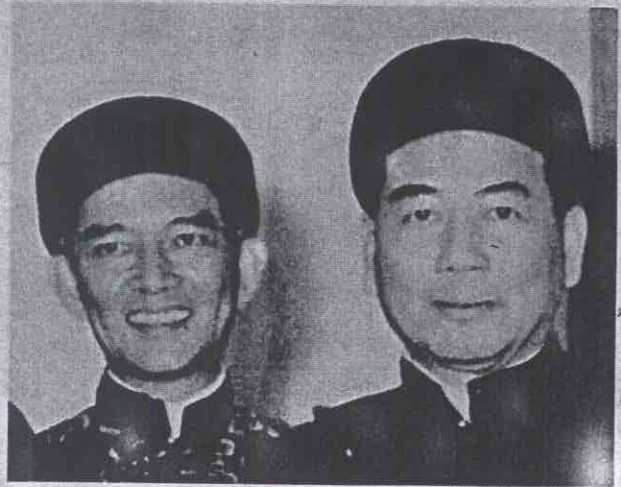
The National Assembly elections of 1956 and 1959 in South Vietnam were primarily charades and the assemblies were mockingly referred to as "the national garage." There was a tremendous propaganda effort to make the second vote appear to be popular and democratic, but, as one of Diem's chief press advisers wrote: "What actually happened on election day and during the preceding weeks shattered the democratic hopes of South Vietnam. Not only were the campaign procedures designed to give the Government-approved candidates a definite advantage, but every elementary standard of justice and fairness was violated on election day in order to get the approved candidates elected." Most of them were specifically chosen by Nhu and his staff. By this time, too, Madame Nhu—who was a member of the Assembly herself and the author of the highly unpopular "family laws" prohibiting divorce and

the laws outlawing dancing as immoral—had begun to play a vital role.

The Vietcong threat to security by the end of 1958 was already considerable, especially in the Delta, and a year later the hard core of guerrillas was up to 5,000 and would double by the end of 1960. It was at this time, in 1959, that, according to some members of the old regime I have recently talked to, Diem and even Nhu realized there was something wrong with the Can Lao and similar approaches to fighting the Communists. They wanted to change both their strategy and tactics, but they simply didn't know how because they were too removed from the manifold realities of the revolutionary struggle in the countryside.

By mid-1959, these sources say, the three problems of pacification and administration, security and the creation of a better political cadre were restudied with the objective of seeking new ways of approach (today, 13 years later, this all has a familiar ring). There was an effort, for example, to reorient the Can Lao so that its loyalties would be directed toward any national government, not just the one in power: but this was ludicrous in itself, since the old Can Lao members by this time had been so thoroughly indoctrinated and motivated by ambition and fear of incurring Nhu's wrath that they were incapable of change.

The Americans, specifically the then Ambassador Elbridge Durbrow, played an important role at this point. Durbrow tried to persuade Diem to get rid of Nhu and to bring some new political parties and faces into the Government, as well as to dissolve



**BROTHERS**—Ngo Dinh Nhu, left, and Ngo Dinh Diem. "Diem was, in a subtle sense, the victim of fratricide."



if necessary, was ready to kill the second group of plotters, which had the main support of the Americans.

(2) The group nominally headed by Gen Duong Van Minh, the senior general in the country, who had been relegated by the mistrustful Diem to a role of adviser. Its actual leader was Gen. Tran Van Don, acting chief of staff of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, though without direct control of troops in the field. Gen. Tran Thien Khiem, today the Prime Minister of Vietnam, who was then operations officer at military headquarters and thus the man with direct control over troop dispositions, was in touch with both Groups 1 and 2 but eventually worked with General Don. For weeks before the coup, this second group was in constant touch with Lieut. Col. Lucien Conein, of the C.I.A. Don was Conein's main contact. The original aim of this group was to overthrow Diem and Nhu but to fly both men out of the country, to Tokyo or Manila, in a plane provided by the Americans. Nhu was to remain in exile but Diem was to be permitted to return afterward in a figurehead role as Chief of State.

