

Running Header: CREATING A CRISIS

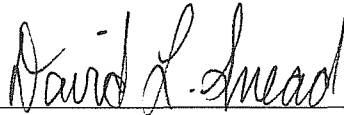
Creating a Crisis: The Diem Coup as an American Construction

Glen Emmett Koch II

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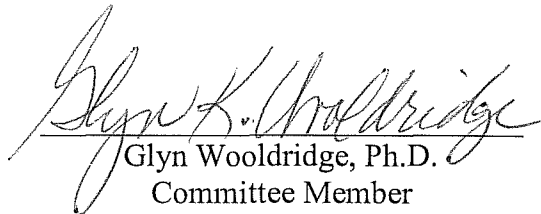
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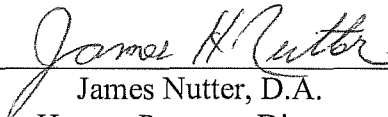
David L. Snead, Ph.D.
Chairman of Thesis



Timothy Saxon, Ph.D.
Committee Member



Glyn Wooldridge, Ph.D.
Committee Member



James Nutter, D.A.
Honors Program Director



Date

Abstract

On May 8, 1963, the South Vietnamese Civil Guard killed eight Buddhists who had protested the ban on flying the Buddhist flag. Events such as this ignited a political confrontation between the Buddhists and the South Vietnamese government. Although practicing Buddhists did not make up a majority of the population, they effectively enflamed the Vietnamese people against Ngo Dinh Diem, the president of South Vietnam, and captured the attention of the American news media by staging sacrificial suicides, hunger strikes, and street protests. The United States tried to convince Diem to make some concessions to the Buddhists, but their powers of persuasion proved ineffective. Without seriously considering an alternative to the Diem government, the administration ultimately backed a coup led by Diem's disgruntled generals. However, the coup did not provide the stability that the administration sought. Instead, the post-coup government became more dysfunctional than its predecessor and would only survive for two and a half months. The military coup of 2 November 1963 that overthrew the Diem government in South Vietnam would not have happened the way it did if the American administration had not over-reacted to the Buddhist crisis, and the nation would not have experienced a messy aftermath had the White House planned for a post-Diem South Vietnam.

Creating a Crisis: The Diem Coup as an American Construction

On May 8, 1963, the South Vietnamese Civil Guard killed eight Buddhists who had protested the ban on flying the Buddhist flag.¹ Events such as this ignited a political confrontation between the Buddhists and the South Vietnamese government. Although practicing Buddhists did not make up a majority of the population, they effectively enflamed the Vietnamese people against Ngo Dinh Diem, the president of Vietnam, and captured the attention of the American news media by sacrificial suicides, hunger strikes and street protests. At first, the United States tried to convince Diem to make some concessions to the Buddhists, but their powers of persuasion proved ineffective.² As the Buddhist crises deepened and the majority of the Vietnamese population turned against Diem, President John F. Kennedy recognized the instability of the situation and the failure of previous policies. The Kennedy administration feared that the lack of popular support for the regime would affect America's ability to defeat the communists. The months and years of muddling through Vietnam policy, subtly influencing military matters and not so subtly giving millions in economic aid, had failed. The administration could choose to abandon Vietnam, escalate, or continue to wait. They decided to escalate.

Without seriously considering an alternative to the Diem government, the administration backed a coup led by Diem's disgruntled generals. However, the coup did not provide the stability that the administration sought. Instead, the post-coup government became more dysfunctional than its predecessor, and would only survive for two and a half months. The military coup of 2 November 1963 that overthrew the Diem

¹ David Kaiser, *American Tragedy: Kennedy, Johnson and the Origins of the Vietnam War* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2000), 213.

² *Ibid.*, 214.

government in Vietnam would not have happened the way it did if the American administration had not over-reacted to the Buddhist crisis, and the nation would not have experienced a messy aftermath had the White House planned for a post-Diem Vietnam.

The United States played a central role in the plot to overthrow Diem. First, the administration operated from the premise that failure in Vietnam would spill over into all of Southeast Asia, which made U.S. officials willing to support extreme action, even a coup attempt.³ Second, government officials decided that Ngo Dinh Nhu, the vice president of Vietnam and Diem's brother, could no longer occupy a prominent position in the Vietnamese government because his oppressive policies had alienated a large percentage of the population.⁴ The administration concluded that if Nhu remained in power, then the communists would win the conflict. In order to rid Vietnam of Nhu, the administration evidenced a willingness to accept a coup against Diem.⁵ Third, even though the administration subtly pressured Diem to get rid of his brother, they did not give Diem an ultimatum because they feared that he would uncover the plot, declare martial law, squash a coup attempt, and expel the United States from Vietnam.⁶ The failure to issue an ultimatum led to uncertainty within the South Vietnamese government. Diem did not know if the United States was backing a coup or not. Fourth, the Kennedy

³ Memorandum From the President's Special Assistant for National Security Affairs (Bundy) to the President, January 9, 1964, *Foreign Relations of the United States*, 1964-1968, Volume I, Vietnam, 1964, www.state.gov, (accessed February 12, 2007).

⁴ Memorandum of Conversation, 'Vietnam,' August 26, 1963, JFKL: Roger Hisman Papers, Country Series, box 4, folder: Vietnam: White House Meetings 8/26/63-8/29/63, State Memcons. The National Security Archive, The George Washington University, <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/>, 5-6. (accessed February 12, 2007).

⁵ Telegram From the Department of State to the Embassy in Vietnam, August 24, 1963, *FRUS*, 1961-1963, Volume III, Vietnam, January-August 1963, 281, www.state.gov, (accessed February 12, 2007).

