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THIRTY-FIVE YEARS OF



DISCREETION

BY DARRELL GARWOOD

Introduction by Tom Gervasi

money and arms in a long, losing attempt to stabilize native governments which, in the name of anti-Communism, are opposed to all important social change. This has been exactly what Mr. Khrushchev's dogma calls for—that Communism should be the only alternative to the status quo with its immemorial poverty and privilege.

When the Laos situation quieted down, American attention shifted to South Vietnam, but with no original thought or intention of becoming involved in war. Throughout most of 1963 and until President Johnson took office in November, an impression backed by statistics remained that the United States was getting out of Vietnam.

That year President Diem had asked for a reduction in the American contingent of twelve thousand military advisers stationed in the country. American aid had been cut back drastically, to \$93 million from \$267 million the previous year. And the Communist Vietcong, with its obsolete arms—no AK-47 submachine guns, no mortars, and no rocket launchers during these days—had considerably reduced its activity.

With his erratic brother Nhu still obscure and after nine solid years in office, President Diem gave an appearance of great stability until the beginning of social turmoil for reasons unrelated to the Vietcong. Many observers then and later thought that if Diem could have been left alone he might have continued to govern indefinitely.

Once again, however, the CIA's operatives had been active behind the scenes from which vantage they succeeded in undermining Diem's authority. The agency was found to be providing \$3 million a year (\$250,000 a month) to finance a private military force—a sort of vest-pocket army which was not under Diem's or regular military command. This force was assigned to the brother, Nhu.

A more destabilizing factor, poised in a more destabilizing way, would have been difficult to contrive. To top it all Diem and his brother represented a Catholic minority in a largely Buddhist country, and the brother could not

resist launching slaughtering attacks on Buddhist pagodas.

In July, 60,000 Buddhists demonstrated against the government. In August, 15,000 announced they were fasting in protest against the government's repressive policies. By the time of Diem's overthrow on November 1, 1963—twenty-one days before the assassination of President Kennedy—five Buddhists had publicly soaked themselves with gasoline and burned themselves to death in the streets.

The overthrow of Diem left a vacuum which no effort was made to fill. With the White House in the wake of Kennedy's death refusing to accept any government that could be called neutralist, strictly military rule which proved ineffective had to be set up. Instead of aiding a local administration, the United States soon found itself more in the position of actually running the government; and when that didn't work either, the U.S. virtually took over the country itself, economically speaking.

South Vietnam, normally one of the great rice-exporting areas of the world, soon was importing from the United States a quantity of rice per year that exceeded the annual crop of the state of Mississippi. And from there with seeming inexorability the situation went from bad to very bad, and from worse to much worse.

The brothers Ngo Dinh Diem and Ngo Dinh Nhu also had an official relationship, with the latter designated as "Political Counselor" to the president. The vague title could have meant almost nothing but grew phenomenally in importance in 1963 after the CIA began providing Nhu with his own military force. The 1,500-man army, called Special Forces, was modeled after the American Green Berets who trained these troops under CIA supervision.

A third though greatly subordinate member of the ruling triumvirate, who answered to the brother Nhu, was Colonel Le Quang Tung, commander of the Special Forces and head of the "Presidential Survey Office," sometimes called a "Vietnamese CIA." When the government was finally overthrown by unanimous decision of the reg-

come out: Almost to the end, with the government tottering crazily, Nhu was said to have boasted that he had "taught the Buddhists and the Americans a lesson."

At 5:15 P.M. the generals gave the brothers another chance to surrender. When they again refused, an attack on the palace by four Vietnamese fighter-bombers was ordered. The bombs did moderate damage and one of the planes was shot down by Vietnamese naval forces which were stationed in the Saigon River and had failed to get the word.

At 3:30 A.M. (still November 1 by American time) a full-scale infantry attack on the palace began. The defenders surrendered but the brothers were found to have escaped to the home of a wealthy Chinese friend in suburban Cholon. Their hideaway was quickly discovered by means not stated, possibly because they had had rush telephone lines installed at the Chinese home and the information could have been obtained from the telephone company.

At 6:30 A.M. Diem offered to surrender if he and his brother were granted safe conduct. The CIA, which had a man (Lucien Conein) in the coup headquarters, transmitted to the American embassy a request for a plane to fly them out of the country. Hasty arrangements were attempted but eventually, because it would have taken twenty-four hours to obtain from Guam a plane with sufficient range to fly them to a country willing to receive them, and no doubt with more than a suspicion this was going to be too late, the effort was abandoned even though the possibility of such a request had been foreseen.

As the rebel forces advanced upon them the brothers made one more attempt to escape, fleeing from the Chinese home to a small Catholic church in Cholon. There they were captured—an announcement said they surrendered—and were bound and placed face down on the floor of an armored car, ostensibly for transfer to command headquarters. They were killed en route. The rebel government issued an announcement that they had committed suicide, but when fellow members of their religion

pointed out that for Catholics this would be a mortal sin, the announcement was amended to say they were victims of "accidental suicide"—a contradiction in terms which the *New York Times* said "strains credulity."

John Mechlin, in *Mission in Torment* (Doubleday, 1965), said:

What counted was that the armed forces turned against Diem almost to a man. . . . Except for the resistance of the presidential guard not a weapon was raised in the regime's defense.

The death toll in the coup was placed at thirty-three—nine rebel soldiers, four palace guards, and twenty civilians including the official victims and innocent bystanders. Tung was included as a civilian despite his rank because his position as chief of the "Presidential Survey Office"—the so-called "Vietnamese CIA"—was considered to have been nonmilitary.

As for the brothers, the new government announced that they had been buried "with appropriate religious ceremonies" but refused for a year to say where. This led many to believe that examination of the bodies would have shown that they were shot or stabbed, or shot and stabbed, in the back.

The creation of two Vietnams was itself a violation of the Geneva Accords, which divided Vietnam at the 17th parallel only for the purpose of "regrouping." This process was to have taken a maximum of three hundred days, during which period the French colonial forces would withdraw from the country. Internationally supervised elections were then to have been held to reunify the country.

Premier and later President Diem (he became president after a year by ousting Paris-residing Emperor Bao Dai and holding a so-called election in which he received 98 percent of the vote) refused to take part in the planned reunifying elections. He was urged to go through the motions of negotiating unsuccessfully with Hanoi regarding

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