(3) The group headed by Col. Le Quang Tung, who was Chief of Special Forces and the most trusted officer of Diem and Nhu. When Nhu got wind of plots Nos. 1 and 2, he sought to use Tung in mounting a fantastic scheme by which this group would strike first in a phony coup called Bravo One, during which Nhu and Diem would be "overthrown" and would flee to a

coastal resort near Saigon. Then, when the real coup was defeated by what he assumed would be loyal troops and the palace secured, Nhu and his brother would return in an operation called Bravo Two.

There were various dates set for the different coups. On Aug. 23-24, just after the attacks by Nhu on the Buddhist pagodas, the Do Mau-Thao group wanted to strike. The Americans by then, as the Pentagon Papers and,

more recently, the N.B.C. television show called "The Death of Diem" revealed, were ready to support a coup. President Kennedy, who was in Hyannis, Mass., had somewhat reluctantly given in to his anti-Diemist "hawks," led by Roger Hilsman, then Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs, but then had had some second thoughts. Nevertheless, the word went out to proceed, but to save Diem's life. At the last minute, Colonel Conein intervened and convinced Thao that he did not have enough strength. By then, secretly, Conein was already co-operating in behalf of Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge and the C.I.A. to help the second (Don-Minh) group to stage a coup. At that time Don was still ready to hold off if Diem introduced certain reforms. He visited Diem in the palace in the last week of August, and gave Diem a memorandum the generals had prepared that dealt with such reforms. Diem promised to study it.

On Oct. 31, the day before the coup, Don, at the instigation of the Americans, again went to the palace and spoke first with Nhu and then with Diem. He warned both men that the situation in the country was bad and asked them what they were going to do about the generals' earlier memorandum and the promised reforms. Both brothers said that the situation had returned to normal and there was no need to do anything. Don left without saying anything further.

The next day, at 1:30 P.M., an hour after Don went to the airport with Ambassador Lodge to say good-bye to Adm. Harry Felt, the Commander of the Pacific Fleet, who had been visiting Saigon and had talked to Diem just that morning, knowing nothing about what was about to happen, the coup began. Group No. 1—the Do Mau-Thao one—had no choice but to go along with it. Six days earlier, on Oct. 26, this group of colonels had again wanted to strike on its own, and again had been called off by Conein and another C.I.A. man.

**T**HE final coup went off with precision, though not

everything turned out as expected. At 3 P.M., an hour and a half after it began, Diem called Don from the palace—all but a few of the coup generals were at military headquarters, as were some of the colonels and hangers-on whom Don didn't trust. Diem asked Don: "What are you doing?" Don reminded the President of their conversation the day before. Diem said he was ready to announce a new policy. Don replied, "Why didn't you tell me that yesterday? Now it's too late." One by one, starting with General Minh, he put 8 or 10 of the other coup leaders on the phone to talk to Diem, to prove his point. Diem hung up. Fifteen minutes later, Nhu called, proposing that the coup leaders come to the palace to negotiate. Don consulted his fellow leaders and they all said no. During both conversations, Don demanded that the two brothers resign and promised them that they would be allowed to fly out of the country with their families.

At 4:30 P.M., still on Nov. 1, Diem had his last talk over the phone with Lodge, during which Lodge, after expressing his admiration for Diem's "courage" and "great contributions to your country," added his fears about the President's "physical safety" and asked Diem if he had heard of the offer of safe conduct out of the country. Diem said no, which was untrue. Lodge then promised to do what he could to assure Diem's physical safety and Diem replied: "I am trying to re-establish order."