⁶ Memorandum of conference with the President, August 29, 1963, 1200, JFKL: JFKP: National Security File: Meetings and Memoranda series, box 316, folder: Meetings on Vietnam, 8/24/63-8/31/63, The National Security Archive, The George Washington University, <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/>, 5-6, (accessed February 12, 2007).

administration sent a cable to the American embassy that supported a coup. The 24 August 1963 cable contained orders for Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge, in conjunction with the Central Intelligence Agency, to begin to encourage disgruntled generals to organize against Diem.⁷ Fifth, the United States clearly communicated to the coup generals that it would *fully* support a new government if Diem's government failed,⁸ a position which was a radical departure from earlier policy,⁹ and a significant move since at the time the United States supplied forty percent of the South Vietnamese government's funding.¹⁰ Sixth, the White House cut off critical financial and diplomatic support for the Diem government to prove their displeasure with the situation, a move that critically weakened the Diem government and emboldened coup leaders.¹¹ Finally, while debating what position the United States should take, the majority of administration officials did not contest that overthrowing Diem would be the preferable option if the coup succeeded.¹² Almost all of their analysis focused on the potential success of the coup.

⁷ Telegram From the Department of State to the Embassy in Vietnam, August 24, 1963, *FRUS*, 1961-1963, Volume III, Vietnam, January-August 1963. 281, www.state.gov, (accessed February 12, 2007).

⁸ Memorandum of Conference with the President, August 28, 1963, *FRUS*, 1961-1963, Volume IV, Vietnam, January-August 1963, www.state.gov, 1. (accessed February 12, 2007).

⁹ Memorandum for the Record of Discussion at the Daily White House Staff Meeting, November 4, 1963, *FRUS*, 1961-1963, Volume IV, Vietnam, August-December 1963. 288, www.state.gov, (accessed February 12, 2007). See also Kaiser, 216.

¹⁰ Memorandum of Discussion at the Special Meeting on Vietnam, November 20, 1963, *FRUS*, 1961-1963, Volume IV, Vietnam, August-December 1963. 321, www.state.gov, (accessed February 12, 2007).

¹¹ Memorandum for the Record of Discussion at the Daily White House Staff Meeting, November 4, 1963, *FRUS*, 1961-1963, Volume IV, Vietnam, August-December 1963. 288, www.state.gov, (accessed February 12, 2007).

¹² Draft Cable, Eyes Only for Ambassador Lodge [CIA cable 79407, noted in upper right hand corner], October 30, 1963, JFKL: JFKP: National Security File: Country File, box 201, folder: Vietnam, General: State & Defense Cables, 10/29/63-10/31/63. The National Security Archive, The George Washington University, <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/>, (accessed February 12, 2007).

Officials within the White House firmly believed that the fall of Vietnam to the communists would lead to the collapse of all of Southeast Asia, and cause America's allies in Europe, Australia, Latin America, and Japan to lose confidence in American resolve. Laos and Cambodia, Vietnam's neighbors, were experiencing political problems of their own as their neutral governments continued to fight communist guerrillas and teetered on the brink of collapse.¹³ The United States recently had negotiated a neutrality agreement in Laos to keep it from falling to the communists; however, strategists in the White House thought that the peace was fragile and that infiltration from a strong, united, communist Vietnam would cause a rapid collapse.¹⁴ A similar argument held for Cambodia. These three countries symbolized more than three dominos that would topple one after another; they would fall simultaneously with the potential to cause a swift deterioration in America's position around the globe.

Once the United States began down the slippery slope of deserting allies, rebels across the world would be emboldened and allies disheartened. In a memo to President Johnson, Robert McNamara made the argument succinctly:

The consequences of a Communist-dominated South Vietnam are extremely serious. . . a truly "neutral" Southeast Asia is very unlikely to emerge from such a sequence of events. . . South Vietnam is both a test of U.S. firmness and specifically a test of U.S. capacity to deal with "wars of national liberation." . . there can be little doubt that any country threatened in the future by Communist subversion would have reason to doubt whether we would really see the thing through. This would apply even in such theoretically remote areas as Latin America. . . Thus, the stakes in preserving an anti-Communist South Vietnam are so high that. . . we must go on bending every effort to win.¹⁵

¹³ Memorandum From the President's Special Assistant for National Security Affairs (Bundy) to the President, January 9, 1964, 1964-1968, *FRUS*, Volume I Vietnam, 1964. 8, www.state.gov, (accessed February 12, 2007).

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

Clearly, saving Vietnam from communist conquest had vital strategic and psychological benefits. Additionally, the United States could demonstrate its resolve in Vietnam and prevent the spread of communism. Lee Kuan Yew, former Prime Minister of Singapore (1959-1990) recently verified the validity of the administration's analysis by arguing that American resolve in Vietnam directly contributed to the positive economic and political development of Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea, Taiwan, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Thailand. In turn, these countries helped precipitate the current economic reforms in communist China and Vietnam.¹⁶ Given the magnitude of the strategic costs of pulling out of Vietnam, advisors concluded that the United States should take its stand there.

Besides the strategic military and international fallout of losing Vietnam, officials feared political consequences. Neither President Kennedy nor President Johnson wanted to be the president who "lost Vietnam." The specter of the fall of China still haunted politicians. The defeat of the nationalists in China politically devastated the Truman administration in the early 1950s, and future administrations took notice. For instance, on 3 February 1964, President Johnson told a journalist from the *Miami Herald*, about Vietnam, "... run and let the dominoes start falling over. And God Almighty, what they said about us leaving China would just be warming up. . ."¹⁷ Moreover, Fredrik Logevall, in his *Choosing War: the Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of the War in Vietnam*, argues that Johnson and his advisors worried that losing Vietnam would

¹⁶ Lee Kuan Yew, "The United States, Iraq, and the War on Terror," *Foreign Affairs* 86 (2007), not paginated. Academic Search Premiere (accessed March 7, 2007).

