

# 'Political Decay'

Until the eruption of Buddhist demonstrations against the Diem regime in May, 1963, much of the American public was oblivious to the "political decay" in Vietnam described in the Pentagon account: the atmosphere of suspicion, the pervasive but latent disaffection with the autocratic Diem regime, the taint of corruption, the suppressed discontent in the Army.

In America, the early months of 1963 were a season of bullish public pronouncements about the war. In his State of the Union address on Jan. 14, President Kennedy declared that the "spearpoint of aggression has been blunted in Vietnam" while Adm Harry D. Felt, commander in chief of Pacific forces, predicted victory within three years.

Although this reflected the view prevailing among policymakers, a national intelligence estimate on April 17 offered a less glowing picture. Provided that

outside help to the Vietcong was not increased, the intelligence paper estimated that the guerrillas could be "contained militarily" but added that there was still no persuasive evidence that the enemy had been "grievously hurt" by the allied war efforts. Conclusion: "The situation remains fragile."

Moreover, as the Pentagon account recalls, military officers had twice tried to kill President Diem — in November, 1960, and again in February, 1962. Deeply distrustful of the army, the South Vietnamese President had placed loyal favorites in sensitive posts commanding troops around Saigon, established a trusted network of military chiefs in all provinces and stripped potential challengers and malcontents of troop commands.

## U.S. Somewhat on the Defensive

Over the years, secret intelligence reports had told of the corrosive effect of such methods on military morale. Pe-

riodically, they also described the gulf between the mandarin ruler and the apathetic peasantry, or the alienation of an urban middle class resentful of overbearing political controls and of its lack of real political voice.

At times even Washington felt exasperated with its chosen ally for failing to strive for greater popular allegiance through political, military and economic reforms. But the United States had become accustomed to having President Diem reject its advice and, early in 1963, found itself somewhat on the defensive before his complaint that there were too many prying Americans roaming his land.

"As the U.S. commitment and involvement deepened," the Pentagon chronicle relates, "frictions between American advisers and Vietnamese counterparts at all levels increased. Diem, under the influence of Nhu, complained about the quantity and zeal of U. S. advisers. They were creating a colonial impression among the people, he said."

Despite such frictions, the Kennedy Administration was content to continue the general policy that, the Pentagon analyst observes, was aptly captured in a journalistic aphorism: "Sink or swim with Ngo Dinh Diem."

As the Pentagon study recounts the 1963 political crisis, the spark of revolt was struck in the central Vietnamese city of Hue on May 8, when Government troops fired into a crowd of Buddhists displaying religious banners in defiance of a Government decree. Nine persons were killed and 14 injured, when they were crushed by armored vehicles.

The regime blamed a Vietcong provocateur. The Buddhists demanded that the Government admit it was the guilty party and pay indemnities to families of the victims. President Diem refused and, despite superficial compromises, the deadlock was never broken. The two sides slid into a series of increasingly violent confrontations.

The Buddhist protests — mass demonstrations and the immolations of yellow-robed monks — were met by police truncheons and growing arrests. Mrs. Nhu, the bachelor President's outspoken sister-in-law, angered the opposition by

ridiculing the fiery Buddhist suicides as "barbecues." There was an outcry of shock abroad, especially in America, which brought the Kennedy Administration under strong public criticism for the United States' policy of backing President Diem.

## Lighting Rod for Frustrations

The original May incident was hardly enough to shake the foundations of power. The Pentagon account blames the regime's mandarin rigidity for fueling the crisis. The Buddhist protests became a lightning rod for accumulated political frustrations. For the first time, the protests exposed the American public to the depth of Vietnamese disaffection with the Government.

By early July C.I.A. agents were tipped off to two rapidly developing coup plots. And a special national intelligence estimate on July 10 forecast that unless President Diem satisfied the Buddhists, "disorders will probably flare again and the chances of a coup or assassination attempts against him will become better than ever." [See text, intelligence estimate 53-2-63.]

The very next day, Mr. Nhu daringly faced down some senior generals and the plotting subsided temporarily.

Throughout May and June the United States Embassy tried to prod President Diem into meeting Buddhist demands by alternately soft and hard tactics. Ambassador Frederick E. Nolting, a soft-spoken Virginian who, the Pentagon narrative notes, considered it his duty to get along with President Diem, tried gentle persuasion. When he left on vacation, his deputy, William C. Truehart, took a tougher line, warning Mr. Diem on June 12 that unless the Buddhist crisis was solved, the United States would be forced to dissociate itself from him.

Cutting short his vacation, Ambassador Nolting rushed to Washington early in July to urge the Administration not to abandon President Diem yet, arguing that his overthrow would plunge Vietnam into religious civil war. Although President Kennedy had already decided to

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send Mr. Lodge to Saigon as Ambassador late in August, he granted Mr. Nolting a last chance to try to talk President Diem into conciliating the Buddhists.

The Pentagon study relates that on Aug. 14, the eve of his departure, Ambassador Nolting extracted such a prom-

ise. As a final gesture to the departing American envoy, President Diem gave a press interview on Aug. 15 saying that conciliation had always been his policy toward the Buddhists and, contradicting Mrs. Nhu's earlier criticism, asserted that his family was pleased with the Lodge appointment.