After vainly telephoning around the country to various troop commanders to seek support, Diem and Nhu made the mistake that probably cost their lives by departing from the palace about 8 o'clock that evening. They did not, as has been maintained, leave by a secret tunnel, but simply went out a back door and took a Land Rover to a point near the Saigon River, where they transferred to a Citroen and went to the home of a rich Chinese friend named Ma



Tuyen. The flight was arranged by a loyal Diem aide, and had originally been a precautionary move in connection with the phony Bravo One and Bravo Two plots Nhu had created. Whatever chance that plan might have had of succeeding was rendered null by the failure of the brothers to rally any support, and by the fact that Colonel Tung, the Special Forces commander and head of the counterplot, had been shot and killed about 6 o'clock.

The attack on the palace began about 9 o'clock that

evening. The first man into the palace among the plotters was Colonel Thao, who got there about 5 A.M. on Nov. 2 and was told by a captured officer where Diem and Nhu were. But by the time Thao reached Ma Tuyen's house, Diem and Nhu had gone.

**T**HEIR original plan had been to flee by boat and car to the Central Highlands headquarters of Gen. Nauyen Khanh, commander of the Second Corps. Khanh, regarded as a lone wolf by the other plotters, knew about the coup but had remained on the sidelines. (Three months later, he was to lead his own coup against the victorious junta and take over himself.) Realizing they were cornered, Diem and Nhu had abandoned the idea of going to Khanh's headquarters and had sought refuge in the Sacred Heart Church in Cholon, not far from Ma Tuyen's house. They got there about 6 in the morning of Nov. 2, shortly before Thao reached Ma Tuyen's.

Almost as soon as he reached the church, Diem took confession and then called General Don at military headquarters. He asked that the lives of the soldiers loyal to him be saved, but Don reminded him that, though they had put up a white flag at the palace, the soldiers had shot and killed one of the coup captains who had come forward to accept their surrender. After some further conversation, Diem agreed to the conditions set by the

coup leaders: resignation—i.e., surrender.

General Minh, who was furious because Diem had refused to talk to him over the phone, held an informal poll among a dozen or so of the coup leaders on the terrace at military headquarters to determine what to do with Diem and Nhu. General Don spoke first and said they should be sent abroad, as planned. He then went into headquarters to prepare two beds for the brothers. So far as I have been able to determine, no formal vote was taken among the other generals and colonels to kill Diem and Nhu, but the consensus was that they should be killed. (General Minh, who gave the order to kill them, has since—just before the last election—acknowledged his "responsibility.")

A column of two jeeps and an armored personnel carrier was thereupon dispatched to the church in Cholon. Two colonels and a general were in the jeeps. The orders apparently were to assassinate Diem and Nhu before returning to military headquarters. The brothers gave up at the church without any resistance, though, when they were bound and thrown into the personnel carrier, Nhu cursed his captors. Capt. Nguyen Van Nhung, General Minh's personal aide, was inside the armored vehicle. Riding on top but looking down through the turret was Capt. Duong Hieu Nghia. At a railway crossing en route, possibly on



the orders of Gen. Mai Huut Xuan, the senior commander present—Nhung shot and bayoneted Diem and Nhu; it is not clear whether Nghia fired any shots.

Nhung was strangled in prison three months later. Nghia today is a full colonel and a province chief in the Delta, and, like some others who took part in the coup, he has promised to relate "the full story some day." Colonel Thao, the leader of the colonels' group of plotters, whom I knew well and who told me many of the coup details, was murdered in July, 1965, after he had overthrown General Khanh but failed in an attempt to seize power and then failed again in a subsequent coup effort. Thao's wife and children are living today in Fort Worth, Tex., where she teaches English.

It is not easy to place the murders of Diem and Nhu, which according to the original coup plans were not supposed to take place, in proper perspective to the current Diemist revival. The consciences of those who killed the brothers have obviously plagued them. Most Vietnamese I have talked with, even those who look back longingly to the Diem period and still speak well of Diem—if not of Nhu—find the revival talk "macabre." Some, as noted earlier, recognize the "nostalgia" but emphasize that "we cannot afford to look back, we must look ahead—why stir the ashes of the dead?"

