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Diem Defeats His Own Best Troops

STANLEY KARNOW

SAIGON

AT THREE one humid morning last November, three battalions of paratroopers surrounded the handsome Saigon palace of South Vietnam's President Ngo Dinh Diem. Within thirty-six hours, their attempted revolt had been crushed. The rebel chiefs fled to sanctuary in Cambodia, and the rebel troops themselves, forced to surrender, tactfully reaffirmed their allegiance to the régime. Bullet holes in buildings were quickly plastered in. The dead were discreetly buried. President Diem, who has survived several serious scrapes in his six years of power, emerged from the fortified cellar of his palace with another narrow triumph to his credit. "The government continues to serve the nation," he intoned confidently, and his spokesmen dismissed the abortive *coup d'état* as merely "an incident."

So it was—just an incident. But it was the most dramatic symptom to date of a deeper disturbance that has plagued South Vietnam for a year or more. Beneath the appearance of calm and stability, and despite all the government's assurances of security, President Diem's régime may well be approaching collapse, and with such a collapse, the country could fall to the Communists. "The situation is desperate," an official told me a few weeks ago.

Bands of Communist guerrillas, directed from Hanoi in North Vietnam, roam almost every rural region, blowing up bridges, blocking roads, terrorizing farmers, and attacking army posts. This menace has been compounded by the demoralization of the peasants, the army, and what the French-oriented Vietnamese call "*les intellectuels*." Most serious of all, perhaps, is President Diem's own attitude. He seems to have survived the revolt with his ego unscathed and his faith in his own infallibility renewed.

DIEM is a complex personality. From his mixed Catholic and Confucian background evolved a combination of monk and mandarin, a kind of ascetic authoritarian. He is a deceptively dainty-looking man; in fact, he is tough and obstinate. To a significant degree, his stubborn self-righteousness saved a régime that most "experts" considered lost back in 1955, after the Geneva Agreement had divided South Vietnam at the seventeenth parallel. Amply bolstered by American sympathy and material aid—which has totaled more than a billion dollars in the past five years—he successfully fought off the insurgent sects, consolidated a government, welcomed and resettled almost a million refugees from the Communist North. He initiated a

land-reform program and embarked upon such ambitious projects as building roads and railways, extending agricultural credit, and establishing light industries.

In all his energetic enterprises, the fixation in Diem's mind has been survival. But in his concentration on survival, Diem seems to have paralyzed rather than inspired those around him. He demands absolute loyalty and has developed an inability or unwillingness to trust others. Instead, fearful of betrayal, impatient with any initiative by underlings, he has gathered all power to himself, and working as much as fifteen hours a day, he plunges into the most minute details of administration, personally signing passport applications, reserving for himself the right to approve a student's scholarship to the United States. He has even been known to decide on the distance between roadside trees.

This sort of one-man rule is not uncommon in underdeveloped countries that lack trained personnel. But it discourages the development of a responsible civil service, and it can inspire minor officials to all sorts of red tape and pettifoggery. Without any balanced administrative structure, officials turn to the most convenient source of power. Here, Diem's family—he does trust them—display their peculiar talents. They

have succeeded in building a partly public, partly clandestine structure inside and outside the government. On this, Diem's power rests.

One of the President's brothers, the mysterious Ngo Dinh Can, lives in Hué, and from there controls central Vietnam. He exercises much of his authority through the National Revolutionary Movement, the pro-government political party. Another brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu, whom Diem trusts implicitly and relies upon constantly, is probably the most powerful single individual in the country after Diem himself. Educated in Paris and the leading native civil servant under French rule, Nhu is a handsome, articulate, passionate, voluble intellectual. Speaking elegant French in a voice that sometimes whines with emotion, he will declaim at length on one of his favorite subjects, the "problems of the underdeveloped country." This includes an exposition of the theory that "freedom must not prevent the march of progress."

There is considerable validity to Nhu's notion. But his ideas in action are somewhat more questionable. He has certainly helped to curtail freedom, but it is not so sure that he has done much to promote progress. He directs an avowedly clandestine movement called the Can Lao Nhan Vi—the "Revolutionary Labor Party"—which, he concedes frankly, is organized along the lines of a Communist apparatus. Its seventy thousand secret members have been infiltrated into factories, villages, government offices, army units, schools, and newspapers, where they spend part of their time collecting information about their compatriots. Nhu's pretty wife—commonly called Madame Nhu, though the family surname is Ngo—commands the ladies' auxiliary.