¹⁷ Robert Mann, *A Grand Delusion, America's Descent into Vietnam* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 312.

destroy their personal credibility and the integrity of their party.¹⁸ To avoid personal humiliation, they glossed over the reports of a failing counter-insurgency effort, preached American responsibility to the free world, and worked feverishly to keep from proving themselves wrong.¹⁹

Robert Mann gives more credibility to the argument that American politicians considered Vietnam a political powder keg. He argues that Democrats, afraid of criticizing the leader of their own party, allowed President Johnson to bully them into silence. Johnson wrapped his policies in the American flag before presenting them to the Senate.²⁰ If someone objected to one of his policies, Johnson turned on him quickly, questioning the patriotism of the individual Senator, and his commitment to the troops.²¹ For instance, in May, 1965 Johnson asked for more money for the troops in Vietnam. He really did not need the money, but America just had responded to an uprising in a Caribbean nation, and he wanted to associate the conflict in Vietnam with “manning the ramparts in the nation’s backyard.” Mann argues that it was this sort of shrewd political maneuvering that made Rhode Island Senator Claiborne Pell quip, “going against Johnson on an issue like this would be ‘like going against motherhood.’”²² Additionally, Johnson succeeded in keeping Congress so quiet that Mann concludes, “[f]rom almost the beginning of the war to its end, the story of Congress was one of a tragic abdication of power and responsibility.”²³ Instead of using their constitutional ability to limit the President’s authority to wage war, they allowed the President to choose Vietnam policies

¹⁸ Ibid., 387.

¹⁹ Ibid., 387-388.

²⁰ Ibid., 728.

²¹ Ibid., 435.

²² Ibid., 437.

²³ Ibid., 730.

that preserved his domestic agenda.²⁴ Neither Kennedy nor Johnson wanted to lose an election because they failed in Vietnam. Given the potential military and political fallout of failing in South East Asia, the White House dismissed political solutions that could have resulted in the neutralization of Vietnam and sought a change in government.

By late August, 1963, largely owing to the escalation of incidents involving Buddhist monks clashing with South Vietnamese forces, the administration sought an adjustment in Diem's regime—a removal of Diem's brother Nhu from power. After the South Vietnamese government staged the pagoda raids in May, Buddhists began protesting the oppressive Diem government. Not only did Nhu and his wife express no sympathy for the Buddhists' problems, they exacerbated the situation by making crude comments about the self-immolation of the Buddhists. For instance, in a letter to the editor published in the *New York Times*, Madame Nhu stated:

I may shock some by saying 'I would beat such provocateurs ten times more if they wore monk's robes,' and 'I would clap hands at seeing another monk barbecue show, for one cannot be responsible for the madness of others.' But what else is there to say when the world, under a mad spell about the so-called 'Buddhist affair' . . . needs an electroshock to resume its senses.²⁵

Such behavior effectively turned public sentiment against the Diem regime and against the American government. U.S. and world newspapers widely reported these comments, and newspapermen began to question the wisdom of supporting the Nhuses. The administration did not think that Diem was the problem *per se*, but that his brother and wife were acting immaturely.²⁶ During a meeting with President Kennedy, General Maxwell Taylor said that the danger existed that Nhu would consolidate his power and

²⁴ Ibid., 731.

²⁵ Madame Ngo Dinh Nhu. Julius Venner. (Rev.) Aloysius McCall, O.F.M. Cap. Churchill. . . *New York Times*, August 14, 1963, ProQuest Historical Newspapers, 32, (accessed March 5, 2007).

²⁶ Kaiser, 228-230.

completely subordinate all of the generals and the civilian government. The result would be a collapse in morale of mid-level military forces who might decide to quit. Such an event would prevent the successful conclusion of the conflict and would ensure that Diem eventually would lose the war.²⁷ Several times during June and July, the administration pressured Diem to apologize to the Buddhists and to rein in his brother and sister-in-law; however, he failed to do so, and the White House began to question his ability to control Nhu.²⁸

On 8 July 1963, Major General Tran Van Don of the South Vietnamese army informed a CIA officer that coup plans existed to overthrow Diem.²⁹ Furthermore, in August, both General Le Van Kim and General Tan Van Don told American ambassadors that Nhu had taken control of much of the government and that the population was losing faith in the regime.³⁰ General Kim even claimed that Nhu controlled the Army like a puppet master.³¹ General Don told a U.S. official that Diem used Nhu as a "thinker and advisor."³² Reports such as these confirmed the administration's fears that Diem's government teetered on the brink of collapse. Kennedy and his advisors still believed

²⁷ Memorandum of Conversation, "Vietnam," August 26, 1963, Noon, Roger Hilsman Papers, Country Series, box 4, folder: Vietnam: White House Meetings 8/26/63-8/29/63, State Memcons, The National Security Archive, The George Washington University, <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/>, (accessed February 12, 2007).

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ DCI Briefing 9 July 1963, JFKL: JFKP: National Security File: Country File, box 51, folder: Cuba: Subjects, Intelligence Material, The National Security Archive, The George Washington University, <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/>, (accessed February 12, 2007).

³⁰ Telegram From the Central Intelligence Agency Station in Saigon to the Agency, August 24, 1963, *FRUS*, 1961-1963, Volume III, Vietnam, January-August 1963. 275, www.state.gov, (accessed February 12, 2007).

³¹ Telegram From the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State, August 24, 1963, *FRUS*, 1961-1963, Volume III, Vietnam, January-August 1963. 274, www.state.gov, accessed February 12, 2007.

³² Telegram From the Central Intelligence Agency Station in Saigon to the Agency, August 24, 1963, *FRUS*, 1961-1963, Volume III, Vietnam, January-August 1963. 275, www.state.gov, (accessed February 12, 2007).

that the Viet Cong had yet to exploit the Buddhist Crisis.³³ However, they feared that continued deterioration of the situation would hurt the war effort. Their fear led several administration officials to draft a cable on 24 August that effectively backed the idea of a coup against Diem.

