THE RISE AND FALL OF THE SECOND REPUBLIC: DOMESTIC POLITICS AND CIVIL SOCIETY IN U.S.-SOUTH VIETNAMESE RELATIONS, 1967-1971

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Sean Fear

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Sean Fear, Ph. D.

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Although an enormous volume of scholarship has been devoted to the Vietnam War, most accounts focus on American experiences and perspectives, drawing almost entirely on American sources. Consulting newly-accessible official South Vietnamese government records, Vietnamese-language memoirs and historical accounts, and Saigon's raucous and at times relatively free press, this study demonstrates the centrality of the struggle for political legitimacy in South Vietnam to the overall outcome of the conflict. It examines the impact of the South Vietnamese state's failure to win legitimacy in the eyes of its diverse anti-communist political and religious groups, and combines traditional state-centered foreign relations history with attention to the diplomatic implications of domestic politics and civil society, fusing the "high politics" of statecraft with local and social history. This challenges the conventional view of the Cold War as a binary ideological clash between rival blocs of superpowers and like-minded local allies. Instead, this study reveals how external Cold War presumptions were repurposed and manipulated by diverse Vietnamese actors pursuing complex domestic goals, often rendering the superpowers incapable of comprehending much less choreographing their presumed proxies.

This dissertation focuses on the intimate connection between domestic politics and diplomacy in South Vietnam's Second Republic (1967-1975), during a decisive but overlooked phase of the war. It begins in 1967, when Saigon's return to elected government gave rise to a

new if fleeting sense of guarded optimism among anti-communist political observers. But by 1971, the blatantly-rigged unopposed re-election of General Nguyễn Văn Thiệu saw these measured hopes give way to despair, resulting in political collapse from within long before North Vietnam's final 1975 military offensive. With this unconventional timeline, I depart from the traditional American-oriented chronology of the war by exploring untapped Vietnamese sources to draw attention to vital but still poorly understood South Vietnamese political developments. Although overshadowed in Vietnam War scholarship by the secret peace deliberations between Washington and Hanoi, South Vietnam's failure to secure the support of its core anti-communist constituents played a critical role in shifting both Vietnamese and Americans perceptions about the war's prospects and legitimacy, accelerating its fateful denouement.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Sean Fear is a Ph.D. candidate in History at Cornell University, and will be a U.S. Foreign Policy and International Security Postdoctoral Fellow at the Dartmouth College John Sloan Dickey Center for International Understanding during the 2016-2017 year. He was an Agnese N. Haury Dissertation Fellow at New York University's Center for the United States and Cold War during the Spring 2016 semester. He earned an Honours Bachelor of Arts with High Distinction in History from the University of Toronto in 2007. He has received number of research grants and awards, including a Doctoral Dissertation Fellowship from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

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INTRODCUTION

In 1967, esteemed legal scholar and future founder of the Progressive National Movement Party Nguyễn Văn Bông published a treatise on South Vietnam's new constitution, ratified after much scrutiny and heated debate earlier that spring. The constitution and the institutions it created – a lower house, Senate, elections, and an initially independent anti-corruption watchdog known as the "Inspectorate" – were intended to restore order, legality and legitimacy after a three year period marked by street-battles, military coups, and religious, regional and political infighting. Intended to serve as a primer on the new constitutional system for students and general readers, Bông's 1967 preface struck an optimistic note. By studying the new legal system, he noted "students will find the advantageous factors they need to make objective assessments about the great issues in the nation, issues which require an essential understanding, not only in the classroom, but in order to express positions in our capacity as free citizens in our participation in political activities."[1]

Updated every two years, Nguyễn Văn Bông's analysis of the constitution provides something of a barometer for the state of South Vietnam's constitutional experiment. Already by 1969 the tone of his preface had changed, with Bông hinting at President Nguyễn Văn Thiệu's mounting heavy-handedness by concluding warily that "institutions and people are two completely different elements… people can – unconsciously or intentionally – completely kill the spirit of institutions, and kill even the nation's faith in institutions."[2] And just two years

[1] "*Chính trong phần nầy sinh viên tim thấy yếu tố ích lợi để có những nhận định khách quan và thực tiến về các vấn đề trọng đại của Quốc gia, vấn đề mà sự hiểu biết cần thiết không những để học và thi mà còn có dịp bày tỏ lập trường – với tư cách công dân tự do – trong cuộc tham gia vào sinh hoạt chính trị*" Nguyễn Văn Bông, *Luật Hiện pháp và Chính trị Học* [The Constitution and Political Science] 3rd. ed. S.i. (Saigon, 1971).

[2] Ibid., "*Tuy nhiên định chế và con người là hai yếu tố hoàn toàn khác biệt… con người có thể - vô tính hay có ý, giết hẳn tinh thần của định chế - giết luôn cả sự tin tưởng của quốc gia vào định chế."*

later, with the constitution having effectively dissolved into farce after Thiệu ran unopposed when his opponents withdrew to boycott his blatant vote-rigging, the studious and notably even-handed Bông abandoned his restraint: "When we published our second edition in 1969, we wrote that people can 'completely kill the spirit of institutions, and kill even the nation's faith in institutions.' All of these concerns have become real if we review the past three years of applying the constitution of the Second Republic. The essence of the constitution has not been fostered, the conception of the body that organized its authority has not been implemented, and going further, democratic spirit has not become ingrained in the consciousness of our ruling class. The people's voice is critical in the struggle for a democratic environment, but our actions and thoughts have not yet transcended the childish maladies of colonial times."[3] Just five years after its much-hailed inauguration, and long before South Vietnam's final military collapse, the Second Republic was a failure in the eyes of its most devoted champions.

This dissertation attempts to tell the story of South Vietnam's Second Republic (1967-1975), which came into being with considerably more interest and enthusiasm than so-called "orthodox" scholars of the Vietnam War have conventionally recognized, and which ended in dismal failure much earlier and far more comprehensively than most Vietnam War revisionists have been willing to admit. It represents an attempt to cast light on what is both one of the most critical and least understood questions in Vietnam War historiography – how and why did South Vietnam's Second Republic fail in its quest for political legitimacy? As this study demonstrates, the Nguyễn Văn Thiệu regime's inability to attract the allegiance not only of uncommitted voters

[3] Ibid "*Ngay khi tái bản lần thứ nhì năm 1969, chúng tôi có viết rằng 'con người có thể - vô tính hay có ý, giết hẳn tinh thần của định chế - giết luôn cả sự tin tưởng của quốc gia vào định chế.' Mối lo ngại đó đã trở thành sự thật nếu chúng ta kiểm điểm lại thành quả của 3 năm áp dụng Hiến Pháp đệ nhị Cộng Hòa. Tinh túy của HIến Pháp không được khai thác, quan niệm của nhà lập hiến về tổ chức chánh quyền không được áp dụng và, đi xa hơn nữa, tinh thần dân chủ chưa ăn sâu vào tâm não của giai cấp lãnh đạo. Miệng nói dân chủ vì phải tranh đấu trong khung cảnh dân chủ, nhưng hoạt động và suy tư chưa thoát khỏi bịnh ấu trĩ của thời thuộc địa.*"

but even devoted anti-communist constituents is paramount to understanding the South Vietnamese state's political collapse from within, and why American voters and their representatives in Congress - whose impressions of the war were shaped by a much greater degree than previously appreciated by their view of Sài Gòn's progress in pursuit of political legitimacy – increasingly withdrew their support for the war, a key constraint that affected the dynamics of the Nixon administration's efforts in ways which are still poorly understood.

Surprisingly, given that the Vietnam War has long been acknowledged as a struggle that was primarily political rather than military in nature, the transition from measured optimism to utter despair that Nguyễn Văn Bông describes remains largely unknown in Vietnam War historiography. Despite a substantial volume of scholarship on the war, the essential local political dynamics of the encounter remain poorly understood, though the contest for political legitimacy in South Vietnam was fundamental to what evolved into a sprawling decades-long multipolar global conflict. And with the majority of English-language studies thus far devoted to American perspectives and relying almost exclusively on American sources, the central role played by Vietnamese actors in shaping their own destiny has long been obscured. South Vietnam in particular has often been wrongfully dismissed as a powerless client of the United States.[4] Though scholars have for some time now attempted to produce "international" accounts of the conflict, Vietnamese-language sources have only recently become more accessible.[5] While the past decade has seen a new generation of Vietnamese-proficient historians working to

[4] See, for instance, Bernard Fall, *The Two Viet-Nams: A Political and Military Analysis* (New York: Praeger, 1963): 236; Frances Fitzgerald, *Fire in the Lake: the Vietnamese and Americans in Vietnam* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1972): 87-88; David Halberstam, *The Making of a Quagmire: America and Vietnam During the Kennedy Era.* Revised ed. (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1988): 16-19; Seth Jacobs, *America's Miracle Man: Ngo Dinh Diem, Religion, Race and U.S. Intervention in Southeast Asia, 1950-1957* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004): 26; James M. Carter, *Inventing Vietnam: the United States and State Building, 1954-1968*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008): 10-14.

[5] R.B. Smith, *An International History of the Vietnam War: Revolution vs. Containment, 1955-1961*. Vol. I. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1983)

address this imbalance, their work examines either the Vietnamese communists, or South Vietnam during the early stages of the conflict under President Ngô Định Diệm (1955-1963).[6] By contrast, South Vietnamese politics during the Second Republic remain obscure and poorly understood despite their critical bearing on the outcome of the struggle for Vietnam. A host of domestic confrontations during the reign of Ngô Đình Diệm, including the Xa Lội Pagoda Raids, the Caravelle Manifesto, or the globally iconic self-immolation of Thích Quảng Đức have long been staples of a canonical if mostly American-centric English-language narrative of the war. But while the international implications of internal politics during the Second Republic were arguably much wider given the global scrutiny the war by then attracted, the crucial events and personalities who determined the balance of power in South Vietnam remain notably absent from most accounts of the war. Indeed, for all the dozens of volumes published each year on the Vietnam War, there is still no basic political history of South Vietnam after American escalation in 1965.[7]

One effect of this predominant focus on the First Republic has been a tendency to overstate the lingering impact of earlier phases of the war, with, for instance, the 1955 decision by the United States to back to Ngô Đình Diệm regime at times interpreted as a turning point which all but doomed all subsequent efforts to craft a stable, popularly-backed anti-communist regime. Though this study deals extensively with Diệm's troublesome legacy, it nonetheless

[6]; Edward Miller, *Misalliance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and the Fate of South Vietnam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013); Philip Catton, *Diem's Final Failure: Prelude to America's War in Vietnam* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2002); Jessica Chapman, *Cauldron of Resistance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and 1950s South Vietnam* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013). Lien-Hang T. Nguyen, *Hanoi's War: an International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam*. (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2012); Pierre Asselin, *Hanoi's Road to the Vietnam War, 1954-1965* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press): 2013; Sophie Quinn-Judge, "The Ideological Debate in the DRV and the Significance of the Anti-Party Affair, 1967-68." *Cold War History*, 5:4 (November 2005).

[7] Among works which provide the most thorough overviews of this time-period are Charles Joiner, *The Politics of Massacre: Political Processes in South Vietnam*. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1974); Allan E. Goodman. *Politics in war; the Bases of Political Community in South Vietnam*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. 1973); Gabriel Kolko, *Anatomy of a War: Vietnam, the United States, and the Modern Historical Experience*. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985).

challenges such teleological assessments, demonstrating that until the 1971 election, politics during the Second Republic were far from overdetermined, and subject to considerably more fluidity and contingency than previously presumed, even if the obstacles to uniting non-communists behind a legitimate Sài Gòn government and withstanding the communist challenge were always formidable.

If orthodox Vietnam War scholars have, however, thus far overshadowed the intricacies of South Vietnam's Second Republic, the same cannot be said for so-called Vietnam War "revisionists," defined by one historian as challenging three crucial "axioms" of orthodox scholarship: "that there was never a legitimate non-communist government in Saigon, that the U.S. had no legitimate reason to be involved in Vietnamese affairs, and that the U.S. could not have won the war under any circumstance."[8] Indeed, the Second Republic has been central to the claims of commenters seeking to challenge the notion that the Vietnam War was a tragic American mistake. One recent publication, citing a dramatic shift in the rural balance of military power after Tết, has posited that during the Second Republic, "There came a time when the war was won. The fighting wasn't over, but the war was won."[9] More "orthodox" historians, however, have long countered that improved security resulted from shifting communist tactics rather than decisive battlefield defeat, and that communist networks in the Mekong Delta were revived considerably during the 1972 Easter Offensive. [10] Perhaps above all, however, such claims of a lost military victory underscore the perils of neglecting the political dynamics of what has long been understood as a conflict that was primarily political in nature. Only through

[8] K.W. Taylor, "How I Began to Teach About the Vietnam War," *Michigan Quarterly Review*, 43, 4 (Fall 2004): 637.
[9] Lewis Sorley. *A Better War: The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America's Last Years in Vietnam*. New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1999: 217.
[10] See, for example, David Elliott. *The Vietnamese War: Revolution and Social Change in the Mekong Delta, 1930-1975*. (Armonk, NY: Sharpe, 2003); Gregory A. Daddis, *No Sure Victory: Measuring U.S. Army Effectiveness and Progress In the Vietnam War*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011). Gian P Gentile, *Wrong Turn: America's Deadly Embrace of Counterinsurgency*.(New York: The New Press, 2013).

careful analysis of South Vietnam's political collapse – marked by utter disillusionment and chronic military corruption, and apparent years before its final military defeat – can the ultimate fall of an army vastly better equipped and at times outnumbering its adversary by more than five-to-one be understood. As contemporaneous American and Vietnamese observers all recognized, military momentum in the countryside contributed little absent a political program to attract citizens newly subject to Sài Gòn's tenuous control.

Meanwhile, other revisionist works have highlighted the Second Republic's de jure democratic system and at times relatively less constrained media networks to justify American intervention in the war. While Sài Gòn's ostensibly free press, among other institutions, has long been cited by advocates of American intervention on South Vietnam's behalf, these proponents have, while hailing the press's existence, tended to neglect the essence of its contributors' increasingly scathing and despondent anti-government critiques. "The War was really about keeping alive the hope and the possibility of a democratic and a free society in the South," one scholar has argued.[11] If indeed the case however, then a primary enemy in the war for "free society in the South" came from within, and the decisive blow was self-inflicted. United States' involvement in such a conflict must also then be regarded as adversarial, in light of Nixon and Kissinger's insistence on propping up the reviled Thiệu dictatorship to guarantee stability in Sài Gòn long enough to sign a separate peace acceptable to Nixon's conservative base, which would doubtless have regarded neglected South Vietnamese opposition peace platforms as tantamount to surrender.[12] In this light, the final stages of the conflict represent a struggle between the United States and Thiệu, and non-communist Sài Gòn's so-called "Third Force" opposition

[11] Keith Taylor. "Closing Remarks." *Voices From the South: New Testimonies from the Last Leaders of South Vietnam*. June 9, 2012. Cornell University.
[12] See also George McT. Kahin, "Nixon and the PRG's 7 Points," *The American War in Vietnam*. Jayne Werner and David Hunt eds. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Southeast Asia Program, 1993): 58-65.

movement, for control over the peace process. And by opting to stand aside as Thiệu crushed the remnants of political pluralism, the United States effectively doomed South Vietnam to long-term failure after the Paris agreement, shackling it - to serve domestic political ends - to a government woefully ill-equipped for political competition with Hà Nội. Flush with American largesse to palliate the blow of Paris, but devoid of legitimacy even in the eyes of determined anti-communists, Thiệu's South Vietnam became a hollow if gilded shell, lacking a political core and prone to toppling at the slightest disturbance, a far cry from the state that had fought the communists to a draw during the 1972 Easter Offensive, albeit with significant residual American assistance. Sài Gòn's domestic politics then are essential to understanding why a state blessed with a vastly larger and better-equipped military, which had already proven itself on the battlefields in 1972, wilted so readily just three years later, collapsing in six months despite communist projections that the final campaign might linger for up to two years. And given the American public's abhorrence for Sài Gòn's chronic corruption, drug-trafficking, ineptitude and brutality, domestic politics are also critical to understanding why the substantially diminished American presence and assistance that had nonetheless saved the day in 1972 was, by April 1975, no longer forthcoming. By providing a detailed analysis of the Second Republic's possibilities and substantial pitfalls, I hope uncover the critical importance of a time period whose intricacies have long been overshadowed by unfounded assertions on the part of orthodox and revisionist scholars alike.

This study is an essence a work of diplomatic history, but one which emphasizes and explores the intimate connection between U.S.-South Vietnamese relations and their respective domestic politics between 1967 and 1971, a period bookended by two very different South Vietnamese elections. With this unconventional timeline, I depart from the traditional

American-oriented chronology of the war by drawing on Vietnamese-language sources to emphasize the centrality of South Vietnamese political developments during this decisive stage. I argue that especially following the communist tactical military regrouping after the 1968 Tet Offensive, the complex, under-examined contest for political legitimacy in South Vietnam played a paramount role both in shifting Vietnamese and American perceptions about the war's prospects and in determining its ultimate outcome. My dissertation challenges a conventional view of the war as binary struggle between pro- and anti-communist proxies. Instead, I demonstrate that the battle for South Vietnam was in fact a far more complicated confrontation, pitting factionalized political groups and religious communities against the communists, the South Vietnamese state, each other, and all too often, themselves. Riven by regionalism and chronic infighting, South Vietnam's anti-communist nationalists persistently failed to cooperate much less unite, a crucial factor in determining the outcome of the war, and one which the United States was powerless to resolve.

Despite having a significant bearing on the war's fateful denouement, the diplomatic implications of South Vietnam's turbulent internal affairs have received very little attention, as indeed has the role of domestic politics in foreign relations history more generally. By consulting American and Vietnamese state archives as well as less orthodox sources for diplomatic history such as Vietnamese-language print media and memoirs, I combine traditional state-centered foreign relations history with an awareness of domestic politics and civil society, fusing the "high politics" of statecraft with local and social history. This innovative research methodology contributes to a new interpretation of the Cold War that challenges the conventional view of the conflict as a dualistic ideological clash between rival blocs of superpowers and like-minded local allies. Instead, my work on U.S.-South Vietnamese relations

demonstrates how external Cold War assumptions were repurposed and manipulated by a wide range of Vietnamese actors pursuing complex domestic goals, often rendering the superpowers incapable of comprehending much less choreographing their presumed proxies. Still, if consistently frustrated in its efforts to manage the trajectory of events in South Vietnam, the role of the United States in determining the end of the conflict must not be overlooked, with Nixon prolonging the war with a series of militarily dubious and politically costly in order to project strength resolve to observers abroad and, especially, at home.

A primary theme in this study is the Nguyễn Văn Thiệu government's "clash of constituents." Under growing international scrutiny and with vital American military and financial support increasingly uncertain, the stakes of South Vietnamese internal affairs had arguably never been higher. The need to project political legitimacy was made all the more imperative by the communists' considerable global public relations success. As my work reveals, President Nguyễn Văn Thiệu's Second Republic struggled to accommodate the renewed desire for political participation by South Vietnam's bewilderingly diverse political and religious groups, which were in turn beset by factionalism and regional rivalries. My research at the newly-accessible National Archives Center II in Ho Chi Minh City shows that the country's military leaders were indeed well aware that sustained American assistance was contingent on appearing to embrace political pluralism for an ever-more watchful global public audience, simultaneously courted by an increasingly savvy Vietnamese opposition. This liberal approach proved incompatible, however, with Thiệu's own corporatist authoritarian ideology, and with demands that the government exert firmer control over an often chaotic political landscape, originating both from within South Vietnam's military and, notwithstanding their lofty democratic rhetoric, from the Johnson and Nixon administrations, which saw military rule in

South Vietnam as "essential to United States' interests," as one planning document puts it.[13] Faced then with a clash of constituencies, both domestic and overseas, Thiệu struggled to reconcile both sets of competing interests, ultimately resorted to abandoning pluralist politics altogether.

Met with cautious optimism after years of regional and religious tensions and military infighting, the 1967 South Vietnamese presidential election marked a return to constitutional government and allowed new opportunities for opposition voices, even if the process was known by all observers to be manipulated by the ruling military. Unable to control much of its territory or perform basic functions like collecting taxes, the Thiệu regime found itself confronting a clash between domestic and foreign constituents – such as the United States Congress - whose demands were often at odds with the priorities of the President and his small but well-organised support base in the National Assembly. And when these local supporters began to press for greater influence over foreign policy in exchange for their loyalty, Thiệu reacted by bypassing them in parliament and tightening presidential control over politics. This culminated in the rigged and universally-condemned one-man presidential election in 1971, bringing an end to the guarded hopes inspired by the 1967 contest. Often little more than a footnote in conventional narratives of the war, the 1971 election was a decisive moment in the government's failed campaign to win widespread legitimacy, marking a point of no return for the Thiệu regime. By crushing Saigon's budding if chaotic constitutional experiment, Thiệu alienated domestic opponents and supporters alike, in turn compromising his increasingly vital international partnerships. And in simultaneously failing to address the internal problems which left it so dependent on outside support, and violating the terms on which such assistance was based, the

[13] Memo: "Vietnamization Meeting with Secretary Laird," October 14, 1970. Gerald Ford Presidential Library, Melvin Laird Papers: Department of Defense Papers Historical Project Files (C Series), Document #264.

Thiệu regime contributed greatly to the timing and the severity of the fateful 1973 U.S. treaty with Hanoi.

A second theme of this dissertation is an examination of South Vietnam's complex and bitterly polarized political sphere, plagued by regional, religious and political fragmentation. Beyond analysis of the government's collapsing legitimacy, epitomized by the disastrous one-man 1971 election, a full account of South Vietnam's deterioration from within requires an understanding of its intricate and constantly evolving political and cultural landscape. Despite the immense scale of the U.S. military commitment, the Vietnam War remained in essence a local struggle characterised by political and regional clashes between a bewilderingly diverse series of parties and religious groups. And while the conflict has often been interpreted as a civil war between communist and anti-communist nationalists, it also pitted highly-factionalized political groups like the Việt Nam Quốc Dân Đảng (Vietnamese Nationalist Party) and Đại Việt parties, and Hòa Hảo, Cao Đài, Buddhist and Catholic religious communities against both the state and each other.

Characterized by much greater political and religious diversity than North Vietnam, particularly after the exodus of some one million refugees following Vietnam's partition in 1954, the task of creating a national vision to unite the South's plethora of hostile communities was always formidable. It is precisely this diversity which makes South Vietnam such a fascinating society, and its political failure so poignant. At the height of the war, global anti-war activists found much to commend about the Vietnamese communists' regimented and determined resistance. Their rigid political structures and ruthless discipline often mattered less than their apparent embodiment of the Vietnamese popular will. As Herbert Marcuse posited, "the spread of guerilla warfare at the height of the technological century is a symbolic event: the energy of

the human body… throws itself against the engines of repression. Perhaps the rebels… are terrorized by their own leaders… but their freedom is in contradiction to the overdeveloped societies."[14] Yet ironically it was in Sài Gòn, and not Hà Nội, where the lifestyle embraced by much of the anti-war movement – complete with hippies, jazz concerts, miniskirts, marijuana, and peace demonstrations – was replicated. Echoing patterns elsewhere, South Vietnam's youth culture engendered a conservative backlash; a bestselling novel, *Cô Hippy Lạc loài* [Wayward Hippy Girl] detailed the familiar travails of a young protaganist whose embrace of a hedonistic lifestyle resulted in ruin.[15] South Vietnam also boasted a raucous free press which prevailed over successive if inept government censorship and harrassment campaigns before finally succumbing to Emergency Powers legislation in 1972.

If this political and cultural diversity resulted in fleeting pockets of vibrancy, it also posed a considerable challenge for those seeking to craft a vision capable of binding South Vietnam's bewilderingly diverse non-communist communities together. Indeed, a critical question through the Second Republic was whether or not anti-communist South Vietnam could reach any basis of mutual accommodation. Though this development alone would not necessarily have sufficed to prevail in the military struggle against the communists, it nonetheless represented a critical objective for the state's basic survival, and a prerequisite if avowed non-communists were to create a program – represented by the 1967 constitutional reforms - that could appeal to the rural majority, consisting of constituents who did not necessarily know who their presumptive president was, but whose support or lack thereof ultimately determined how the balance of power would fall.

[14] Herbert Marcuse, "Political Preface," *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Introduction to Freud*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966).
[15] Nhã Ca, *Cô Hippy Lạc loài* (Saigon: Vàng Sơn, 1971).

A critical moment in the trajectory of non-communist unity was the 1968 communist Tết Offensive. Conventionally regarded in the United States as a significant setback for Washington and Sài Gòn, and a political triumph for Hà Nội, the Tết Offensive was a military disaster for the communists, with some 50,000 casualties shifting the balance of power in the south. Rather than rally behind the communists, South Vietnam's polarized curbanites instead united, albeit briefly, behind the military regime of Nguyễn Văn Thiệu. Unmoved by the mayhem, Hà Nội continued with costly "mini-Tet" attacks for moths to follow. These efforts further alienated non-committed southerners, enervated already depleted communist ranks, and inflamed regional tensions within the communist movement. Despite exposure to new levels of military intensity, the Tết Offensive can be regarded as an unlikely high-water mark for South Vietnam, providing, along with the spectre of an imminent American settlement, the zenith of South Vietnamese political unity. The shock of the attacks served to rally South Vietnam's non-communist opposition, prompting waves of consideration for what might serve as a positive basis of accommodation beyond varying degrees of apprehension about communism. Tết, and especially, subsequent American counterattacks, opened up new spaces for political engagement in the rural South, as security conditions improved considerably following the communists' tactical retreat. But as the imminent threat of communist conquest receded, so too did the impetus for cooperation, and, lacking a compelling program to present to rural voters, the opportunity for engagement was squandered. South Vietnam as a unified nation-state, it turned out, was conceivable only in the crucible of extreme political violence.

This trajectory demonstrates that the failure of anti-communist parties and religious movements to overcome regional and doctrinal quarrels in order to cooperate contributed as much as Thiệu's unpopularity to the communists' eventual triumph. South Vietnam's Buddhist

majority was polarized, for instance, between the far-smaller pro-government Tâm Châu faction and the more-popular anti-government central Vietnamese Ấn Quang movement, whose political stridency and organized official hierarchy led to disputes with more moderate followers from southern South Vietnam. These regional, theological and political divisions hindered Buddhist solidarity in the face of challenges from Vietnamese Catholics, whose perceived influence over and patronage from the government contributed to two Ấn Quang-led anti-government uprisings in 1963 and 1966 – a reflection of the intractable Buddhist-Catholic tensions that ultimately doomed anti-communist unity. Vietnamese Catholics, meanwhile, were no less polarized, with refugees from North Vietnam earning a reputation for fierce anti-communism, antagonizing the southern-led Sống Đạo group, among others, which called for negotiations and reconciliation with the NLF. Additionally, large swathes of the Mekong Delta were dominated by the Hòa Hảo and Cao Đài, syncretic local faiths that emerged in the 1930s only to suffer the same doctrinal and political divisions plaguing the Buddhists and Catholics. South Vietnam's elaborate mosaic of overlapping religious and regional fault-lines defies its crude Cold War division into "communist" and "nationalist" camps, resulting in a complex civic scene suffering from intense political and spiritual disputes.