Although there is not a single shred of evidence against them, Nhu and his wife are believed to be at the heart of most major corruption in the country. Through his Can Lao, Nhu is said to control the wood and charcoal trade, and there are tales of his investments in Brazil, France, and Switzerland. When the Nhus are confronted with stories of their supposed venality, they simply issue denials. "It's the diplomats," Madame Nhu told me huffily during

a recent chat. "They have nothing better to do than gossip. I just ignore them." Her husband tends to protest more vigorously. "Foreign powers are against us," he insists. "Everyone picks on poor little Ngo Dinh Diem and his brothers. Why? Maybe it's because we are Catholic. I don't know. But these rumors of our corruption, our stealing—all lies. Nobody has any proof."

Eight Hundred Murders a Month

One way or the other, however, everyone believes that the Nhus are corrupt (everyone, that is, but Diem himself, who will not even listen to charges against his family). The real or imaginary, or total or partial, misconduct of Diem's family is serious because it coincides with a period of tension generated by increased Communist terrorism. And as Communist terrorism became more acute, the growing uneasiness and insecurity



sparked more vocal dissatisfaction which, not long ago, began to spread beyond the family to criticism of Diem himself.

The current Communist offensive against South Vietnam began to build up as early as September, 1959. Communist guerrillas opened their operations with teams of fifty or more, soon increasing to company strength of a hundred—their largest groups since they fought the French. They had French, British, and American weapons hidden since wartime days; newer arms—some of Czech or Chinese origin—and fresh recruits were brought in from the north.

The first big push came last January. One night, attacking in company force, the Communists raided a regimental headquarters at Tay Ninh,

northwest of Saigon, and killed thirty-four Vietnamese soldiers sleeping off their Chinese-style New Year's celebration. Soon they were fanning out through the southern delta, hitting army posts, ambushing troops, terrorizing local village chiefs. It is no longer safe to travel without escort in many parts of the country, and the important commercial highway between Saigon and Phnompenh is often closed. The Communists are, at present, killing about eight hundred people per month—rural officials, troops, police, and ordinary peasants. In recent weeks they have reportedly destroyed some fifty bridges in the delta area and they have killed an American military adviser—mainly as a demonstration of their strength.

Communists guerrillas are believed to number about six thousand at the moment. Reliable intelligence sources describe them as highly mobile and extremely well acquainted with the local countryside, and there is no place in the southern delta they cannot effectively control. But they apparently do not always consider it advantageous to be aggressive. Well aware of Mao Tse-tung's art of partisan warfare, they seem to recognize that a hostile population would be to their detriment. Thus they scout villages carefully. When they take one, they hold it long enough to deliver political lectures and distribute pamphlets, then leave behind them the threat of execution if they do not get co-operation. By "co-operation" they mean information and food, perhaps recruits, maybe medical care.

THE SOUTH VIETNAM ARMY of 150,000 men, supported by American aid and trained by American advisers, seemed to lack sufficient instruction for the kind of conflict they had to fight. As in Laos and Thailand, they had been taught conventional, western methods of warfare, and they were outfitted with tanks, armored cars, and artillery.

Not until last spring—after some squabbling among various American services—was an anti-guerrilla school created in South Vietnam. But most of the army has not begun to unlearn its earlier instruction, and in many areas troops will not move at anything less than battalion or regiment strength, accompanied by elab-

orate armor. A more hopeful program in South Vietnam was the recent creation of a corps of thirty thousand civil guards, armed with shotguns and radios to get help when Communist partisans are sighted. They have not been operating long enough to have proved their value.

If they are to be successful, however, Diem will have to alter part of his political and administrative structure, which has seriously hindered the fight against the Communists. In each of the thirty-eight provinces, for example, the civil guard is under the orders of a semi-autonomous province chief, who is directly responsible to the president alone but usually clears his moves with brothers Nhu or Can. Often the province chiefs exercise their peculiar right to deny their neighbors "hot pursuit" of guerrillas more than five kilometers into their territory. Similar rules and regulations hamstring the army. Units may only move within their own military districts, and lateral communications between districts are poor or nonexistent.

