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America Comes to Vietnam, 1954–1963

Direct American involvement in Vietnam began in 1954 with the Geneva Accords and the subsequent partition of the country into two states, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam) and the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam). Elsewhere in Indochina, Laos and Cambodia became independent states pledged to neutrality in international affairs. American policy to support South Vietnam was part of Washington's overall Cold War policy of containment, which was put in place beginning in 1947 to limit Soviet expansion in Europe. Containment was extended to Asia when in June 1950, less than a year after the Communist victory in the Chinese civil war, North Korea invaded South Korea and thereby began the Korean War. The imperative to defend South Vietnam from a Communist takeover was reinforced by acceptance of the domino theory. As detailed in Chapter 1, revisionist historians have marshaled compelling evidence to defend the policy of containment, its application to South Vietnam, and the validity, at least in certain cases, of the domino theory.

THE GENEVA ACCORDS

In *The War Everyone Lost – and Won*, political scientist Timothy Lomperis introduces the agreements reached at Geneva in July 1954 with a heading that has the word "Accords" in quotation marks. His point is that beyond ending the war between the French and Vietminh, the Geneva Accords settled nothing; rather, they left critical matters ranging from the legal status of the demilitarized zone (DMZ) at the 17th parallel to an election to unify the country "in

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limbo."[1] In other words, the Geneva Accords did not provide a legal framework for the future of Vietnam. This perspective contrasts with the generally accepted position among orthodox commentators, which holds that the Accords provided for a temporary division of Vietnam and for national elections in 1956 to unify the country under a single regime.[2] Occasionally orthodox historians acknowledge, as does George Herring, that the Accords "were vague in certain places, and different people viewed their meaning quite differently."[3] However, this does not prevent most orthodox commentators from labeling the subsequent American decision to defend South Vietnam as an independent state a violation of the Accords, as well as a disastrous mistake.[4]

In fact, both the terms in the Accords and the context from which they emerged refute the orthodox interpretation. Guenther Lewy was one of the first commentators to make this point. The Geneva Accords, Lewy writes in *America in Vietnam*, have "been the subject of much misunderstanding."[5] They consisted of a variety of documents, eleven in total, most of which cannot be considered formally binding accords. The only binding accords were the three cease-fire agreements, which are signed by the appropriate military commands. The cease-fire agreement that applied to Vietnam (the other two applied to Laos and Cambodia), signed by the French and Vietminh military commands, provided for the separation of the French and Vietminh forces at the 17th parallel, with the French withdrawing to what the agreement called its "regrouping zone" south of that line and the Vietminh to its north.

The documents that cannot be considered binding are the six unilateral declarations; the minutes of the last plenary session of the conference; and, most importantly, the final declaration. The final declaration is problematic for a variety of reasons. As Lewy notes, it was not signed by any of the nine delegations that attended the conference or adopted by a formal vote. Beyond that, while the final declaration called for a political settlement to be determined by free elections by secret ballot

[1] Timothy J. Lomperis, *The War Everyone Lost – and Won: America's Intervention in Vietnam's Twin Struggles*, rev. ed. (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 1993), 46, 48.

[2] For example, see Herring, *America's Longest War*, 49; Moss, *Vietnam*, 65–67; Prados, *Vietnam: The History of an Unwinnable War*, 35–36.

[3] Herring, *America's Longest War*, 49.

[4] For a recent example, see Prados, *Vietnam*, 37, who complains about a nonexistent "solemn vow" not to disturb the Geneva agreements that "would be broken by U.S. subversion of reunification elections."

[5] Lewy, *America in Vietnam*, 7.

in 1956, it also mandated that all people in Vietnam be permitted to decide whether they wanted to live north or south of the 17th parallel. Lewy therefore asks, "Why have a massive exchange of population if the two zones were to be unified within 700 days or so?" He answers this crucial question by quoting the noted political scientist Hans J. Morgenthau, who commented that the free elections provision "was a device to disguise the fact that the line of military demarcation was bound to be a line of political division as well."[6] With specific regard to the elections, the government of South Vietnam objected to the proposed date and reserved for itself "complete freedom of action" to guarantee the freedom and independence of the Vietnamese people. The United States added that the elections had to be "free and fair" and, significantly, supervised by the United Nations. This "American Plan," which had the support of South Vietnam and Great Britain, was rejected by Soviet foreign minister Vyacheslav Molotov, the head of the Soviet delegation, with the backing of the other Communist delegations. The United States, along with supporting the South Vietnam's declaration, then reaffirmed that it would not enter into an agreement that would deny the Vietnamese people the right to determine their own future.[7] Both the US and South Vietnamese delegations thus refused to accept key parts of the final declaration, a document that was not legally binding on them in the first place.

Looking more broadly at all the conference participants, Lewy points out that in the absence of "either written or verbal consent of all of the nine participants" in the 1954 Geneva Conference, "the final declaration created no *collective* conference obligations." He cites one of the most comprehensive and respected works on the conference, Robert F. Randle's *Geneva 1954: The Settlement of the Indochinese* War (1969), to the effect that "the operative terms of the declaration were not binding on *all* of the participants of the Geneva Conference." Lewy adds that while in certain cases oral statements may create obligations under international law, both the United States and South Vietnam "stated their opposition in no

[6] Ibid., 8.