Finally, this study explores the manner in which domestic politics in the United States shaped Nixon's fluid and inconsistent approach to the war. A critical insight comes from examining not only the shifting views of Nixon and National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger, but also assessments and impressions on the part of the rest of the Nixon cabinet, including the State Department, C.I.A., Defense Department, and Joint Chiefs of Staff, as well as the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV), the military's on-site authority in Vietnam. I provide a close analysis in particular of NSSM-1, a vast exercise from the early days of the Nixon

administration in which the aforementioned agencies were tasked with assessing the state of the war. In doing so, I provide context allowing for a better understanding of how radical Nixon's approach was relative to the rest of his administration, as well as the extent to which disputes over Vietnam within the Administration were reflected by competing segments within the American public. Much of the scholarship on Nixon's Vietnam has focused on the President and his National Security Advisor, with much attention dedicated to analyzing the quirks and foibles of Nixon and Kissinger's personalities and relationship during the Vietnam War era.[16] This largely biographical approach overlooks the considerable impact of less self-promoting officials, particularly Defense Secretary Melvin Laird, whose esteem among fiscally conservative Congressmen alarmed by the soaring costs and limited returns on investment in the Thiệu regime, enabled him to hasten the pace of U.S. troop withdrawal far more rapidly than the President intended. At least regarding Vietnam, the Nixon Administration was less a duopoly centered on Nixon and Kissinger, and more a triumvirate, with Nixon's approach fluctuating between Laird's cogent demands for fiscal responsibility and restored strategic parity with the Soviet Union, and Kissinger's willingness to indulge and implement recurring waves of bellicosity designed to project toughness and resolve to audiences in Hà Nội, Beijing, Moscow – and above all, at home in the United States.

Laird and Kissinger's at times almost comically emotional clashes mirrored a growing split within the Republican Party between fiscal conservatives, who saw Vietnam as an expensive if not embarrassing strategic liability, and hawkish conservatives and religious groups who saw winning in Vietnam and thus maintaining American credibility and honour as paramount. Caught between clashing constituents, Nixon often wavered, deploying Kissinger to

[16] Examples include See for example Jeffrey Kimball. *Nixon's Vietnam War*. (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 1998) and Robert Dallek. *Nixon and Kissinger, Partners in Power*. (New York: Harper Collins, 2007).

lash out in frustration through militarily dubious bombing attacks and incursions in Laos and Cambodia, while still largely adhering to Laird's broader strategic vision. The much-debated 'Decent Interval' – the notion that Nixon and Kissinger cynically pursued a settlement that would allowing for Sài Gòn's survival only as long as required for the pair to escape the blame – was less a coherent doctrine then an often haphazard compromise between two polar visions of South Vietnam's importance to American identity.[17] Long after the Paris settlement, and all the while maneuvering to shift blame for Sài Gòn's likely collapse elsewhere, Nixon and Kissinger continued in vain to defend South Vietnam through the discredited tactics of the "madmen theory," even as the President accepted the inevitability and accompanying constraints of Laird's strategic logic, in which South Vietnam was rightly doomed to its own devices as a costly liability.

Admittedly a bystander during the Paris talks, South Vietnam nonetheless contributed significantly to the diplomacy of its own demise. Given the intense global media scrutiny of South Vietnamese affairs as a result of America's vast commitment, local events and developments in South Vietnam acquired international implications, with political figures in both the government and opposition growing increasingly attuned to overseas optics. This process renders virtually untenable any attempt to categorize developments during the final stages of the Vietnam War as discreetly "local" or "foreign" affairs. Well aware that vital U.S. domestic support for South Vietnam was eroding, Thiệu launched an ambitious global public relations campaign beginning in 1967 which targeted right-wing American political and religious groups in the hopes they would pressure the U.S. government to continue funding South Vietnam. A telling example came when, to promote South Vietnam's purported democratic progress and

[17] See Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War;* Kimball, The Case of the "Decent Interval": Do We Now Have a Smoking Gun?," *Passport SHAFR Newsletter*, (September 2001); Larry Berman, "A Final Word on the 'Decent Interval' Strategy." *Passport SHAFR Newsletter*, (December 2003).

principles, dozens of Vietnamese Assembly delegations were scheduled starting in 1967, stopping in places as far-flung as Fairbanks, Alaska, where the Johnson and Nixon administrations hoped they would bolster support for the war. During these tours, the delegates forged important relationships with their American counterparts, at a time when growing doubts about South Vietnam's prospects prompted an increasingly wary Congress to oppose increased funding for the war. But this public relations effort backfired when President Thiệu began compromising the Assembly through bribery and intimidation, and its members used their new Congressional connections to publicize and protest Thiệu's authoritarianism. Inspired by direct accounts of its Vietnamese equivalent's plight, Congress reacted by curtailing aid to Vietnam, forcing the United States to withdraw from the war far sooner than the White House and the Saigon regime intended. Meanwhile, South Vietnam proved eminently vulnerable to shifts in the American political landscape. Though Saigon's preferred candidate Richard Nixon ultimately prevailed after brokering a secret arrangement with Thiệu to stall the onset of peace talks, Nixon's narrow 1968 victory underscored South Vietnam's susceptibility to external political developments over which it had little control. This dependence on fortuitous American internal affairs is hardly surprising, given that in South Vietnam, foreign and domestic politics were intimately and uniquely linked. Absent vast sums of increasingly scarce American assistance, South Vietnam was effectively structurally insolvent, rendering it utterly at the mercy of the American politicians who determined the level of U.S. aid.

The first chapter covers the troubled legacy of Ngô Đình Diệm, whose memory dominated intellectual debate throughout the Second Republic, and informed the nature of its basic institutions, conceived in response to his government's perceived excesses. Long after his violent passing, Diệm symbolized the indelible divide that plagued South Vietnamese politics

unti Sài Gòn's ultimate collapse, while his image served as a conceptual yardstick against which subsequent political actors were measured. An understanding of his substantial posthumous impact is critical in appreciating how and why politics during the Second Republic unfolded as they did. Next, I cover the 1967 Presidential election in the second chapter, which examines the measured hopes invested in the proceedings, and significant disappointment with the final result. Nevertheless, the election was a momentous event whose importance transcended the final voting tally, and whose impact became apparent only in time. I challenge previous English-language accounts which have largely dismissed the proceedings, demonstrating the contest represented a critical encounter in the trajectory of the final stages of the war. The third chapter explores the Nixon's administration's response to the war, revealing Nixon's striking divergence from his own cabinet, as well as the critical but underappreciated contributions of Defense Secretary Melvin Laird in determining American policy. Next, the fourth chapter examines South Vietnam's robust but ultimately unsuccessful diplomatic campaign, fatally undermined by exposing its domestic political shortcomings. This chapter establishes the intimate connection between American and Vietnamese domestic and diplomatic affairs. Finally, I conclude by demonstrating how the 1971 election, an overlooked but decisive political development, effectively marked the end of the Second Republic as a political project, dooming attempts to both unite South Vietnam's quarrelsome political class, and reengage rural voters. The election marked the end of the possibility of legitimate government in South Vietnam, an essential factor in accounting for the conflict's fateful denouement.

CHAPTER 1

A TROUBLED INHERITANCE: LEGACIES OF NGÔ ĐÌNH DIỆM AND THE TUMULTUOUS INTERREGNUM

On November 2, 1971, Sài Gòn's Notre Dame Basilica is packed with spectators, and the streets outside teem with throngs of onlookers. *Vietnam Press*, the Republic of Vietnam's official news service, reports that over five thousand people turn out for the commemorations, which continue later that afternoon at the Mạc Đĩnh Chi Cemetery. In attendance are a number of political notables, including the President's wife; Vice President Trần Văn Hương; several cabinet ministers; and even former Generals Đỗ Mậu and Lê Văn Nghiêm, both noted enemies of the man being honoured.[18] At the cemetery, standing next to the fallen man's grave, is Trương Công Cừu, Chairman of the Revolutionary Social Humanist Party [Viêt Nam Nhân Xã Cách Mạng Đảng], or Nhân Xã, widely known in political circles as a thinly-veiled attempt to revive the former Cần Lao Party. Trương Công Cừu eulogizes the man they have all gathered to remember: "he was the incarnation of the noblest ideals of our race and mankind. Animated by a glorious ideal from childhood, he consecrated his whole existence to the righteous cause… he brought South Vietnam from a dependent, exhausted, disordered and disorganized position into the ranks of a sovereign, prosperous and well-disciplined nation, respected by the whole world, friends and foes alike." [19] But the death of the man to whom Trương Công Cừu referred was not, however, a recent passing – in 1971, he had been dead for eight years – and his demise in 1963 had brought far more substantial crowds into the streets of Sài Gòn, who cheered and danced for

[18] "Reqiuem Mass Held for Late Pres. Diem," *Vietnam Press* (Morning ed.), no. 5767, November 3, 1971.
[19] "Embassy Translation of Truong Cong Cuu Speech," Airgram A-76 from Saigon to Department of State, 10 May 1972, POL 6 VIET S 1970-1973 Central Foreign Policy Files (CFPF), Record Group (RG) 59, National Archives and Records Administration (NARA).

joy rather than mourn the news of his downfall. [20] As these very different responses to his death suggest, Ngô Đình Diệm, the Republic of Vietnam's first President, left an ambivalent but intriguingly fluid legacy, his star rising and falling in response to evolving trends and perceptions that emerged long after his death.

Ngô Đình Diệm has long been caricatured in English-language studies of the Vietnam War as little more than an American puppet, or a hopelessly out-of-touch traditional "mandarin" unable to comprehend much less respond to the rapidly changing world around him. [21] But in recent years, he has been the subject of considerable attention by a new generation of Vietnamese-language proficient historians who have revealed him to be an idealistic albeit conservative nation-builder who resisted domestic and American pressure to compromise his vision. Nonetheless, although Ngô Đình Diệm was a more complex and sophisticated leader than most accounts have traditionally acknowledged, the divergent attitudes toward his death portrayed above are indicative of his controversial status, both among scholars and in South Vietnam following the 1963 coup that deposed him.

Consistently misrepresented as an ephemeral figure in subsequent South Vietnamese politics, Ngô Đình Diệm is mistakenly assumed to have been all but forgotten following the celebrations greeting news of his death. One particularly influential example, Frances Fitzgerald's National Book Award, Pulitzer, and Bancroft prizewinning *Fire in the Lake,* asserts that "the people of Saigon rarely spoke of the Diem regime" after his death, a passage still cited

[20] For a first-hand account, see Mai Elliot, *The Sacred Willow: Four Generations of Life in a Vietnamese Family* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999): 299.
[21] See, for instance, Denis Warner, *The Last Confucian* (New York: Macmillan, 1963); Frances Fitzgerald, *Fire in the Lake: the Vietnamese and Americans in Vietnam* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1972); David Halberstam, *The Making of a Quagmire: America and Vietnam During the Kennedy Era.* Revised ed. (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1988): 16-19; Seth Jacobs, *America's Miracle Man: Ngo Dinh Diem, Religion, Race and U.S. Intervention in Southeast Asia, 1950-1957* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004): 26; James M. Carter, *Inventing Vietnam: the United States and State Building, 1954-1968*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008): 10-14.

without scrutiny in recent scholarship.[22] In fact, Ngô Đình Diệm's memory loomed large over South Vietnam's Second Republic, which faced many of the same lingering challenges that he had confronted and in some cases created. Heated discussions of his legacy featured prominently in Sài Gòn's raucous but at times relatively free press, especially after revelations from the Pentagon Papers in 1971 appeared to many commentators to cast him in a more sympathetic light. Ngô Đình Diệm's image and governing style also proved remarkably persistent, with the Nhân Xã Party striving to revitalize the Cần Lao brand, and with President Nguyễn Văn Thiệu – who had led the final attack on Ngô Đình Diệm's palace – courting former Cần Lao Party architects and emulating key structures of his predecessor's regime. Additionally, impressions of Ngô Đình Diệm's personality and policies informed popular responses to the governments that succeeded him, whose leaders were measured if not defined by past relations with the former President or the junta that ousted and murdered him. Mounting public criticism of Nguyễn Văn Thiệu was conditioned by bitter experiences of similar political models forged under Ngô Đình Diệm, whose name along with the Cần Lao moniker became something of a pejorative levied within South Vietnam's political class to express despair over Nguyễn Văn Thiệu's perceived authoritarianism. Likewise, figures such as Dương Văn Minh, the public face of the 1963 coup, would both enjoy considerable esteem and suffer vicious but localized resentment for their role in toppling Ngô Đình Diệm. During the Nguyễn Văn Thiệu era, Dương Văn Minh in particular emerged as the emblematic leader of a diverse coalition of anti-military civilians who coalesced against Nguyễn Văn Thiệu and the Nhân Xã Party much as they had in opposition to Ngô Đình Diệm and the Cần Lao.

[22] Fitzgerald, *Fire in the Lake*, 136, cited in Seth Jacobs, *Cold War Mandarin: Ngo Dinh Diem and the Origins of America's War in Vietnam, 1950-1963* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006): 189.

Throughout the Second Republic then, Ngô Đình Diệm remained an evocative symbol with strong emotional connotations, both positive and, more often, negative, according to the outlook of the beholder. Long after his passing, he served as a symbolic wedge reinforcing South Vietnam's all but intractable social fragmentation. Although recent scholarship has devoted significant effort to reconsidering the Ngô Đình Diệm era, contemporaneous South Vietnamese interpretations of his reign have received much less attention. In fact, Ngô Đình Diệm's ambivalent status within South Vietnam had a considerable impact on future political developments, providing a basic vocabulary and comparative framework for assessing subsequent state affairs, shaping perceptions of and responses to his successors, and exacerbating the underlying social tensions that his contested memory came to symbolize. As this chapter hopes to demonstrate, Ngô Đình Diệm's lasting posthumous impact on South Vietnam's Second Republic is a critical dimension to consider both in evaluating his legacy and in understanding the deep-seeded social, political and religious tensions which the Second Republic ultimately failed to overcome.

Political Dynamics of the Late Ngô Đình Diệm Era

In hindsight, many South Vietnamese observers would come to date the turning point for the Ngô Đình Diệm regime to the abortive effort by a group of dissident paratroopers to depose him on November 11, 1960. The rebels, nominally led by Nguyễn Chánh Thi, attacked the Presidential Palace, citing Diệm's increasing authoritarianism, nepotism, and the growing control of his Catholic-dominated Cần Lao Party over the army. But though the coup plotters won the support of prominent politicians like Phan Quang Đán and Nguyễn Tường Tam (Nhất Linh), and the sympathy of repressed opposition groups like the Vietnamese Nationalist Party [*Việt Nam Quốc Dân Đảng*] (VNQDD) and Đại Việt [*Đại Việt Quốc Dân Đảng*] parties, and Hòa Hảo and

Cao Đài religious movements, they neglected to blockade the roads into the capital or disable the Palace's phone lines.[23] Stalling for time, Diệm appeared to defer to the demands of the rebels, who offered to grant him a figurehead position heading a coalition government rather than simply opening fire with their artillery. Meanwhile, intelligence director Trần Kim Tuyến frantically summoned reinforcements, who arrived decisively the following morning under the command of Trần Thiện Khiêm.[24] Khiêm, an ambitious colonel once described as having "no fixed principles above self-interest," had hedged his bets by "seeming to approve the coup in principle," and "hold[ing] the 21st [Division] out of action until the coup's chances appeared to be fading, after which he joined moves to put down the rebels."[25] The loyalists prevailed in the ensuing gun battle, in which hundreds of anti-Diệm civilian demonstrators who charged the Palace were fired on by pro-government ARVN marines, killing four. Afterwards, Thi and his followers fled to Cambodia, and opposition leaders like Đán and Phan Khắc Sửu were imprisoned and tortured.[26]

Two years later, a rather more quixotic affair saw two rogue pilots, Nguyễn Văn Cử and Phạm Phú Quốc, bomb and strafe the Palace, citing familiar grievances such as the persecution

[23] Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam, a History* (New York: Viking, 1991), 252.
[24] Ronald Bruce Frankum, Jr., *Vietnam's Year of the Rat: Elbridge Durbrow, Ngô Đình Diệm, and the Turn in U.S. Relations, 1959-1961* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2014), 99. While several sources including A.J. Langguth, *Our Vietnam: the War 1954-1975* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000) and Mark Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken: the Vietnam War, 1954-1965* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006) claim, without citations, that Nguyễn Văn Thiêu led the ARVN 7th Division in support of Diệm, his U.S. Embassy file notes that he "was not influential enough either to have been the target of recruiting efforts by the plotters, or to have been involved in suppression of the coup." The 7th Division in 1960 was commanded by Huỳnh Văn Cao, while Thiệu, according to an official state biography, served as Superintendent of the National Military Academy in Dalat until 1961. Airgram A-131 from Saigon to Department of State, 13 August 1971, POL 15-1 VIET S 1970-1973 Central Foreign Policy File (CFPF), Record Group (RG) 59, National Archives and Records Administration (NARA); *Nguyễn Văn Thiệu, President of the Republic of Vietnam* (Saigon: Việt Nam Cộng Hòa, 1969), 6.
[25] Airgram A-131 from Saigon to Department of State, 13 August 1971, POL 15-1 VIET S 1970-1973 CFPF, RG 59, NARA.
[26] Đán and Sửu were kept in solitary confinement in cages at the Saigon Zoo and subject to water and electroshock torture before their transfer to the French-built prison on Poulo Condore (Con Sơn) Island. See Ray Fontaine, *The Dawn of Freedom: a Biographical Sketch of Doctor Phan Quang Dan* (Brownsville, TX: Pan American Business Services, 1992), 46-56; Trần Văn Đôn, *Our Endless War: Inside Vietnam* (San Rafael, CA: Presidio Press, 1978), 66-67.

of opposition parties. Diệm escaped unscathed, but the assault left three dead, thirty injured, and the building destroyed, forcing him and his staff to decamp to nearby Gia Long Palace, which he prudently had outfitted with a security bunker and a network of secret tunnels.[27] But though the coup attempts failed to dislodge the increasingly beleaguered regime, they came to represent the moment when both the army and civilian political groups began losing faith in the government, and when regional and religious equilibrium deteriorated.[28] In the years that followed, the government found itself beset with a litany of crises, including a burgeoning rural communist insurrection, religious violence, discontent in the military, growing popular unrest, and a widening schism with its ever more intrusive American ally. As we shall see, these familiar recurring developments would once again emerge after lingering grievances from the Ngô Đình Diệm era intensified during the Second Republic under Nguyễn Văn Thiệu.

Of particular concern for many government critics was the encroachment into public affairs by the Cần Lao Party, the clandestine political network inspired by Ngô Đình Diệm's guiding philosophy of Personalism [*Nhân vị*], but increasingly perceived as an instrument for advancing Ngô family private interests. "By 1960," future Ambassador-to-the-United States Bùi Diễm recalled, "the government had become, in essence, a family-run oligarchy. Hanging over everything like a pall were the police-state measures that kept the jails filled and silenced dissident voices," he added, "and all this was complemented by an expanding guerrilla war, organized by the remnants of the Vietminh infrastructure but drawing on the support of badly disaffected people at every level of society."[29] In the civil service, the promotion of unqualified Cần Lao Party members was especially resented, resulting in a wave of resignations.

[27] Karnow, 280-281. Gia Long Palace was the former residence of the French Governor of Cochinchine.
[28] See, for instance, Chính Đạo, "Dẫn nhập" [Introduction], *Nhìn lại biến cố 11/11/1960* [Looking Back at the November 11, 1960 Incident]. (Houston, TX: Van Hoa, 1997): 7-11.
[29] Bùi Diễm, *In the Jaws of History* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1987), 94.

"Professionalism was disappearing," lamented Nguyễn Hữu Hanh, who stepped down as Director of the Central and Commercial Credit Banks in 1960 to protest their use as "a financial and political support for Nhu's Can Lao Party and Diem's family members' business undertakings."[30] The Cần Lao Party had an equally demoralizing effect on the military, where, at least according to Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) [*Quân lực Việt Nam Cộng hòa*] Ninth Division commander Lâm Quang Thi, "it was a well-known fact that to advance under Diem's regime, one had to be a member of the Can Lao Party, a Catholic, and a resident of Central Vietnam."[31] Like Bùi Diệm, Lâm Quang Thi also saw 1960 as the year when "it was apparent to everyone that President Diem's one man rule, the excess and corruption of his entourage, and the growing power of a centralized oligarchy had caused dissatisfaction and resentment in the population and in the army."[32]

In January 1960, communist guerillas overran a regiment of the ARVN Twenty First Division in Tây Ninh Province, the first in a series of assaults sweeping the countryside that year. Cited in the Caravelle Manifesto [*Tuyên ngôn Caravelle*], an open letter signed in April by eighteen prominent civilian leaders urging administrative reforms, the episode in Tây Ninh also touched a nerve within ARVN. The defeat was attributed by many officers to the hasty promotion of inexperienced commander Trần Thanh Chiêu, dismissed as nothing more than "a trusty Cần Lao Catholic subordinate" by ARVN Military Security Service Director Đỗ Mậu.[33]

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[30] Hanh H. Nguyen, *Brushing the World Famous: the Story of My Life* (Lincoln, NE: iUniverse, 2005), 51.
[31] Though the perception that the Ngô Đình Diệm regime had favoured Northern and Central Catholics was widespread in the Second Republic, it was something of an exaggeration; as Edward Miller notes, only three of the twenty men who served as generals under Ngô Đình Diệm were Catholic. Edward Miller, "Religious Revival and the Politics of Nation Building: Reinterpreting the 1963 'Buddhist crisis' in South Vietnam," *Modern Asian Studies, FirstView* Articles. Published online (08 August 2014). Available on CJO 2014 doi:10.1017/S0026749X12000935: 14.
[32] Lâm Quang Thi, *The Twenty Five Year Century: a South Vietnamese General Remembers the Indochina War to the Fall of Saigon* (Denton, TX: University of North Texas Press, 2001), 93, 97.
[33] [*một tay chân Cần Lao Công giáo thân tín*] Đỗ Mậu, *Việt Nam máu lửa quê hương tôi* [Vietnam: My Country of Blood and Fire] (California: Hoa Kỳ, 1986), 399.

Himself a Cần Lao member, albeit an ever more disillusioned one, Đỗ Mậu would regard the paratroopers' subsequent November "mutiny" as "the final link in a long chain of political and military crises which the [Ngô Đình] Diệm regime faced due to its widespread clumsiness and lack of preparation."[34] And though he had abstained from the 1960 rebellion, by 1963, Đỗ Mậu was working with Trần Kim Tuyến, yet another disgruntled former loyalist, and later, with Generals Dương Văn Minh, Trần Văn Đôn and Lê Văn Kim, to eliminate Ngô Đình Diệm. Crucially, 1960 also saw the trio of Dương Văn Minh, Trần Văn Đôn and Lê Văn Kim holding their first clandestine meetings to discuss a mutual "sense of discontent" over the Ngô family's "exclusive exploitation of the nation's resources." Three years later, citing alarm over the government crackdown against Buddhist and student demonstrators, the generals had determined that Ngô Đình Diệm and his brother Ngô Đình Nhu had to go.[35]

Arguably the Ngô Đình Diệm regime's defining crisis, the 1963 Buddhist uprising has come to be regarded as almost preordained, the inevitable result of what Western observers saw as the inherent unsuitability of a Catholic leader in majority-Buddhist Vietnam. For David Halberstam, for instance, it was a truism that "by Vietnamese standards, there was little legitimacy; Diem …an American creation… was a Catholic in a Buddhist country, a Central Vietnamese in the South, …[and] a mandarin, a member of the feudal aristocracy in a country swept by revolution."[36] But before the Vesak Day shootings on May 8, 1963 - when, in an act one eyewitness described as "inhuman repression," nine Buddhist demonstrators were killed by government security forces in Huế - relations between Catholics, the state, and South Vietnam's Buddhist population were more stable than subsequent events would suggest, if still somewhat

[34] [*cuộc binh biến*]; [*mắt xích cuối cùng của một chuỗi dài những khủng hoảng chính trị và quân sự mà chế độ Diệm phải đối phó với rất nhiều vụng về và thiếu chuẩn bị*] Ibid., 436.
[35] [*ý thức bất mãn*]; [*độc quyền khai thác tài nguyên quốc gia*] Trần Văn Đôn, *Việt Nam nhân chứng: hồi ký chánh trị* [Vietnam Witness: Political Memoir] (Los Alamitos, CA: Xuan Thu Publishing, 1989), 150-151.
[36] David Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest*. (New York: The Modern Library, 2001 ed.): 168.

less than cordial.[37] Although Catholics were historically subject to state persecution, during the reign of Emperor Minh Mạng (1820-1841) for instance, there had also been periods of official tolerance following the ascension of Gia Long (Nguyễn Phúc Ánh) in 1802. And despite their portrayal in post-war national histories as something of a colonialist fifth column, Catholic communities in Vietnam had a far more complex relationship with radical politics than stereotypical depictions of Ngô Đình Diệm partisans suggest.[38] Catholicism in South Vietnam was also characterized by considerable diversity. While northern-dominated political groups like the Cần Lao and later, Nhân Xã, the Greater Solidarity Force (G.S.F.) [*Lực lượng Đại Đoàn kết*], or the Catholic Citizens' Bloc [*Khối Công dân Công giáo*] had a reputation for uncompromising anti-communism and staunch support for the war, southern Catholic intellectuals, in publications such as Hope [*Hy Vọng*], Face-to-Face [*Đối Diện*] or Faithful Living [*Sống Đạo*], led calls to negotiate with the National Liberation Front, and were among the government's most prominent and persistent critics.[39] Indeed, during the 1967 Presidential election, many Catholics rebuffed Nguyễn Văn Thiệu, a Catholic convert, opting instead to support Trần Văn Hương, the southern Buddhist still reviled by many Buddhists for suppressing their protests during his brief 1964 stint as Prime Minister.[40]

[37] [*sự đàn áp vô nhân*] Vũ Văn Mẫu, *Sáu tháng pháp nạn, 1963*. [Six Months of Buddhist Crisis] (Garden Grove, CA: Giao Diem, 2003): 10; Miller, "Religious Revival," 13-19.
[38] Charles Keith, *Catholic Vietnam: a Church from Empire to Nation*. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2012): 1-10.
[39] Alarmed by their prospects in a communist state, seeking new opportunities, and inspired by the possibility of spiritual renewal in the south, tightly-organized northern Catholic communities arrived en masse in South Vietnam after the 1954 Geneva Conference. Still, significant numbers of northern Catholics choose to remain, including influential leaders such as Hà Nội Archbishop Trịnh Như Khuê. And those who left were by no means unanimous in supporting the war, as the case of peace activist Nguyễn Mạnh Hà among many others suggest. Peter Hansen. "Bắc Đi Cư: Catholic Refugees and Their Role in the Southern Republic, 1954-1959," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, 4, no. 3 (Fall, 2009); Trần Thị Liên, "The Challenge of Peace Within South Vietnam's Catholic Community: a History of Peace Activism," *Peace and Change*, 38, no. 4 (October, 2013).
[40] Võ Long Triều, *Hồi ký tập hai: Đệ Nhị Việt Nam Cộng Hòa*. [Memoirs Volume Two: Second Republic of Vietnam] (Lexington, KY: Người Việt, 2010):32-36, Lý Quí Chung, *Hồi ký không tên* [Untitled Memoirs] (Thành phố Hồ Chí Minh: Nhà Xuất bản Trẻ, 2004): 112.