Still another stumbling block to effective military activity has been Diem's typical propensity to ignore his senior officers. Like a model-railroad enthusiast dispatching toy trains hither and yon, he occasionally picks up a telephone in his palace and capriciously orders a battalion to pack up and move five hundred miles, without informing anyone else of the directive and leaving all his subordinates wondering which troops are where.

The Rural Balance Sheet

In any conflict against guerrillas, however, the key to success or failure lies in the rural population, and in many regions of South Vietnam the peasants' attitude to the Diem régime seems to range between plain and "hostile" neutrality.

To some extent, the army has been at fault. It has tended—as the French did so often in Indo-China—to evacuate villages at night, thereby leaving peasants to the mercy of terrorists. Like most Oriental armies it has done its share of brutalizing peasants—raping, pillaging, torturing. And often it is caught in clever Communist traps. In the

Mekong River delta a couple of months ago, for instance, a Communist band captured a junk-load of rice. They carried it to a nearby settlement and distributed it free to the people, thus winning a vote of gratitude. But to consolidate this tactic, disguised Communist agents went to army officers in the vicinity and told them where the captured cargo could be uncovered. Government troops were promptly dispatched to raid the village and confiscate the stolen rice, and the final score in this ruse was one more psychological victory for the Reds, one more psychological loss for the Diem régime.

AGGRAVATING this sort of fumbling, some of Diem's dramatic security decisions have fallen short. Late in 1959, for example, he devised a scheme to pull the peasants together in large agglomerations, officially to be called "prosperity centers" and commonly known as *agrovilles*. The laudable aim of these projects was to establish protected villages and, incidentally, to set up marketing co-operatives. Last spring, traveling with military escort, I drove down to an *agroville* at Vi Thanh, in the heart of the dangerous delta region. At first glance, it seemed magnificent compared to the scrubby farms I had seen along the way. Flanking a



canal for about four miles, it had ample bamboo-and-thatch houses, each with a large garden. There were ferries to take farmers to their fields, and in the town itself there was a power plant, a school, a dispensary, and a common market; and there were plans to stock the local canals with fish to give peasants another source of income between rice harvests.

But probing a bit more deeply into the story of Vi Thanh, I discovered some fatal flaws that, in practice, had made the entire scheme a detriment to South Vietnam's security—and perhaps explain why the government has abruptly dropped the whole *agroville* idea.

For one thing, the project ran directly counter to traditional social patterns in the region. Peasants in the delta area, unlike those in the north, have always lived on their land and not in villages. The swift and ruthless manner in which the *agrovilles* were created not only disrupted ancient customs, it also alienated more peasants than it could ever have protected. The ingenuous provincial official who was responsible for Vi Thanh was delighted to describe what he considered his achievement. In fifty days, beginning in December, 1959, with the help of the army he rounded up twenty thousand peasants—although they were in the midst of their rice harvest—and put them to work immediately. They were paid nothing, and many of them had to walk ten or twelve miles to and from the construction job every day. And when the *agroville* was finished, there was room in it for only 6,200 people, leaving some fourteen thousand others without their rice crop, without any payment for their work, and without any opportunity to enjoy the fruits of their labor.

On balance, there is no doubt that Diem has done a great deal for the South Vietnamese peasant. The accomplishments—credit, new seeds, irrigation projects, tax exemptions, land distribution, and the like—cannot be overlooked. But the individualistic, self-conscious farmer, like farmers everywhere in the world, has an inherent inclination to discount his blessings; and in critical times, such as the present, failings tend to gain greater currency than achievements.

In a different but no less serious way, the dissatisfaction of the peasants has been matched by the increasing disenchantment of Saigon's educated elite with Diem and his government.

FROM various conversations during the past year, I can only venture some opinions of the influences at

work among the Saigon "intellectuals." Events in Korea last spring, which culminated in the overthrow of Syngman Rhee, had a profound and pervasive effect throughout Asia. In South Vietnam—as in Formosa—y younger people were inspired with the fuzzy idea that they, like the Koreans, might be able to "do something," without ever specifying clearly what they wanted to do. Many, for example, would have liked to "do something" about government bureaucracy, and in many private talks, almost every Vietnamese I saw—including some public officials—vehemently wanted to "do something" about Diem's family and its influence. Several of these youths, lacking the right political connections for advancement, felt frustrated by the difficulties they encountered in trying to serve their country.