[7] Ibid., 8–9. On the "American Plan" and Molotov's reaction, see Robert F. Turner, "Myths and Realities of the Vietnam Debate," 4. Available online at www.viet-myths.net/turner.htm. This article originally was published in the *Cambell Law Review*, 9, no. 3 (Summer 1987). For the texts of the Final Declaration and the US statement see the website of the Avalon Project: http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/inch005.asp and http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/inch006.asp

uncertain terms. Neither of them, therefore, could be considered bound by the provision for elections in 1956."[8]

There is some irony here, mainly the divergence between the attitudes of the major powers on both sides of the Cold War divide on the one hand and the attitude of the Vietnamese in the Communist and non-Communist camps on the other. With regard to the former, both the Soviet Union and the PRC as well as the United States supported a permanent partition to prevent Vietnam from causing another Cold War crisis that these powers did not want. In sharp contrast, both the Communist and non-Communist Vietnamese delegations wanted to unify Vietnam under a single regime, although they obviously disagreed about who should control the country. The crucial point, however, is that Ho Chi Minh and his colleagues, who without question would not have accepted the US standard for genuine free elections, clearly did not expect any national elections. Thus, just after the conference ended, Pham Van Dong, the head of the Vietminh delegation, responded to a question about the elections as follows: "You know as well as I do that there won't be any elections." Later Le Duan told his party's central committee, "Everyone clearly understood that there was no way elections would ever be held."[9]

It is reasonable to conclude that neither the wording of the Geneva Accords nor the manner in which they were interpreted by the key players at the time support the orthodox contention that the Geneva Conference of 1954 provided for a united Vietnam to be created by elections held in 1956. Therefore there was nothing illegal according to international law in American support for the new government of South Vietnam or in that government's refusal to participate in national elections in 1956, elections that in territory controlled by North Vietnam would have been neither free nor fair. Meanwhile, as Robert Turner points out in *Vietnamese Communism*, from the start North Vietnam violated several binding articles of the Accords. Article I of the cease-fire agreement between the French and Vietminh called for all Vietminh forces to regroup north of the 17th parallel, yet an estimated 10,000 to 15,000 guerrillas and other operatives remained behind for future operations. The North Vietnamese violated Article 14 of the cease-fire agreement by preventing several hundred thousand civilians and possibly many more, the majority of whom were Catholics, from moving to the South. Hanoi also violated Articles 16 and 17 of the agreement by strengthening and resupplying its

[8] Lewy, *America in Vietnam*, 8–9. The quotation from Randle is on page 9.
[9] Quoted in Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken*, 430, n.65, 58.

army with aid from the PRC, aid that included hundreds of artillery pieces.[10] What the Geneva Accords did was end the Franco-Vietminh war and give the French an exit route from Vietnam. They also de facto divided Vietnam into two states. In the absence of any mechanism to regulate the relationship between those two states, their fates depended on what they and their respective outside backers did next, not on the assorted and ambiguous documents known as the Geneva Accords.

SOUTH VIETNAM AND NGO DINH DIEM

Between 1954 and 1963, the American effort to prevent a Communist takeover of Vietnam south of the 17th parallel rested on support of the regime headed by Ngo Dinh Diem. There is relatively little debate about some aspects of Diem's first years in power. In June 1954 Diem was appointed prime minister of what was then called the State of Vietnam by the Emperor Bao Dai. His chances of survival, and those of the regime he served, were slim. As General Phillip B. Davidson has aptly put it, "Diem had inherited chaos – a mishmash of conflicting political cliques and religious factions, an ineffective and almost nonexistent governmental apparatus, and a farce for a police force and army."[11] Diem's ramshackle government was opposed by the Cao Dai and Hoa Hao religious sects, both of which had armies, the former's numbering about 20,000 and the latter's about 15,000, and by a formidable criminal gang known as the Binh Xuyen, which controlled much of the gambling, prostitution, and other vice in Saigon and fielded an armed force of 25,000. The French also still had 160,000 troops in South Vietnam, and Paris was not friendly to Diem, viewing him as a tool America was using to push France completely out of Vietnam. All this was in addition to the thousands of cadres (and their hidden weapons) the Vietminh, in violation of the Geneva Accords, had left behind in 1954 to maintain its presence in rural areas.

It was under these daunting circumstances that in 1954 the United States began providing the Diem regime with limited aid and military advice. Washington also saw to it that the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), formed in the fall of 1954 to combat Communism in Asia, took South Vietnam under its protective wing.

[10] *Vietnamese Communism*, 100–104. The estimate for the number of Vietminh who remained in the South is from Herring, *America's Longest War*, 56.

[11] Davidson, *Vietnam at War*, 288.

MAP 3 Indochina from the Geneva Accords of 1954 to Black April of 1975

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American support was forthcoming despite the fact many policy makers working for US President Dwight Eisenhower, including important figures on the scene in Vietnam, had little faith in Diem personally or in his ability to survive politically. But between 1954 and 1956 Diem did precisely that, and considerably more. During 1955, with American help, he defeated the Cao Dai and Hoa Hao and destroyed the Binh Xuyen. Diem benefited greatly from advice and technical assistance on many vital matters provided by Lt. Colonel Edward G. Lansdale, who was sent with a small team of assistants to South Vietnam in mid-1954. Meanwhile, the French withdrew their forces from the country, removing another anti-Diem player from the scene. In October 1955 Diem held an election, albeit one that was rigged, according to which the people of southern Vietnam replaced the monarchy with a republic and, with 98 percent in favor, voted for Diem as their leader. Diem then proclaimed himself president of the Republic of Vietnam and in 1956 had a constitution written that gave the country the powerful presidency he wanted. By then Diem's political base had been reinforced by about 700,000 Catholic refugees (out of a total of about 900,000 Vietnamese) who had fled Ho Chi Minh's Communist dictatorship and, in the process, doubled the Catholic population of South Vietnam. Meanwhile, Diem's highly successful, if often brutal, "Denounce the Communists" campaign during 1955 and 1956 in rural areas dramatically weakened the position of the cadres Ho had left behind in South Vietnam; by 1957 that campaign had reduced Communist membership in the villages to what Herring calls "precarious levels."[12] The restoration of order in the countryside enabled rice production to double between 1955 and 1960, despite the limitations and inadequacies of Diem's land reform program, a situation that stood in stark contrast to the shortages in North Vietnam. Orthodox commentators have stressed that Diem's regime received more than $1 billion in US military and economic aid between 1955 and 1961 and that his anti-Communist campaign included arbitrary arrests of non-Communists as well as Communists and led to several thousand executions. Revisionist scholar Mark Moyar, citing orthodox scholarship, responds that "Diem's crackdowns of the 1950s were not as bloody or cruel as the North Vietnamese land reform or the 'Destruction of Oppression' in 1960." Moyar also correctly points