South Vietnamese Buddhists were likewise divided over the question of relations with the state, with Thích Trí Quang advocating forceful resistance against Ngô Đình Diệm even as Thích Tâm Châu pursued a settlement with the embattled President, at least until the regime's resort to violence ultimately forced his hand. This rift crystalized during the Second Republic after Nguyễn Văn Thiệu's sponsorship of Thích Tâm Châu's small, northern-dominated Quốc Tự faction alienated the much larger Central Vietnamese Ấn Quang bloc, an act Dương Văn Minh compared to French "divide and rule" tactics and to Ngô Đình Diệm's "unacceptable" intervention in Buddhist affairs.[41] Both emerging factions, however, were motivated by a collective sense of anxiety that Buddhism was fading from Vietnamese life. Indeed, the Buddhist "Struggle Movement" [*Phong trào Phật giáo Tranh đấu*] which confronted Ngô Đình Diệm in the early 1960s drew on a longstanding Buddhist Revival [*Chấn hưng Phật giáo*] tradition from the 1920s, which called for a return to Buddhist principles and insisted that Buddhism belonged at the core of Vietnamese national identity.[42]

This drew the Struggle Movement into conflict with local Catholics led by Ngô Đình Thục, the Archbishop of Huế and Ngô Đình Diệm's older brother, a confrontation with lasting consequences that would linger throughout the Second Republic. Hoping to turn Central Vietnam into a Catholic heartland, Ngô Đình Thục strove to assert Catholic power in the region, and his extravagant efforts to this end and heavy-handed dealings with local Buddhists contributed greatly to the May 8 tragedy. Following the massacre, the crisis that would precipitate the President's downfall escalated rapidly after Ngô Đình Diệm lost patience with younger brother Ngô Đình Cẩn's conciliatory approach, instead coming to favour Ngo Đình Nhu

[41] "Conversation with General Duong Van 'Big' Minh," Airgram A-1140 from Saigon to Department of State, 26 December 1968, POL 27-14 VIET 1967-1969, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.
[42] Miller, "Religious Revival," 7-13; Shawn McHale, *Print and Power: Confucianism, Communism, and Buddhism in the Making of Modern Vietnam* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2004): 145-147.

and Ngô Đình Thục's repressive tactics.[43] The ensuing crackdown resulted in the iconic, globally-resonant self-immolation of Thích Quảng Đức on June 11, the much-condemned August 21 police pagoda raids, and the rapid deterioration of relations between Buddhists, Catholics, and the state. Thus, in spurning the efforts of Ngô Đình Cẩn and Thích Tâm Châu to contain these simmering religious hostilities, Ngô Đình Diệm elevated latent but previously manageable Catholic-Buddhist tensions to a new level of intensity, provoking an outburst of violence and resentment that was by no means preordained even in the immediate aftermath of Vesak Day. Perhaps the most enduring legacy of his tenure, this eruption of mostly dormant religious animosities created immense long-term political damage which subsequent governments struggled to restore.

In Washington, State Department officials were alarmed by the government's inability to dampen the protests, and embarrassed by the growing public relations nightmare caused by the prolonged standoff.[44] A turning point came on August 24, when a State Department cable to the Sài Gòn Embassy, issued while senior officials were away for the weekend, instructed Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge to demand Ngô Đình Nhu's removal, and further cautioned that if "Diem remains obdurate and refuses, then we must face the possibility that Diem himself cannot be preserved."[45] But while President Kennedy later clarified to Lodge that he "reserve[d] a contingent right to change course and reverse previous instructions," and in spite of his grave doubts about what a coup might bring, he would never waver from the policy of deposing Ngô Đình Diệm should he continue to resist American-backed reforms.[46] On November 1, having

[43] Miller, "Religious Revival," 16-17, 35-40, 49-52.
[44] Undersecretary of State George Ball, for instance, described Ngô Đình Diệm as "an enormous humiliation" following the Xá Lợi raids. Howard Jones, *Death of a Generation: How the Assassinations of Diem and JFK Prolonged the Vietnam War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 315
[45] State to Saigon, 24 August 1963, US Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States 1961-1963 – Vietnam*, 3: 628-629 (hereafter cited as *FRUS*).
[46] JFK to Lodge, 29 August 1963, *FRUS*, 1961-1963, 4: 35-36.

secured both American blessing and the loyalty of General Tôn Thất Đính, whose troops were strategically positioned surrounding the capital, the generals –Dương Văn Minh, Trần Văn Đôn and Lê Văn Kim - made their move, their forces capturing Ngô Đình Diệm and his brother Ngô Đình Nhu the following morning and executing them in the back of an armed personnel carrier. South Vietnam's First Republic had come to an abrupt and unseemly end

Putting the Pieces Back Together

In the White House, President Kennedy was aghast at what had befallen Diệm, who had made a lasting impression on the young Senator from Massachusetts when first introduced during a 1953 luncheon in Washington. "He literally blanched," Defence Secretary Robert McNamara remembers, "I had never seen him so moved."[47] Still, in spite of a cabinet profoundly divided on whether the risks of a coup were worth bearing, the Kennedy administration was aware from the outset of the generals' plans, and never once moved to annul them. A C.I.A. cable for Lodge on October 9 effectively encapsulates American policy: "While we do not wish to stimulate [a] coup, we also do not wish to leave [the] impression that U.S. would thwart a change of government or deny economic and military assistance to a new regime if it appeared capable of increasing [the] effectiveness of [the] military effort, ensuring popular support to win [the] war and improving working relations with [the] U.S."[48] And when Đôn conveyed uncertainty about U.S. intentions during an October 23 conversation with Conein, prompting the Embassy to seek clarification from Washington, National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy affirmed that "we should not be in position of thwarting [the] coup" provided it appeared likely to succeed, a message the Ambassador delivered to Đôn in person five days

[47] Robert McNamara, *In Retrospect: the Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996): 84.
[48] C.I.A. to Lodge, 9 October 1963, *FRUS*, 1961-1963, 4: 393.

later.[49] As this exchange suggests, though the Vietnamese generals' grievances against Diệm were all their own, they scarcely dared proceed without repeated explicit assurances of American support. Three weeks later, Kennedy himself was gunned down in Dallas, leaving his successors – and generations of historians – perplexed about his intentions in Vietnam had he lived.[50] Meanwhile, the new administration found itself drawn in deeper to conflict, as the tide of communist momentum continued to swell.

Although the generals and their American collaborators were convinced that eliminating Ngô Đình Diệm was necessary to stem the state's spiralling disintegration, ousting the President only accelerated the crisis it was intended to resolve, ushering in a period of utter political chaos. From the outset, the generals' self-proclaimed "Revolution" [*Cuộc Cách mạng*] lacked a legal basis, and was characterized by what one account describes as the "narrow minds and visions and the boundless ambitions" of its leaders.[51] Worse still for the White House was Dương Văn Minh's apparent willingness to negotiate a settlement with the communists, who wasted little time exploiting the tumult in Sài Gòn by expanding and consolidating their control in the countryside, building on the wave of momentum they had enjoyed from the start of the 1963 campaign. When resolutely anti-communist officer Nguyễn Khánh launched the "Readjustment" [*Cuộc Chỉnh lý*], a second coup sweeping aside the initial triumvirate of generals some three months later, he enjoyed immediate American support.[52] "Perhaps," reflected former Foreign

[49] Ahern, *House of Ngo*, 198-199; Bundy to Lodge, 25 October 1963, *FRUS*, 1961-1963, 4: 437; Đôn, *Việt Nam Nhân Chứng*, 208-210

[50] See, for instance, James G, Blight, Janet M Lang, and David A Welch. *Vietnam If Kennedy Had Lived: Virtual JFK*. (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009).

[51] Vinh The Lam, *Republic of Vietnam 1963-1967: Years of Political Chaos*. (Hamilton, Ontario: Hoai Viet, 2010): 6.

[52] Fredrik Logevall, *Choosing War: the Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of the War in Vietnam*. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999): 81-82, 99-102.

Minister Vũ Văn Mẫu on the Dương Văn Minh trio, "intoxication with victory and fame had lulled these generals toward defeat."[53]

Enjoying none of the initial prestige associated with those who had overthrown Ngô Đình Diệm, and with an even more limited popular support base, the aloof and uncharismatic Nguyễn Khánh likewise struggled to restore political order. Initially he sought to partner with the Đại Việt Party, a regionally-fragmented clandestine political network which eschewed grassroots organization for efforts to command power by infiltrating top bureaucratic positions. Hoping that association with Đại Việt politicians – known for their hostility to Ngô Đình Diệm - would defuse allegations that he intended to restore Catholic Ngô family partisans to power, Nguyễn Khánh soon fell out with the Party after uncovering a February Đại Việt plot to seize control of his government from within.[54] Instead, he turned for support to a loose coalition of Buddhists and students, whose demands included the May 9, 1964 execution of Ngô Đình Cẩn as proof of Nguyễn Khanh's anti-Ngô family credentials, an event which further aggravated South Vietnam's chronic Catholic-Buddhist rupture. Within the military, Khánh also came to rely on the "Young Turks" [*Nhóm các tướng trẻ*], a group of junior officers including Nguyễn Cao Kỳ, Nguyễn Chánh Thi, and Nguyễn Văn Thiệu, who rose to prominence by suppressing a failed anti-Nguyễn Khánh military coup led by Catholic generals in September 1964. Their influence further enhanced after putting down a second abortive Catholic officers' coup in February 1965, the Young Turks capitalized on the chaos by removing Nguyễn Khánh from power altogether, replacing him with the gregarious but impulsive Nguyễn Cao Kỳ. All the while, the prolonged Catholic-Buddhist rivalry saw successive politicians dismissed from the increasingly titular

[53] [*Phải chăng men chiến thắng và danh lợi đã ru ngủ các tướng này để đưa họ đến thất bại?*] Vũ Văn Mẫu, *Sáu Thánh Pháp Nạn 1963*, 13.
[54] Quang Minh, *Cách mạng Việt Nam thời cận kim: Đại Việt Quốc Dân Đảng*. [Modern Vietnamese Revolution: the Dai Viet Party] (Westminster, CA: Văn Nghệ, 2000): 246-252; Keith Taylor, *A History of the Vietnamese*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013): 591-592.

position of Prime Minister. In February 1965, Trần Văn Hương was replaced by Phan Huy Quát after a wave of Buddhist protests, only for Phan Huy Quát, a northern Buddhist Đại Việt, to be pressured into resignation by hostile Catholic groups, prompting Nguyễn Cao Kỳ to declare an end to the shaky façade of civilian rule altogether in June 1965.[55]

Meanwhile, in Vietnam's Central Highlands, yet another toxic legacy of the Ngô Đình Diệm era became apparent with the sudden emergence of FULRO, the United Front for the Liberation of Oppressed Races [*Front de Lutte des Races Opprimés*], an alliance of ethnic minorities opposed to Ngô Đình Diệm's longstanding policy of flooding the once-autonomous highlands with ethnic Vietnamese settlers. In September 1964, US-trained FULRO special forces swept across Buôn Mệ Thuột Province denouncing the government's "systematic genocidal policy" and demanding the withdrawal of "Vietnamese imperialists" from the region. A second December 1965 uprising after talks with the government broke down was forcibly supressed, resulting in the execution of four FULRO rebels and the exile of its more militant leaders to Cambodia, dampening, for the time being, the movement's momentum. Nonetheless, tensions between Sài Gòn and the highlands minorities represented yet another lingering fissure from the Ngô Đình Diệm era which plagued the Second Republic, not least in the form of decisive pockets of ethnic minority support for communist forces in the highlands as they prepared their final 1975 offensive.[56]

The FULRO uprising came as White House officials, alarmed by communist progress in the countryside, prepared a vast expansion of US involvement in the war to follow the 1964

[55] Vinh The Lam, *Republic of Vietnam*, 60-65, 110-115; Taylor, 594-597; Jack Langguth, "Saigon Generals Striving to Find a Stable Regime," *The New York Times*, June 13, 1965.
[56] Gerald Hickey, *Fire in the Forest: Ethnohistory of the Vietnamese Central Highlands, 1954-1976*. (New Haven, CN: Yale University Press, 1982): 99-108, 138-142; Oscar Salemink, *The Ethnography of Vietnam's Central Highlanders: a Historical Contextualization, 1850-1900* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2003): 204. Lê Văn Kim, one of the architects of the 1963 coup, was removed from his position as highlands Land Development Program Director by Ngô Đình Diệm for his opposition to the practice of compensating ethnic minorities with alcohol in exchange for their forcibly expropriated lands. Hickey, 42-45.

presidential election, in spite of grave if private doubts that escalation could succeed in bringing Hà Nội to heel.[57] Beginning in the spring of 1965, American troop deployments combined with massive economic investment fundamentally transformed South Vietnamese society, a process which, as we shall see, had the effect of recasting the First Republic from a time of political turmoil to one of relative tranquility in the memories of many South Vietnamese. But while the introduction of American ground troops managed to check communist military advances, it did little to stabilize South Vietnam's protracted political chaos.

In March 1966, a second far more substantial Buddhist uprising in Central Vietnam attracted the sympathy of thousands of students, teachers, civil servants, and even the mayor of Đà Nẵng, resulting in the effective loss of Huế and Đà Nẵng to central government control. What began as a power struggle between Nguyễn Cao Kỳ and Nguyễn Chánh Thi, the popular Buddhist commander of I Corps in Central Vietnam, soon acquired familiar political, regional and religious implications after Buddhist protestors led by Thích Trí Quang seized on local resentment over Nguyễn Chánh Thi's March 11th dismissal to demand an end to military rule, perceived Buddhist alienation, and the rapidly intensifying American-backed war. Particularly effective in motivating the crowd was a series of Huế radio broadcasts in which Thích Trí Quang warned that Nguyễn Chánh Thi's removal was intended to clear the way for the return of Ngô Đình Diệm loyalists to power. Local ARVN discipline began to break down as a growing number of Buddhist soldiers disobeyed orders and joined the insurrection. And in Huế, angry crowds burned the American Consulate and United States Information Service (U.S.I.S.) library to the ground, defying even Thích Trí Quang's efforts to harness the violence. Meanwhile, back in Sài Gòn, counter-demonstrations by Catholic groups, alarmed at their prospects under a Buddhist-dominated state and concerned that the disorder would embolden the communists,

[57] Logevall, *Choosing War*, xvii-xxii.

raised the pressure on Nguyễn Cao Kỳ to respond.[58] As it had with FULRO, the military opted for a show of force, with Nguyễn Cao Kỳ ordering a May 15 assault on Đà Nẵng that ultimately won back control of the central coast after weeks of bitter street-to-street guerilla combat, resulting in the deaths of an estimated one hundred protesters and the arrest of Thích Trí Quang and thousands of his supporters.[59]

Suppressed but far from placated, the 1966 demonstrations represented yet another manifestation of South Vietnam's by now virtually intractable polarization, accompanied by a prevailing sense of cynicism and widespread suspicion of the state. Though clearly exacerbated by the anarchy that followed the 1963 coup, the ensuing explosion of street violence had been ultimately set in motion by the Ngô family, whose nepotism and authoritarianism had activated South Vietnam's underlying social fault-lines, resulting in rapid political deterioration already well underway before the ineffectual coup that deposed them. And while the protestors in Central Vietnam had proved no match for American-backed ARVN firepower, the 1966 Uprising revealed once again that the government's political bankruptcy could not be resolved by brute force alone.

In a tacit acknowledgment that the military had disappointed the hopeful crowds of November 1963, Nguyễn Cao Kỳ conceded that the assault on Đà Nẵng would be followed by elections and a new constitution, offering the promise of reform in exchange for domestic order, and hoping to shore up dwindling support from domestic and American constituents, to whom the regime was increasingly beholden. But behind closed doors in Washington and Sài Gòn, the elections were regarded as a no more than a means of improving the government's public image

[58] Robert J. Topmiller, *The Lotus Unleashed: the Buddhist Peace Movement in South Vietnam, 1964-1966*. (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 2002): 44-69, 130-131; Thích Nhất Hạnh, *Vietnam: Lotus in a Sea of Fire* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967): 79-81.
[59] Topmiller, *The Lotus Unleashed*, 125: Trần Ngọc Nhuận, *Đời quân ngũ: ký ức của niên dư Trần Ngọc Nhuận*. [Military Life: Memories of Tran Ngoc Nhuan] (Los Alamitos, CA: Xuân Thư, 1992): 406-407.

and legalizing the status quo, strictly intended to consolidate rather than contest the military's power. As Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge put it, "the military is the only group which has experience or competence in managing the country… [they] will need to run the country for some time, and if we give any real power to civilians, the military will overthrow the government."[60] Civilian politics were likewise under few illusions that the military was sincere in professing to stage an honest contest. For many observers, the prospect of elections raised at best measured hopes of a more responsive state, while reviving persistent anxieties about what if anything could succeed the disgraced Ngô Đình Diệm regime. As the southern Catholic journalist and politician Võ Long Triều recalls: "In the last months and days of the First Republic, many members of the Catholic intellectual Pax Romana Movement, myself included, were constantly discussing the South's leadership 'crisis,' in which the mass of public opinion was discontent that the brothers of President Ngô Đình Diệm, Ngô Đình Nhu and Ngô Đình Cẩn were enforcing an undemocratic system of nepotism that had lost the hearts of the people… However, there were also many brothers among us who supported President Ngô Đình Diệm, who often posed the question: apart from President Ngô Đình Diệm, who is more worthy of the task of administrating the country?' It was a question that nobody could answer decisively."[61]

To be sure, Ngô Đình Diệm was far from solely responsible for the breakdown of the First Republic's precarious social order. After all, the overlapping confrontations that exploded during the last days of his rule and its aftermath reflected deep underlying social schisms, and

[60] Telegram 17704, Embassy Saigon to Department of State, 9 February 1967, POL 14 VIET S, 1967-1969, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.

[61] [*Trong những ngày tháng cuối của Đệ Nhứt Cộng Hòa, nhiều thành viên trong Phong Trào Trí Thức Công Giáo Pax Romana, trong đó có tôi, bàn tán luôn miệng về vấn đề 'khủng hoảng' lãnh đạo của miền Nam khi dư luận quần chúng bất bình thấy hai người em của Tổng thống Ngô Đình Diệm là Ngô Đình Nhu và Ngô Đình Cẩn đang thực thi một chế độ gia đình trị, phi dân chủ, mất lòng dân khá nhiều…Tuy nhiên cũng có nhiều anh em trong chúng tôi ủng hộ Tổng thống Ngô Đình Diệm nên thường đặt ngược câu hỏi: Ngoài Tổng thống Ngô Đình Diệm còn ai là người xứng đáng hơn ông trong việc điều hành đất nước? Câu hỏi không ai có thể trả lời dứt khoát*] Võ Long Triều, *Hồi ký tập hai*, 30-31.

were orchestrated by a host of headstrong personalities. Still, as we have seen, Ngô Đình Diệm's overbearing response to the Buddhist crisis in particular upset South Vietnam's delicate political balance, reviving and intensifying latent grievances that would always prove a challenge to redress. Accordingly, as his successors struggled to restore order, the fallen President, however accurately, came to personify the enduring animosities that his actions had helped to unleash.

The Neo-Cần Lao and the Ngô Đình Diệm Revival

It was in this atmosphere of persistent sectional antagonism that the Vietnamese Revolutionary Social Humanist Party [*Viêt Nam Nhân Xã Cách Mạng Đảng*], widely referred to as the "Nhân Xã" Party, made its debut on the South Vietnamese political scene in the Spring of 1968. Though not the only political organization led by former Cần Lao partisans – indeed, Nguyễn Gia Hiên regarded rumored initiatives by Foreign Minister Trần Văn Lắm and former Ngô Đình Diệm-era intelligence director Trần Kim Tuyến as much greater threats than Nhân Xã to the primacy of the G.S.F - Nhân Xã stood out as the sole party that explicitly promoted Ngô Đình Diệm in its imagery and rhetoric.[62] Unveiled at Sài Gòn's Thống Nhất Theatre on April 28, 1968, Nhân Xã was the product of years of planning by a number of former Ngô Đình Diệm-era notables, including former Cabinet Minister Trương Công Cừu (the concurrent Chair of the N.S.D.F. Policy and Planning Committee); Nguyễn Văn Thuận, the Bishop of Nha Trang and the

[62] Telegram 25824, Embassy Saigon to Department of State, 27 April 1968, POL 12 VIET S, 1967-1969, CFPF, RG 59, NARA. The short-lived Progressive Republican Movement [*Phong trào Cộng hòa Tiến bộ*], a third Cần Lao revival effort led by former head of Ngô Đình Nhu's Republican Youth Cao Xuân Vỹ and funded by Nguyễn Cao Thăng, copied the Cần Lao manifesto and internal by-laws, and considered merging with Nhân Xã, though they opted due to political sensitivities to obscure their Cần Lao origins in public. Intelligence Information Cable 44356, "Proposed Reestablishment of Can Lao Political Party," Central Intelligence Agency, 15 February 1969, File: Government of South Vietnam – Nhan Xa Party 1969-1973, NSAF, NSC VIG, GFL.

late President's nephew; and wealthy pharmacists La Thành Nghệ and Ngô Khắc Tỉnh, the latter, Nguyễn Văn Thiệu's uncle, serving as Minister of Information and later, Education.[63]

Although an unnamed Party spokesman denied in the English-language *Saigon Post* newspaper that Nhân Xã represented "a rebirth of the former Can Lao Party," his remarks, the US Embassy noted, "will not be widely believed, as it is already fairly common knowledge in Saigon that Nhan Xa... reflects at least one faction of Can Lao leadership."[64] After all, Nhân Xã Party material bore the familiar red and green of the Cần Lao, and its organizational structure, dominated by former Cần Lao members, borrowed extensively from the Cần Lao model of clandestine cells and secret internal hierarchies, employing its forerunner's tactic of covertly infiltrating existing institutions to achieve de facto control. Thus, "appear[ing] to take considerable satisfaction in renewed activity by former (or present) Can Lao," Presidential Special Assistant (and former Cần Lao member) Nguyễn Cao Thăng boasted to an Embassy source that "every political organization worth its salt today… has Can Lao elements. This is simply because only the Can Lao have genuine grassroots organization."[65] Even the Nhân Xã Party name, which can be translated roughly as "Social Humanist Party," was an obvious allusion to Personalism [*Nhân Vị*], the Ngô Đình Diệm regime's guiding ideology.

After staging a series of more modest regional ceremonies to complement the Sài Gòn inauguration, and establishing two newspapers, "Times" [*Thời Báo*], and later, "Independence" [*Độc Lập*] to promote its efforts to revive the Diệmist brand, Nhân Xã set its sights on the 1970 Senate Election as a springboard for reclaiming official government sponsorship. Meanwhile, no

[63] "'V.N. Nhân Xã Cách Mạng Đảng' ra mắt" [Nhan Xa Party Launches] *Xây Dựng* [Construction], April 30, 1968; Andre N. Van Chau, *The Miracle of Hope: Francis Xavier Nguyen Van Thuan, Political Prisoner, Prophet of Peace*. (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 2003).
[64] "New Party Makes Bow," *Saigon Post*, April 30, 1968; Telegram 26035, Embassy Saigon to Department of State, 27 April 1968, POL 12 VIET S, 1967-1969, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.
[65] Telegram 26090, Embassy Saigon to Department of State, 1 March 1968, POL 12-1 VIET S, 1967-1969, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.

doubt interpreting his 1969 Ministry of Information appointment as a signal that the Party enjoyed his nephew's good graces, Ngô Khắc Tỉnh hastened to exploit his Presidential connections by filling the Ministry's ranks with Nhân Xã partisans. This prompted Ministry Director of Training Phạm Xuân Nùng to complain to a C.I.A. contact about the Party's "plans to use the [Ministry's] training courses to train Vietnam Information Service employees so that when they return to their provincial offices, they can act mainly as Nhan Xa cadres and form the Party's provincial organizations."[66] Despite significant state resources at its disposal however, the 1970 Election was a disappointment for the Party, which found itself crowded out by a wide array of more-established northern Catholic competitors and unable even to unite behind a single Nhân Xã ticket. Ngô Khắc Tỉnh's list finished a distant fourth (amid rumors of covert government support), falling well short of securing one of three available places, while Trương Công Cừu's slate managed only an eighth place showing.[67] But if a frustrating 1970 campaign revealed the limitations of overtly emulating the largely disgraced Cần Lao brand, Nhân Xã's publicization of Ngô Đình Diệm's image was an altogether different matter. And in fostering the poignant November 2 anniversary of Ngô Đình Diệm's death (one day after the much more equivocal occasion of National Day celebrated his deposal) Nhân Xã's bid to redeem the late President came to fleeting fruition in 1971, testament to the complexity of his legacy even as the anti-Catholic anxieties that emerged during his final years in office were again on the rise.

Before 1971, the graves of Ngô Đình Diệm and his brother Ngô Đình Nhu had been unmarked and scarcely attended save for a small crowd of Ngô family friends and relatives who

[66] Intelligence Information Cable 02736, "Nhan Xa Party Members Taking Over Positions of Importance in the Ministry of Information," Central Intelligence Agency, 11 December 1969, File: Government of South Vietnam – Nhan Xa Party 1969-1973, NSAF, NSC VIG, GFL.
[67] "Sau cuộc bầu cử: những bài học não lòng" [Heart-Rending Lessons After the Election], *Chính Luận* [Political Discussion], September 4, 1970; Assessment of Upper House Election Results," Airgram A-255 from Saigon to Department of State, 19 September 1970, POL 14 VIET S 1970-1973, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.

assembled annually on November 2. The 1971 commemorations - which, as we have seen, drew large, emotional crowds to the cemetery and the Sài Gòn Cathedral - appeared to emerge almost spontaneously, surprising many observers with their intensity, and prompting much local and overseas media speculation about what a Diệmist revival might portend.[68] In fact, the 1971 memorial represented the culmination of a long behind-the-scenes campaign by a Nhân Xã organizing committee led by Party Chairman Trương Công Cừu. November 2, 1969 witnessed the first Nhân Xã-sponsored Ngô Đình Diệm memorial, and by 1971, the Party was attracting high profile guests like First Lady Nguyễn Thị Mai Anh (a Mekong Delta Catholic), and official support from the Catholic Church and a host of Catholic political organizations. In October 1971, Nhân Xã established a multi-partisan Ngô Đình Diệm Memorial Committee, recruiting powerful allies including the Greater Solidarity Force and the Vietnamese Confederation of Labor [*Confédération Vietnamienne du Travail*], headed by staunch Ngô Đình Diệm supporter and former Cần Lao executive Trần Quốc Bửu. The Committee was chaired by Father Nguyễn Văn Thịnh, who revealed to a C.I.A. source that he "hope[d] the Diem Memorial Committee will form the basis for a permanent political organization which would play a paramount role in Vietnamese life in the near future… [and] perhaps lead to the formation of a permanent alliance whose guiding spirit would be the life of President Diem."[69] Undoubtedly a factor in the wildly successful 1971 Sài Gòn commemorations, these influential partnerships also enabled Nhân Xã to expand its efforts beyond the capital by staging concurrent memorials in Đà Nẵng, Nha Trang and Xuân Lộc.[70] But while the 1971 event was rather less spontaneous that it appeared, the size

[68] "Requiem Mass Held for Late Pres. Diem," *Vietnam Press* (Morning ed.), no. 5767, November 3, 1971; Robert Shaplen, "Nine Years After a Fateful Assassination – the Cult of Diem." *New York Times*, May 14, 1972.
[69] Intelligence Information Cable 457614, "Formation and Visionary Plans of the Diem Memorial Committee," Central Intelligence Agency, 29 October 1971, File: Government of South Vietnam – Nhan Xa Party 1969-1973, NSAF, NSC VIG, GFL.
[70] "The Ancien Regime Revisited: Dim Prospects of a Diemist Revival," Airgram A-76 from Saigon to Department of State, 10 May 1972, POL 6 VIET S 1970-1973, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.

and diversity of the crowds, which caused severe traffic congestion in Sài Gòn, clearly exceeded the limited reach of Trương Công Cừu and his colleagues alone.[71] How then to account for this intense but ultimately short-lived Diệm revival?