On 24 August 1963, the White House, with the specific permission of President Kennedy, sent a cable to the embassy in Saigon that expressed a loss of faith in the Diem regime and a desire for the embassy to explore alternate possibilities for leadership. The cable represents the most significant push by the U.S. government for a coup in Vietnam. Rodger Hilsman wrote the first draft of the cable, and Michael Forrestal gave it to the President. Robert McNamara, and several other officials who would later criticize the cable were on vacation or unavailable on the weekend. However, this did not prevent the acting advisors from clearing the cable and sending it.³⁴ The cable stated clearly that the United States could not continue to support the Vietnamese government as long as Nhu had any power. If Diem did not get rid of his brother, then the United States would get rid of him. The cable told the embassy to continue to push Diem to reform his government, but the second order stated that Lodge should "tell appropriate military commanders we will give them direct support in any interim period of breakdown central government mechanism." Furthermore, the administration told the ambassador to explore "alternative leadership and make detailed plans as to how we might bring about Diem's replacement if this should become necessary."³⁵ Lodge acted immediately.³⁶ Any one of these policies would have been a significant departure from the status quo,

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Kaiser, 230-231.

³⁵ Telegram From the Department of State to the Embassy in Vietnam, August 24, 1963, *FRUS*, 1961-1963, Volume III, Vietnam, January-August 1963, www.state.gov, (accessed February 12, 2007).

³⁶ Ellen J. Hammer, *A Death in November* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1987), 180-181.

but in aggregate they painted a picture of America's commitment to a regime change. Up until this point, the administration had only received scattered, unreliable reports that coup plotters existed.³⁷ Now, the government wanted the embassy to find disgruntled officials, express the United States' displeasure with Diem, and promise them support in the event that they precipitated a coup.

Despite their enthusiasm for a coup, the administration did not have evidence that broad support for an overthrow of Diem existed. David Kaiser argues that a developed plot did not exist in Vietnam until the United States sent feelers out to the generals. He argues that the administration believed that many coup plotters existed because of recent articles in the newspapers by David Halberstam, but no evidence from the country supported the idea that a coup was brewing. Instead, it was the United States that really precipitated action.³⁸ Some of the reports that came out of Vietnam at the time support Kaiser's argument. In the middle of July, intelligence analysts speculated that some of the rumors of plots coming out of Vietnam could have been ones planted by the administration as a ruse to root out disloyal commanders.³⁹ Even if some of the plotters had been discontented and had contemplated a coup before the cable, they were not organized in large numbers. This is known because even after Lodge made inquiries, the generals took months to get the coup together.

The 24 August 1963 cable sparked a debate within the administration over whether the American government should continue to support a coup or if it should try to stop it. Fredrick Nolting and Secretary Robert McNamara voiced the strongest

³⁷ Ibid., 180-181.

³⁸ Kaiser, 243.

³⁹ DCI Briefing 9 July 1963, JFKL: JFKP, National Security File: Country File, box 51, folder: Cuba: Subjects, Intelligence Material, the National Security Archive, The George Washington University, <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/>, (accessed February 12, 2007).

opposition during this time, while Under Secretary George Ball, W. Averell Harriman and Rodger Hilsman all supported the coup. The administration knew that they were backing a coup, and they needed to decide if they wanted to go all in or if they wanted to back off. Nolting did not think that the generals could pull it off because they did not have sufficient support. At the same time, he commented on the delicate situation. He said that if America turned its back on the generals, then they would completely abandon any coup attempts, which would overly limit the U.S. options.⁴⁰ In the same meeting where Nolting voiced his concerns, McNamara "expressed grave doubts that the generals could carry out a clean coup. . . military forces were few and scattered."⁴¹ Despite the misgivings of McNamara and Nolting, Ball advocated a coup because the United States could no longer continue to support Nhu since he continued to gain power. He believed that the administration was "beyond the point of no return."⁴² Along with Ball, Ambassador Lodge and General Harkins supported a coup.⁴³ McNamara, the president, and most of the advisors thought that the United States should not support an overthrow if it did not have a solid chance of success.⁴⁴ The president decided to communicate this to Lodge. In an August 28 meeting with his staff he expressed this: ". . . the President wanted to be assured that there was full coordination between Saigon and Washington. . . he wanted to avoid any situation in which the field was going ahead on a plan that was against their better judgment because they thought it was orders from Washington. . ."⁴⁵

⁴⁰ Memorandum of Conference With the President, August 27, 1963 *FRUS*, 1961-1963, Volume IV, Vietnam, January-August, 1963, 303, www.state.gov, (accessed February 12, 2007).

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Memorandum of Conference With the President, August 28, 1963, *FRUS*, 1961-1963, Volume IV, Vietnam, August-December 1963, 1, www.state.gov, (accessed February 12, 2007).

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

By the end of the first week after sending the 24 August cable, the administration decided to not actively support a coup, but they did not actively discourage one either.

A cable sent on 29 August 1963 demonstrates the administration's indecision and provides proof of American involvement in coup plotting. The State Department told Lodge that the administration had held high level meetings about the course of the war in Vietnam and decided to confirm the "basic course" set out in the 24 August cable.⁴⁶ The cable then clarified the administration's position. It authorized General Harkins to maintain contact with disgruntled generals and to continue to tell them that the U.S. government still wanted the Nhus removed from power.⁴⁷ Harkins could "review plans" but could not become involved in direct planning.⁴⁸ The cable further stipulated that Harkins should know the specifics of any attempts to remove the Nhus before giving final approval to the generals. The government conditioned its support further by pledging to back a coup that "has a good chance of succeeding," but it would not pledge American troops. Only paragraph three mentioned Diem. It stated, "Question of last approach to Diem remains undecided and separate personal message from Secretary to you develops our concerns and asks your comment."⁴⁹ To the administration, the cable stopped active U.S. participation in the coup. They wanted the embassy and the CIA to act as advisors to any indigenous efforts to overthrow the government and to avoid pushing too hard. The third paragraph is vague and confusing because the first two seem to say that the United States would back an overthrow of Diem in order to get rid of Nhu as long as the

⁴⁶ State-Saigon Cable 272, August 29, 1963, Lyndon B. Johnson Library: Lyndon B. Johnson Papers: National Security File: Country File Vietnam Addendum, box 263 (temporary), folder: Hilsman, Roger (Diem), The National Security Archive, The George Washington University, <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/>, (accessed February 12, 2007).