[12] Herring, *America's Longest War*, 81.

out that after 1954 North Vietnam received substantial military and economic aid from both the Soviet Union and the PRC.[13]

Many commentators on the Vietnam War have treated Diem harshly. This negative image dates from the reporting by a number of American journalists who covered the Vietnam War beginning in the early 1960s and over time reached wide audiences. Some American journalists reporting from Vietnam did defend Diem while he was in office, but by 1963 the negative picture was the one that predominated in news reports Americans read or saw on television. That picture prevailed among important officials of the Kennedy administration as well. The mainstream US media generally portrayed Diem as a repressive reactionary without a plan for modernizing his country. Making matters worse, that narrative continued, Diem had built an autocratic regime, with most power closely held by members of his family, that was based on Vietnam's Catholic minority and therefore lacking in public support. He also had ignored US advice to make reforms that might have broadened his base of support.

That general assessment of Diem became, and has remained, a staple of orthodox historiography. For example, in 1994 William Duiker wrote that Diem "had no political party and no mass popular base." He was a member of a privileged religious minority (Vietnam's Catholic community) that "had aroused suspicion and resentment among most of the local population." And unlike a number of other Asian leaders – Duiker lists Indonesia's Sukarno, India's Nehru, and Burma's U Nu, none of whom were Communists, along with Ho Chi Minh – Diem lacked the "charismatic appeal" needed to "symbolize in his person the aspirations and ideals of his people."[14] In 2002 George Herring explained that Diem "was an elitist who had little sensitivity to the needs and problems of the Vietnamese people." He "looked backward to a Vietnam that no longer existed" and "had no blueprint for building a modern nation or mobilizing his people." Diem in addition "lacked the qualities necessary for the formidable challenge of nation building," a failing made worse because by 1960 he faced internal opposition, supported by North Vietnam, "that he, like the French before him, seemed increasingly incapable of handling."[15]

[13] Mark Moyar, "Section III Response," 207; *Triumph Forsaken*, 56. On the problems with Diem's land reform see Joseph Buttinger, *Vietnam: A Political History* (New York and Washington, DC: Praeger, 1968), 434–35.

[14] William J. Duiker, *U.S. Containment Policy and the Conflict in Indochina* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 146.

[15] Herring, *America's Longest War*, 59, 87.

According to historian David L. Anderson, writing in 2005, Diem not only "lacked the charisma and political skills usually associated with a political leader," he also "projected a mandarin's reserve toward the common people, and he had no political following."[16] And in 2009 John Prados provided his readers with a relentless account of Diem's unsuitability to lead South Vietnam.[17]

Another staple of orthodox historiography is that the Diem regime was a failure on most fronts. Orthodox commentators acknowledge that Diem's efforts against the Communists during the mid and late 1950s were highly successful, but they counter that in the end his repressive policies alienated many non-Communists throughout South Vietnamese society. Urban intellectuals resented restrictions on political activity, Buddhists were antagonized by favoritism shown toward Catholics, and peasants were alienated by the failure to implement land reform and Diem's reversal of land distribution the Vietminh had undertaken in areas it controlled before 1954. Herring thus is repeating a widely held viewpoint when he argues that because of Diem's "misguided policies," Communist insurgents found a "receptive audience" when North Vietnam began promoting a rebellion in South Vietnam in 1959. The orthodox narrative maintains that the signature part of Diem's effort to counter the spreading insurgency, his strategic hamlet program, under which peasants were placed in fortified villages to separate and protect them from the Vietcong, also was a failure.[18] As a result by 1963 the Diem regime had made so many enemies in South Vietnam that it was unable to cope with the Communist insurgency and was on the verge of collapse. Some revisionist commentators, perhaps most notably Guenter Lewy, while far more sympathetic to Diem because of the challenges he faced, also paint a generally negative portrait of him.[19]

Diem did have defenders while he was in office, including historian and specialist on Vietnam Ellen Hammer and journalists Joseph Alsop and Marguerite Higgins. To them and other American scholars and journalists must be added the Vietminh, who, as Arthur Dommen points out, ranked Diem as "the only nationalist Vietnamese the Communists were worried about."[20] Among the prominent revisionist commentators who later challenged the orthodox view of Diem was William Colby, who spent years in

[16] Anderson, *The Vietnam War*, 28.
[17] Prados, *Vietnam: The History of an Unwinnable War*, 57–81.
[18] Herring, *America's Longest War*, 82, 106–7. [19] Lewy, *America in Vietnam*, 18–28.
[20] Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience of the French and the Americans*, 263.