We must first recall that in 1971, South Vietnam was a very different country than the one forcibly bequeathed by Ngô Đình Diệm in 1963. The escalation of the war and the deployment of millions of American soldiers beginning in 1965 had ushered a profound transformation of South Vietnamese society. Hoping to foster popular support for the war effort, the United States subsidized a large-scale commodity import program, introducing a wealth of consumer goods but also disrupting the country's economic balance, resulting in rampant corruption, profiteering, and chronic inflation which devastated South Vietnam's substantial fixed-income class. Meanwhile, as the war in the countryside intensified – roughly four times more bomb tonnage was dropped on South Vietnam than North Vietnam between 1965 and 1975 - millions of displaced rural South Vietnamese fled for shelter in the cities, overwhelming local authorities and generating severe traffic, sanitation and poverty concerns.[72] By 1970, the US Embassy reckoned, Sài Gòn had become the most densely-populated settlement in the world, plagued by "generalized urban discontent caused by rising prices, overcrowding and inadequate public services, and frictions on the political scene," which rendered the city "more volatile than it has been for some time."[73] A piece by Nguyễn Đình Thiều in "Life" [*Sống*] magazine (arrayed beside a photo-spread showing pornography stalls on Lê Lợi Street) rechristened the city "Sàighềnh," describing its jarring transition from charming capital to squalid metropolis, replete with swindlers, gangs, addicts and thieves. 1968, the author proclaimed, was the "year of 'cave'

[71] Shaplen, "Cult of Diem."
[72] Holly Hill, James R. Curran, and Gareth Robinson, "Electronic Records of the Air War over Southeast Asia: a Database Analysis," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, 8, no. 4, (Fall 2013): 104.
[73] Telegram 5193, Embassy Saigon to Department of State, 1 April 1970, POL 2 VIET S, 1970-1973, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.

[slang for 'prostitute'] inflation" [*Sài Gòn 1968 là năm lạm phát cave*].[74] Meanwhile, nationalist South Vietnamese of all stripes recoiled in horror at the infusion of American culture, luxury goods and largesse. As the prominent southern Catholic intellectual Lý Chánh Trung affectingly observed: "The dominance of the American Empire, under the guise of national sovereignty, has a profoundly and comprehensively different character than the dominance of classical empires. It can deface even the very soul of a people… The day that the people of the South accept America's permanent 'defense of our freedom' is the day when our freedom can only be a prefabricated freedom produced in America and imported here under the brands 'Coca' or "Pepsi' Cola. We will have a Pepsi system, Pepsi government, Pepsi education, Pepsi culture. We will have the freedom to starve and the freedom to fatten our bellies drinking Pepsi-Cola-a-go-go! Whoever dreams of a future like that for our country can go ahead and dream. But as for me, because I don't know how to drink Pepsi-cola, I think that: the Americans can donate any kind of object, but they cannot donate freedom. Freedom cannot be an aid commodity. There is no Pepsi-Cola freedom!"[75]

Lý Chánh Trung's remarks reveal another feature of the Second Republic – spiralling war-weariness and anti-Americanism among even staunchly anti-communist South Vietnamese. "Our peasants," wrote Information Minister Tôn Thất Thiện, "will remember their cratered rice fields and defoliated forests, devastated by an alien air force that seems at war with the very land

[74] Nguyễn Đình Thiều, "Sàighềnh: đượi! trọc phú! nhoai nhoai! liền bà con gái đẹp và thợ nhót!" [Saighenh! Nouveau-Riche! Teenage Brats! Beautiful Women and Pickpockets!], *Sống* [Life], Tuần báo 3, Số Đặc biệt về Sài Gòn [Weekly Edition 3, Special Volume on Saigon], 29 June 1968.

[75] [*Sự thống trị của đế quốc Mỹ, dưới cái vỏ chủ quyền quốc gia, có tính cách toàn diện và sâu xa sự thống trị của các đế quốc cổ điển. Nó có thể hủy hoại cả linh hồn của dân tộc... Ngày nào mà nhân dân miền Nam chấp nhận cho Mỹ vĩnh viễn 'bảo vệ tự do' của mình, thì tự do đó chỉ có thể là thứ tự do tiền chế được sản xuất tại Mỹ và nhập cảng vào đây dưới nhãn hiệu Coca hay Pepsi cola. Chúng ta sẽ tự do nhịn đói và tự do phình bụng uống Pepsi-Cola a gogo! Ai có mơ ước môt tương lai như vậy cho đất nước nầy thì cứ mơ ước. Riêng phần tôi, vì không biết uống Pepsi-cola, nên tôi nghĩ rằng: người Mỹ có thể viện trợ bất cứ cái gì, nhưng họ không thể viện trợ tự do. Tự do không thể là món hàng viện trợ. Không có tự do Pepsi-cola.]* Lý Chánh Trung, "Tự do Pepsi-Cola" [Pepsi Cola Freedom], *Tin Sáng* [Morning News], 19 October 1970.

of Vietnam. Villagers will remember their hamlets uprooted from the earth, all to no purpose. And our city dwellers and intellectuals will mark how, while saving Vietnam, a half-million American soldiers are suffocating it with their fantastic wealth, their gadgetry, their promiscuous virility, and their destructive innocence."[76] This widespread consternation over American political, economic and cultural dominance was aggravated by US soldiers' unfortunate habit of shooting or running down Vietnamese pedestrians while driving past them in their jeeps. In the Central Vietnamese town of Quy Nhơn, the December 7, 1970 killing of a high-school student by errant gunfire from a passing US truck sparked two days of student riots, forcing local officials to declare a curfew and deploy the provincial militia to restore order. Scarcely a month later, a second Quy Nhơn teenager was fatally shot on January 16 by a stray bullet from American troops tasked with sinking contaminated food cans with rifle fire. January 21 saw a local schoolteacher gunned down by a soldier from the 173rd Airborne Brigade, and on February 9, two more Quy Nhơn children were shot to death by passing American troops. Three days later, a second round of rioting kicked off in the city, with a series of mobs each several thousand strong surrounding the Provincial Headquarters; placing the deceased children's coffins in the province chief's office; torching the entire fleet at a US transport depot; overturning and igniting two American buses to immobilize the Quy Nhơn airfield, and blockading the highway and threatening to burn any approaching US vehicles.[77]

[76] Cited in Bernard Weinraub, "US Impact on Vietnam Called 'Devastating,' *New York Times*, June 10, 1968.
[77] "Quy Nhơn bạo động ngày Thứ 2; 3000 sinh viên xuống đường" [Second Day of Quy Nhon Revolt; 3000 Students Take to the Street] *Điện tín* [Telegram], February 15, 1971; Telegram 0907, Embassy Saigon to Department of State, 20 January 1971, File: Anti-Americanism (2), NSAF, NSC VIG, GFL; Telegram 2176, Embassy Saigon to Department of State, 13 February 1971, File: Anti-Americanism (2), NSAF, NSC VIG, GFL; Intelligence Information Cable 265531, "Vietnam Situation Report as of 1600 Hours Local Time, February 13, 1971," Central Intelligence Agency, 13 February 1971, File: Anti-Americanism (2), NSAF, NSC VIG, GFL; Henry Kissinger, "Memorandum for the President: Allied Misconduct and Anti-Americanism in South Vietnam," 27 January 1971, National Security Files (NSF), Vietnam Country Files (VCF), Box 152, Folder 1, Richard Nixon Presidential Library (RNL).

While Quy Nhơn was perhaps especially misfortunate, its experience was hardly unique. In Huế, after two Vietnamese youths were shot dead by US troops in September 1971, hundreds of students marched through the city carrying banners demanding immediate US withdrawal, Nguyễn Văn Thiệu's resignation, and condemning "Bloodthirsty Americans." One US jeep was burned, an American reporter was pelted with stones, and Vietnamese police were confronted by students hurling Molotov Cocktails. That same week saw US vehicles in Quảng Ngãi surrounded by South Vietnamese veterans demanding cash payments and prisoner releases, while an American security guard who broke a disabled veteran's wooden arm during a confrontation in Đà Nẵng found himself swarmed by dozens of fellow veterans, who pulled the pins from their grenades until their comrade was promised compensation.[78] Reports of anti-American outbursts in the provinces often prompted sympathy demonstrations in the capital, where American property, vehicles and installations were by now routinely set upon by bands of Molotov-wielding students. "Anti-American demonstrations always are the easiest to organize," the traditionally-conservative Law School Board's Vũ Ngọc Lộc confided to an Embassy source, because "no student will defend the Americans in front of his colleagues."[79] In response, the US military convened a Command Safety Council in December 1970, distributing memos "re-emphasizing the prohibition on indiscriminate firing of weapons," and affirming that "vehicle driving safety is one of the areas of concentration… in improving US-Vietnamese relations."[80] But by autumn 1971 the situation had grown so severe that a fact-finding mission led by Deputy

[78] Telegram 15016, Embassy Saigon to Department of State, 18 September1971, File: Anti-Americanism (2), NSAF, NSC VIG, GFL.
[79] Telegram 15621, Embassy Saigon to Department of State, 29 September 1971, POL 13-2 VIET S, 1970-1973, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.
[80] Telegram 1238, Embassy Saigon to Department of State, 26 January 1971, NSF, VCF, Box 152, Folder 2, RNL.

National Security Advisor Alexander Haig advised: "another reason for accelerating US redeployments is the threat posed by anti-American incidents."[81]

Against this backdrop of immense civilian casualties, inflation, corruption, squalor, and the proliferation of social vices such as drug abuse and prostitution, the Ngô Đình Diệm era, when considered in hindsight, acquired a powerful nostalgic appeal, reminding people of a simpler time when "the war was small and distant, the Piastre [VNĐ] more valuable, and Americans scarce," as one observer put it.[82] In a similar manner, the late president himself could be recast from aloof, nepotistic autocrat to paragon of a vanishing moral order. Famously unmarried, and by all accounts a devout, even austere figure seen to have personally abstained from the temptations that discredited his more permissive entourage, Ngô Đình Diệm re-emerged during the Second Republic exuding a welcome aura of rectitude and propriety during a period of turbulence and decay.

His budding revival was bolstered by two publications in the spring of 1971. The first, "How to Kill a President" [*Làm thế nào để giết một tổng thống*] by Cao Thế Dung and Lương Khải Minh (widely known to be a pseudonym for former intelligence director Trần Kim Tuyến), revisited the events leading up to the fateful 1963 coup, drawing heavily on subsequent disclosures in the Western press. Noting the recent tension between a "movement actively advocating the restoration of the Ngô Đình Diệm regime" and those who saw "restoration of former President [Ngô Đình] Diệm's honour as… a public negation of the meaning of November 1, 1963… a day of revolution and pride," the pair ultimately sided with the latter: "restoring the Ngô Đình Diệm regime in the time and space of 1970 and in the current reality of the South,"

[81] B/Gen A.M. Haig, Jr., "Memorandum for Henry A. Kissinger, Southeast Asia Trip September 20-26, 1971," NSF, VCF, Box 157, Folder 1, RNL.
[82] "The Ancien Regime Revisited: Dim Prospects of a Diemist Revival," Airgram A-76 from Saigon to Department of State, 10 May 1972, POL 6 VIET S 1970-1973, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.

they concluded, "was nothing but a fantasy in the clouds."[83] Trần Kim Tuyến had, after all, contributed to one of several plots against Ngô Đình Diệm in 1963. Still, their extensive two-volume work complicated prevailing dim impressions of the late President, emphasizing his determination to resist by now-resented American efforts to commandeer the management of the war, and unveiling the critical role played by Ambassador Lodge and the C.I.A. in enabling and orchestrating his demise. After 1963, they noted, "the American Embassy was extremely satisfied in achieving an aspiration… which Mr. [Ngô Đình] Diệm was determined to refuse… the establishment in every Strategic Region of a structure commanded by an American director."[84]

The ripples from "How to Kill a President," however, were dwarfed by the sensational revelations in the Pentagon Papers, the leaked top secret US Defense Department history of American involvement in Vietnam which appeared in the *New York Times* beginning in June 1971. Rivalled only by coverage of the upcoming South Vietnamese Presidential election in Sài Gòn's raucous and still precariously independent press, the Pentagon Papers disclosures touched a nerve with war-weary and increasingly anti-American readers. Much of the coverage focused on exposing American duplicity or perceived Vietnamese slights at the hands of the United States. On June 26, "Telegram" [*Điện Tín*], a southern-oriented pro-Dương Văn Minh daily, printed what would have been a detailed comparison of American officials' public statements with their leaked private remarks – were it not for extensive government censorship rendering much of the column blank. The irony, undoubtedly, was not lost on "Telegram" readers. Even

[83] [*phong trào vận động tích cực để phục hồi chế độ Ngô Đình Diệm*]; [*phục hồi danh dự cho cố Tổng thống Diệm tức là đã công khai phủ nhận ý nghĩa của ngày 1-11-1963… một ngày cách mạng với niềm tự hào*]; [*tái lập chế độ Ngô Đình Diệm ở vào không gian và thời gian 1970 và trong thực tại miền Nam như hiện nay thì đó chỉ là chuyện giả tưởng trên mây*] Lương Khải Minh [Trần Kim Tuyến] and Cao Vị Hoàng [Cao Thế Dung], *Làm thế nào để giết một tổng thống* [How to Kill a President]. (Sài Gòn: Đinh Minh Ngọc, 1970): 14, 697-698.
[84] [*Tòa đại sứ Mỹ rất thỏa mãn vì đạt được ước vọng mà… ông Diệm quyết tâm từ chối… thiết lập tại mỗi Vùng chiến thuật một cơ cấu do một giám đốc người Mỹ chỉ huy*] Ibid., 14-21, 692.

more evocative was a large (uncensored) cartoon showing a buxom American woman provocatively stripping off an American flag to expose concealed secret documents, an image scorning both American perfidy and licentiousness.[85] "Face-to-Face" [*Đối Diện*], meanwhile, a leading Catholic opposition journal, published a detailed inquest of alleged American "neo-colonialism" [*Thực dân mới*] between 1941 and 1954, drawing on the Pentagon Papers for inspiration.[86] And "Telegram" was one of several newspapers to highlight a sensitive December 1964 encounter in which then-US Ambassador Maxwell Taylor delivered a humiliating rebuke to South Vietnam's ruling generals.[87]

One of the more enduring effects of the Pentagon Papers leaks, however, was to further hasten Ngô Đình Diệm's unlikely rehabilitation. Long derided as "American Diệm" [*Mỹ Diệm*] in communist propaganda to underscore his apparent subservience to foreign patrons, the embattled former president re-emerged in the Pentagon Papers as a forceful and determined leader who consistently frustrated what were now widely regarded as sinister American efforts to occupy and exploit Vietnam. "Peace" [*Hòa Bình*] newspaper, for instance, reworked Trần Kim Tuyến's well-known title with a piece headlined: "How the Americans Killed a Vietnamese President" [*Người Mỹ làm thế nào để giết một T.T. Việt Nam*].[88] And "Construction" [*Xây Dựng*] devoted the entire front page of its 1971 National Day edition to coverage of "martyred

[85] *Điện Tín* [Telegram], June 26, 1971.
[86] The Editor's introduction argued that "The movement of American journalists competing to release the 'secret documents' has created a considerable fervour in public opinion, which will obviously have a positive effect towards peace and independence." [*Phong trào báo chí Hoa Kỳ thi đua tung ra các "tài liệu mật" đã làm xôn xao dư luận không ít và hẳn là sẽ có tác dụng tốt cho việc đi tới Hòa bình Độc lập*] Võ Việt Quốc, "Diễn tiến Cuộc Xây Dựng và Phát triển Chính sách Thực dân mới của Mỹ tại V.N. (từ 1941 đến 1954)" [Appearance and Development of an American Colonialist Policy in Vietnam (From 1941 to 1954)] *Đối Diện* [Face to Face], no. 26, (August 1971): 1-39.
[87] *Điện Tín* [Telegram], June 26, 1971, Telegram 103001, Embassy Saigon to Department of State, 29 June 1971, POL 2-5 VIET S, 1970-1973, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.
[88] "Hồ sơ tối mật của Ngũ Giác Đài: Người Mỹ làm thế nào để giết một T.T. Việt Nam" [Secret Pentagon Files: How the Americans Killed a Vietnamese President], *Hòa Bình* [Peace], July 28, 1971.

hero Ngô Đình Diệm, who resisted the schemes of foreign states."[89] Abrupt though it may have been, Ngô Đình Diệm's transition to martyred defender of Vietnamese sovereignty and dignity, an interpretation eagerly promoted by beneficiaries like Nhân Xã, resonated with a South Vietnamese public that had long since tired of the many hardships accompanying the massive American escalation of the war.

In this context, rhetorical invocations of Ngô Đình Diệm's name served a versatile range of objectives, from projecting veiled scorn against the United States to condemning, by extension, the late president's successors, who succumbed to foreign enticement where their forerunner had defiantly abstained. Certainly, in the US Embassy, the Ngô Đình Diệm revival was understood to reflect what one report described as "a sublimated anti-American nationalism which allows Vietnamese to praise Ngo Dinh Diem's resistance to foreigners without openly denouncing the United States."[90] Nhân Xã, which had long relied on anti-American rhetoric – a 1969 Đà Nẵng pamphlet, for instance, warned that "sacrifices of [the] Vietnamese become meaningless if they only benefit American foreign policy" – was quick to deploy their redeemed champion in this manner.[91] Trương Công Cừu's 1971 eulogy lauded Ngô Đình Diệm as a "master and benefactor… who oppose[d] the impetuous landing of foreign troops in our country," an implied but pointed critique of both Ngô Đình Diệm's successors and their American sponsors.[92] And Võ Văn Hải, a Lower House Nhân Xã candidate in Sài Gòn who demanded a full state funeral for Ngô Đình Diệm eight years after his death, referred in his platform to "striking proofs… in several recent disclosures in the foreign and domestic press…

[89] "Vị Anh hùng tuẫn quốc Ngô Đình Diệm, vì chống lại âm mưu ngoại bang" [Martyred Hero Ngô Đình Diệm, Who Resisted the Schemes of Foreign States], *Xây Dựng* [Construction], November 1, 1971.
[90] "The Ancien Regime Revisited: Dim Prospects of a Diemist Revival," Airgram A-76 from Saigon to Department of State, 10 May 1972, POL 6 VIET S 1970-1973, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.
[91] Telegram 22420, Embassy Saigon to Department of State, 08 November1969, File: Anti-Americanism (2), NSAF, NSC VIG, GFL.
[92] "Embassy Translation of Truong Cong Cuu Speech," Airgram A-76 from Saigon to Department of State, 10 May 1972, POL 6 VIET S 1970-1973, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.

that Ngo Dinh Diem lost his life because he had energetically opposed the building of US military bases in this country. He was one of those clear-minded persons who could fathom the cunning and cruel schemes of the foreigners."[93]

Even South Vietnam's largely-southern liberal opposition, while much less effusive in evaluating Ngô Đình Diệm's legacy, embraced this line of reasoning to emphasize the Nguyễn Văn Thiệu regime's unfavorable performance in comparison. A June 23, 1971 editorial by "Morning News" [*Tin Sáng*], the flagship southern opposition newspaper managed by eminent figures like Ngô Công Đức, Lý Chánh Trung, Hồ Ngọc Nhuận, and Lý Quí Chung, cited the Pentagon Papers as proof of American deceit, while provocatively dismissing Nguyễn Văn Thiệu as a puppet, noting that "in 4000 years of history we have never seen anyone who can be considered a patriot if he sides with foreign states."[94] And Trần Ngọc Châu, the Lower House deputy whose politically-motivated 1970 arrest at Nguyễn Văn Thiệu's behest was ruled unconstitutional by the Supreme Court, issued a similar warning, urging him to mend fences with civilian politicians to resist "being lured by Ambassador Bunker into a most dangerous scheme… [whereby] the United States will possess every means of influencing and subverting the government… The all-too-shining examples of Mossadegh in Iran, Syngman Rhee in Korea and Ngô Đình Diệm and Dương Văn Minh in Viet-Nam are proofs of my observation."[95]

Published during the height of the 1971 Presidential campaign, the Pentagon Papers also triggered the recurrence of Ngô Đình Diệm's fate as a campaign issue, beginning with a July 10 interview with Dương Văn Minh by the *Washington Post*. One of three candidates along with

[93] "Embassy Translation of the Platform of Võ Văn Hải (Saigon's First Constituency, August 29, 1971)," Airgram A-76 from Saigon to Department of State, 10 May 1972, POL 6 VIET S 1970-1973, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.
[94] [*Trong suốt bốn nghìn năm lịch sử VN, chúng ta chưa bao giờ thấy có một nhân vật nào đi với ngoại bang mà lại được lịch sử ghi tụng 'đó là con người yêu nước' cả*] "Vụ Nứu Ước Thời Báo với tiền đồn Thế giới Tự do" [The Case of the New York Times, Outpost of World Freedom], *Tin Sáng* [Morning News], June 23, 1971.
[95] Trần Ngọc Châu, "The Statement of Trần Ngọc Châu," printed in *The Antioch Review,* vol. 30, 3-4, (Autumn 1970 – Winter 1971): 299-310.

Nguyễn Cao Kỳ and the incumbent Nguyễn Văn Thiệu, Dương Văn Minh sought to counter mounting evidence that the President's re-election was already pre-arranged by harnessing American public opinion to pressure the State Department into insuring a fair election (a strategy which Nguyễn Văn Thiệu denounced as "blackmail").[96] Domestically, on the other hand, the former general hoped to minimize Catholic voter alienation while still rallying his southern Buddhist base, whose loyalty derived primarily from his status as the face of the Ngô Đình Diệm coup. When, for instance, *Washington Post* correspondent Peter Jay asked his maid, "to all appearances a completely apolitical Vietnamese lady," who she supported, she immediately replied: "General Minh. He was the one who threw out Diem and Nhu."[97] With these constituencies in mind, Dương Văn Minh informed Jay (in an interview his campaign staff subsequently translated and distributed locally) that contrary to the Pentagon Papers, he had never contacted the C.I.A. while planning the coup, and that responsibility for Ngô Đình Diệm's death fell on Nguyễn Văn Thiệu who, tasked as a Catholic officer with ensuring the President's personal safety, had inexplicably arrived late at the Palace, allowing the Ngô brothers to escape toward their apparently unscripted demise.[98] Courting the formidably well-organized northern Catholic vote even more aggressively, Nguyễn Cao Kỳ echoed Dương Văn Minh's position that Nguyễn Văn Thiệu's dithering was to blame for Ngô Đình Diệm's death in "Viewpoint" [*Lập Trường*], his mouthpiece newspaper, while also condemning anti-northern discrimination.[99]

But it was the incumbent who arguably got the best of the politically-charged Ngô Đình Diệm exchanges. Responding to the sensational treatment that the allegations against him were

[96] Telegram 11152, Embassy Saigon to Department of State, 17 July 1971, POL 14 VIET S, 1970-1973, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.
[97] Peter A. Jay, "Minh Runs as Peace Candidate but is Keeping his Plans Vague," *Washington Post*, July 11, 1971.
[98] Peter A. Jay, "CIA Lied on Coup, Minh Says," *Washington Post*, July 11, 1971.
[99] Telegram 11472, Embassy Saigon to Department of State, 20 July 1971, POL 2-5 VIET S, 1970-1973, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.

accorded in the press, Nguyễn Văn Thiệu struck back against his opponents during an emotional July 19 press conference. Dương Văn Minh's "cowardly" accusations, he countered, amounted to a dereliction of responsibility, a feeble attempt to pass the buck by blaming subordinates for his own failures in command. It was precisely this sort of inept leadership, Nguyễn Văn Thiệu continued, that had seen his rival's hapless tenure cut short after just three months in power.[100] Clearly vulnerable to such charges of indecision and weakness, which had dogged him ever since his abrupt January 1964 dismissal, Dương Văn Minh attempted an about-face, denying that he had blamed Nguyễn Văn Thiệu for Ngô Đình Diệm's death, and insisting that he had "always accepted full responsibility" for the former President's fate.[101] Instead, he accused foreign journalists of distorting his remarks, although, given that he had declined to correct the *Washington Post* interview in the eleven days since its publication, and had even arranged for its translation and circulation, his demurral was hardly convincing. One week later, in an interview with northern Catholic "Peace" [*Hòa Bình*] newspaper, Dương Văn Minh attempted further damage control, denying that he had referred to US Ambassador Bunker as a "vote rigging instigator," and insisting that he and his fellow generals had never intended for Ngô Đình Diệm to die.[102]

With the outcome of the election – an opportunity to "smash the treasonous, demagogic rhetoric of a minority of defeatists," as one Nguyễn Văn Thiệu campaign planning document put it – once again arranged long before the polls opened, the electoral stakes of the ongoing Ngô

[100] Ibid.
[101] Telegram 11600, Embassy Saigon to Department of State, 22 July 1971, POL 14 VIET S, 1970-1973, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.
[102] [*đầu tầu bầu cử gian lận*] "'Big' Minh đã lật con tẩy của ông cho mọi người biết" ['Big' Minh Pulls Out the Eraser for Everyone to See], *Hòa Bình* [Peace], July 28, 1971.

Đình Diệm exchanges were limited.[103] Still, the manner in which the former President's contested legacy flared up during consecutive heated campaigns reveals the extent to which his memory remained a live and extremely sensitive issue in South Vietnam long after his death. As politicians like Dương Văn Minh discovered, striking a public balance acceptable to both sides of the debate was an awkward if not perilous proposition. Much of the difficulty stemmed from the fact that interpretations of Ngô Đình Diệm were in essence statements about the nature of South Vietnam itself, so deeply embedded were the social fault-lines that he had done so much to aggravate and enshrine. Taking a definitive stand on the late president often meant signalling an implied position on any number of delicate, vexing questions at the heart of competing visions of how the proper balance of regional, religious and military or civilian power should lie. Given the acrimonious and intensely polarized political environment that he left behind, Ngô Đình Diệm's legacy could scarcely have been anything but fraught and ambivalent.