In all the recent Saigon grumbling, however, there has been surprisingly little demand for "democracy." The general displeasure, as I heard it, was with what the wits dubbed "Diemocracy"—the government's make-believe guarantees of civil liberties and fair elections. With much fanfare, extensive plans were worked out for National Assembly elections in August, 1959, and opponents of the government's National Revolutionary Movement were invited to run. But hardly had the campaign begun than opposition politicians encountered a variety of obstacles, such as having the wrong stamp or signature on their documents or displaying "illegal" placards. Those who managed to hurdle these barriers found themselves facing another block on election day. Contingents of troops were moved into Saigon, where the opposition was strongest; the troops were all under orders to vote for the government candidates.

Even so, a Harvard-educated opponent of the régime, Dr. Phan Quang Dan, somehow succeeded in winning a parliament seat. He was never able to assume it, however. With almost infantile pique, the government arrested him for such infractions as opening his campaign "too early," using "unauthorized posters," and making "false promises"; and despite appeals by three western ambassadors to Diem, Dr. Dan's election was annulled.

Although nobody was prepared to fight strongly for Dr. Dan, the government's action against him made Diem appear petty and peevish, and it diminished his prestige considerably. Last April, a group of eighteen former officials—among them several ex-ministers, the president of the Red Cross and, in spite of family ties, Madame Nhu's uncle—sent Diem a petition requesting that he "liberalize his régime, expand democracy, grant minimum civil rights," and reform the administration, the army, and the economy. Neither this modest appeal nor its signers could have been considered a menace to the régime.

Upon receipt of their petition, however, President Diem's first reaction was to have them arrested and sent to "political re-education camps," where an estimated 25,000 citizens are currently being shown the paths of righteousness. After some reflection, Diem decided to ignore them. But, coincidentally, about thirty obscure doctors, students, and journalists were picked up on suspicion of "Communist affiliations." To my knowledge, none of them—nor any other suspects—has ever been brought to trial. Frequent police roundups of this kind serve as a warning.

THE RUMBLING of disgruntlement throughout last spring and summer did not delude Diem and his government, and much of it sounded ominously like another South Korean episode in the making. Diem was extremely sensitive to this possibility, and a good deal of his irritation was directed toward the United States, which had taken a hand in removing Syngman Rhee and was, through its diplomats in Saigon, constantly trying to press upon him the urgent need for reforms.

But heads of state, however much aid they receive, are still aware of their sovereignty; indeed, the more impoverished and indebted they are, the more sensitive and stubborn they may be in resisting the advice or pressure of an American representative. Efforts with Diem elicited only an impatient rejection of "interference" in his domestic affairs. Obliquely, one of Diem's close aides described to me how the United States had "dislocated" South Korean society.

South Vietnam and South Korea are, it seems, parallels that do not meet. Korea had an organized opposition party, a body of fairly sophisticated students, and a group of independent army officers. In Vietnam, there has not been—and may still not be—any visible alternative to Diem except the Communists. As recently as a month or two ago, his most vociferous critics could not conceive of South Vietnam without him. "We cannot abandon him," one of them said, "but he must bring in reforms." There are several reasons to believe that the paratroopers who rebelled last year shared this feeling about Diem. They were frustrated and overworked. They were irritated by political meddling in their operations, and they blamed the government for failing to generate popular support in the countryside. Despite a later government propaganda campaign to vilify them—as "egomaniacs," "Communist and colonial agents," and the like—there is scarcely any doubt that the rebels were sincere.

Over and over again during their rebellion, the paratroop officers repeated the same theme: the régime needs overhauling so its fight against the Communists can be more effective. "If we allowed things to continue," a rebel captain explained, "it's obvious that this country would be Communist in a year."