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

overthrow was successful, whereas the third paragraph clarifies that the United States was still undecided. The administration's indecision would continue for the next several months.

Throughout the rest of September and October 1963, the administration's hesitancy continued. On the one hand, Nolting continued to contend that Diem's government was still prosecuting the war effectively and that no successor government would be able to take over well.⁵⁰ On the other hand, Ambassador Lodge reacted to the 24 August cable by communicating with two South Vietnamese Generals through CIA contacts.⁵¹ The contacts told both of the men the U.S. position on Nhu and gave them assurances that the United States would protect them if the coup failed or would support the new government if it succeeded.⁵² The embassy followed its orders and did not involve itself in the intricacies of the planning. However, embassy officials stretched their orders to the limits by encouraging the generals. At various points during September and October, Lodge sent telegrams to the White House and the State Department that detailed several military leaders who supported a coup and those who might oppose one. The conversations in the committee meetings focused on how successful a coup would be and how much pressure could be applied to Diem before he snapped. During this entire period, indecision mounted.

The administration's irresolution continued into late October 1963. Even as late as 29 October, just a few days before Diem fell, President Kennedy and his top advisors still debated the pros and cons of a coup. In a meeting Attorney General Robert Kennedy

⁵⁰ Hammer, 181-183.

⁵¹ Ibid., 180-181.

⁵² Ibid., 189.

and several of the Joint Chiefs of Staff voiced concerns about the wisdom of a coup.⁵³ Robert Kennedy pointed out that the intelligence reports were still as vague as they had been at the beginning of the plotting and that the administration could not be certain that the coup would go off correctly.⁵⁴ In fact, he pointed out, they knew less about the person who would take over the government than they did about Diem, and that if the coup failed, Diem would certainly kick the United States out of Vietnam. Secretary Rusk warned that backing off would cause the plotters to become anti-American and could hurt the war effort. General Taylor came in on the side of the Attorney General. He said that a completely successful coup would probably still hurt the war effort because the new government would suffer from inexperience and would have to replace all of the civilian leadership that was loyal to Diem, allowing the Viet Cong to make gains.⁵⁵ Director John McCone agreed with this assessment. He thought that any outcome from a coup would hurt the war.⁵⁶ Harriman then pointed out that if Diem remained in power, his government would eventually lose support of the people, and the United States would have to leave Vietnam anyway. He argued that a coup now, even if it was a poor option, was still the best alternative.⁵⁷ McGeorge Bundy pointed out that a civil war could erupt in the country and quickly spiral out of control. The president concluded that the United States should actively discourage a weak coup attempt. In an October 29th meeting he confirmed expressed his concern. The minutes read, "The President said it appears that the pro-and anti-Diem military forces are about equal. If this is so, any attempt to

⁵³ Memorandum of Conference with the President, October 29, 1963, [this is the transcript for the last meeting before the coup JFKL: JFKP: National Security File, Meetings & Memoranda series, box 317, folder: Meetings on Vietnam, 10/29/63, The National Security Archive, The George Washington University, <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/>, (accessed February 12, 2007).

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

engineer a coup is silly.”⁵⁸ In a 30 October cable to Ambassador Lodge the White House drove home this point, “we believe that. . . you should take action to persuade coup leaders to stop or delay any operation which, in your best judgment, does not clearly give high prospect of success.”⁵⁹ The administration worried that a coup failure would destroy America’s diplomatic and military credibility in Vietnam.

Ambassador Lodge did not share the president's belief that the United States could discourage a coup. He replied in an October 29th cable that the coup planning was too far along and that it could commence imminently. In a reply to this cable, McGeorge Bundy told Lodge that the administration firmly believed that it had the power to prevent a coup if it wanted to, and he told Lodge to discourage a coup if he thought that it did not enjoy an extremely strong possibility of success.⁶⁰ Furthermore, Bundy told Lodge that in the event of a coup the United States would not intervene on either side. On the other hand, he told Lodge that if a coup started, that "it is in the interest of the U.S. government that it succeeds.”⁶¹ Telling Lodge to adopt the precautionary principle with future coup planning was as close as the administration got to telling him to discourage a coup. Furthermore, Bundy only told him to oppose a coup if he thought that it would not succeed. Since Lodge was extremely pro-coup, and the administration knew this, there was little chance that he would call off the coup. Although the administration did not give its de facto approval of the coup that would happen in two days, its failure to decisively discourage a coup acted as a de jure command.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Draft Cable, Eyes Only for Ambassador Lodge [CIA cable 79407, noted in upper right hand corner], October 30, 1963, JFKL: JFKP: National Security File: Country File, box 201, folder: Vietnam, General: State & Defense Cables, 10/29/63-10/31/63 The National Security Archive, The George Washington University, <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/>, (accessed February 12, 2007).

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

Indecision within the administration may have been mounting during this time, but the Vietnamese generals did not perceive indecision, they perceived strong support. Vietnam historian Ellen J. Hammer, in *A Death in November*, contends that the generals supposed significant support from the United States. She claims:

Officially, the American plot to overthrow Ngo Dinh Diem was over by August 31. . . . The Vietnamese generals, however, were neither politicians nor lawyers, and for them the week of signals and contacts, the talk of pressures against the government and promises to the military could not be expunged by a piece of paper as though all of it had never happened. Leading generals had been told that the American government was at last ready to support them against the regime, and they had joined in what had turned out to be, not a rehearsal, but soundings, for the coup that was to come.⁶²

To a rational observer not privy to the intense conflict within the administration, the United States officially backed a coup. For a week, the top level ambassador and two CIA contacts met in smoky backrooms and promised money and support for an overthrow of the Diem government.⁶³ During subsequent meetings in September and October, neither Lodge nor the CIA officers ever told the generals that the United States would no longer protect them. They did not tell them that the United States would not recognize a successor government as legitimate. They did not tell them that they would not supply them money to help them plan the coup. They did not tell them that they had restored faith in the Diem government. Instead, they continued to monitor the coup developments and carefully calculated the chances of success.⁶⁴ Historian Howard Jones, argues that the Kennedy Administration “bore heavy responsibility. The president has

⁶² Hammer, 196.