Nothing reflected this ambiguity and discord more than South Vietnam's National Day, an event marked by official if somewhat uneasy public celebration, and followed the next day by more sincere but much more subdued pockets of private mourning. For architects of the ambitiously self-proclaimed "Revolution," the anniversary of Ngô Đình Diệm's downfall was an opportunity to self-servingly define the coup as a spontaneous manifestation of "pure national spirit," as Trần Văn Đôn put it during his 1969 National Day remarks.[104] Nguyễn Văn Thiệu's growing list of opponents, which swelled considerably after his dubiously-engineered 1971 re-election, also appealed to the officially-sanctioned symbolism of the occasion, hoping to employ its dwindling ceremonial currency to cast legitimacy over their grievances. On November 1,

[103] [*đập tan luận điệu mỵ dân và phản quốc của một thiểu số chủ bại*] "Tài Liệu Hướng Dẫn về Việc Lập Kiến Nghị Đệ Trình Tổng Thống," undated, folder 5652, Phủ Tổng thống Đệ Nhị Cộng Hòa (PTTDNCH), Trung tâm Lưu trữ Quốc gia 2 (TTLTQG2).
[104] [*tinh thần quốc gia thuần túy*] "Bài phát biểu của Nghị sĩ Trần Vặn," *Điện Tín* [Telegram], November 1-2, 1969

1971, for instance, Ấn Quang's Thích Thiên Hoa declared that he "regretted that under the present government, National Day could not be celebrated correctly in accord with the spirit of the 1963 Revolution."[105] Sài Gòn's journalists, on the other hand, had no such stake in edifying the proceedings, and their coverage reveals a much more equivocal affair, replete with abiding bitterness beneath the celebratory public facade. "If we didn't have a National Day on November 1 each year," lamented a "Political Discussion" [*Chính Luận*] editorial, "perhaps our divided situation would have faded somewhat. But every year we have a National Day, and when National Day comes, there are people who see each other as enemies." "Are we Vietnamese happy or unhappy on the November 1 Revolution Day?" another headline pondered.[106]

In an atmosphere already imbued with nostalgia for the First Republic's comparative tranquility, the Pentagon Papers heightened the complexity of Ngô Đình Diệm's legacy. And though his image came to function as an icon of South Vietnam's contentious fragmentation, both criticism and praise for the late President routinely emerged from unexpected sources, confounding attempts to divide interpretations of his leadership into simple regional or religious binaries. As we have seen, many of Ngô Đình Diệm's Catholic constituents bemoaned the lasting detrimental effects of what was widely regarded, however accurately, as the Diệmist convention of preference for northern and central Catholics, inspiring significant if closeted Catholic political support for sympathetic southern Buddhists like Trần Văn Hương.

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[105] Telegram 17427, Embassy Saigon to Department of State, 2 November 1971, POL 2-5 VIET S, 1970-1973, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.

[106] [*Nếu mỗi năm… không có một ngày Quốc Khánh vào dịp 1-11, có lẽ tình trạng chia rẻ đã phai nhạt phần nào. Nhưng mỗi năm lại có một ngày Quốc Khánh, và cứ đến dịp Quốc Khánh, lại có những người nhìn nhau như kẻ thù*] "7 năm cách mạng" [Seven Years of Revolution], *Chính Luận* [Political Discussion], November 1, 1970; Telegram 17618, Embassy Saigon to Department of State, 3 November 1970, POL 2 VIET S, 1970-1973, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.

Additionally, some of South Vietnam's most fervent anti-communists, men like Revolutionary Đại Việt Senator Phạm Nam Sách, came to regard Ngô Đình Diệm as responsible for creating the conditions that enabled the communists' rapid rural ascent.[107] The Communist Party had succeeded in "ruthlessly committing crimes never before seen in the history of humanity," Phạm Nam Sách declared during a 1968 Senate address, because "since 1960, in light of the political and social evils committed by the former Ngô Đình Diệm government, the communists have had a reason to use the pretext of national democratic revolution, taking advantage of discontented people, victims of the [Ngô Đình] Diệm regime, the poor, and even frivolous patriots."[108]

Former adversaries, on the other hand, would come to volunteer his qualities. Hà Thúc Ký, one of Ngô Đình Diệm's more prominent political prisoners, remembered the former President as "a man with nationalist spirit, who loved his country... though the people around him didn't want to share power with anybody. …Although the Ngô Đình Diệm regime made serious mistakes, especially in the final years, in nine years in power, [it] managed to hold the nation's sovereignty."[109] Conceding the President's aura of personal propriety, no doubt to further absolve themselves from the enduring controversy that their actions provoked, the architects of the 1963 coup also tended toward complementary interpretations of Ngô Đình Diệm's character (in contrast to his far more sinister family) in their mostly self-exculpatory memoirs. Tôn Thất Đính's "Twenty Years a Soldier" [*20 Năm Binh Nghiệp*], one of the more

[107] Phạm Nam Sách created a minor furor when he was quoted in the May 25, 1968 edition of "Construction" [*Xây Dựng*] accusing a group of southern "intellectuels déracinés" led by Trần Văn Tuyến of "colluding with a foreign power to seek a coalition with the N.L.F." See Trần Văn Tuyến, "A Matter of Realism," *Viet-Nam Enquirer*, June 4, 1968.

[108] [*thẳng tay phạm một tội ác chưa từng có trong lịch sử nhân loại*]; [*Từ năm 1960, trước những tệ đoan chính trị, xã hội mà chánh phủ cổ Ngô Đình Diệm phạm phải, Cộng sản đã có lý do đem chiêu bài cách mạng dân tộc dân chủ ra lợi dụng những người bất mãn, những nạn nhân của chế độ, những dân chúng nghèo đói, và cả những người yêu nước nông nổi*] "Bài Thuyết trình của Nghị sĩ Phạm Nam Sách," undated (1968), folder 796, PTTDNCH, TTLTQG2.

[109] [*Ngô Đình Diệm là người có tinh thần quốc gia, có nhiệt tình yêu nước… nhưng những người chung quanh Thủ Tướng không muốn chia sẻ quyền lực với bất kỳ ai… Mặc dù chế độ Ngô Đình Diệm đã mắc phải những lỗi lầm, nhất là vào những năm cuối cùng, nhưng trong 9 năm cầm quyền, chế độ Diệm đã nắm được chủ quyền quốc gia*] Hà Thúc Ký, *Sống còn với dân tộc* [Surviving with the People]. [S.I.]: Phương Nghi Ấn Hành, 2009: 203, 359.

extreme examples of this trend, portrays an impossibly naïve and innocent Ngô Đình Diệm, doomed by a childlike faith in his cunning and duplicitous brothers.[110] Even veterans of the Struggle Movement, arguably the regime's most formidable non-communist challenger, were sometimes willing to sing his praises. Writer Hoàng Nguyên Nhuận allowed that Ngô Đình Diệm had been "a good nationalist who expelled the last bastion of French colonialists," while no less a figure than Struggle activist Mai Thọ Truyền startled a US Embassy officer during a 1967 conversation by "comment[ing] at length on Diem's good qualities."[111]

The intricacies of the debate, however, did little to dampen its passion, with rhetorical salvoes exchanged long after the guns of war fell silent. Đỗ Mậu's epic "Vietnam, My Country of Blood and Fire" [*Việt Nam máu lửa quê hương tôi*], for instance, created a stir upon its release in 1986 by singling out Vietnamese Catholics, who Đỗ Mậu accused of "indirectly or directly pushing the Diệm brothers into a deep pit of sin, resulting in the collapse of their regime and their assassination." "Because the Ngô Đình Diệm government saw the people as a means to serve the regime," he continued, "they came to see the people as an enemy… and were thus compelled to exterminate the Hòa Hảo, attack the Cao Đài, and finally, take up arms against the Buddhists. The ultimate goal of this endeavor was to Catholicize the people of the South, and grant the Catholic religion a monopoly on the throne." Reflecting the manner in which Ngô Đình Diệm came to symbolize much deeper historical animosities, Đỗ Mậu also emphasized the "persistence in space and time of the dogmatic and monopolistic spirit of the Roman Catholic Church, and its exploitation of harmonious accords between the colonialists and 'Overseas

[110] Tôn Thất Đính, *20 năm binh nghiệp: hồi ký của Tôn Thất Đính* [Twenty Years a Soldier: Memoirs of Ton That Dinh], (San Jose, CA: Chánh đạo, 1998): 90-91, 220, 352-361, 371-377, 405, 419-420.
[111] Hoàng Nguyên Nhuận, "Portrait of the Leader," *Vietnamese Engaged Buddhism: the Struggle Movement of 1963-1966*. Phạm Văn Minh et al. (Westminster, CA: Văn Nghệ, 2002): 498. Mai Thọ Truyền's admission was "ironic," Ambassador Bunker noted, "in view of the fact that he was one of the principal leaders of the 1963 'Struggle,' which provided the emotional climate and pretext for the military overthrow of the Diem regime." Telegram 26245, Embassy Saigon to Department of State, 22 May 1967, POL 14 VIET S, 1967-1969, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.

Missionary Societies' over two centuries in the French empire's policy of conquest." Although "nine years of being favored under the [Ngo Đình] Diệm regime was not long enough to deliver a force for subverting the structure of all national activity and commanding every aspect of the economy, politics, culture, and the defense of the nation," he concluded, "the nine years of the [Ngô Đình] Diệm regime represented a final high point."[112]

In response, former Second Republic Senator Nguyễn Văn Chức published a 622 page rebuttal condemning Đỗ Mậu's use of "uneducated mob rhetoric" to denigrate Catholics, insisting that the Ngô Đình Diệm regime was instead "merely the first victim… [of the] Buddhist 'Protect Religion' struggle, the first step of a process that toppled all authority in South Vietnam." And "if the Diệm brothers persecuted or repressed Buddhism – and this is merely hypothetical, and not actually the case – then it was entirely their fault alone, and not at all related to the Roman Catholic Church."[113]

Nonetheless, as South Vietnam approached its fateful denouement, a tentative consensus in the hotly-contested public discourse on Ngô Đình Diệm began to emerge between these extremes, whereby both the President's personal qualities and political failures were acknowledged simultaneously. "Poor Mr. Diệm" [*Tội nghiệp ông Diệm*], a 1970 essay by

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[112] [*…khối Công giáo Việt Nam đã gián tiếp hay trực tiếp đẩy anh em Diệm sa vào hố sâu tội lỗi để cho chế độ họ bị sụp đổ và anh em họ bị sát hại*]; [*Chính quyền Ngô Đình Diệm đã xem dân như một phương tiện để phục vụ chế độ, đã phải xem dân như kẻ thù… vì vậy chính quyền Diệm mới phải tiêu diệt Hòa Hảo, đánh phá Cao Đài, và cuối cùng khai chiến với Phật giáo. Mục đích tối hậu của chủ trương này là để Công giáo hóa nhân dân miền Nam dành cho Thiên Chúa giáo ngôi vị độc tôn*]; [*…sự nối dài, trong không gian lẫn thời gian, cái tinh thần giáo điều và độc tôn của Tòa Thánh La Mã… sự khai thác những thỏa hiệp nhịp nhàng giữa thực dân và "Hội Truyền Giáo Hải Ngoại" trong chính sách xâm thực của đế quốc Pháp từ gần 2 thế kỷ*]; [*9 năm được ưu đãi dưới chế độ Diệm chưa đủ lâu để khai sinh một lực lượng khuynh loát hầu hết sinh hoạt quốc gia ở thượng tầng kiến trúc, khống chế mọi khu vực kinh tế, chính trị, văn hóa, quốc phòng của quê hương… 9 năm của chế độ Diệm chỉ là cao điểm cuối cùng mà thôi*] Đỗ Mậu, *Việt Nam máu lửa quê hương tôi*, 800-801, 932.

[113] [*luận điệu của những phường vô giáo dục*]; [*Chính quyền Ngô Đình Diệm chỉ là nạn nhân đầu tiên …cuộc đấu tranh mệnh danh "bảo vệ đạo pháp" của Phật Giáo năm 1963… chỉ là bước đầu trong tiến trình lật đổ tất cả các chính quyền tại miền Nam Việt Nam*]; [*Nếu anh em ông Diệm kỳ thị hoặc đàn áp phật giáo - đây chỉ là giả thuyết chứ sự thật không có như vậy - thì đó là hành động và tội riêng của họ, không liên quan gì đến Tòa Thánh La Mã*] Nguyễn Văn Chức. *Việt Nam chính sử hay là những sai lầm và gian trá trong "Việt Nam máu lửa quê hương tôi của Đỗ Mậu"* [A Political History of Vietnam, or, the Mistakes and Lies in Do Mau's "Vietnam: My Country of Blood and Fire"], (Falls Church, VA: Alpha, 1992): 12, 410-411.

journalist Lý Chánh Trung, encapsulates this more nuanced interpretation. Reflecting on his first encounter with Ngô Đình Diệm as a student in Belgium, Lý Chánh Trung recalled a man whose death was as tragic as his deposal was imperative. Ngô Đình Diệm, he wrote, was "a gentle and virtuous man who loved his country, though he understood nothing about the problems of society… and it seemed like he could only speak by himself and not have a true dialogue with anybody." Ultimately, he concluded, the President had been a tragic figure, whose "basic error was that he believed in his own 'People's Saviour, Wise Leader' legend… which the Americans and a number of his underlings created to take advantage of him… When he realized it was just an illusion, it was already too late: he died because of that illusion." Still, seven years on, "even victims of the regime …seemed more forgiving towards [Ngô Đình] Diệm," though of course, Lý Chánh Trung observed, sympathy for Ngô Đình Diệm was made possible only by his absence, which allowed "memories to fade, hatreds to be soothed, and suppressed hidden feelings to be released." "Furthermore," he continued, "the reality of southern society went from bad to worse, creating a tendency for people to remember only the more appealing virtues of the Ngô Đình Diệm government whenever they compare those days with the present." And when it came to Ngô Đình Diệm's political legacy, Lý Chánh Trung was unequivocal:

"To suggest that Ngô Đình Diệm's government was a golden age, and that we only need to emulate him in order to solve the country's problems, like a number of his henchmen are now proclaiming with much fanfare, is truly ridiculous and shameless. Those who shout and weep around the name Diệm are like a flock of crows on a corpse. With their plot to restore a Diệm regime without Diệm so they can gorge themselves on extortion just like before, please let them remember that the current of history never flows backwards."[114]

[114] [*Tôi có cảm tưởng ông là người hiền lành, yêu nước và có đạo đức độ nhưng lại… không am hiểu gì hết về các vấn đề xã hội… Hình như ông chỉ có thể nói được một mình chớ không đối thoại thật sự được với ai*]; [*Cái lỗi căn*

As we have seen then, owing primarily to factors which became apparent only after his death, Ngô Đình Diệm's reputation underwent a degree of posthumous redemption, his status as defiant if quixotic patriot and beacon of piety accentuated by the corruption and squalor that subsumed South Vietnamese society after his passing. His improved personal standing coincided, however, with a growing consensus shared even by one-time supporters that his record as head-of-state had been disastrous. And when Lý Chánh Trung and others increasingly began to refer to "the Diệm regime without Diệm" [*Chế độ Diệm không Diệm*] to characterize Nguyễn Văn Thiệu's administration, their intent could scarcely have been less complementary.

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bản của ông là chính ông đã tin nơi cái huyền thoại "Cứu tinh dân tộc, lãnh tụ anh minh"... do người Mỹ và một số tay chân bộ hạ tạo ra để lợi dụng... Khi ông nhận thấy đó chỉ là một ảo tưởng thì đã quá trễ: Ông đã chết vì cái ảo tưởng đó]; [ngay cả những nạn nhân của chế độ ấy ...có vẻ khoan hồng hơn đối với ông Diệm]; [*Với thời gian, kỷ niệm đã mờ nhạt, hận thù được xoa dịu, những ẩn ức dồn nén được giải tỏa*]; [*Trong khi đó, cái thực trạng của xã hội miền Nam mỗi ngày them xấu xa tệ hại, khiến cho người ta có khuynh hướng chỉ nhớ tới những nết tương đối dễ coi của chế dộ Ngô Đình Diệm, mỗi khi so sánh thời nầy với thời trước*]; [*Cho rằng chế độ ông Diệm là một thời đại hoàng kim và chỉ cần bắt chước ông Diệm là có thể giải quyết những vấn đề đất nước, như một số tay chân bộ hạ của ông đang tuyên bố rùm beng, thì thật là lố bịch và vô liêm sỉ. Những người đang hò hét khóc lóc chung quanh cái tên ông Diệm như bầy quạ trên một xác chết. Với cái âm mưu tái lập một chế độ Diệm không Diệm trong đó họ sẽ phè phỡn bòn rút như xưa, xin họ nhớ rằng going lịch sử không bao giờ chảy ngược chiều*] Lý Chánh Trung, "Tội nghiệp ông Diệm" [Poor Mr. Diem], *Tin Sáng* [Morning News], August 21, 1970.

CHAPTER 2

BUILDING THE SECOND REPUBLIC

A Tale of Two Constituencies

Shortly before the Tết holiday in 1967, Arthur S. Giuliano reported on a series of recent conversations with South Vietnamese student leaders "which may be symptomatic of a new round of (some) student unrest, discontent with the GVN [Republic of Vietnam], and possibly even rumbles." A Joint United States Public Affairs Office (JUSPAO) Youth Officer stationed in Sài Gòn, Guiliano met regularly with Vietnamese students. But what was intended to have been a routine chat with Trần Ngọc Báu, Chairman of the government-sponsored Viet Nam Youth Council, had morphed into a searching two-hour long discussion. Báu began by warning Giuliano about a rise in anti-American sentiment among his fellow students, prompted by steadfast U.S. support for the largely reviled Nguyễn Cao Kỳ administration. Giuliano countered that the newly elected Constitutional Assembly was hard at work drafting a program of political reforms, but Báu interjected: "nobody believes this government will permit real elections." Prompted to elaborate on his "feelings of frustration and gloom," Báu revealed his growing doubts about South Vietnam's political prospects: "You know, what I tell you, Mr. Giuliano, I tell you as a friend. If some other students were to talk to you, they would be much more severe. And you must realize that all my background inclines me to be pro-West. I speak French and was French-educated. I'm a Catholic; I believe in one God and in one truth. Everything in me makes me deny Communism. In 1954, I was dead set against Communism. In 1963 too. In 1966 (here Bau wrinkled up his face and shrugged his shoulders). But unless things change, maybe by 1968 or 1970 I'll be for the Communists as the only way out. This war has gone on

too long. Why don't you leave it to the Vietnamese to solve their problems among themselves? Only then will Ho Chi Minh respect us."[115]

Elsewhere, Giuliano was invited by South Vietnam Ministry of Information Director of Training Lê Dũng to meet with his son, Trần Triệu Luật, a Faculty of Pedagogy student and Buddhist activist. Although he had fought with the Việt Minh against France, Lê Dũng fled south in 1952 after his landowning mother and older brothers were executed by a tribunal established by Hồ Chí Minh, prompting his only sister to commit suicide. Arriving in Sài Gòn, Dũng soon grew disillusioned with the repressive rule of Ngô Đình Diệm, and he was imprisoned for a year for his contributions to Nguyễn Chánh Thi's abortive 1960 coup. Like many Vietnamese anti-communist nationalists, he wearily sided with the American-backed Republic of Vietnam more from a sense of necessity than affection.

His son Trần Triệu Luật, on the other hand, held rather less ambiguous views about the nature of the struggle for South Vietnam. "Luat sat down at the table and immediately started grilling me," Giuliano reported, asserting, despite his family history, "that Ho Chi Minh and the Communists were the only real Vietnamese nationalists." An animated conversation proceeded, covering communist relations with the Nationalist [*Việt Nam Quốc dân Đảng*] and other anti-French parties; agrarian reform in China, North Vietnam and Cuba; and Luật's involvement in a student movement lobbying to close foreign schools in Vietnam. Despite scarcely seeing eye-to-eye, Giuliano praised Luật as a "bright, extremely nationalistic, politically active student leader, the type with which we have had little contact, probably because this type does not seek contact with Americans." But if his passion had impressed Giuliano, it was a source of exasperation for his father, who sighed and remarked "now you understand the problem" as he accompanied his

[115] "Vietnamese Youth and Student Discontent," Airgram A-353 from Saigon to Department of State, January 5, 1967, POL 13-2 VIET S 1967-1969, Central Foreign Policy Files (CFPF), Record Group (RG) 59, National Archives and Records Administration (NARA).

American guest to his car.[116] As it turned out, Lê Dũng's concern for his son was warranted – eighteen months later, as Sài Gòn recovered from the 1968 Tết Offensive, Trần Triệu Luật was sentenced to death in absentia by a military field court for allegedly joining the Alliance (Alliance of National, Democratic and Peace Forces) [*Liên minh các Lực lượng Dân tộc, Dân chủ và Hòa bình Việt Nam*], a communist-controlled front organization targeting urban intellectuals, students and Buddhist dissidents.[117]

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In mid-August 1967, standing Prime Minster and Vice-Presidential candidate Nguyễn Cao Kỳ leads a delegation of American reporters on campaign trip through Sa Đéc Province in the Mekong Delta. With almost one-hundred thousand registered voters and the highest voter turnout rate in the delta, Sa Đéc is a significant prize in the upcoming presidential election. And, given military Province Chief Lê Thọ Trung's uncharacteristic posture of neutrality in the contest, the outcome is expected to be competitive between Nguyễn Cao Kỳ and running-mate Nguyễn Văn Thiệu, and leading civilian contender Trần Văn Hương.[118] Beyond Sa Déc, however, the election had been largely discredited for some time in the eyes of the Vietnamese and American constituents whose support it was intended to recover. Against a backdrop of intensified press censorship (proscribed by South Vietnam's new constitution) and widespread threats and harassment of opposition candidates, the U.S. Embassy in Sài Gòn fielded howls of protest from incensed Vietnamese voters, who demanded that Washington intervene to guarantee a fair contest. These concerns were recorded and amplified in American media coverage of the elections, with an August 3 *New York Times* editorial warning that "South Vietnam's ruling

[116] Ibid.
[117] Telegram 32483, Embassy Saigon to Department of State, July 12, 1968, POL 13-2 VIET S, 1967-1969, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.
[118] Telegram 4058, Embassy Saigon to Department of State, August 25, 1967, POL 14 VIET S, 1967-1969, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.

military junta seems determined to convert the Sept. 3 Presidential election – so widely touted as a democratic showcase – into a farcical matter of 'heads we win; tails you lose.'"[119] Irritated by persistent questions about his alleged interference with the elections, Nguyễn Cao Kỳ abruptly departs from his itinerary, instead leading the reporters into the nearest village. Assembling the villagers, he inquires whether anyone recognizes him, and whether or not anyone in the crowd has been pressured to vote for a particular candidate. When the bemused villagers reply to both questions in the negative, a triumphant Kỳ leads the journalists back out of the village, satisfied that he had demonstrated the integrity of the proceedings. "People stay a thousand miles away from Viet Nam and then talk about me," he remarks defiantly. "They should come, look, see, and then afterwards have their own ideas."[120]

* * *

Revealed in these disparate exchanges are some of the formidable challenges facing non-communist South Vietnam and its military government during election year, 1967. Following the turbulent aftermath of Ngô Đình Diệm's assassination, the drafting of a new constitution and the election of a president and deputies to sit in a new bicameral National Assembly was intended at the very least to restore order and stability after years of military coups and religious and regional conflict. This development was hardly to be taken for-granted; in January for instance, exorbitantly wealthy Defence Minister Nguyễn Hữu Cơ was stripped of his position while overseas on a diplomatic mission, prompting Sài Gòn's Tân Sơn Nhất to be placed on high alert lest Cơ attempt to return by force. Although ostensibly dismissed for his alleged corruption, Cơ enjoyed the support of southern military officers, and his removal threatened to revive longstanding regional infighting within ARVN, which had flared up only months earlier during

[119] "Neutralizing Vietnam's Vote." *New York Times*, August 3, 1967.
[120] Telegram 022026 State Department to all diplomatic posts, August 16, 1967, POL 14 Viet-S, 1967-1969 CFPF, RG59, NARA; "Ky Hits U.S. Critics of Viet Nam Elections," *Chicago Tribune*, August 13, 1967.

the so-called "North-South crisis."[121] Seeming "quite shaken in contrast to his general appearance of confidence and equanimity," according to the U.S. Embassy in New Zealand, Prime Minister Nguyễn Cao Kỳ took precautions against the threat of a retaliatory coup, switching to a commercial flight back from a state visit to Wellington after his private jet suffered mysterious "engine troubles."[122] By binding all parties to a new legal framework and series of governing procedures, the new constitutional system was intended to reduce the probability and heighten the cost of the generals' chronic habit of resolving their differences by force, at a time when the U.S. Embassy routinely warned that "another coup would mark the end of American help to Vietnam."[123]

In addition to stabilizing and attempting to legitimize military rule, the 1967 reforms were also designed woo back wavering anti-communist civilians like Nguyễn Báu and Lê Dũng. As their conversations with Giuliano reveal, an aversion to communist rule was by no means a sure indication of support for the South Vietnamese government. By 1967, civilian observers had long since tired of the corruption, inflation, and political instability that had accompanied military rule and American escalation of the war, and they worried about South Vietnam's prospects against the communist challenge absent substantial reforms. Given that winning back the allegiance if not the esteem of these constituents was predicated on overcoming their profound cynicism of military intentions, the staging of elections as the basis for restored faith in the government was always an ambitious endeavour – as Nguyễn Báu's assessment of their anticipated probity suggests. But if South Vietnamese political observers were all but

[121] Telegram 020398, Embassy Saigon to Department of State, January 24, 1967, POL 23-9 VIET S, 1967-1969, CFPF, RG 59, NARA. In October 1966 Nguyễn Cao Kỳ attempted to fill the cabinet with fellow Northern Vietnamese, prompting the mass resignation of southern military and civilian officials.
[122] Telegram 021521, Embassy Wellington to Department of State, January 25, 1967, POL 7 VIET S, 1967-1969, CFPF, RG 59, NARA
[123] Telegram 38867 Saigon to State Department, September 27, 1968, POL 15-1 Viet-S, 1967-1969, CFPF, RG59, NARA.

unanimously skeptical that the elections would amount to a meaningful contest of military rule, they were nonetheless regarded as a critical development in the quest to establish a legitimate non-communist state in South Vietnam. For commenters like Phan Quang Đán, Trần Văn Tuyên, or Võ Long Triệu, the reality of preponderant military power in no way negated the importance of the elections as the basis for a new legally-codified and more transparent relationship between the military and its civilian critics. "The next two or three years will be crucial for the Vietnamese and American people," observed Phan Quang Đán, a respected politician known for his arrest and torture under Ngô Đình Diệm. "The new government must have wide popular support, so it can undertake necessary reforms and introduce new programs."[124]

Additionally, South Vietnamese civilians were no less divided than their military counterparts. Pitted into a series of overlapping religious and political associations beset with regional factionalism and often limited to local strongholds, the chronic fragmentation of South Vietnam's anti-communist forces was a significant factor in the communists' ascendance. As we have seen, these parties and organizations clashed throughout the post-Ngô Đình Diệm interregnum in a series of heated street confrontations, resulting in the dismissal of a host of civilian prime ministers. And it was precisely because of the divided and disorderly state of civilian politics that a significant minority of civilian participants, particularly in rural constituencies, reluctantly backed the military as the only realistic institution capable of administering the fragmented and decentralized South Vietnamese polity. In Phú Yên province in Central Vietnam, for instance, Buddhist Province Council President Huỳnh Diệu and Secretary Huỳnh Xuân Mai backed – surprisingly given his recent encounters with Buddhists in

[124] Telegram 15816 Saigon to State Department, January 17, 1967, POL 15 Viet-S, 1967-1969, CFPF, RG59, NARA.

