

Lansdale in the Breach

While Colonel Lansdale's team carried out its covert operations, the major policy decisions made by the National Security Council in August, 1954, were being put into practice.

In December, Gen. J. Lawton Collins, who had been chosen by President Eisenhower as his personal representative to Vietnam, signed an agreement with the French providing for the United States to take over all military training duties from them.

The agreement was put into effect in February, 1955, the account says, and the French, under American pressure, began their unexpected withdrawal from South Vietnam.

Despite the decision in August, 1954, to back Premier Diem, there was still widespread uneasiness in the American Government over his lack of support and the fragile political situation in Saigon, the Pentagon account goes on.

General Collins, who had been given the rank of Ambassador, felt that Premier Diem was unequal to the task and urged that he be removed.

If the United States was unwilling to replace Mr. Diem, General Collins wrote to Washington in December, 1954, then "I recommend re-evaluation of our plans for assisting Southeast Asia." This is the "least desirable but in all honesty and in view of what I have observed here to date this may be the only sound solution," he said.

Still Secretary Dulles remained convinced, as he cabled in reply to General Collins's message, that "we have no other choice but continue our aid to Vietnam and support of Diem." And he told Assistant Secretary of State Walter Robertson several days later that the United States must "take the plunge" with Mr. Diem, the narrative adds.

In the spring of 1955 the crisis in Saigon worsened. The Hoa Hao and Cao Dai armed sects formed a united front with the Binh Xuyen, a group of gangsters who controlled Saigon's police against Premier Diem, and sporadic fighting broke out in the city. The French told Washington they thought Premier Diem was "hopeless" and "mad."

General Collins, now adamant that

Mr. Diem must go, flew back to Washington in late April to press his case personally with the Secretary of State.

On April 27, after a meeting with General Collins, Secretary Dulles reluctantly agreed to the replacing of Premier Diem. He cabled the embassy in Saigon to find an alternative.

But Colonel Lansdale was working hard to support his friend Mr. Diem. In October the colonel had foiled a coup against Mr. Diem by Gen. Nguyen Van Hinh, the army Chief of Staff, by inviting General Hinh's two key aides to visit the Philippines for a tour of secret projects.

The authors of the Lansdale group's report do not specifically state that the team's instructions included supporting Mr. Diem against internal non-Communist opposition. But it is apparent from Colonel Lansdale's actions that he considered this an important part of his mission.

Reliable Bodyguards for Diem

During the fall of 1954 Colonel Lansdale helped Mr. Diem recruit, pay and train reliable bodyguards. He had been shocked to discover when he visited Mr. Diem at the palace during a coup attempt that the official bodyguards had all deserted. "Not a guard was left on the grounds," the report says. "President Diem was alone upstairs, calmly getting his work done."

With permission from the embassy, the Saigon Military Mission then began secretly paying funds to a Cao Dai leader, Gen. Trinh Minh The, who offered his services to Premier Diem.

Colonel Lansdale also brought from the Philippines President Magsaysay's senior military aide and three assistants to train a battalion of Vietnamese palace guards.

When the sect crisis broke out in the spring of 1955, Colonel Lansdale visited Mr. Diem nearly every day, the S.M.M. report says. "At President Diem's request, we had been seeing him almost nightly as tensions increased, our sessions with him lasting for hours at a time."

During the sect armies' uprising, the

Saigon Military Mission helped Premier Diem plan measures against the Binh Xuyen, and Colonel Lansdale repeatedly pressed the embassy to support the Premier.

With the acting C.I.A. station chief, Colonel Lansdale formed a team to help take action against the Binh Xuyen. The S.M.M. report recounts that "all measures possible under the narrow limits permitted by U.S. policy were taken."

'Number of Successful Actions'

Uncharacteristically, the report adds, "These will not be described here, but there were a number of successful actions."

On what proved to be the crucial day, April 28, the Pentagon study reports, Premier Diem summoned Colonel Lansdale to the palace and outlined his troubles. He had just "received word from his embassy in Washington that the U.S. appeared to be about to stop supporting him."

This was probably a reference to Secretary Dulles's decision of the previous day.

Premier Diem also reported that Binh

Xuyen units had begun firing on his troops.

Colonel Lansdale sought to reassure him. "We told him that it looked as though Vietnam still needed a leader," the report says, "that Diem was still President, that the U.S. was still supporting him."

That afternoon Premier Diem ordered a counterattack against the Binh Xuyen, and within nine hours achieved a major victory.

"Washington responded with alacrity to Diem's success, superficial though it was," the narrative says. Saigon was told to forget Secretary Dulles's order to drop Diem. The embassy then burned the April 27 message.

Thereafter Mr. Diem had full American backing, the study reports, and moved with more confidence. The next October he organized a referendum to choose between himself and Bao Dai.

After winning what the Pentagon narrative describes as a "too resounding" 98.2 per cent of the vote, Premier Diem proclaimed himself President.