⁶³ Ibid., 198-207.

⁶⁴ Draft Cable, Eyes Only for Ambassador Lodge [CIA cable 79407, noted in upper right hand corner], October 30, 1963, JFKL: JFKP: National Security File: Country File, box 201, folder: Vietnam, General: State & Defense Cables, 10/29/63-10/31/63 The National Security Archive, The George Washington University, <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/>, (accessed February 12, 2007).

become an accomplice in the coup by signaling the conspirators that Diem would receive no U.S. assistance.”⁶⁵

When the coup occurred, American officials would proclaim that it had been an indigenous affair, and while they had heard rumors, the United States had not been involved.

A question then remains: was the United States correct in announcing that it had had no part in the coup, or was the Kennedy administration somewhat responsible? Lawrence Freedman argues that the administration "still avoided direct responsibility" by being indecisive during the September through October period.⁶⁶ Freedman shifts blame from the administration to Lodge, and he says that the administration was hesitant, whereas Lodge was exceedingly pro-coup.⁶⁷ Freedman supports his claim by discussing the 29 October 1963 meeting in which Robert Kennedy voiced support for Diem. Freedman says that "[t]his reflected Washington's continued failure to grasp the dynamics of the situation, desperately searching for a middle way that would bring a change of policy without a change of government."⁶⁸ Freedman concludes that Kennedy wanted to discourage a coup, but that Lodge believed that the coup was too far along and avoided stopping it. The conclusion that Kennedy's greatest contribution to the coup was his inability to decide between supporting and discouraging an overthrow of Diem is wrong. As evidenced above, the administration may have thought that it no longer backed a coup after August, but the generals perceived that the United States still wanted it to continue.

⁶⁵ Howard Jones, *Death of a Generation: How the Assassinations of Diem and JFK Prolonged the Vietnam War* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 9-10.

⁶⁶ Lawrence Freedman, *Kennedy's Wars: Berlin, Cuba, Laos, and Vietnam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 390.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 393.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 394.

Within two years of the coup, administration officials forgot how their push for a coup in August and their side line sitting through September and October contributed to the generals' plan. In a brief written for President Johnson in 1966, William Bundy and Bill Moyers argued that the United States only maintained contact with coup leaders and that it did not "actively promote . . . a coup."⁶⁹ They went on to say that the administration decided that it could not prevent a coup, so they "stood aside" while the Vietnamese generals undertook a purely local affair.⁷⁰ The conclusion that they reached stands in stark contrast to the statements and conversations directly preceding and following the coup. For instance, in a daily White House staff meeting on 4 November 1963, Forrestal and Bundy pointed out that cutting off financial aid to the regime and verbally pressuring officials helped precipitate the coup.⁷¹ Furthermore, the 29 October 1963 cable discussed above provides direct evidence that the administration thought that it could stop a coup as late as the beginning of November. Had the United States decided to fully support the Diem government during the months following the 24 August cable, it seems that the coup would not have happened when and how it did.

On 1 November 1963 at 2:00 PM Saigon time the coup commenced. Rebel forces seized control of several strategic areas within the city, and many military units joined the coup forces. Diem barricaded himself in the palace with his few remaining men, while

⁶⁹ Department of State, Memorandum William P. Bundy-Bill Moyers, Discussions Concerning the Diem Regime in August-October 1963, July 30, 1966, Lyndon B. Johnson Library: Lyndon B. Johnson Papers, National Security File, Country File Vietnam, box 263, folder: Hilsman, Roger (Diem 1963), The National Security Archive, The George Washington University, <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/>, (accessed February 12, 2007).

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Memorandum for the Record of Discussion at the Daily White House Staff Meeting November 4, 1963, *FRUS*, 1961-1963, Volume IV, Vietnam, August-December 1963, 288, www.state.gov, (accessed February 12, 2007).

the rebelling generals maneuvered to surround him.⁷² The White House received initial reports that almost the entire army in and surrounding Saigon had joined the coup forces except for the palace guard.⁷³ None of the generals had committed their forces to an all out assault on the palace. Instead, they waited for Diem to give himself up.⁷⁴

Diem, realizing that his government was in imminent danger, phoned Ambassador Lodge. He told the ambassador that some of his generals had rebelled. He wanted to know if the United States backed the rebels, or if it still backed him. Lodge lied. He told Diem that he was not informed enough about the situation to commit himself to any official policy. Diem paused and then hung up.⁷⁵ Within hours, Diem escaped from the palace into Saigon. He did not make it far before he and his brother were captured, bound, and shot.⁷⁶

For the next few days following the coup, the United States received upbeat reports of the success of the takeover and the popularity of the new regime. Reports indicated that fewer than one hundred Vietnamese soldiers had lost their lives in the attack and that no Americans had died.⁷⁷ Furthermore, the reaction of the Vietnamese people to the coup surprised American officials. The Vietnamese held parades and threw

⁷² Kaiser, 274.

⁷³ Memorandum for the Record of Discussion at the Daily White House Staff Meeting, November 1, 1963, *FRUS*, 1961-1963, Volume IV, Vietnam, August-December 1963, 263, www.state.gov, (accessed February 12, 2007).

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Department of State, John M. Dunn, Memorandum for the Record, November 1, 1963 Gerald R. Ford Library: Gerald R. Ford Papers: National Security Adviser's Files: NSC Convenience File, box 6, folder: Henry Cabot Lodge, inc. Diem (2) The National Security Archive, The George Washington University, <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/>, (accessed February 12, 2007).

⁷⁶ Kaiser, 275-277.