Central Vietnam – Nguyễn Cao Kỳ, though their interlocutor hastened to add that "theirs appears to be a less than whole-hearted commitment and is probably engendered by both a realization of the where the real powers lies and the dearth of other attractive candidates."[125] Beyond Sài Gòn, there was simply no bureaucratic infrastructure apart from the military command structure, and, excepting the Communist Party, the military served as the sole de facto integrated and nominally-united institution with a nation-wide administrative presence. None of the civilian candidates entered the contest with anything approaching nationwide grassroots organization, including those – Hà Thúc Ký, Trương Đình Dzu, Nguyễn Hoa Hiệp or Vũ Hồng Khánh – affiliated with existing political groups like the Đại Việt and Nationalist Parties, which had long since dissolved into rival constellations of discontinuous province- or district-level networks. Religious communities were likewise polarized. As we have seen, Vietnamese Buddhists and Catholics were divided along regional and organizational lines, while more local Mekong delta religious communities like the Cao Đài and Hòa Hảo likewise suffered from factional infighting. Once regarded in Sài Gòn as kingmakers in the delta for their ability to deliver the votes of their tightly-organized and disciplined constituents en masse to the highest bidder, Hoa Hảo leaders saw their authority dimished by the ongoing feud between the Trần Văn Tươi and Lương Trọng Tương factions.[126] In June 1968, the quarrel erupted into open warfare when the Lương Trọng Tương compound in Sài Gòn was stormed by grenade-hurling Trần Văn Tươi partisans, resulting in two deaths and twenty-five wounded.[127]

Given, then, the chronic fragmentation and infighting that characterized civilian politics, expectations for the upcoming election often fell short of its stated purpose of staging a true

[125] "Political Developments in II Corps," Airgram A-8 from Saigon to Department of State, 4 July 1967, POL 18 VIET S 1967-1969, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.
[126] See Nguyễn Long Thành Nam, *Hoa Hao Buddhism in the Course of Vietnam's History*. Trans. Sergei Blagov. (New York: Nova Science Publishers, 2003).
[127] Telegram 33339 Saigon to State Department, July 23, 1968, POL Viet-S, 1967-1969, CFPF, RG59, NARA.

competition for power. And while civilian critics were often vociferous in speaking out against the excesses of military rule, many acknowledged that absent a nationwide grassroots alternative to the ARVN bureaucracy, it would take more than a mere election to graft political pluralism onto the essentially latent military dictatorship outside Sài Gòn. Instead, political observers settled for the more modest hopes that grievances were to be aired and debated peacefully if not constructively in the new National Assembly rather than in violent street clashes, and that the Presidential contest, if less than a true challenge to military rule, might nonetheless effect the renegotiation of military-civilian relations resulting in a more transparent and accountable military subject to civilian input and bound by the rule of law.

But as Nguyễn Cao Kỳ's encounter with the inhabitants of rural Sa Đéc reveals, stabilizing the military, smoothing its relations with politically-attuned civilians, and channeling political, religious and regional antagonism from the streets to the legislature were the least of the formidable political challenges facing South Vietnan in 1967. Thus far, this study has focused on "political observers," members of what can be regarded as South Vietnam's "political class," loosely defined for the purposes of this chapter simply as those who either participated in political activities or organizations, or who maintained a general awareness of national-level political figures and events. The failure of Kỳ's rural interlocutors even to recognize him as their presumptive executive much less indicate consent for his government's authority reveals the chasm between primarily though not exclusively urban political observers, and the majority rural population over whom the state claimed jurisdiction. It is worth noting here that this rural unfamiliarity with national-level politics was more the result of wartime circumstance than constituent apathy, an important feature distinguishing the Second Republic from the First. During the Ngô Đình Diệm era, as author and critic Võ Phiến noted in his study of South

Vietnamese literature: "[Before 1963], newspapers were widely disseminated, and went deep into the rural areas. Usually there were newspaper reading rooms at the district level, with newspapers delivered for free by the Information Service… Newspapers could go… all the way down to the hamlets. But this happy situation did not last long. As the security situation in the countryside worsened by the day, the flow of reading material to the villages had to be cut off."[128] As the communist insurgency swelled during the final years of Ngô Đình Diệm's rule, Sài Gòn's links with the countryside became increasingly strained, with some provinces effectively cut off altogether.[129] News of Diệm's death reportedly took a month to reach some rural communities even in III Corps surrounding Sài Gòn, and by 1967, the safety of a thirty-minute car trip to Tân An, capital of neighbouring Long An province, could hardly be assured.[130]

With intra-provincial communication restricted by the intensification of the war, the focus of politics outside Sài Gòn became increasingly local during the Second Republic, such that awareness of events in the capital was limited outside government outposts and the larger provincial towns, and even the presumptive head of state himself was a shadowy figure for many of his more isolated constituents. Instead, political affairs centered on local officials like military district and hamlet chiefs – and, of course, their communist counterparts. Revolutionary Development (RD) workers, envisioned as Sài Gòn's answer to the communists' formidable district and hamlet level political network, had thus far largely failed to endear themselves to rural inhabitants – one Provincial Attitudes Report quoted a villager who dismissed them as

[128] Võ Phiến. *Hai mươi năm Văn Học Miền Nam: Tổng Quan* (Nhà Xuất Bản Văn Nghệ: Westminster, 1986): 79-80.
[129] A February 1967 report on Quảng Đức province noted that official traffic between province headquarters and the capital was reduced to once every six weeks, when a military supply convoy arrived. Airgram A-464: Quang Duc: A Dim Present and a Dim Future, Saigon to State Department, February 24, 1967, POL 18 Viet-S, 1967-1969, CFPF, RG59, NARA.
[130] Telegram 5649 Saigon to State Department, September 12, 1967, POL 14 Viet-S, 1967-1969, CFPF, RG59, NARA.

draft-dodging "punks from the city" – and given the 24% annual RD worker attrition rate, the sentiment was apparently mutual.[131]

Given the chasm then between South Vietnam's political class and the majority of its inhabitants, the election was not only an attempt to stabilize tensions between and among the military and civilian observers, but also, more crucially, a project to re-introduce the very concept of a non-communist South Vietnamese state, its institutions and customs, to a population largely isolated by events in the capital due to the war. With a view to bridging the gulf between town and country, the election was conceived as a centerpiece nation-building exercise, complete with subsidies for posters and campaign materials throughout the country; television and radio appearances for all candidates; and a twelve city whistle-stop debating tour with security guaranteed by the military's monopoly on air-power, a critical political factor in a country where ground-level security was precarious. The cost of these provisions placed a considerable strain on the National Budget.[132]

As such, it represented a dramatic departure from the conventional South Vietnamese political style of clandestine groups like VNQDD and Đại Việt parties, which originated as anti-French networks of secret cells committed to wielding power by infiltrating and subverting colonial institutions. Sài Gòn's so-called "salon" politicians, a pejorative term referring to operatives who cut backroom deals on behalf of territories which they scarcely dared visit, would instead be forced to compete by engaging their constituents, and by considering the rural population as body to be persuaded rather than simply managed from afar. Acknowledging the

[131] Telegram 12864 Saigon to State Department, December 7, 1967, File: Anti-Americanism, National Security Advisor Files (NSAF), NSC Vietnam Information Group: Intelligence and Other Reports (NSC VIG), 1967-1975, Gerald Ford Presidential Library (GFL); Robert Kromer, Telegram 169191, DEF 9-3 Viet-S, 1967-1969, , CFPF, RG59, NARA.

[132] "Trích yếu: mời báo chí đi theo phái đoàn ứng cử viên tổng thống và phó tổng thống," HS 5317, June 1967, , Phủ Tổng thống Đệ nhị Cộng hòa (hereafter PTTDIICH)/Vietnam National Archives Center II (hereafter VNAC2).

existential stakes of non-communist South Vietnam's struggle for rural allegiance, critics of the military regime extended measured support for the broader objectives of the endeavour, certain though they were that its immediate outcome had already been arranged to secure and validate the military status quo. For one, the election, with its high-profile public debates and media coverage, provided a rare opportunity to air grievances, provide constructive criticism, and offer alternative solutions. But there was also an awareness among political commenters that what amounted to no more than a performance of democracy was nonetheless an important chance for the political class, government and opposition alike, to present a vision of what a non-communist state had to offer to neglected but critical rural audiences.

The importance of the elections – even to Vietnamese observers most disaffected by the impropriety of their administration by the military – has long been overlooked in English-language Vietnam War historiography. With the outcome effectively arranged long before the final vote, the contest has often featured as little more than a footnote in narratives of post-Ngô Đình Diệm politics in South Vietnam, itself a poorly understood if critical dimension in the ultimate outcome of the conflict. Likewise, those studies which have devoted more attention to the proceedings have focused almost entirely on the military's clumsy efforts to manipulate the outcome and the ensuing backlash, overlooking the common acknowledgement on the part of South Vietnam's political class of the election's broader nation-building objectives.[133] But if English language historians have largely been content to dismiss the contest as merely the latest example of South Vietnam's long history of fraudulent elections, contemporaneous Vietnamese commenters could not afford to be so glib given the existential stakes of securing rural affection, whatever their dismay over the military's obvious interference.

[133] See, for example, Frances Fitzgerald, Fire in the Lake: the Vietnamese and Americans in Vietnam (Boston: Little, Brown, 1972); James McAllister. "A Fiasco of Noble Proportions." *Pacific Historical Review*, vol. 73, no. 4 (November 2004).

Finally, there was an additional and even more distant class of constituents whose loyalty the election was intended to bolster – American voters and their congressmen. By 1967, opposition to the war had long since transcended the college campuses where it was once centered, with a range of influential public figures from Martin Luther King, Jr., Reinhold Neibuhr, and Dr. Benjamin Spock speaking out against the war. Inside the White House, President Johnson found himself hemorrhaging congressional support for the war, with once reliable fellow Democrat allies like Massachusetts congressman Tip O'Neill now publicly voicing their reservations.[134] The cost of the war also proved an increasing burden – as Secretary of State Dean Rusk noted, a recent corresponding tax increase had "in my opinion… made many doves" – while its material requirements had as early as 1966 threatened to violate American NATO commitments and damage transatlantic relations through diversions from Europe to Southeast Asia.[135] Desperate to shore up floundering support, the Johnson administration likewise seized on the elections as an opportunity to demonstrate the necessity and legitimacy of American intervention in Vietnam. "We are coming to a stage," insisted National Security Advisor Walt Whitman Rostow, citing Sài Gòn's upcoming election, "when we can begin to put the war to the American people in a new way."[136] To that end, Johnson sought South Vietnamese assistance in implementing the proceedings in manner conducive to American observers, complaining to incoming South Vietnamese Ambassador Bùi Diễm that "the attitude towards Vietnam of the press, the churches, universities, the liberals and others was a very real

[134] Memorandum for the President: Memorandum of Conversation, October 5, 1967. *Digital National Security Archive,* document VIO1816.
[135] Ibid., Memorandum for the Secretary of Defense: Worldwide US Military Posture, October 7, 1966. *Digital National Security Archive,* document VIO1854.
[136] Memorandum of Conversation, October 5, 1967. *Digital National Security Archive,* document VIO1820.

problem for him" before suggesting that "anything that the Ambassador could do to help produce a better understanding would be very useful to both governments."[137]

Further down the chain, local South Vietnamese officials occasionally rankled at the contradictory demands produced by the intimate links between American and Vietnamese domestic politics. In the Mekong Delta's An Giang province, province chief Lý Ba Pham, after receiving orders not to interfere in the 1966 village elections, expressed irritation when the ensuing 62% turnout earned him a rebuke from Sài Gòn, which hoped to cite high participation to demonstrate its domestic legitimacy to overseas voters and their representatives. Ordering the police and province militia to compel An Giang voters to turn up at the upcoming the presidential polls, Pham complained to an embassy contact that "if the government really wanted a high turnout instead of the democratic elections they talked about, they should have told him so before the first Sunday's elections."[138]

But if there was consensus on both sides the Pacific behind the importance of the approaching ballot, the view from Washington about what form the vote should take and the extent of the changes it should be permitted to effect was far less certain. A rift soon emerged between the State Department and Ambassador-to-Sài Gòn Henry Cabot Lodge over the nature of military-civilian relations. While State wanted to limit the field to civilian candidates, with military power exercised more subtly behind the scenes and a run-off election to insure a plurality for the winner, Lodge was insistent that the military's dominant position in politics be preserved. "The military is the only group which has experience or competence in managing the country," he wrote. "There are no politicians with any support outside Saigon, no civil society,

[137] Memorandum of Conversation: Conversation After Presentation of Credentials. January 19, 1967. POL 17 VIET S, 1967-1969, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.
[138] "Village Elections in the Delta" Airgram A-677 from Saigon to Department of State, 19 May 1967, POL 18 VIET S 1967-1969, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.

the military will need to run the country for some time, and if we give any real power to civilians the military with overthrow the government."[139] Lodge had been, after all, a key architect in supplanting Ngô Đình Diệm's civilian rule with military force. Instead, the Ambassador proposed that a military candidate compete directly on a joint ticket with a token civilian running-mate to provide "scenery." Still, committed to military leadership but well aware of the need for positive "optics," both American and Vietnamese, Lodge took pains to insist on security detail for the civilian contenders, warning Nguyễn Cao Kỳ not to assassinate leading civilian rivals Trần Văn Hương and Phan Khắc Sửu, whose deaths "could be a bigger defeat than anything [either] could inflict while alive."[140] What both sides could agree on however, was that a joint Presidential Vice-Presidential ticket headed by Nguyễn Cao Kỳ and Nguyễn Văn Thiệu, the two most powerful men in the military, would be a disaster. "Even if they could win it legitimately, which most experts doubt, few in Vietnam or elsewhere would believe it was not a rigged affair," as one report put it – a fateful remark, as we shall see, which reiterates just how little the United States managed to choreograph events in Sài Gòn despite its massive commitment.[141]

If the 1967 elections then were largely an attempt by the military and the United States to construct a veneer of legality for the status quo of military rule, they were also an implicit acknowledgement that political consensus and an increased sense of popular participation in government were necessary to soothe South Vietnam's longstanding political, regional and religious tensions, which had erupted during the final years of Ngô Đình Diệm's rule. Still,

[139] Telegram 17704, Embassy Saigon to Department of State, 9 February 1967, POL 14 VIET S, 1967-1969, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.
[140] Telegram 222283, Embassy Saigon to Department of State, 6 April 1967, POL 14 VIET S, 1967-1969, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.
[141] "Memorandum on Action Program to Promote a Favorable Political Evolution in Saigon," White House to Department of State. 13 January 1967, POL US-VIET S 1967-199, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.

staging elections was seen as no small gamble in both Washington and Sài Gòn, tempting the very real possibility that peaceful political competition could spiral out of control, in turn inviting yet another unpopular military intervention. We "ought to take out coup insurance against this risk," one White House directive pithily suggested.[142] And as the new Constitutional Assembly [*Quốc hội Lập hiến*] delegates tasked with drafting election laws and a new constitution soon discovered, the social fragmentation that accelerated during the last year of Ngô Đình Diệm's reign would continue to exacerbate the already considerable challenge of creating a new legal framework to put the pieces back together again.

When, on January 10, 1967, the Assembly presented the Armed Forces Council [*Hội đồng Quân lực*] with a preliminary constitution, the draft was immediately attacked from all sides, with demands at times hinging on what seemed to American observers like quaint and frivolous objections. Edward Lansdale, the veteran US operative tasked with overseeing the drafting, complained, for instance, of the delegates' "superstition in the form of the mesmeric arcane" when delays were caused by "last minute editorial juggling" so that the phrase "we the people" could be revised to result in a more astrologically-auspicious word count.[143] These dismissive attitudes overlooked, however, the high degree of imagery and symbolism imbued in the often performative dialogues between rival political forces in South Vietnam, broadly but by no means strictly divided along overlapping northern-southern, Catholic-Buddhist, and pro and anti-military poles.

Northern Catholic political groups like Nguyễn Gia Hiên's Greater Solidarity Force, for example, focused their efforts on condemning the deletion of an earlier reference to a "supreme

[142] "Memorandum on Action Program to Promote a Favorable Political Evolution in Saigon," White House to Department of State. 13 January 1967, POL US-VIET S 1967-199, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.
[143] Edward Lansdale, "Nationalist Politics in Vietnam," pp 52-53. 17 August 1968, POL 15 US-VIET S, 1967-1969, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.

being" [*Đấng Tối cao*] from the constitution's preamble. After Catholic delegates rejected United Buddhist Association Director [*Viện trưởng Viện Hóa đạo*] Thích Tâm Châu's compromise suggestion of "merciful being" [*Đấng Từ bi*] for being "too Buddhist," some 2,500 Catholic protestors surrounded the Assembly on March 31, demanding that Assembly Chairman Phan Khắc Sửu restore the phrase. Phan Khắc Sửu, insisting that he was not an atheist, informed them that there was nothing he could do, as the Assembly would not meet again until April 6, after the constitution was scheduled for promulgation. Instead, he suggested that the demonstrators confer with the military-led National Leadership Council [*Ủy ban Lãnh đạo Quốc gia*] responsible for ratifying the draft, whereupon the crowd headed en masse toward the heavily-guarded Independence Palace demanding to speak with Prime Minister Nguyễn Cao Kỳ. Three hours later, Nguyễn Cao Kỳ emerged only to declare that while he personally had no objection to the phrase "supreme being," the Assembly alone had the authority to change the wording of the document – by which point most of the crowd had grown bored and dispersed.[144] The following day, a *New York Times* report on the fracas downplayed the debate over the preamble's wording as "typical Vietnamese fondness for the occult."[145]

But what appeared to many outsiders like a trifling and parochial confrontation was actually the latest round of rhetorical jousting for influence over the constitutional process, played out in the relatively safe realm of symbolism after both sides drew back from the violence that characterized the post-Ngô Đình Diệm interregnum. In fact, as Nguyễn Gia Hiên later explained to a US Embassy officer, the Catholic protestors did not actually expect their

[144] Nguyễn Văn Bông, *Luật hiện pháp và chính trị học* [Constitutional Law and Political Science], (Sài Gòn: s.n., 1971): 580-581; "Với 3 chữ 'Đấng Tối Cao,' dân có gì thắc mắc về Hiện Pháp thì cứ hỏi thẳng Quốc Hội L.H." [Regarding the words "Supreme Being," Curious Citizens Should Consult the Constitutional Assembly], *Chính Luận* [Political Discussion], April 1, 1967; Telegram 21769, Embassy Saigon to Department of State, 31 March 1967, POL 23-8 VIET S, 1967-1969, CFPF, RG 59, NARA; William Tuohy, "New Viet Constitution Becomes Law of Land," *The Los Angeles Times*, April 1, 1967.
[145] R.W. Apple, Jr, "Saigon Promulgates New Constitution," *The New York Times*, April 1, 1967.

demonstration to change the phrasing of the constitution, though they nonetheless seized on the occasion to display their determination, revealing a pragmatic deployment of symbolic protest to stake a claim for themselves in the new political system. Likewise, Nguyễn Cao Kỳ's public refusal to intercede, the Embassy suspected, was most likely little more than a performative act of defiance meant to mollify military critics opposed even to the constitution's token concessions to civilians. Given the conspicuous arrival of many of the Catholic protestors in ARVN jeeps, the Embassy concluded, the entire affair had been more spectacle than genuine standoff, perhaps even pre-arranged to allow both parties to project resolve to their opponents and constituents.[146]

Nguyễn Gia Hiên's rivals, on the other hand, were no less adept at employing allegory to project political intent. During the Assembly's March 18 morning session, on the day when delegates voted on the constitution for the final time before sending it to the National Leadership Council for review, Nguyễn Đắt Dận, representing the Mekong Delta's Ba Xuyên Province, opened the proceedings by invoking the spirit of Trần Văn Văn, before, as one eyewitness recorded, he "unveiled [a] bust of [Trần Văn] Văn which was placed in front of [the] Speaker's podium, and implied that to compromise on transitional arrangements would be [a] betrayal of [Trần Văn] Văn. Several deputies protested [Nguyễn Đắt] Dận's demagoguery."[147] Arguably South Vietnam's most prominent southern politician and an emblem of southern regional identity, the late Trần Văn Văn had been prone to speculating about secret northern alliances to control the south between Hà Nội, the Ngô family, and northern Đại Viêts and Catholics.[148] Exaggerated though they may have been, his suspicions of sinister northern conspiracies

[146] Telegram 21769, Embassy Saigon to Department of State, 31 March 1967, POL 23-8 VIET S, 1967-1969, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.
[147] "Q.H.L.H. vẫn giữ nguyên lập trường"[Constitutional Assembly Maintains its Point of View] *Chính Luận* [Political Discussion], March 19-20, 1967; Telegram 20724, Embassy Saigon to Department of State, 18 March 1967, POL 15-3 VIET S, 1967-1969, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.
[148] Robert Critchfied, *The Long Charade: Political Subversion in the Vietnam* War. (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968): 17-24

reflected the widespread southern anxiety about northern intentions that had informed successive Buddhist "Struggle" uprisings and contributed to the delight of the crowds that had turned out to hail the Ngô family's passing. It was seen as a near certainty in southern political circles that Trần Văn Văn's December 7, 1966 assassination had been carried out by the military to silence Nguyễn Cao Kỳ's most outspoken civilian critic, and the defiant anti-military and anti-northern implications of Nguyễn Đắt Dận's performance were obvious to all present.[149] And though the bust was ordered removed after the morning session, a group of southern deputies later retrieved it, waiting until the afternoon's final vote to once again place it next to a large incense burner at the front of the hall before pointedly swearing an oath to uphold and defend the constitution.[150] These acts of competing performative symbolism, conducted by rival aggregations of identity whose mutual antagonism crystalized during Ngô Đình Diệm-era, reflect the depth and persistence of the polarization that the late President helped engender, with the constitution interpreted as the latest salvo in an ongoing regional and religious struggle.

With the constitution finally ratified on April 1st, the Assembly turned to drafting political party legislation in anticipation of the upcoming votes for a new President, Senate, and Lower House in September and October respectively. Here too, Ngô Đình Diệm's toxic legacy would complicate the already delicate process of reconciling South Vietnam's bewildering array of regional and religious axes. Initially scheduled for resolution in the spring of 1967, Assembly debate on the political parties law lingered well into the summer, prompting an exasperated US Embassy to recommend using "what influence we can bring to bear on both the Government and

[149] A 1988 series in Hồ Chí Minh City's Police [*Công An*] newspaper would later confirm the official version that Trần Văn Văn was killed by a communist assassin. See Ryan Nelson, *The Struggle to Build Viable Vietnamese States, 1947-1966: the Life and Death of Trần Văn Văn*. (M.A. Thesis, University of Madison-Wisconsin, 2013): 93-95.

[150] Telegram 20761, Embassy Saigon to Department of State, 18 March 1967, POL 15-5 VIET S, 1967-1969, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.

the Assembly to persuade them to write a good party law" before the election. The primary obstacle, the Embassy noted, was that "the Vietnamese are… familiar with 'political parties' which are essentially devices for control of the population. These include Diem's National Revolutionary Movement [*Phong trào Cách mạng Quốc gia*], Nhu's Republican Youth [*Thanh niên Cộng hòa*], and various communist mass organizations. The Vietnamese… know well the kind of party represented by Ngo Dinh Diem's Can Lao."[151]

To alleviate such fears, a 1967 newspaper campaign featured a series of editorials extolling the need for political parties, both to impose order in the new electoral system and to organize its hopelessly factionalized anti-communists against the Communist Party – by some distance South Vietnam's only party with a national grassroots presence. "Freedom" [*Tự Do*], a newspaper known for its northern Catholic sympathies, acknowledged, for instance, that parties suffered in the eyes of "suspicious people" from the fact that they "have had a very bad reputation in the past" – a clear reference to Ngô Đình Diệm's Cần Lao. "But what was this past if it was not in the hands of colonialists and dictators?" the paper inquired rhetorically, before insisting that "the political atmosphere in Vietnam will be lively and bright when there is an open regime. Vietnamese parties should then cease organizing in secrecy and in silence… There is no reason to be suspicious of any political party when one loves democracy and when there is already a worthy regime."[152]

Lingering suspicions of the Cần Lao were not so easily assuaged, however, as no less a figure than President Nguyễn Văn Thiệu admitted in November while contemplating forming a

[151] "Political Party Law," Airgram A-747 from Saigon to Department of State, 10 June 1967, POL 12 VIET S 1967-1969, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.