Vietnam in key posts and later became head of the CIA. Colby rose to Diem's defense in 1989 with the publication of *Lost Victory*. While not overlooking what he saw as Diem's weaknesses, Colby argues that Diem understood Vietnam and its problems better than most Americans on the scene and was committed to his country's modernization. He praises Diem's "strength and leadership" and maintains that, contra Diem's orthodox critics, the strategic hamlet program was a success and in fact "seized the initiative in the contest with the Communists for the first time."[21]

A few orthodox historians also have challenged the conventional orthodox assessment of Diem, most comprehensively Philip E. Catton. To be sure, the title of Catton's monograph, *Diem's Final Failure*, reflects his overall judgment that Diem's shortcomings outweighed his attributes and his general agreement with the orthodox case. Still, Catton rejects the standard orthodox view of Diem as a "dyed-in-the-wool reactionary, who stymied U.S. attempts to reform his regime in order to preserve an old-fashioned autocracy." According to Catton, Diem was a "modern nationalist" who had his own strategy for modernization and nation building. As he put it in an article written after his book's publication, "Diem was a conservative modernizer rather than a traditional autocrat; he was looking forward, not backward." Diem's approach to modernizing Vietnam was a doctrine known as Personalism, an ideology developed in France during the 1930s by the Catholic philosopher Emmanuel Mounier that drew on Catholic humanism and concerns with social reform. The idea of applying Personalism to Vietnam came from Ngo Dinh Nhu, Diem's younger brother and closest advisor. One problem with Personalism, which had authoritarian political characteristics, was that the US approach for moving forward in South Vietnam was based on American democratic principles. That led to serious tensions between Washington and Saigon when Diem and Nhu, convinced that US policy proposals were unsuited to Vietnamese realities, resisted or ignored those proposals. Catton acknowledges that he is questioning a fundamental orthodox tenet by asserting that Diem had a "coherent nation-building program" and that his regime and non-Communist Vietnamese nationalism in general "had some real ideological substance to them." That said, Catton affirms his orthodox credentials by asserting that there were "enormous obstacles to the creation of a viable South Vietnam" and that to call Diem a modern

[21] Colby, *Lost Victory*, 34–36, 102–3, 158. The quotation on the strategic hamlets is on page 102.

nationalist is not to reject the fundamental orthodox tenet that for the United States the war in Vietnam "was ultimately unwinnable."[22]

Another orthodox historian who has dissented from part of the conventional assessment of Diem is Edward Miller. In *Misalliance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States and the Fate of South Vietnam*, Miller characterizes Diem's program to modernize as "an ambitious attempt to synthesize certain contemporary ideas and discourses about Catholic Christianity, Confucianism, and Vietnamese national identity." Miller goes beyond Catton when he acknowledges that by 1962 Diem's strategic hamlet program significantly increased the percentage of South Vietnam's rural population under the government's control. That achievement was part of a broader pattern of success at the time that Miller calls "significant and impressive."[23]

THE DIEM REGIME, 1956–1963

Diem's partial rehabilitation by some revisionist and a few orthodox commentators has not gone nearly far enough for Mark Moyar. Moyar's more comprehensive rehabilitation of Diem is a central part of the case he makes for the American defense of South Vietnam in *Triumph Forsaken*. To Moyar, "Diem was one of the finest national leaders of the Cold War and . . . many of his alleged faults were not faults at all."[24] He understood his country better than did his American critics. Moyar rejects the notion held by many critics of Diem's dictatorial behavior that Vietnam's authoritarian political culture and institutions could be quickly replaced by a political system based on American democratic traditions and principles. He approvingly quotes what Diem said on this point to Marguerite Higgins: "Procedures applicable to one culture cannot be transplanted wholly to another culture." Diem added that Vietnam did have some democratic traditions at the village level, but they could not be extended to the national level in South Vietnam in the middle of a war; in the present crisis only authoritarian methods could hold his country together. Moyar further maintains that those Americans on the scene "who treated Vietnam on its own terms" usually respected and supported

[22] Catton, *Diem's Final Failure*, 2–3, 41, 209–12; Catton, "Ngo Dinh Diem and South Vietnam Reconsidered," in *Triumph Revisited*, 32–36. The first two quotations are from Catton's book; the others are from his article.

[23] Miller, *Misalliance*, 21, 248–49.

[24] Moyar, "Section I Response," in *Triumph Revisited*, 62.

MAP 4 South Vietnam, 1954–1975

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Diem.[25] Moyar's staunchly positive view of Diem as presented in *Triumph Forsaken* and subsequent publications has been challenged by orthodox historians, but he has directly and vigorously engaged his critics in debate, including in several published forums.[26] In this commentator's judgment, Moyar has fared exceedingly well in these debates. His main arguments therefore will be the basis of the overview of the Diem regime between 1956 and 1963 that constitutes the remainder of this chapter.

The defense of Diem logically begins with Personalism, his program for the modernization of Vietnam. Diem and Nhu wanted to modernize Vietnam while still retaining fundamental elements of its culture. It therefore was important that despite its Catholic origins, Personalism had a lot in common with Confucianism, which the Ngo brothers greatly admired. They were convinced that Personalism provided a system for modernizing Vietnam that balanced the needs of the individual, society, and the state. They believed the state should implement programs to promote the well-being of the people, and while in power they attempted to do that. The object was to enable people to develop as individuals but also understand and carry out their responsibility to the group. Diem and Nhu saw Personalism as an alternative to both Marxism, which crushed individual liberty and initiative, and liberalism, which to them was excessively individualistic and overlooked the needs of the community. The Ngo brothers despised Marxism, considering it an alien, oppressive, and inhumane ideology. They considered Western liberalism and democracy unsuited to Vietnam because of its authoritarian traditions and because those doctrines would not make it possible to implement the drastic changes the country urgently needed. Diem further argued that the Vietnamese wanted leaders with military power who could provide good leadership and inspire them with the force of their personalities.[27] Moyar sympathetically notes that "Diem adopted some of the traditional practices of the mandarins and the emperors because of both reverence for the past and confidence that these methods would still work."[28] Diem himself told Australian journalist Denis Warner that "our political system

[25] Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken*, 38, 229–30.