⁷⁷ Central Intelligence Agency, The Situation in South Vietnam, November 2, 1963 JFKL: JFKP: President's Office File, box 128A, folder: Vietnam: Security, 1963, The National Archive, The George Washington University, <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/>, (accessed February 12, 2007).

roses on the rebel forces.⁷⁸ The coup seemed to have taken the Viet Cong by surprise because even though the Viet Cong incident rate increased to about a thousand a week immediately following the coup, the rate dropped back down to normal levels for the next few weeks.⁷⁹

On November 3 1963, Ambassador Lodge sat down with the new civilian leadership and talked about the specifics of the new government's policies and future economic aid from the United States. The generals immediately expressed interest in the resumption of American support to help the government begin functioning again.⁸⁰ Lodge also asked them about the structure of the new government. They told Lodge that they did not want to have a military dictatorship. Instead, they wanted to have a government in which the military was barely involved, and they wanted the military to be governed by a committee headed by General Tran Van Minh.⁸¹ The generals seemed upbeat, and Lodge expressed a hope that they would be able to quickly consolidate the government and begin to fight the communists effectively.

The administration's hope that the new government would organize quickly and function efficiently rapidly dissipated. By the third, the headaches had already started. Critics of the new government blamed the deaths of Diem and Nhu on the generals and

⁷⁸ Memorandum for the Record of Discussion at the Daily White House Staff Meeting, *FRUS*, 1961-1963, Volume IV, Vietnam, August-December 1963, 288, www.state.gov, (accessed February 12, 2007).

⁷⁹ Situation Report Prepared in the Department of State for President Johnson, November 23, 1963, *FRUS* 1961-1963, Volume IV, Vietnam, August-December 1963, 325, www.state.gov, (accessed February 12, 2007).

⁸⁰ Telegram From the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State, Saigon, November 3, 1963, *FRUS*, 1961-1963, Volume IV, Vietnam, August-December 1963, www.state.gov(accessed February 12, 2007).

⁸¹ Ibid.

claimed that the government was holding several political prisoners.⁸² The administration wanted to pressure the government to become more democratic, but feared that if it pushed them too hard the new government would collapse.⁸³ Analysts did not believe that the new government was losing the war against the communists. Even though the generals were not actively losing the war, they also had not made any advancement over the success of the Diem government as evidenced by the lack of improvement in the strategic hamlet program.⁸⁴ The State Department optimistically predicted that the government would quickly remedy the military situation because they “stress[ed a] desire to get on with war at full throttle.”⁸⁵ Even though the new government seemed to be getting off to a rough start, for the first couple of weeks, the White House continued to believe that the generals would capitalize on the popularity of the coup, set up a new government, and fight the war more effectively.

The optimism that characterized the first few weeks of the new regime was soon tarnished by reports coming out of Vietnam that the war was not going as well as the Americans had thought it was. First, a report from the Bureau of Intelligence and Research stated that the morale of the South Vietnamese army was suffering severely. The report stated that as many as 80% of the South Vietnamese troops in one large unit had deserted.⁸⁶ Second, reports stated that information the administration had received in October that had concluded that the war were progressing was misleading because

⁸² Telegram From the Department of State to the Embassy in Vietnam, Washington, November 3, 1963, *FRUS*, 1961-1963, Volume IV, Vietnam, August-December 1963, (accessed February 12, 2007).

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ Telegram From the Commander, Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (Harkins) to the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Saigon, November 5, 1963, *FRUS*, 1961-1963, Volume IV, Vietnam, August-December 1963, 295, www.state.gov, (accessed February 12, 2007).

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ Memorandum From the Director of the Bureau of Intelligence and Research (Hilsman) to the Secretary of State, Washington, November 8, 1963., *FRUS*, 1961-1963, Volume IV, Vietnam, August-December 1963, 306, www.state.gov, (accessed February 12, 2007).

analysts had changed the rules for determining troop strengths and enemy activities.

Third, the Viet Cong escalated its attacks to a level that had not been seen for six months and had captured many weapons and other material.⁸⁷ The new government had failed to bring the situation under control within the first few weeks of being in power.

Not only did the administration find out that the war was not going well, the new South Vietnamese prime minister, Nguyen Ngoc Tho, informed them that the strategic hamlet program had collapsed in the Delta region.⁸⁸ He said that the Viet Cong had been making huge advancements in the Delta for several years since the population of the Delta had lost faith in the Diem government, the United States, and the successor government. Tho explained that in two years more than 20,000 Viet Cong casualties had been reported in the Delta region. Surprisingly, this number was larger than the total number of Viet Cong estimated to have been in the region two years ago.⁸⁹ These statistics suggested that the Viet Cong could quickly replace their losses with more people from the countryside. Tho used An Giang, his home province, as an example of a failing. He said that the Diem government had forced the population to build the strategic hamlets, canals, roads and bridges. The Vietnamese government did not adequately compensate the peasants for their work, so on average they lost 1,000 piastres apiece while they worked for the government. In contrast to this, the Viet Cong only required at most 100 piastres for taxes.⁹⁰ Tho expressed a desire to remedy the problems

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Memorandum for the Record of a Conversation Between the Assistant Director for Rural Affairs of the United States Operations Mission (Phillips) and Prime Minister Tho, Saigon, November 13, 1963, *FRUS*, 1961-1963, Volume IV, Vietnam, August-December 1963, www.state.gov, (accessed February 12, 2007).

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

associated with the strategic hamlet program, but fixing these problems would first require a functioning government in Saigon.

The new government in Saigon never recovered from the coup against Diem. Even though the generals had expressed a willingness to fix the problems that the Diem regime created, they encountered serious roadblocks.⁹¹ The government did not have a clear program of action designed to win the war; their government seemed to be drifting.⁹² Additionally, the generals were becoming suspicious of one another. When one increased his power over an area or a division of the government, the other ones tried to counter his efforts. Americans began to fear that rivalries among the generals could cause a breakdown in the government.⁹³ The further deterioration of the hamlet program provides more evidence that the new government was failing. In a memo to President Johnson, Michael Forrestal said that "[o]ne recent report states that out of 219 strategic hamlets in the Long An Province which had been reported as completed under the Diem regime, only 45 actually have been identified."⁹⁴ By the middle of December, the political and military situation teetered like a house of cards.