[152] [*những người hoài nghi*]; [*trong quá khứ, chánh đảng đã tỏ ra tồi quá*]; [*Nhưng quá khứ là gì nếu không phải là quá khứ trong tay thực dân và độc tài?];* [*không khí chánh trị ở Việt Nam sẽ sôi động và sáng sủa khi có một chế độ cởi mở. Đảng phái V.N. sẽ không còn tổ chức âm thầm bí mật nữa… đã yêu dân chủ và đã có chế độ xứng đáng thì không thể ngại gì về đảng phái nữa*] "Vấn dề Đảng phái Việt Nam" [The Problem of Vietnamese Political Parties], *Tự Do* [Freedom], January 7, 1967.

new pro-government party. Although he "obviously needed the nucleus for a political party to support the government," the President explained to US Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker, he "did not want it to be identified as his personal instrument in view of the still fresh memories of Diem and the Can Lao Party."[153] Instead, Nguyễn Văn Thiệu opted in the spring of 1968 to assemble the "Coalition" [*Liên minh*], a loose partnership of pro-government groups, insisting again in July that he "did not want to repeat Diem's mistakes."[154] But despite this initial discretion, the looming spectre of a revived Cần Lao meant that even as Nguyễn Văn Thiệu consolidated power over the Lower House, helped by extensive bribery funded by the C.I.A. and Presidential Special Assistant Nguyễn Cao Thăng, it was not until July 17, 1969, almost two years after the elections, that the political party statute was finally rammed through the National Assembly in spite of many deputies' grave reservations.[155]

Even more important for holding elections was the election law itself, the subject of an equally heated confrontation in the Assembly throughout the spring of 1967. Here too, the legislature was roughly divided along regional and religious lines, with southern deputies rallying behind the Movement for the Renaissance of the South (M.R.S.) [*Phong trào Phục hung miền Nam*], and northern Catholic and Đại Việt legislators largely supporting the Greater People's Bloc [*Khối Đại chúng*] or the much larger pro-military Democratic Alliance Bloc [*Khối Liên minh Dân chủ*] led by Nguyễn Cao Kỳ's close ally Lê Phước Sang. The subject of particular M.R.S. enmity, Lê Phước Sang embodied for many southerners the tradition of cronyism and corruption that had defined the Ngô Đình Diệm regime and its successors. Faced,

[153] Telegram 10424, Embassy Saigon to Department of State, 11 November 1967, POL 12 VIET S, 1967-1969, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.
[154] Telegram 32844, Embassy Saigon to Department of State, 17 July 1968, POL 13 VIET S, 1967-1969, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.
[155] For the use of C.I.A. funds to influence the Constitutional Assembly, see Thomas L. Ahern, Jr., *The C.I.A. and the Generals: Covert Support to Military Government in South Vietnam*. (Washington, D.C.: Center for the Study of Intelligence, 1998): 45. For an account by a former Lower House deputy of Nguyễn Cao Thăng's efforts see Lý Quí Chung, *Hồi Ký Không Tên*, 139.

for example, with the prospect of Lê Phước Sang's appointment as Assembly Chairman, deputy Võ Long Triều declared that should the nomination proceed, he would "resign immediately and apply for Lao citizenship; keeping Vietnamese citizenship with an Assembly Chairman like him would be too shameful for me to bear."[156]

Scheduled for passage by the end of the April, the election law stalled when M.R.S. deputies demanded increased campaign funds for prospective candidates, and run-off provisions in the Presidential race to counter what they saw as a military tactic of dividing votes between as many civilian candidates as possible. Here the opposition won rare sympathy from the US Embassy. No doubt overestimating the military's popularity or, at the very least, its ability to manipulate results in one-on-one contests against anti-communist civilians, the United States also advocated run-offs to forestall the possibility of secretly communist-backed candidates prevailing against a divided anti-communist field.[157] But while the opposition successfully calculated it could win constitutional concessions by leveraging pressure on Nguyễn Cao Kỳ to present President Johnson with an approved draft of the constitution during their March 20 meeting in Guam, when it came to the election law, the military was determined not to give in.[158] Eager to maximize already substantial administrative advantages, and to project resolve to Armed Forces Council hardliners who opposed further concessions to civilians, Nguyễn Cao Kỳ began applying the stick to deputies who rejected the covert financial carrots on offer to those who supported the government. In April, M.R.S.-affiliated politicians like Phan Quang Đán began voicing a litany of allegations against the government, including threats of physical violence from pro-military deputies, menacing anonymous phone-calls, grenades mailed to the

[156] [*tôi sẽ từ chức ngay và xin nhập quốc tịch Lào; giữ quốc tịch Việt Nam với một ông chủ tịch Quốc hội như vậy tôi xấu hổ lắm*] Võ Long Triều, *Hồi ký tập hai*, 28-29.
[157] Telegram 23078, Embassy Saigon to Department of State, 14 April 1967, POL 14 VIET S, 1967-1969, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.
[158] Lý Quí Chung, *Hồi ký không tên,*109-110.

houses of M.R.S. members, and newspapers refusing to publish opposition pieces for fear of government reprisal.[159] And in the Assembly, "to put further pressure on deputies' votes" as M.R.S. member Lý Quí Chung recalls, National Police Chief and Military Security Service Director Nguyễn Ngọc Loan, one of Nguyễn Cao Ky's most loyal partisans, took to patrolling the balcony during Assembly sessions, conspicuously brandishing his revolver while imbibing six-packs of beer.[160] Intimidated but still unbowed, the opposition deputies continued to hold out. Then, during the May 12 Assembly session, demonstrators from the Catholic Citizens' Bloc, which had earlier spearheaded the "supreme being" protests, once again surrounded the Assembly, unfurling anti-opposition banners and chanting "down with the National Assembly." Inside the chamber, deputies abandoned the election law debate to take turns denouncing what they regarded as an obvious military campaign to harass them, eventually forcing Assembly Chairman Phan Khắc Sửu to adjourn the proceedings. At this point, the crowd gathered outside attempted to storm the Assembly by force, smashing windows and kicking down doors before finally being dispersed by riot police.[161]

Convinced the military was once again employing its favored tactic of collaborating with sympathetic northern Catholic parties to stage apparently spontaneous civilian demonstrations, the State Department contemplated intervening more forcefully. But in the end, having already implicitly warned Nguyễn Cao Kỳ not to assassinate prominent civilians like Trần Văn Hương or Phan Quang Đán, the United States ultimately determined that further American pressure only

[159] Telegram 24275, Embassy Saigon to Department of State, 28 April 1967, POL 14 VIET S, 1967-1969, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.; Telegram 222283, Embassy Saigon to Department of State, 6 April 1967, POL 14 VIET S, 1967-1969, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.
[160] [*nhằm gây áp lực cho cuộc bỏ phiếu của dân biểu*] Lý Quí Chung, *Hồi ký không tên*, 97; Telegram 1384, Embassy Saigon to Department of State, 19 July 1967, POL 14 VIET S, 1967-1969, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.
[161] "Nhóm áp lực vào Quốc Hội vỗ tay vang rền… Nhiều Ông Nghị lớn tiếng lên án việc gây áp lực" [Pressure Group Applauds… Many Deputies Loudly Condemn Intimidation], *Chính Luận* [Political Discussion], May 14-15, 1967; Telegram 25552, Embassy Saigon to Department of State, 12 May 1967, POL 14 VIET S, 1967-1969, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.

risked provoking the military into abandoning the elections altogether.[162] Tellingly, the State Department, consistently frustrated by its inability to choreograph South Vietnamese politics in spite of massive American military and financial commitments, ordered a study following the elections to find "ways we can more efficiently exert leverage on [the] newly elected GVN [Government of Vietnam] to maximize [the] latter's performance in [the] post-election period."[163] Meanwhile, the government made a concerted effort, backed by a radio and newspaper campaign, to crack down on pro-military deputies' chronic absenteeism from Assembly sessions, no small factor in the opposition's successful protracted resistance.[164] And with these last obstacles removed, the Assembly finally passed the election law on June 15, eliminating the run-off provisions, and, in a nod to its virulently anti-communist supporters, adding the far-reaching Article 11(9) disqualifying candidates "who have directly or indirectly worked for communism or pro-communist neutralism or in the interests of communism."[165]

Meanwhile, though the campaign was not formally scheduled to begin until August, Nguyễn Cao Kỳ wasted little time instructing Nguyễn Ngọc Loan to, as the C.I.A. reported, "put into conspicuous action his belief in using government resources to promote Ky's bid."[166] Reports from the countryside of a wave of threats, harassment, and the demotion or transfer of rival candidate supporters, among other underhanded tactics, soon reached the capital, prompting

[162] Telegram 200638, Department of State to Embassy Saigon, 23 May 1967, POL 14 VIET S, 1967-1969, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.; Telegram 222283, Embassy Saigon to Department of State, 6 April 1967, POL 14 VIET S, 1967-1969, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.
[163] Telegram 030020, Department of State to Embassy Saigon, 31 August 1967, POL 15 VIET S, 1967-1969, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.
[164] Telegram 29896, Embassy Saigon to Department of State, 27 May 1967, POL 14 VIET S, 1967-1969, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.
[165] "Quốc Hội L.H. chịu 3 diểm của UBLĐQG" [Constitutional Assembly Accepts National Leadership Committee's Three Points], *Chính Luận* [Political Discussion], June 15, 1967; Telegram 24451, Embassy Saigon to Department of State, 2 May 1967, POL 14 VIET S, 1967-1969, CFPF, RG 59, NARA. If strictly upheld, Article 11(9) would have disqualified even head of state and future President Nguyễn Văn Thiệu, the district chief of a Việt Minh youth group in 1946. *Nguyễn Văn Thiệu, President of the Republic of Vietnam* (Saigon: Việt Nam Cộng Hòa, 1969), 2.
[166] Ahern, Jr., *The C.I.A. and the Generals*, 52.

prospective civilian contenders to implore the US Embassy to intervene to guarantee a fair election.[167] Trần Văn Hương, for instance, informed US Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker that he "kn[ew] for certain that word-of-mouth orders have gone to province chiefs and district chiefs to rig the election in favour of Ky and Thieu." "These and other tactics were used in the Diem regime," he continued, "and [I] fear they will be employed again."[168] Phan Khắc Sửu, considered a leading civilian candidate along with Trần Văn Hương, was equally suspicious, informing the Embassy that Nguyễn Cao Kỳ and Nguyễn Văn Thiệu were "pressuring province chiefs to ensure a heavy vote for their ticket, and General Loan is doing the same to provincial police chiefs."[169] And Hà Thúc Ký, leader of the Revolutionary Đại Việt faction [*Đại Việt Cách mạng Đảng*], complained of widespread withholding of voter registration cards by the military: "even Mai Thọ Truyền [Trần Văn Hương's running mate] can't get his voting card," he exclaimed. Although post-election cooperation would be essential, Hà Thúc Ký continued, "such cooperation would be difficult if [the] election [was] not honest."[170]

Opposition candidates also saw their newspapers harassed and censored, prompting yet another Embassy with Nguyễn Cao Kỳ, who was informed that such practices were "mak[ing] it difficult to present critics and American public in general with convincing arguments that forthcoming election will be free."[171] And when press censorship was relaxed somewhat on July 20 (despite having been officially proscribed by the constitution since April 1), an outpouring of critical articles followed voicing similar concerns, with "Time" [*Thời Đại*], for instance,

[167] Võ Long Triều, *Hồi ký tập hai*, 70.
[168] Telegram 02286, Embassy Saigon to Department of State, 2 August 1967, POL 14 VIET S, 1967-1969, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.
[169] "Conversation with Phan Khắc Sửu," Airgram A-68 from Saigon to Department of State, 28 July 1967, POL 18 VIET S 1967-1969, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.
[170] Telegram 04781, Embassy Saigon to Department of State, 2 September 1967, POL 14 VIET S, 1967-1969, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.
[171] Telegram 208983, Department of State to Saigon, 9 June 1967, PPB 9 VIET S, 1967-1969, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.

asserting that while Trần Văn Hương would surely win a fair election, "suspicion is justified after experiences acquired from Diem-style election farces."[172]

The Embassy, still committed to a military victory, publicly downplayed the allegations while reiterating its official policy of strict non-interference in the campaign. Behind closed doors however, there was growing concern that Nguyễn Cao Kỳ was ignoring Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge's direct April 17 warning that "it is important that no one be given any real grounds for complaining that there had been any abuse of the police power. The Vietnamese people… resent the abuse of police power, and this was perhaps the greatest single factor in the wave of public emotion against Diem and Nhu in 1963."[173] No longer able to deny that the implications of such an obvious reference to the manner of Ngô Đình Diệm's demise had failed to produce the desired effect, Lodge's successor Ellsworth Bunker informed President Johnson on June 14 that "Loan has begun systematically summoning police and military security officers from throughout the country in order to instruct them on how to assure that Ky is elected."[174]

Before it had even formally begun then, the election had already lost much of its credibility in the eyes of the civilian opposition, the very people whose loyalties the entire exercise had been intended to recover. "Nobody believed the election would be carried out honestly," Lý Quí Chung recalled. At best it amounted to "a chance for people opposed to the government to express our points of view, and apply stronger pressure against military

[172] "Vietnamese Press Activity," Telegram 03738, Embassy Saigon to Department of State, 16 August 1967, POL 14 VIET S, 1967-1969, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.
[173] Telegram 23234, Embassy Saigon to Department of State, 17 April 1967, POL 14 VIET S, 1967-1969, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.
[174] Ellsworth Bunker, "Seventh Weekly Telegram," 14 June 1967. Printed in *The Bunker Papers: Reports to the President from Vietnam, 1967-1973*. Douglas Pike ed. (Berkeley, CA: Asia Foundation Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California-Berkeley Indochina Research Monograph Series, 1990), Volume I: 48.

dictatorship and the war."[175] In relying so heavily on what were widely referred to as "Ngô Đình Diệm-style" tactics, the military had effectively brought South Vietnamese politics full circle. The generals who one eyewitness records as having been "hailed as heroes [and] greeted as saviours of the country" for eliminating Ngô Đình Diệm were now regarded as perpetuating the very system they had once been lauded for dismantling.[176] And the election, once conceived as the centerpiece of a campaign to reconcile competing anti-communist factions, now seemed like merely a continuation of their struggle, reinforcing rather than resolving the country's acute polarization.

That civilian politicians so reviled the military's "Diệmist" tactics and that they invoked Ngô Đình Diệm's memory so readily in condemning them was perhaps to be expected given that the list of aspiring candidates read like a roll call of men who had endured considerable personal suffering for having dared to oppose the late President. Of the 17 joint President/Vice-Presidential tickets filed for Assembly approval on July 1, three men – Phan Khắc Sửu, Trần Văn Hương and Trần Văn Lý – had been imprisoned for signing the Caravelle Manifesto. Phan Khắc Sửu and his running-mate Phan Quang Đán had then been subject to beatings and water and electrical torture, and it was for this reason that "speaking very confidentially," Trần Văn Hương informed the Embassy, "Suu would be a terrible President. [He] was imprisoned and beaten during his long years as a revolutionary leader, and he is now fuzzy in the head."[177] For their efforts on behalf of the Đại Việt and Nationalist Parties [*Việt Nam Quốc dân Đảng*] respectively, candidates Hà Thúc Ký and Vũ Hồng Khanh had also been imprisoned under Ngô Đình Diệm, as

[175] [*Mọi người đều không tin cuộc bầu cử sẽ diễn ra trung thực*]; [*… một dịp để những người đối lợp với chính quyền có cơ hội bày tỏ quan điểm mình, áp lực mạnh mẽ hơn chống độc tài quân phiệt và chống chiến tranh*] Lý Quý Chung, *Hồi ký không tên*, 114.
[176] Mai Elliot, *The Sacred Willow,* 299.
[177] Ray Fontaine, *The Dawn of Freedom: a Biographical Sketch of Doctor Phan Quang Dan* (Brownsville, TX: Pan American Business Services, 1992), 46-56; Trần Văn Đôn, *Our Endless War: Inside Vietnam* (San Rafael, CA: Presidio Press, 1978), 66-67; Telegram 04784, Embassy Saigon to Department of State, 2 September 1967, POL 14 VIET S, 1967-1969, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.

had Ngô Đình Nhu's one-time lawyer Trương Đình Dzu, disbarred and arrested in 1963 on what was widely regarded as a politically-motivated charge of writing a bad cheque after running against Ngô Đình Diệm in the National Assembly.[178] Another attorney, Dương Văn Minh's running-mate Trần Ngọc Liễng, had served as defense lawyer to many of Ngô Đình Diệm's aforementioned political prisoners.[179] Other candidates in 1967 included Phạm Huy Cơ, who had led a delegation of Phan Quang Đán's Free Democratic Party [*Đảng Tự do Dân chủ*] to foreign capitals seeking assistance in removing Ngô Đình Diệm; Nguyễn Đình Luyện, Minister of Health in the 1960 rebels' abortive anti-Ngô Đình Diệm cabinet; Âu Trường Thanh, who had advocated overthrowing both Ngô Đình Diệm and Hồ Chí Minh in favor of a "neutralist" [*Trung lập*] government; and Hoàng Cơ Bình, who lost his dental practice after signing the 1960 rebels' manifesto, albeit for very a different reason – his frustration over Ngô Đình Diệm's failure to attempt the "liberation" the North by force – than his colleagues.[180]

More surprising perhaps was the similar manner in which Ngô Đình Diệm featured in the rhetoric of Nguyễn Cao Kỳ's main military rival, the titular Chair of the National Leadership Council Nguyễn Văn Thiệu. Circumspect and calculating where Nguyễn Cao Kỳ was flamboyant and spontaneous, Nguyễn Văn Thiệu appealed to conservatives repelled by Nguyễn Cao Kỳ's brash attitude and playboy persona, though he was regarded as enjoying less support within ARVN than his competitor. As it grew clear early in 1967 that a self-administered victory for the military was forthcoming, speculation turned instead to whether Nguyễn Cao Kỳ and

[178] Telegram 187, Embassy Saigon to Department of State, 3 July 1967, POL 14 VIET S, 1967-1969, CFPF, RG 59, NARA; Telegram 318, Embassy Saigon to Department of State, 5 July 1967, POL 14 VIET S, 1967-1969, CFPF, RG 59, NARA; Telegram 181, Embassy Saigon to Department of State, 3 July 1967, POL 14 VIET S, 1967-1969, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.
[179] Telegram 502, Embassy Saigon to Department of State, 7 July 1967, POL 14 VIET S, 1967-1969, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.
[180] Telegram 158, Embassy Saigon to Department of State, 3 July 1967, POL 14 VIET S, 1967-1969, CFPF, RG 59, NARA; Telegram 161, Embassy Saigon to Department of State, 3 July 1967, POL 14 VIET S, 1967-1969, CFPF, RG 59, NARA; Telegram 157, Embassy Saigon to Department of State, 3 July 1967, POL 14 VIET S, 1967-1969, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.

Nguyễn Văn Thiệu would field rival Presidential tickets, or whether ARVN would settle the confrontation by internally appointing one of the rival generals to serve as its official representative.

Undoubtedly, Nguyễn Cao Kỳ's surreptitious groundwork in the countryside had been intended as least as much to gain a head-start in thwarting Nguyễn Văn Thiệu as to promote his own prospects. This set the stage for a tense June 15 encounter between Nguyễn Văn Thiệu and Ellsworth Bunker, wherein the general, "with considerable emotion," Bunker recorded, excoriated his colleague's "attempted use of some members of the armed forces such as General Tri [Nguyễn Bảo Trị] and General Thang [Nguyễn Đức Thắng] in support of his candidacy, the flagrant abuse of censorship, and General Loan's activities." Nguyễn Văn Thiệu "then went on at some length," the Ambassador reported, "to stress his view of the imperative need for fair and honest elections if the people were to have confidence in the government. Otherwise… there would be a return to the days of Diem and eventually there would be another coup."[181] Well aware of mounting American media criticism of Nguyên Cao Kỳ's campaign excesses, Nguyễn Văn Thiệu's remarks were in part a bid to portray himself as a savvier and more responsible alternative to his impetuous rival, and as a statesman who understood the importance of curating South Vietnam's image for constituents both at home and abroad. But in referring so pointedly to his predecessor's demise, the aspiring President was also raising the stakes by shrewdly employing the Embassy's own tactic of invoking Ngô Đình Diệm's fate to levy veiled but unmistakable warnings. Given the turbulent post-Ngô Đình Diệm interregnum, which prompted a by-now-overarching US commitment to avoid extra-legal changes of government at all costs, such coup speculation could hardly be dismissed as an idle threat.

[181] Telegram 28170, Embassy Saigon to Department of State, 15 June 1967, POL 14 VIET S, 1967-1969, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.

This latest salvo in the generals' feud came amid growing ARVN fears that forcibly-retired general Dương Văn Minh, whose effective captivity in Bangkok "violates [the] language of [the] constitution and electoral law," as Ellsworth Bunker put it, would attempt to force his way back to Sài Gòn to contest the military for the presidency.[182] Unlike the other civilian candidates, men unknown to the vast majority of South Vietnam's mostly rural population, Dương Văn Minh enjoyed national prominence and considerable prestige. His esteemed reputation stemmed almost entirely from popular association as the symbol of anti-Ngô family resistance, and it persisted in spite of his own deposal, forced retirement, and exile shortly thereafter. A southern Buddhist vocal in supporting peace initiatives, Dương Văn Minh functioned as an iconic opposite of Ngô Đình Diệm and his military successors, and he was held to be the only figure with sufficient stature to unite South Vietnam's chronically factionalized opposition. Accordingly, throughout the Second Republic, he was courted by successive opposition operatives hoping to harness his popularity to advance their political ambitions. Few of these men, however, had much regard for Dương Văn Minh's administrative abilities, preferring to enlist him as something of a cipher whom they could deploy on their behalf from behind the scenes. Trần Văn Đôn, one of Dương Văn Minh's most outspoken public backers, admitted privately for instance that as President, his protégé would be "hopeless," claiming that "even those who supported Minh were fearful of the consequences if he were elected."[183]

And yet if anything, Dương Văn Minh's lasting appeal despite these perceived deficiencies only underlines his symbolic value as an emblem of southern Buddhist opposition to the Ngô family and its supporters, correspondingly demonstrating once again the depth and

[182] Telegram 29083, Embassy Saigon to Department of State, 27 June 1967, POL 14 VIET S, 1967-1969, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.
[183] Telegram 18724, Embassy Saigon to Department of State, 30 November 1971, POL 15-2 VIET S, 1970-1973, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.

persistence of resentment for the Ngô Đình Diệm regime. Certainly, for the increasingly reviled military, the extensive popular admiration for Dương Văn Minh posed an acute threat to the Election Law strategy of exploiting the opposition's otherwise insurmountable fragmentation.

With the Nguyễn Cao Kỳ - Nguyễn Văn Thiệu rivalry and the Dương Văn Minh question coming to a head as the July 1 deadline to file candidacies approached, the military called a top-secret summit for its highest-ranking officers at the end of June. The generals quickly determined that Dương Văn Minh could not be permitted to return from Thailand, with Chairman of the Joint General Staff Cao Văn Viên formally requesting on July 6 that the National Assembly disbar his candidacy on the grounds that he posed a National Security threat.[184] The tactic broke down however, because, as Central Election Council member Lý Văn Hiệp explained, "the complaint by Vien… has not been backed up by further statements, reasons, or documents… and the military has not explained what it means by 'National Security.'"[185] Instead, against a backdrop of vitriolic editorials in northern Catholic newspapers demanding Dương Văn Minh's exclusion, the military seized on a technicality, requesting that his candidacy be eliminated due to running mate Trần Ngọc Liễng's alleged former French citizenship, a violation of Article 53 of the constitution stating that candidates could not have held any citizenship except Vietnamese since birth.[186] On July 18, with Nguyễn Ngọc Loan again patrolling the National Assembly balcony while liberally imbibing, the military-sponsored Democratic Alliance Bloc turned out in full strength to ratify Dương Văn Minh's

[184] "Đại Tướng Minh không được phép về nước để ứng cử Tổng thống" [General Minh Not Permitted to Return to Contest the Presidential Election], *Chính Luận* [Political Discussion], July 7, 1967; Telegram 425, Embassy Saigon to Department of State, 6 July 1967, POL 14 VIET S, 1967-1969, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.
[185] Telegram 620, Embassy Saigon to Department of State, 9 July 1967, POL 14 VIET S, 1967-1969, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.
[186] For Catholic editorials, see, for example, "Chẳng có gì trái với Dân chủ" [Nothing Contrary to Democracy], *Xây Dựng* [Construction], July 6, 1967; Trần Ngọc Liễng protested that he had held only French "Metropolitan" status rather than full citizenship, that it had been unwittingly bestowed on him in 1950, and that he had never actively pursued French affiliation. Telegram 620, Embassy Saigon to Department of State, 9 July 1967, POL 14 VIET S, 1967-1969, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.

disqualification. Behind the scenes, despite public professions of impartiality, the Embassy signaled its approval of Dương Văn Minh's admittedly unconstitutional detention, noting that "the opposition of both the leading military figures and the Catholics [to Dương Văn Minh's candidacy] suggests that a 'Big' Minh victory could put us back in the atmosphere of 1963-64."[187]

Meanwhile, though not formally on the ARVN summit agenda, the Nguyễn Cao Kỳ - Nguyễn Văn Thiệu rivalry remained an elephant in the room throughout the Dương Văn Minh deliberations. Events unexpectedly reached a crisis complete with bitter accusations, denunciations, and tears when III Corps Chief and Nguyễn Cao Kỳ loyalist Lê Nguyên Khang revealed that in light of his patron's underhanded campaign tactics, his support for Nguyễn Cao Kỳ had wavered.[188] ARVN top brass seized on the shift in momentum, imposing a resolution whereby Nguyễn Cao Kỳ and Nguyễn Văn Thiệu would contest the election together on a joint President-Vice Presidential ticket, with the latter supplanting the former as the military's choice for President. The resulting all-military slate, an outcome described earlier by the White House as a "disaster" to be avoided at all costs, once again confounded the prevailing interpretation among South Vietnamese political observers like Lý Quí Chung that "whichever candidate the United States chose would of course be elected president."[189]

Elevated to ARVN heir apparent pending the inevitable administration of his election, Nguyễn Văn Thiệu faced a barrage of media criticism over the military's obvious intervention against Dương Văn Minh, complete with familiar comparisons to the dark days of Ngô Đình

[187] Telegram 620, Embassy Saigon to Department of State, 9 July 1967, POL 14 VIET S, 1967-1969, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.
[188] Telegram 1177, Embassy Saigon to Department of State, 16 July 1967, POL 14 VIET S, 1967-1969, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.
[189] "Memorandum on Action Program to Promote a Favorable Political Evolution in Saigon," White House to Department of State. 13 January 1967, POL US-VIET S 1967-199, CFPF, RG 59, NARA; [*Ứng cử viên được người Mỹ chọn đương nhiên sau đó sẽ đắc cử tổng thống*] Lý Quý Chung, *Hồi ký Không Tên*, 105.

Diệm. Nguyễn Ngọc Loan was subject to particular disdain, with pro-southern "Echo" [*Tiếng Vang*] condemning his "intimidation of the Assembly" by, as "Life" [*Sống*] colorfully put it, reminding legislators that "they could be rounded up and sent to Pleiku for a rest."[190] In response, Nguyễn Văn Thiệu addressed accusations of Catholic partisanship during an August 26 press conference by citing his assault on Ngô Đình Diệm's palace as proof of his religious impartiality. This marked the emergence of November 1963 as a recurring campaign issue, employed in subsequent elections by candidates of all persuasions as rhetorical shorthand to position themselves on either side of South Vietnam's indelible regional and religious divides.[191]

Of course, invoking Ngô Đình Diệm's ouster as evidence of patriotism hardly endeared Nguyễn Văn Thiệu to northern Catholic Ngô family loyalists, though by now the Greater Solidarity Force had already committed the votes it controlled to supporting the ARVN slate. Other Catholic groups, however, were yet to be persuaded. Nguyễn Ngọc Biên, leader of the Catholic Citizens' Bloc in Bình Thuận where some 30,000 Catholics resided, complained to a Vietnamese US Embassy contact that the G.S.F. had been "bought off" by the military. His followers would instead "follow our conscience," which in Nguyễn Ngọc Biên's case meant siding with southern Buddhist Trần Văn Hương, who he saw as "sympathetic to Catholic interest[s] and, just as important, free of any of the taint of corruption which surrounds the present government." Moreover, Nguyễn Ngọc Biên explained, "a Catholic President won't work – too many people remember Ngô Đình Diệm." Rather than make his allegiance public,

[190] [*biết đùa ông ta chẳng bắt mình lên Pleiku nghỉ mát*] "Tiết lộ một âm mưu" [Uncovering a Plot], *Sống* [Life], July25, 1967; Telegram 2048, Embassy Saigon to Department of State, 28 July 1967, POL 14 VIET S, 1967-1969, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.
[191] "Trung Tướng Thiệu họp báo" [Lieutenant-General Thieu Holds Press Conference], *Tự Do* [Freedom], August 26, 1967.