[26] See "Triumph Forsaken Roundtable Review," H-Diplo, July 2, 2007. Available online at http://h-diplo.org/roundtables/PDF/TriumphForsaken-Roundtable.pdf; "Triumph Forsaken? A Forum on Mark Moray's Revisionist History of the Vietnam War, 1954–1965," *Historically Speaking*, November/December 2007: 29–41; "A Roundtable on Mark Moyar's *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954–1965*," *Passport*, December 2007; and *Triumph Revisited*.

[27] Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken*, 35–37, 158. [28] Ibid., 34.

has been based not on the concept of management of the public affairs by the people or their representatives, but rather by an enlightened sovereign and an enlightened government." However, as he stressed to Marguerite Higgins, "We are not going back to a sterile copy of the mandarin past. But we are going to adapt the best of our heritage to the modern situation."[29]

Diem's view about how he should govern and lead Vietnam quickly got him into trouble with the United States. Ironically, Diem's genuine credentials as a nationalist, which enabled him to win US backing in the first place, actually exacerbated his problems with Washington. Both the Eisenhower and Kennedy administrations viewed US-South Vietnam relations as a patron-client relationship and expected that as the patron the United States would dictate South Vietnamese policy on crucial issues. One sees this assumption axiomatically expressed by officials from John Foster Dulles, Eisenhower's secretary of state; to Averill Harriman, who negotiated an agreement on the neutralization of Laos that Diem bitterly opposed; to Henry Cabot Lodge, Kennedy's ambassador to Saigon during Diem's last years in office.[30] As a nationalist determined to see his country independent not only of the French but also of the Americans, Diem rejected that relationship. As he rhetorically asked journalist Marguerite Higgins in August 1963, in the face of the threat that the United States would cut off aid if he did not follow Washington's dictates, "If you order Vietnam around like a puppet on a string, how will you be different – except in degree – from the French?"[31]

Moyar backs up his positive evaluation of Diem by presenting evidence that, far from being a failure and despite setbacks and errors, Diem on the whole and despite the odds was successful in combating Communism and North Vietnamese aggression during his time in office. His disputes with the American government notwithstanding, Diem enjoyed considerable success during the second half of the 1950s. Beginning in 1957, under direction from Hanoi, the Communist cadres who had remained in South Vietnam after the Geneva Accords began a campaign of assassination and terror against government officials in the countryside. Diem's military response was remarkably successful to the point where by the end of the year the Communist rural infrastructure was severely damaged in many areas and party membership in South Vietnam as a whole had fallen

[29] Denis Warner, *The Last Confucian: Vietnam, Southeast Asia, and the West* (Harmonsworth: Penguin, 1963), 91; Higgins, *Our Vietnam Nightmare*, 166.
[30] Catton, *Diem's Final Failure*, 11–12. [31] Higgins, *Our Vietnam Nightmare*, 168.

by two-thirds. Moyar quotes a Communist source to make the point that during 1958 and 1959, "with a number of wicked agents already trained, with an espionage system already established in hamlets and some reactionary organizations set up in rural areas," a Diem regime offensive "succeeded in dismembering 80–90 percent of our organization in many base areas." Although these victories masked some serious weaknesses and policy errors of the Diem regime, Moyar is on solid ground when he stresses Diem's successes during this period. This includes Diem's oft-maligned land reform program, which reduced the percentage of landless peasants in the Mekong Delta from an overwhelming majority to a minority, albeit one that was still too large.[32] Indeed, it was precisely those successes that in 1959 forced North Vietnam, aware that the Communist cause south of the 17th parallel was on the verge of collapse, to abandon its effort to undermine the Diem regime by pulling strings from afar and intervene directly in that struggle with its own troops and military equipment.

Moyar acknowledges that Diem initially did not have a response to North Vietnam's direct intervention in South Vietnam. Whereas at the end of 1959 Vietcong guerrillas had little influence or power in the countryside, by the end of 1960 they were mounting a strong insurgency. Several factors accounted for this, including widespread resentment against government abuses, the Vietcong's use of assassination and terrorism against South Vietnamese officials and civilians, and the infiltration of soldiers and party cadres into the South via the Ho Chi Minh Trail, a network of jungle pathways extending from the North into the South the North Vietnamese began building in 1959.[33] The third factor makes it clear that what Diem faced was not an "indigenous" rebellion being carried on by local guerrillas, as many orthodox commentators have claimed.[34] By 1961 the number of infiltrators from North Vietnam exceeded 10,000, and while the great majority of them were so-called regroupees – that is Vietminh originally from the South who had moved to the North after 1954 – these infiltrators were not South Vietnamese by any standard. When Vietnam was divided, they became North Vietnamese by choice and conviction, just like Le Duan and other top leaders of the Hanoi

[32] Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken*, 73–83. The Communists in their official documents call this period their "darkest hour." Duiker, *The Communist Road to Power in Vietnam*, 183–84, 359, n.29.

[33] See Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken*, 84–85, 91, 115–16, "Section III Response," 62.