In addition to an unstable political and military environment, South Vietnam stood on the brink of economic meltdown. The South Vietnamese budget predictions looked dismal. The projected deficit was 7 billion piasters. The deficit represented 8%

⁹¹ Memorandum From the Chairman of the Central Intelligence Agency's Working Group on Vietnam (Cooper) to the Director of Central Intelligence (McCone), Washington, December 6, 1963, *FRUS*, 1961-1963, Volume IV, Vietnam, August-December 1963, www.state.gov (accessed February 12, 2007).

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Memorandum From Michael V. Forrestal of the National Security Council Staff to President Johnson, Washington, December 11, 1963, *FRUS*, 1961-1963, Volume IV, Vietnam, August-December 1963. 360, www.state.gov, (accessed February 12, 2007).

of Vietnam's GNP, and one third of the money supply that existed in Vietnam.⁹⁵ Since Vietnam's economy was based heavily on agriculture, it could not expand rapidly enough to satisfy the growing international demand. Economists feared that if the budget was not stabilized that inflation would begin.⁹⁶ Given the political instability that existed, rapidly increasing food prices could have caused the majority of the peasants to starve and rebel.⁹⁷ At the very least, increasing food prices would cause enough political instability to completely preclude the new government from consolidating power.⁹⁸ McNamara commented that "the new government is sitting on top of a keg of political dynamite." He argued that the solution to the problem should be to increase the amount of fertilizer being channeled into agricultural regions because this would vastly increase the productive yields.⁹⁹ Officials realized the seriousness of the situation and pledged to keep the economy and therefore the government from collapsing, thereby deepening the American commitment.¹⁰⁰

The Diem coup directly impaired the new government's ability to fight effectively. The generals failed to create a successful government, and they failed to motivate the people politically or militarily. The United States had recognized this as a possible outcome before the coup, and Robert Kennedy identified these problems as likely results of a rebellion, but the plotting continued. Not only was the war going badly, by the middle of December, it had probably deteriorated further than it would have under Diem in the same amount of time. Even if the pro-coup policymakers had been

⁹⁵ Memorandum of Discussion at the Special Meeting on Vietnam, Honolulu, November 20, 1963, *FRUS*, 1961-1963, Volume IV, Vietnam, August-December 1963, www.state.gov, (accessed February 12, 2007.)

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

right and Diem's government would have eventually failed, there was a chance that it would have corrected itself, or that the United States could have prevented coup forces from taking over; thereby, keeping the conflict at a simmer until the domestic and international political environment favored a settlement or a withdrawal. Instead, the United States decided to deepen its military commitment from 16,500 soldiers and advisors in 1963 to hundreds of thousands of combat troops within a few years and its economic commitment in a like manner. The rapid escalation that would come months later bloomed from roots laid in November.

By January 1964 the political, economic, and military problems created by the coup had worsened. Reports began to come out of Vietnam that the South Vietnamese government could be sliding toward neutralization.¹⁰¹ On January 28, Major General Nguyen Khanh, a senior military officer in the South Vietnamese Army told an American advisor that some of the generals wanted to negotiate a neutralization agreement with North Vietnam. He said that these pro-neutralization forces were planning a coup on 31 January, and that once they took power they would “immediately call for neutralization of” South Vietnam.¹⁰² Khanh used the rumors of a pro-neutralization coup as a pretext for leading a conservative coup on 29 January to preempt the liberal forces.¹⁰³ In all likelihood, Khanh manufactured the seriousness of the neutralization rumors to justify his

¹⁰¹ Memorandum From the Secretary of Defense (McNamara) to President Johnson, Washington, December 21, 1963, *FRUS*, 1961-1963, Volume IV, Vietnam, August-December 1963, www.state.gov, (accessed February 12, 2007.)

¹⁰² Telegram From the Central Intelligence Agency Station in Saigon to the Agency, Saigon, January 28, 1964, *FRUS*, 1964 1968, Volume I Vietnam, 1964, 18, www.state.gov, (accessed February 12, 2007).

¹⁰³ Memorandum From the Deputy Director of the Bureau of Intelligence and Research (Denney) to the Acting Secretary of State/1/ Washington, January 29, *FRUS*, 1964 1968, Volume I Vietnam, 1964, 20, www.state.gov, (accessed February 12, 2007).

own power grab.¹⁰⁴ Regardless of his motivation, he took power, and his government proved as short lived and ineffective as the previous.

In conclusion, the United States shares responsibility for the brevity of the post-Diem government and the economic, military, and political nosedive that occurred in Vietnam in December and January 1963. The White House firmly believed that a communist takeover of Vietnam would cause unacceptable domestic and international political fallout. Operating from the premise that the United States could not fail in Vietnam, they never seriously considered withdrawing when the political situation went south. Instead, the public reaction to the Buddhist crisis in May caused the United States to become acutely aware of Diem and Nhu's unpopularity with the people. Fearing that an unpopular government could not continue to fight the war effectively, the administration overreacted and sent the 24 August cable. Throughout the rest of the fall an internal debate occurred within the administration over the pros and cons of a coup. The White House never decided to preempt a coup attempt. As a result, they played a central role in the overthrow of Diem. Vietnamese generals believed that the United States wanted them to overthrow Diem and that they would receive the full support from the White House. The results of the coup were not what the administration expected. The generals, concerned more about their own power, never set up an organized government. Furthermore, morale and economic problems plagued the country. Finally, the system broke down and one power hungry general after another took over. One cannot decisively conclude that had Diem not been overthrown that he would have done a better job. However, it is clear that his demise and the failure of the administration to

¹⁰⁴ Memorandum From the Acting Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs (Green) to the Secretary of State/1/ Washington, January 30, 1964, *FRUS*, 1964-1968, Volume I Vietnam, 1964, 23, www.state.gov, (accessed February 12, 2007).

plan for a successor government led to a much quicker collapse of the South Vietnamese war effort and the accelerated involvement of the United States.

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