The insurgent leaders were, first and foremost, soldiers. One of them, Lieutenant Colonel Vuong Van Dong, was a native of the north who had served with the French against Vietminh. His partner in the uprising was Colonel Nguyen Chanh Thi, commander of the country's three thousand paratroopers—a veteran who had helped save Diem's life in 1955, when the régime was attacked by the piratical Binh Xuyen and other sects. Since then, Colonel Thi had been so intimate with the Ngo family that Diem often referred to him as "my son." Neither these nor any of the other military men involved appear to have had political ambitions or much political acumen. They failed to follow the most elementary procedures of a *coup d'état*, such as seizing the radio station, blocking the roads into the city, or cutting communications. At the height of the fracas, for example,

it was still possible to pick up a telephone and ring the palace switchboard. This evidence points to utter naïveté. It also points to a motive behind the façade of callowness. No experienced military men would have held back their troops for thirty-six hours from attacking the palace of the president they intended to overthrow—unless, of course, they did not intend to overthrow the president.

That, in my opinion, was the reason for their restraint. They were primarily attempting to pressure Diem into reform. In their only effort to see him, they went to the chief of the American military mission, and after outlining their grievances, asked for an escort to the president. Most Americans in Saigon were sympathetic to the rebels. But neither the general nor Ambassador Elbridge Durbrow could risk involvement in the revolt. They refused to arrange a meeting, and at no time during the episode did Diem and the insurgents confront each other. Although they skirmished with the palace guards, the rebels never made a frontal attack on the palace. Indeed, their conduct throughout—as a paratroop colonel described it at the time—was “gentlemanly.”

PRESIDENT DIEM, on the other hand, was playing to win. At the first rebel outbreak, he and his brother Nhu descended to the palace cellar, which had recently been equipped against the possibility of a siege. There, sitting at a table—now enshrined as “*la table de la victoire*”—Diem began sending radio messages to army units in the nearby countryside. This very practice of personally moving around troops, which so exasperated professional soldiers, became an essential element in his success. He managed to contact commanders in the south and north, and ordered them into Saigon to rescue him. They were slow in coming. To stall, Diem agreed to a whole list of reforms—civil liberties, free elections, a liberal economic program, a more effective offensive against the Communists, and other changes. He also promised to dismiss the government and form a new coalition cabinet, with himself as president. A tape recording of these decisions had barely been broadcast when his sav-

iors arrived and, after some fierce fighting, sent the rebels scattering.

Without much hesitation, Diem publicly reneged on his promises. They were made, he explained, at a time when the situation seemed lost and it was imperative “to preserve the integrity of our military potentialities.” He forgave the rank-and-file paratroopers, claiming that they had assembled at his palace under the illusion that they were protecting him. And he reaffirmed that “republican and personalist principles” would continue as the basis of his régime. In short, there would be no change.

Saigon seemed calm and peaceful again. But scores were quietly and severely settled in the days that followed. A kind of committee of public safety, sanctioned by the government, announced “a systematic purge in state and civic organizations until the last suspected element is wiped out.” As advertised, it systematically aided the secret police in making arrests, cluttered the city with vengeful posters, and failed only “to stop the indignant masses” from smashing up five newspaper offices that were guilty of printing news of the revolt.

In that sort of atmosphere it is usually difficult to assess public opinion. But in Saigon that week I discovered, on the contrary, a greater willingness in people to talk than I had ever before encountered. They had, it seems on looking back, a desire to unburden themselves engendered by a mixture of confused feelings: desperation at the rebel failure, encouragement from the attempt, and, I found everywhere, the certainty that sooner or later there would be another revolt—a successful one. “The army has lost its virginity,” as a knowledgeable Vietnamese put it. “Next time it will be easier.”

Good News for the Guerrillas

South Vietnam will be fortunate, however, if the “next time” there is fighting in Saigon, the anti-government forces are not Communists. For the revolt and its aftermath is bound to prove a boon to the guerrillas. It introduced an element of distrust between Diem and his army that should inevitably make their relations more brittle than ever. Beyond that, the insurrection took a moral and physi-

cal toll on the most effective army unit in the country. The paratroopers were the spearhead against the Communist partisans. From their bases around Saigon, they could be mobilized and put into action anywhere within eighteen hours. Although no casualty figures have been released, it is calculated that as many as four hundred of them may have been killed during the revolt. Some of their best officers fled with the rebel colonels; and nobody knows how many individual soldiers, beaten and ashamed, deserted to the jungles. A high-ranking apolitical military man commented sadly: “The Communists would have given three divisions to wipe out the paratroopers. We have done it for them.”