[34] For example, see Prados, *Vietnam: The History of an Unwinnable War*, 66.

regime who had been born south of the 17th parallel. All of them had undergone training and indoctrination in North Vietnam. The soldiers were drawn from People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) combat units. Warren Wilkins, author of *Grab Their Belts to Fight Them*, a well-received volume that focuses on Vietcong warfare against US troops, reports that these soldiers had received "expert instruction in guerrilla warfare, ambush tactics, and the building of fortifications." They mastered these skills at special training facilities.[35] And the role of these North Vietnamese soldiers and party cadres was critical, even greater than their numbers suggest. Thus the official history of the People's Army of Vietnam, published in Hanoi in 1988, reports that by 1963 these infiltrators from the North "represented 50 percent of the full-time armed forces in the South and 80 percent of the cadre and technical personnel assigned to the command and staff organizations in South Vietnam." Between 1961 and 1963 they had trekked down the Ho Chi Minh Trail accompanied by 165,000 weapons – including artillery pieces, antiaircraft weapons, and mortars – as well as hundreds of tons of other military equipment.[36]

This infusion of soldiers, cadres, and weapons from the North saved the faltering Communist rebellion in the South. Whereas at the beginning of the rebellion the North Vietnamese leadership limited itself to exploiting discontent in the South without resorting to direct intervention, the new infiltration turned the situation into straightforward aggression from the outside. Hanoi's effort to mask this change included setting up the National Liberation Front (NLF) in South Vietnam in December 1960. Supposedly an indigenous organization uniting a broad range of opponents of the Diem regime, including non-Communists, a claim accepted and trumpeted for years by many orthodox commentators, in fact the NLF was controlled by the Communist leadership in Hanoi from the start. The effectiveness of North Vietnam's direct intervention, as opposed to its remote-control effort before 1959, in turn led President John F. Kennedy, who took office in 1961, to dramatically increase American aid to South Vietnam, including raising the number of advisors assisting its army (the Army of the Republic of Vietnam, or ARVN) from less than 1,000 in 1961 to about 16,000 in 1963.

[35] Warren Wilkins, *Grab Their Belts and Fight Them: The Viet Cong's Big-Unit War Against the U.S., 1965–1966* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2011), 8; Turley, *The Second Indochina War*, 64–66.

[36] *Victory in Vietnam: The Official History of the People's Army of Vietnam, 1954–1975*, trans. Merle L. Pribbenow (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002), 115.

There is no dispute about the serious decline in the fortunes of the Diem regime between 1959 and 1961. The disagreement is over what happened during the next two years. Moyar argues that the Diem regime recovered and that by 1963 it again held the upper hand in the military struggle against the Communist forces in the South. He credits large-scale American military assistance, which came in the form of aircraft, armored vehicles, radios, and other modern equipment as well as thousands of military advisors, whose numbers quadrupled during 1962. Moyar also credits the considerable improvement in South Vietnamese military and civilian leadership as personnel trained since 1954 replaced those from the colonial era. All of this strengthened not only South Vietnam's regular army but also local militia forces. He notes that during 1963 South Vietnamese forces "aggressively sought battle and inflicted many defeats" on Communist forces.[37] This assessment has received strong support, albeit with some caveats, from military historian Andrew J. Birtle, a leading specialist on the history of the US Army's experience in counterguerrilla warfare. Birtle asserts that claims that South Vietnam was losing the war in 1962 "do not bear up against the weight of the evidence" and adds that progress continued into 1963. He cites Communist sources and reports from those years to back up this assessment.[38]

Moyar has particular praise for the strategic hamlet program, which he argues "revolutionize[d] the war effort."[39] Established by the Diem government in 1961, the strategic hamlet program was a counterinsurgency effort designed to protect Vietnamese peasants from the Vietcong by moving them into fortified villages. Orthodox commentators have consistently portrayed it as a failure.[40] Moyar vigorously argues the opposite. He maintains that the program was working and gaining strength during 1962 and 1963, until Diem was overthrown and murdered in the coup of November 1, 1963. His claim is based not only on assessments by Western participants and observers on the scene at the time but also,

[37] Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken*, 154–60.

[38] Andrew J. Birtle, "*Triumph Forsaken* as Military History," in *Triumph Revisited*, 127–29. Birtle, while disagreeing with Moyar on some points, provides evidence of his own to demonstrate the improvement of South Vietnam's military situation during 1962 and 1963.

[39] Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken*, 155–56. Moyar points out the differences between the strategic hamlet program and Diem's earlier and unsuccessful agroville program, under which entire hamlets were often forced to relocate. See *Triumph Forsaken*, 158.

[40] See Herring, *America's Longest War*, 108; Moss, *Vietnam: An American Ordeal*, 133; Duiker, *The Communist Road to Power in Vietnam*, 215, 228; Catton, *Diem's Final Failure*, 192, 198, 211.

significantly, on Communist sources. The former group includes Australian guerrilla war expert Colonel Ted Serong; British expert Sir Robert Thompson, whose efforts against Communist guerrillas in Malaya provided a model for the program in Vietnam; Rufus Philips, the chief American advisor to the program, who wrote a highly positive report in May 1963; and Marine Major General Victor H. Krulak, who toured all of South Vietnam to report on the war in June 1963. There certainly were problems with the program, particularly in several provinces in the Mekong Delta, but the overall picture was decidedly upbeat.[41] Contemporary Communist sources reinforce this conclusion, as the following report demonstrates:

> The enemy has been able to grab control of population and land from us, and he has drawn away for his own use our sources of resources and manpower. We have not yet been able to stop them. On the contrary, from an overall perspective, the enemy is still pushing his program forward into our areas.[42]