**D**URING a mass rally in Saigon at the time of the Buddhist crisis of August September, 1963, Diem said "If I go forward, follow me. If I go backward, kill me. If I am murdered, avenge me." The number of people who miss and revere Diem may be growing, but there are few who want to avenge him, notwithstanding the fact that the series of coups and counter-coups and the less-than-successful American-inspired efforts to establish democracy in Vietnam since Diem was murdered have scarcely contributed to the nation's stability. Some Vietnamese and Americans feel that if Diem had survived, and a way could

have been found to eliminate Nhu, Vietnam would have been a lot better off today than it is—at least a major war would have been averted, they say, and hundreds of thousands of lives would have been spared.

The time to remove Nhu, however, one way or another, was back in the late fifties, and by 1963 it was too late; Diem, to all intents and pur-

poses, had lost his ability to cope with the situation, either politically or militarily. He was, in a subtle sense, the victim of fratricide. By that time, too, the pent-up religious as well as political hostility against the regime combined to make the coup inevitable, and it would have taken place whether or not the Americans had approved of it and helped promote it. One cannot say

that our deep subsequent involvement in the war was the result of that approval, but one can speculate that if a 1960 coup had succeeded, before the emotional stakes were so high in Vietnam, we might not have become as involved as we did, simply because American passions, fanned by the Buddhist revolt which was so greatly publicized were not then so aroused. Our emotional commitment reached its crisis point in 1963. After that, we were, in a way, hooked.

Over-all, however, the real tragedy, and irony, is that the overthrow of Diem and Nhu solved nothing and that South Vietnam's future remains as much in doubt today as it was in 1963, whether the war continues or the sputtering negotiations in Paris get anywhere. If Nhu had made a deal with the Communists behind Diem's back, the war might have been avoided, but in my opinion I think Nhu would not have succeeded and the war would have taken place, coup or no coup, though, as I have indicated earlier, we might not have taken part in it to the extent of our ill-conceived over-commitment after 1965. In any event, a decade later, the determination of the North Vietnamese to dominate the south, at least politically, remains exactly as it was at the time of the coup, and their chances of achieving that aim, through conquest or accommodation and coalition, are certainly equal, as of today, to the chances of South Vietnam surviving on its own. Could Diem have had a better chance of holding the country together, had he lived and had he, for instance, returned to Vietnam after the coup, as was the idea of some of the plotters? I do not think that the Diem of 1963 could have done so under any circumstances, for he was by then a beaten, disillusioned man. The current Diemist revival, however, represents both a desperate longing for peace and a feeling of bitterness and sorrow that everything that has happened in the Vietnam war since Diem's overthrow, including America's destructive engagement in the war, has all been in vain. ■





**Rehabilitation.** In Saigon last November, Diemists gather before a portrait of their lost leader at the first such memorial permitted by the present regime. Had Diem not been overthrown, some South Vietnamese and American observers now ask privately, could things have been any worse?



## Eerie Soliloquy

Because my own recollection of Diem remains so much the same 10 years later, I should like to quote a paragraph from my 1965 book, "The Lost Revolution," describing my meeting with him in 1962:

"He was a short, broadly built man with a round face and a shock of black hair, who walked and moved jerkily, as if on strings. He always dressed in white and looked as if he were made out of ivory. His self-absorption became apparent as soon as he started to speak, identifying himself and his cause with the nation. He indulged in few amenities of greeting, and since he was a compulsive talker, with whom it was impossible to have an interview—one had an audience; in fact, one was an audience—a single question was

likely to provoke a dissertation of an hour or more. And as he talked, encompassing his own past with that of history, his dark eyes shone, but they seemed to be, looking through his listener, through the walls of his palace, through everything, and one experienced an almost eerie sense of listening to a soliloquy delivered in another time and place by a character in an allegorical play. What emerged out of the torrent of words was strangely incomplete and unsatisfactory—perhaps because it was, more than anything else, an expiation and an apologia, an angry and often impassioned plea for understanding and sympathy, but a plea delivered without human warmth or empathy."

—R. S.