If the insurrection hurt the army, it also shattered Diem’s prestige. The aloof mandarin had never been loved, but he had at least enjoyed a healthy measure of respect. Diem lost ground by allowing the situation to degenerate to a point at which revolt was conceivable, especially by troops who had often served as his most trusted bodyguard. Moreover, he lost face badly by disavowing the promises of reform he had broadcast during the uprising. “We didn’t want the rebels to harm him,” a schoolteacher said bitterly, “but now we’re sorry they didn’t.”

Misplacing the Blame

The ugly mood of the country does not seem to have affected Diem. Just after the revolt, palace officials reported that they had rarely seen him in such good humor, and a western ambassador who paid a courtesy call described him as “bouncy.” His self-confidence is paralleled by his brother Nhu’s somewhat alarming analysis of the “real causes” behind the country’s unsettled state. In a long conversation I had with him a few weeks ago, Nhu emphasized that the principal culprits in the revolt were the “western embassies” in Saigon, and individual Americans in particular. They supposedly provoked the paratroopers to rebellion by disseminating rumors of corruption and nepotism. “Not only that,” he said, “but American military advisers were helping the paratroopers during the revolt. And they volunteered—they were not invited.”

To this suggestion of “colonialist”

inspiration—a charge diffused widely by the government press—Nhu added another disturbing notion. He readily admitted that the country's fight against the Communists was not going well. But, he pointed out, the army rather than the government was at fault. "The army is doing its job badly," he said. "They don't know enough about psychological warfare. It's entirely wrong to suppose that the population is displeased with the government. It's the army they dislike." And hinting at possible purges to come, he added: "Every military chief must take stock of his conscience."

Nhu's analysis of events, which naturally absolves Diem of any fault, thus puts the blame squarely on the two main props of the régime—the United States and the South Vietnamese Army. This thesis—to which Diem himself certainly subscribes—is likely to create trouble in the future. Anxiety and suspicion that the United States is "interfering," as it did in South Korea, is apt to stiffen Diem against further efforts to make him liberalize. A very blunt version of this fear was expressed in a recent *Times of Vietnam* editorial, which commented: "The threat to our independence does not come from our Communist enemies alone, but also from a number of foreign people who claim to be our friends." At the same time, Nhu's criticism of the army and the possibility of purges—even if partly justified—can be hazardous for a country heavily infiltrated by Communist guerillas. Military morale, as the insurrection testified, has reached a low point. Should Diem inaugurate "loyalty tests" for his troops or punish them for his own failings, he may find nothing between himself and Ho Chi Minh's terrorists.

Key to Survival

Some of the president's aides, conscious of the unstable situation—and also concerned with the régime's reputation abroad—persuaded Diem to let them announce a forthcoming "reshuffle of the cabinet and a general revamping of our entire establishment." This program of "reform," which has yet to be revealed in detail, does not, however, answer the basic question of whether Diem himself can be reformed. In Saigon, as

in Djakarta and Rabat and Léopoldville, the Establishment is never as important as the man who manages it. Liberal constitutions, parliaments and law courts are a glut in underdeveloped countries where governments resemble nothing so much as the personality of the man at the top.

The characteristics that made Diem a success in 1955 and 1956—obstinacy, single-mindedness, and guile—are his most obvious weaknesses today. If he is unable to change, there is not much hope that he, or perhaps even the country, can last. In recent months, several reputable firms have declined to underwrite any business in South Vietnam. "No premium, no matter how high, is worth the risk," explains one American insurance executive.

The precariousness of the Diem régime, the current fighting in Laos, and Prince Norodom Sihanouk's unpredictable neutralism in Cambo-

dia have combined to bring Indochina to its dreariest days since Dienbienphu. A durable anti-Communism can, in time, emerge from economic and social development. The problem in a vulnerable country like South Vietnam is to survive and progress simultaneously, as Malaya did throughout the years of its emergency. This is, of course, easier to suggest than to accomplish. But neither survival nor progress is likely to evolve out of puerile slogans, secret police, and massive regiments maneuvering like ancient Asian armies of elephants. Among other things, it requires the rational use of force accompanied by long-term economic planning and efforts to arouse popular enthusiasm. It also needs an intangible: style of leadership. If Diem cannot, in some radical switch, provide these elements, he is liable to fall. The Communists are ready to fill the vacuum.