Birtle provides interesting nonmilitary evidence regarding the success of the strategic hamlets when he points out that after 1960 the area under rice cultivation in South Vietnam increased so that by 1962 more land was producing rice than in 1959, when North Vietnam began infiltrating troops into the South.[43] When answering critics in *Triumph Revisited*, Moyar himself observes that in critiquing *Triumph Forsaken*, Philip Catton does not dispute his (Moyar's) contention that the strategic hamlet program and war effort as a whole were going well, "a contention that runs contrary to what he [Catton] had written in his book." Moyar then adds, "It appears to be an example of a disproven falsehood disappearing quietly."[44] In the end the strategic hamlet program did collapse under Vietcong pressure, but Moyar cites both contemporary US and Communist sources to demonstrate this happened only after the coup against Diem.[45]

THE BUDDHIST REVOLT AND THE END OF THE DIEM REGIME

Another essential aspect of Moyar's defense of the Diem regime concerns the so-called Buddhist revolt of 1963. This event was decisive in undermining the Kennedy administration's support for Diem and led to

[41] Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken*, 207–8, 247–48. [42] Ibid., 248.
[43] Britle, "*Triumph Forsaken* as Military History," 128–29.
[44] Moyar, "Section I Response," 62. [45] Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken*, 283–84.

the US-sponsored coup by a group of South Vietnamese generals that overthrew his government on November 1, 1963. The trouble began in May 1963 when Buddhist monks in Hue demonstrated to protest what they claimed was discrimination against the country's Buddhist community by the Diem regime. This action led to mass demonstrations in several cities after troops in Hue fired into the crowd, killing nine people. The crisis intensified further when a monk committed suicide by self-immolation on a Saigon street in June, the first of several such incidents. After unsuccessful attempts to negotiate an end to the protests, in August the Diem regime carried out a series of raids on Buddhist monasteries in Hue (the epicenter of the demonstrations), Saigon, and other cities during which more than 1,400 monks were arrested. The raids quelled the revolt, but they also contributed directly to Washington's decision to support a group of generals who were seeking to overthrow Diem.

Moyar does not dispute this narrative. What he disputes is the orthodox view that the Buddhist monks had legitimate grievances and widespread public support, that all of them were sincere nationalists, and that the entire series of events demonstrated the isolation of the Catholic-dominated Diem regime from the predominantly Buddhist population of South Vietnam. He also accuses US journalists on the scene of misleading and inflammatory reporting and certain American officials of recklessly pushing for Diem's removal from office.

With regard to alleged discrimination against Buddhists, Moyar points out that Diem actually had helped his country's Buddhists, a fact that stands "in stark contrast to Ho Chi Minh," who after 1954 had acted brutally to end any independent activities by Buddhists in North Vietnam. Diem permitted Buddhist activities forbidden by the French. By 1963 about a quarter of South Vietnam's 4,766 Buddhist pagodas had been built during Diem's tenure, often with government help.[46] To be sure, as K. W. Taylor notes, Diem was not without fault in dealing with Vietnam's Buddhist community. While he had no intention of discriminating against non-Catholics, there was what Taylor has called an "undercurrent of incipient favoritism toward Catholics" associated with his government. This was mainly due to Diem's elder brother, Ngo Dinh Thuc, a Catholic priest who was appointed archbishop of Hue in late 1960. Thuc's efforts to promote Catholicism combined with his influence on government policy undermined the good relations that had prevailed between the

[46] Ibid., 215–16.

government and local Buddhist monks and thereby contributed to the crisis that erupted in May 1963. Diem's fault in this case, Taylor notes, was that he could not admit that the elder brother he had always respected and deferred to was causing a serious problem.[47]

It is against this background that the refusal of the protesting Buddhist monks' militant leadership to come to terms with the Diem government must be understood. The key issue here is the matter of Communist influence among these monks. There is no doubt that Communist operatives infiltrated the lower and middle levels of the Buddhist movement, although their presence at the top levels remains uncertain. Moyar quotes Communist sources published in Hanoi during the 1990s, by which time the need to cover up such subversive activities had dissipated, to demonstrate that Communist agents influenced the course of events. For example, one Hanoi source reports "our Party provincial and city committees stayed close to *and directed* [italics added] the movement from the inside through the use of our agents in the mass organizations and in the Buddhist Church." Another cites the role of the National Liberation Front's central committee in directing people to cooperate with the Buddhist monks and nuns. Other sources describe how Communists in the South infiltrated the Buddhist movement in Saigon. Moyar also notes that the Buddhist movement, which was an urban phenomenon, actually was a minority movement as far as South Vietnam's Buddhists were concerned since most of them were peasants living in the countryside who were neither informed about nor involved in what was happening in Saigon or Hue.[48]

At the center of this discussion is the role of the monk Thich Tri Quang, the most important leader of the protest movement. Tri Quang, who consistently rejected any accommodation with the Diem regime, is controversial because he was accused of being a Communist agent. Moyar acknowledges that Hanoi has never admitted to this but adds that substantial evidence points in that direction. For example, Tri Quang stated in his sermons that Buddhism was compatible with Communism; his methods for rallying crowds were similar to those used by Communists and different from what Buddhists normally did; and "over and over again, Tri Quang would refuse generous concessions from the government." Other Buddhist leaders later accused Tri Quang of working with the Vietcong. Moyar concludes by arguing that the "sum of the evidence

[47] Taylor, *A History of the Vietnamese*, 585–86.
[48] Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken*, 214–17, 458, n.58. The quotation is on page 217.

strongly suggests that Tri Quang was a Communist operative" and that, at a minimum, he "caused enormous harm to every South Vietnamese regime from 1963 to 1966."[49]

The nature of the Diem government – that is, whether it was a Catholic regime ruling over a Buddhist population – is important when one considers the Buddhist crisis of 1963. Moyar points out that although Catholics were overrepresented in Diem's government compared to their percentage of the South Vietnam's population, this was largely because they had a higher percentage of educated people than the population as a whole. But Diem's government was far from a Catholic regime. His cabinet had five Catholics, five Confucians, and eight Buddhists, with the last group including the country's vice-president and foreign minister. Twelve of Diem's provincial chiefs were Catholics along with twenty-six who were Buddhists or Confucians, while only three of the country's nineteen top military leaders were Catholics.[50] At least half of the ten generals who in August 1963 urged Diem to quell the Buddhist revolt were themselves Buddhists, and when that was done on August 21 both the general in charge in Saigon and the overall supervisor of the operation were Buddhists.[51]

Finally there is the matter of the coup itself, which emerged directly out of the Buddhist crisis in general and the August 1963 raids on the pagodas in particular. Moyar is critical of inaccurate reporting on the Buddhist crisis by American journalists, who "were ready to publish unsubstantiated gossip that supported their views." He is especially scathing regarding *New York Times* correspondent David Halberstam, who, among other inaccuracies, "wrote a string of fallacious front-page articles on the pagoda raids." The inaccuracies of Halberstam and other Western journalists are not surprising since two of their most important Vietnamese sources were Hanoi's agents. This reporting influenced American officials and US public opinion and contributed to Kennedy's decision to encourage the generals' coup against Diem. Moyar is equally tough on several American officials who pushed hard for the coup, among them Henry Cabot Lodge, the newly appointed US ambassador to Saigon, State Department undersecretaries Averell Harriman and Roger Hilsman, and National Security Council member

[49] Ibid., 217–18. "Thich" is a surname taken by all Vietnamese Buddhist monks. Moyar does not use it, referring simply to "Tri Quang."

[50] Ibid., 215–16.

[51] Ibid., 231–32. The general in charge in Saigon was the son of a Buddhist nun.

Michael Forrestal.[52] They prevailed in spite of strong opposition to the coup from Vice-president Johnson, Secretary of Defense McNamara, the CIA, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and others, all of whom believed Diem was the best bet the United States had in Vietnam and that his removal would make things much worse.

More than half a century after the event there is widespread agreement among revisionists that the decision to overthrow of Diem, which also resulted in the murder of both Diem and Nhu, was a disastrous error. R. B. Smith writes that the coup "opened a Pandora's box" of trouble the United States could not control. Ellen Hammer, a strong supporter of Diem, makes the same point in *A Death in November*, as do a number of other scholars.[53] As Moyar has convincingly demonstrated, it was only after the coup that the strategic hamlet program fell apart and the 1962–1963 successes against Communist forces on the battlefield were reversed. Diem provided far more effective leadership than any of his successors was able to do for years, and that in turn had pivotal implications for what the United States would have to do. One this point at least, Moyar and Catton are not that far apart. Thus according to Catton:

> The Diem government looked like a model of order and stability compared with the floundering, revolving-door regimes that followed in the period 1964–1965. In the absence of a functioning South Vietnamese government, President Johnson was forced to confront the eventuality that his predecessor had not: the prospect of the south's collapse without a dramatic increase in the U.S. commitment. Johnson's response was to send five hundred thousand U.S. troops to South Vietnam, in an attempt to overcome Saigon's weaknesses by overwhelming the enemy militarily.[54]

Moyar puts it as follows:

> Because of Diem's accomplishments in 1962 and 1963, the Viet Cong lacked the ability to defeat the government at the time of Diem's death, and for a considerable period thereafter. Had Diem lived, the Viet Cong could have kept the war going as long as they continued to receive new manpower from North Vietnam and maintained sanctuaries in Cambodia and Laos, but it is highly doubtful that the war would have reached the point where the United States needed to introduce several hundred thousand of its own troops to avert defeat, as it would under Diem's successors.[55]

[52] Ibid., 233–36.

[53] Smith *An International History of the Vietnam War:* vol. 2, 190; Hammer, *A Death in November*, passim.

[54] Catton, *Diem's Final Failure*, 211. [55] Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken*, 286.

William Colby perhaps summed the consequences of the coup most succinctly when he wrote that the Kennedy administration's 1963 decision to support the coup against Diem "must be assigned the stigma of America's primary (and perhaps worst) error in Vietnam."[56]

Interestingly, that consensus extends, at least in part, into the orthodox camp. For example, Moss writes that the coup "weakened rather than strengthened the security of South Vietnam."[57] More significantly, it extends all the way to Hanoi, where Ho Chi Minh had the following to say when he heard about the coup and Diem's murder: "I can scarcely believe that the Americans would be so stupid." The North Vietnamese Politburo as a whole agreed, officially resolving that "Diem was one of the strongest individuals resisting the people and Communism. Everything that could be done in an attempt to crush the revolution was carried out by Diem." And pro-Communist Australian journalist Wilfred Burchett reported that Vietnamese Communist leaders told him that "the Americans have done something that we haven't been able to do for nine years and that was to get rid of Diem."[58]

Diem, on nationalist grounds, had always opposed American efforts to manage the war against the Communists in South Vietnam. In doing so, he was not only asserting his country's independence but doing the United States a favor by keeping it out of the war. By sponsoring Diem's overthrow, Washington opened the door to the Americanization of the Vietnam War. It would prove to be a frustrating and painful experience.

[56] Colby, *Lost Victory*, 366. [57] Moss, *Vietnam: An American Ordeal*, 144.
[58] All three quotations are cited by Moyar. See *Triumph Forsaken*, 286.