Nguyễn Ngọc Biên confided that he would instead mount a covert mouth-to-mouth campaign on Trần Văn Hương's behalf, to avoid "difficulties with the authorities."[192]

As expected though, ARVN overcame these reservations on Election Day, securing victory albeit with just 34% of the vote despite vast financial and administrative advantages, and rampant electoral fraud. Phan Khắc Sửu and Phan Quang Đán placed third, slightly ahead of Trần Văn Hương, who nonetheless went away with the consolation prize of winning the vote in Sài Gòn, regarded as the fairest contest given the concentration of scrutiny and election monitors. Both tickets were dismayed, however, by what they took to be a disappointing showing, having vastly overestimated their prestige in rural areas. Still, Sửu and Hương could take pride having delivered effective critiques of South Vietnamese government and society, seizing the forum provided by the elections to air the grievances and present the demands of South Vietnam's substantial fixed income class. Both elder statesman were upstaged to a considerable extent by the younger and more dynamic Phan Quang Đán, who, despite taking something of backseat as Sửu's running-mate, emerged as the election's most articulate and comprehensive critic. Đán directed his analysis toward a host of issues, from corruption, poverty, inequality, the plight of rural refugees, urban squalor, the decline of middle class-fixed-income wage-earners from inflation generated by the American presence, and the terrible impact of the militarization of South Vietnamese society. Absent reform, he argued during the Biên Hòa campaign stop, "the only careers which will be open to Vietnamese youth will be working in bars or shining shoes

[192] An estimated two-thirds of Bình Thuận's Catholic community were northern refugees clustered around the provincial capital Phan Thiết, including some 14,000 from Nghệ An Province alone. "Political Developments in Coastal II Corps for Period Ending August 4, 1967." Airgram A-108 from Saigon to Department of State, 6 August 1967, POL 18 VIET S 1967-1969, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.

and foreign cars."[193] In Chợ Lớn, Đán instructed his audience to "just look around, and if you like what you see, vote for Thieu."[194]

If the results were a disappointment for the Sudiste establishment, they amounted to an eclipse for the old clandestine parties. Both the VNQDD and Đại Việt Parties were humiliated, non-factors in the final polls at less than five percent of the vote each – further indication that the new manner of politics based on mass communication rather than covert machinations was taking hold. Vũ Hồng Khánh, Hà Thúc Ký and Nguyễn Hoa Hiệp took turns excoriating the military for having rigged the results, but while their allegations were not without substance, they in no way accounted for such an unflattering showing. Observers were also taken aback by how poorly the military performed, collecting just thirty-five percent of the vote (the Embassy anticipated 48% on the eve of the contest) despite months of illicit preparations and a near monopoly on province and district level administration. Indeed, the military polled the highest in communist-controlled districts and the remote Central Highlands, where logistics and security concerns rendered monitoring all but impossible, and where Montagnard leaders, who "for all practical purposes control the Montagnard vote," according to the Embassy, were happy to deliver votes in exchange for smooth and lucrative relations with the generals.[195] Urban areas, on the other hand, saw much more modest showings for Thiệu and Kỳ relative to civilian candidates, though the earlier decisions to structure election with no run-offs and a substantial number of candidates to split the vote largely paid off.

[193] Telegram 3362, Embassy Saigon to Department of State, 17 August 1967, POL 14 VIET S, 1967-1969, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.
[194] Telegram 4512, Embassy Saigon to Department of State, 31 August 1967, POL 14 VIET S, 1967-1969, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.
[195] Telegram 4794, Embassy Saigon to Department of State, 2 September 1967, POL 14 VIET S, 1967-1969, CFPF, RG 59, NARA; "Provincial Reporting: Election Outcome in II Corps," Airgram A-199 from Saigon to Department of State, 18 September, 1967, POL 18 VIET S 1967-1969, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.

While public relations teams in Washington and Sài Gòn worked to spin the low total as proof of the contest's propriety, behind closed doors Embassy analysis revealed that a transformative if rather less edifying development had instead transpired in the densely-populated Mekong Delta heartland. As the dust settled after polls closed on September 2, it soon became apparent that unlike in the Central Highlands, and with the exception of the delta's ethnic Cambodian communities, the patronage networks that Nguyễn Cao Kỳ long employed to secure vote-rich ethnic and religious communities had ruptured, yet another example of how the election had upended conventional political practices. Feuding amongst the Hòa Hảo and Cao Đài leaders, upon whose paid allegiance Kỳ had relied to prevail in the 1966 Constitutional Assembly and Village elections, saw discipline break down among rank and file votes, dampening turnout in critical delta provinces, and diversifying their voting patterns. This too, the Embassy determined, accounted for the military's surprisingly weak showing.[196]

The big surprise was a runner-up finish with 17% for Trương Đình Dzu, who, no doubt having absorbed the fate of Dương Văn Minh, shrewdly waited until after his candidacy was approved before launching an effective and resonant radio campaign calling for immediate peace talks with communists. Somewhat obscure even among Sài Gòn's more informed political followers, Dzu was a lawyer with something of a spotty background. He rose to prominence as the personal attorney for Ngô Đình Nhu, whereupon he was arrested for writing a bad check in 1962 after falling out with the Ngôs for daring to run independently for National Assembly. The charges rested on rather dubious grounds, the Embassy noted, as Dzu had more than enough to cover the expenses in question. Subsequently accused of trying to bribe US servicemen, Dzu was again arrested for missing a court date, and was presumed to be running for President merely

[196] Telegram 4885, Embassy Saigon to Department of State, 4 September 1967, POL 14 VIET S, 1967-1969, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.

to avoid prosecution while assembling his defense.[197] His stunning ascent in the polls caused shockwaves among informed observers, though he had in fact been working for some time to build his political network, backed by wealthy Cao Đài running-mate Trần Văn Chiêu and sponsored in the western Delta by the Tân (New) Đại Việts, the Southern Bloc of the long-fractured Đại Việt party.[198]

Given what appeared in Sài Gòn to be an exceedingly unlikely rise, Dzu was subject almost immediately to allegations of having prevailed only through secret French or communist backing.[199] His appeal, however, owed far more to a simple, repetitive platform which resonated in rural areas as a result of his charismatic capitalization on newly-introduced state-subsidized radio broadcasts. Dzu campaigned on a straightforward call for peace with the National Liberation Front at the soonest opportunity, reinforced by his evocative symbol – subsequently emulated by scores of candidates in every election to come – a white dove. His formal platform (translated and widely distributed in English) called for the end of the bombing against North Vietnam; immediate negotiations with Hà Nội, an unconditional ceasefire; amnesty for the NLF; autonomy in the highlands; and the withdrawal of all foreign troops after a peace treaty was settled.[200] This, unsurprisingly, caused a stir behind closed doors in official Sài Gòn, provoking an infuriated Nguyễn Cao Kỳ to publicly proclaim that he would hold Dzu captive in a cage on the Presidential Palace lawn should he be elected.[201]

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[197] For Embassy view of charges against Trương Đình Dzu see "Arrest of Prominent Vietnamese Lawyer." Airgram A-568 from Saigon to Department of State, 29 March 1963, POL 6-1 S VIET, 1963, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.
[198] Telegram 4885, Embassy Saigon to Department of State, 4 September 1967, POL 14 VIET S, 1967-1969, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.
[199] Robert Brigham. *Guerrilla Diplomacy: the NLF's Foreign Relations and the Vietnam War.* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999): 70.
[200] "Platform of Presidential Candidate Truong Dinh Dzu." Airgram A-84 from Saigon to Department of State, 1 August 1967, POL 14 VIET S 1967-1969, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.
[201] *Chính Luận*, August 25, 1967.

But for all the indignation he aroused, Dzu's ideas reflected a degree of sophistication, with elements of his agenda echoed in the campaign rhetoric of several of his better-established colleagues. He fell short, for instance, of advocating a coalition government with the communists, which would have been constitutionally proscribed. Instead, he proposed direct talks between Hà Nội and Sài Gòn, with British and Soviet observers and under American supervision, and with any peace arrangements to be subject to UN monitoring. Dzu also forswore dignifying the NLF with formal talks, though he noted that given their obvious control of significant population and territory, they could not simply be ignored, and could thus be consulted privately. Campaigning in Ban Mẹ Thuột province, he even stuck a hawkish note, proclaiming that South Vietnam would never surrender. Still, he continued, the country needed to be realistic by acknowledging negotiations as inevitable. If Sài Gòn deferred from taking the lead in peace talks with Hà Nội, he warned – presciently, it turned out, given that Washington was already pursuing communist backchannels – then it risked being excluded from setting the terms of any ultimate settlement, a view echoed repeatedly by Nguyễn Ngọc Huy of the Progressive Nationalist Movement, the showpiece of what Ellsworth Bunker liked to describe as "responsible opposition."[202]

While the Embassy assumed the Phan Khắc Sửu/Phan Quang Đán ticket would perform best among the civilian slates, rating Dzu's expected tally at between four to eight percent of the vote, they were nonetheless impressed by his articulation, and by the clarity of his message. Certainly, at least among the "obscure" civilian candidates, Dzu dominated press coverage. What ensued however was a comprehensive runner-up finish with 17% of the vote, including six outright province wins in Bình Dương, Hậu Nghĩa, and Tây Ninh in III Corps; and Hòa Hảo-

[202] Telegram 3647, Embassy Saigon to Department of State, 20 August 1967, POL 14 VIET S, 1967-1969, CFPF, RG 59, NARA. For backchannel see, for example, James Hershberg, *Marigold: The Lost Chance for Peace In Vietnam.* (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2012).

controlled An Giang and Châu Đốc, and Kiên Phòng in the Mekong Delta.[203] Startled by his stunning ascent seemingly from nowhere, the Embassy prepared a thorough analysis of the results to determine whether he had indeed coasted to second place on the back of communist subversion.

Dzu had indeed performed well in communist-dominated districts, the report concluded, though this was almost certainly less the result of outside interference than the fact that such areas were disproportionately subject to American and ARVN violence, producing a corresponding increase in the appeal of an immediate ceasefire. Instead, the Embassy concluded, Dzu's strong showing likely owed far more to the clarity and stridency of his message. A careful analysis of the results revealed that he had enjoyed nationwide support, from I to IV Corps, which had hardly been confined to communist- or Tân Đại Việt-controlled territories. In several provinces his success defied any clear pattern, as in vote-rich Bình Định in politically-engaged Central Vietnam. Here, Dzu outpolled Thiệu in secure areas, carrying the prosperous urban South where a strong VNQDD and Revolutionary Đại Việt presence in the civil service dampened military vote-rigging, while the military prevailed in the communist-influenced rural North and the highlands, both far more easily subject to electoral tampering.[204] The pattern was reversed in the delta's Long An, however, where Thiệu carried province capital Tân An over Dzu with a two-to-one margin, while the inverse held true for the countryside. Local military officials, the Embassy concluded, had taken their victory for granted, catching Dzu's momentum just in time to sack the Tân Đại Việt deputy Province Chief and narrowly deliver the province to

[203] Telegram 4885, Embassy Saigon to Department of State, 4 September 1967, POL 14 VIET S, 1967-1969, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.
[204] Telegram 4315, Embassy Saigon to Department of State, 20 August 1967, POL 14 VIET S, 1967-1969, CFPF, RG 59, NARA; Telegram 5557, Embassy Saigon to Department of State, 9 September 1967, POL 14 VIET S, 1967-1969, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.

Thiệu.[205] Meanwhile in Kiên Phòng, a notoriously communist-controlled delta province, Dzu carried the province by sweeping its prosperous town centers, while Thiệu prevailed only in insecure communist districts. "Dzu wins where there are people, Thieu where there are soldiers," a local reporter concluded.[206] An Giang and Châu Đốc – almost devoid of communist-controlled areas - were the sites of additional Dzu triumphs. The pair had long been South Vietnam's most secure provinces, the result almost entirely of grassroots dominance by the Hòa Hảo, sworn enemies of the communists after the assassination of spiritual father Huỳnh Phú Sổ. Here Dzu's success appeared to come from the intensified Trần Văn Tươi- Lương Trọng Tương leadership feud, resulting in lay officials' failure to enforce voting discipline behind the military, and allowing Hòa Hảo rank-and-file to vote according to their conscience. In the Châu Đốc province capital, officials were made aware of the extent of Dzu's appeal only as the votes started to arrive for counting, with insufficient time and the customary increased scrutiny in urban centers conspiring to forestall the intended outcome. Elsewhere in the delta, Dzu took the capital of Vĩnh Long province by a four-to-one margin, though he narrowly missed out on securing the province as a whole.[207] In any event, detailed province-by-province reporting revealed no evidence of communist interference behind Dzu's candidacy.

Needless to say, given Dzu's opposition to sustained hostilities combined with unprecedented mass appeal, the State Department found itself enormously relieved not to have prevailed in the quarrel with Cabot Lodge and the generals over the need for follow-up run-off elections – which would have effectively, in Dzu's case, amounted to a referendum on the war,

[205] Telegram 5682, Embassy Saigon to Department of State, 1 September 1967, POL 14 VIET S, 1967-1969, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.
[206] Telegram 5833, Embassy Saigon to Department of State, 13 September 1967, POL 14 VIET S, 1967-1969, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.
[207] Châu Đôc was created from An Giang by Ngô Đình Diệm, in part to give the appearance of an additional secure province in the delta. Telegram 6126, Embassy Saigon to Department of State, 16 September 1967, POL 14 VIET S, 1967-1969, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.

requiring substantially less subtle manipulation to deliver the correct outcome. All told, it was a remarkable performance, given the expense and extreme danger of travel in the countryside. In part the result of these factors, Sài Gòn politicians during the Second Republic had virtually no nationwide grassroots political networks, speaking at most for small, geographically-constrained political or religious communities whose local presence at times exceeded that of the state, albeit in relatively miniscule territories. Dzu's success then reveals just how resonant his peace campaign had proved to be, hinting as well at the power – and from the generals' perspective, the danger – of new means of communication like television and, especially, radio. Dzu's clear appeal, from Quảng Trị to Cà Mau, also suggested the existence of an embryonic nationwide constituency, transcending the existing "political class" network of informed civil servants and soldiers, tenuously linked across the capital and isolated provincial towns and outposts. Properly cultivated, Dzu's base represented an unprecedented opportunity for South Vietnam's political class to open a dialogue with long-neglected rural constituents, recognized as critical in the struggle against communism, but upon whose awareness, much less allegiance, to the anti-communist state they had been unable to rely since at least the final days of Ngô Đình Diệm.

But it was not be. Following the election, Dzu attempted to organize protests against alleged military interference with the results, and was immediately arrested and prosecuted on currency trading charges dating back to 1962 (which even the Embassy regarded as politically motivated), prompting an American media outcry which further undermining one of the primary objections of the entire enterprise – improved American public relations. Sentenced to nine months incarceration, Trương Đình Dzu was again placed under indefinite "protective custody," as Nguyễn Văn Thiệu put it, following the 1968 Tết Offensive, and formally charged three months later for having advocated contact with the National Liberation Front. He was sentenced

to five years in prison, though Sài Gòn papers noted that his remarks had been more or less echoed by Phan Quang Đán, who had wasted little time in setting aside his objections after the election to accept a post as Minister of State in the new Thiệu cabinet.[208] Meanwhile, officials in provinces where Dzu had succeeded were soon purged, most notably in Tây Ninh where popular and by all accounts effective province chief Hồ Đắc Trưng was dismissed of his duties, reigniting long-standing tensions between Sài Gòn and the Cao Đài.[209]

Regardless of his unfortunate treatment at the hands of the authorities, it is difficult to consider how Dzu might have fared had he prevailed in a fairer contest. Regarded as a crass opportunist if not a charlatan among Sài Gòn's political establishment, he struggled to attract the esteem of his fellow civilian candidates, to say nothing of the generals whose de facto authority was all but assured regardless of the outcome of the vote. "Dzu wears a political mini-skirt," one opponent quipped, "so he has caught the imagination of the youth."[210] But while disaffected students had initially rallied behind his post-election demonstrations, within weeks, they too had grown disillusioned by what Saigon Student Union leader Kiến Bé interpreted as Dzu's attempt to commandeer their movement.[211] And Dzu's subsequent remarks to an Australian reporter that he enjoyed the support of three ARVN divisions and was prepared to mount a coup if need be did little to secure the confidence of the political class.[212] Still, if considerably less than a meaningful contest for power, not least because of the weakness and fractiousness of the civilian opposition, the election nonetheless provided a rare opportunity for insight into rural public

[208] Telegram 20174, Embassy Saigon to Department of State, 22 February 1968, POL US-VIET S, 1967-1969, CFPF, RG 59, NARA; Charles Joiner, *The Politics of Massacre: Political Processes in South Vietnam*. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1974): 268.
[209] Telegram 37256, Embassy Saigon to Department of State, 5 September 1967, POL 15-4 VIET S, 1967-1969, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.
[210] Denis Warner, "South Vietnam Exists," *The Reporter*, September 21, 1967.
[211] *Sống*, September 26, 1967.
[212] Telegram 032427, Department of State to Embassy Saigon, 6 September 1967, POL 14 VIET S, 1967-1969, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.

opinion, universally acknowledged to be critical in the struggle against communism, but thus far largely obscure and subject to outside projections. If nothing else, the result suggests a widespread desire for peace in the countryside, where, unlike in informed urban centers, voters appeared far more interested in the content and clarity of Dzu's message rather than the nature of his character. With its wildly unpredictable outcome, the election represented a dangerous game for the United States and the generals, whose infighting had several times threatened to send the political scene spiralling out of control, raising the possibility that the risks of the endeavour outweighed the benefits of legalized if not legitimized military rule. It is certainly instructive to contrast the manipulated if nonetheless pluralistic campaign of 1967 with the much more strictly controlled and ultimately uncontested fiasco when Thiệu came up for re-election in 1971.

Carried out in the challenging context of a brutal ongoing war, the outcome of the election was mixed at best. At the very least, it had "legitimized, legalized and civilianized the old military regime," Trần Văn Tuyên posited in "Political Discussion" [*Chính Luận*] newspaper, and provided a basis for bringing an end to the chaos that, "because there had been no relationship between the government and the people," had characterized the past four years.[213] Other observers however, such as Senate candidate and future Ambassador-to-Laos Hoàng Cơ Thụy, were skeptical of even this basic feat: "the constitution of 1956, adopted under Diem, was a very reasonable document in itself," he pointed out, "but, as used by Diem, it became an instrument of an authoritarian government." While he had "every hope for the new constitution," Hoàng Cơ Thụy was "more concerned over the manner in which it is applied by

[213] [*chánh quyền quân nhân cũ đã được hợp thức hóa, chỉnh lý hóa và sắp được dân sự hóa*]; [*vì giữa chánh quyền và nhân dân không có sự liên hệ*] Trần Văn Tuyên. "Vài ý nghĩ về cuộc bầu cử 3 tháng 9" [A Few Thoughts on the September 3 Election], *Chính Luận* [Political Discussion], September 16, 1967.

Vietnamese leaders in the future." [214] And when it came to the fundamental problem of political polarization, even the more sanguine Trần Văn Tuyên harboured grave doubts. "President Ngô Đình Diệm's biggest and most basic mistake," he wrote, "was not knowing how to unite national forces… the prerequisite condition for success in any undertaking." "I am not optimistic," he continued, "like those who say that if we have a constitution and an assembly, we can have democracy and if we have a popularly-elected regime, we can have peace… I worry that this Second Republic is deficient at its very beginning and that its existence is seriously threatened at its very birth."[215]

Conceived in part as a means of reconciling anti-communist South Vietnam's complex overlapping regional and religious poles, the election was nearly undone by the very tensions it had been intended to resolve, if anything serving to aggravate rather than alleviate Catholic-Buddhist and civilian-military rivalries. Unsurprising for an exercise contested by factions that emerged and largely defined themselves in response to Ngô Đình̀a Diệm's divisive rule, pro- and especially anti-Diệmist allegory and rhetoric and featured heavily, with candidates positioning themselves by invoking competing interpretations of his legacy. A "Political Discussion" [*Chính Luận*] commenter, for instance, described a country cleaved between those who "wanted order after the chaos that followed November 1, 1963," and those who "feared dictatorship… and were compelled to find a way to prevent the recurrence of a second [Ngô Đình] Diệm." The Second Republic, he proposed, amounted to a series of symbolic concessions to the latter camp: "Did [Ngô Đình] Diệm connive at corruption and abuse? In that case, we have a watchdog with broad

[214] "Conversation with Hoang Co Thuy, Leading Candidate on Senate List No. 9," Airgram A-192 from Saigon to Department of State, 4 August 1967, POL 14 VIET S 1967-1969, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.
[215] [*lỗi lầm căn bản và lớn nhất của tổng thống Ngô Đình Diệm… không biết đoàn kết lực lượng quốc gia… đó là điều kiện tiên quyết thứ nhất của mọi công việc*]; [*Tôi không lạc quan như những người cho rằng có Hiến pháp, có QH là sẽ có dân chủ, có chánh phủ dân bầu là sẽ có hòa bình… tôi lo ngại mà thấy rằng chế độ Cộng hòa thứ II là một chế độ tiên thiên bất tức và đời sống của nó bị đe dọa nghiêm trọng ngay từ lúc ra đời*] Trần Văn Tuyên, "Vài ý nghĩa về cuộc bầu cừ 3 tháng 9."

powers to eradicate corruption… Did he stifle freedom of speech? Then censorship must be avoided, at least regarding the press."[216] In turn, voter expectations and reactions were likewise conditioned by impressions of Ngô Đình Diệm and his government. As the 1967 campaign to restore legitimacy and constitutional rule reveals then, South Vietnamese politics in the Second Republic were dominated by the former President's looming posthumous presence, with ongoing debates about his memory mirrored in the basic configuration of its polarized political scene.

The election then was less a true contest than a sort of national plebiscite on the war, the results of which, however, both the military and the United States opted to ignore in their prolonged pursuit of a military solution. Regardless of the contest's propriety, civilian politicians themselves were at times willing to concede that there was simply no civilian strong enough or prestigious enough to unilaterally administer the country, a position rendered self-fulfilling by their sustained failure to cooperate and unite. Instead, the events came to be interpreted as an attempt to graft a civilian public emblem onto a legally-bound and, ideally, more responsive ARVN. After all, South Vietnam remained a country where the most important decisions were made by generals behind closed doors, and where the most important political relationships were within the military, often managed unofficially through family or client-patron channels. It would always take more than a mere election to change reality of latent military power in a country where ARVN and the Communist Party provided the only true nationwide institutions.

Still, the election represented a symbolic gesture nonetheless worthy of consideration, and a rhetorical commitment to rule of law, even if the reality often fell far short. As we have

[216] [*…mong muốn trật tự vì chịu ảnh hưởng của các vụ đảo lộn sau 1/11/1963*]; [*…e sợ độc tài… họ phải tìm một cách ngăn ngừa sự tái xuất của một ông Diệm thứ hai*]; [*Ông Diệm có dung túng cho tham nhũng lộng hành? Nên phải có một cơ quan Giám sát có quyền rất rộng để chống tham nhũng. Ông Diệm có bóp nghẹt tự do ngôn luận? Vậy kiểm duyệt phải được bãi bỏ, ít nhất đối với báo chí]* Nguyễn Văn, "Chế độ ba tuổi" [The Three-Year-Old Government], *Chính Luận* [Political Discussion], September 4, 1970.

seen, it set the foundation for and hinted at the possibility of a new style of mass civilian politics. At first obscured by disappointment over the military's egregious interference, the new constitutional order also provided South Vietnam with new political structures and institutions, which served as a critical rallying point for anti-communists months later during the shock of the Tết Offensive. Four weeks after the first communist attacks, and with the countryside in the midst of months of upheaval and disarray, Secretary of State Dean Rusk wrote: "We are convinced that the existence of a representative, constitutional government in Saigon at the time of the Tet Offensive worked in our favor at the moment of crisis. Had it not been there and had we in its stead a fragile military junta such as existed in other years, we feel that the GVN would have been much more vulnerable. Fortunately, the constitutional framework was there and though it suffered and is suffering from extreme tensions, it survived its initial test and provided a frame of reference to which the Vietnamese both within and outside the government could relate."[217] Of course, it would take more than a shoddily-rigged election to overcome such entrenched hostilities, but, as Trần Văn Tuyên wearily concluded, "in the midst of the current political chaos, having something in hand is better than void and nothingness."[218]

[217] Telegram 126178, Department of State to Embassy Saigon, 7 March 1968, POL 15 VIET S, 1967-1969, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.
[218] [*trong cảnh hỗn mang chính trị hiện thời, có một cái gì trong tay được còn hơn khoảng rỗng, hư không*] Trần Văn Tuyên, "Vài Ý nghĩa về Cuộc bầu cừ 3 Tháng 9."

CHAPTER 3

NIXON'S CLASH OF CONSTITUENTS

As we have seen, in spite of the vast scale of its commitment to the war, the United States often struggled to choreograph the course of events in South Vietnam. Nonetheless, American policy towards Vietnam was, of course, critical to shaping the conflict's pivotal denouement. And indeed, given the overbearing nature of U.S. involvement in the war, many South Vietnamese observers, if anything, tended to overstate the extent of American influence over political developments in Sài Gòn. Thus, after the 1968 Tết Offensive, conspiracy of American complicity abounded, with C.I.A. rumoured to have colluded to permit the attacks either in order to provide pretext for a settlement with Hà Nội, to test ARVN performance, or as a means of elimininating the more hard core communists in order to permit moderates to pursure the Paris negotations. Such speculation, the Embassy noted, reflected widespread "Vietnamese views of how the wily American mind works."[219]

Back in the United States, the war likewise played an increasing role in shaping the trajectory of domestic affairs, most notably prompting President Johnson's dramatic March 1968 announcement that the U.S. would impose a halt on the bombing of North Vietnam as precursor to peace negotiations in Paris, and that he would not contest the upcoming fall Presidential election. With casualties steadily climbing in Vietnam, the United States appeared to have made little progress since the deployment of ground troops in 1965, especially in light of the 1968 Tet Offensive, initially interpreted by the American media as an unprecedented show of strength by

[219] Airgram A-449, "Rumors of American Complicity in the Viet Cong Tet Offensive," Embassy Saigon to Department of State, 20 January 1971, File: Anti-Americanism (1), NSAF, NSC VIG, GFL.

communist forces.[220] Worse still, the war had come to serve as a focal point for increasingly widespread domestic strife. In 1967, more than 50,000 anti-war demonstrators had assembled at the Pentagon to protest, contributing to a conservative backlash outside the Democratic Convention in Chicago the following year, which one official report described as "a police riot."[221] By the spring of 1968, the spectre of social upheaval had grown so severe that the Joint Chiefs of Staff felt compelled to assure the Johnson administration that their proposed deployment of reinforcements to South Vietnam in the wake of Tet would leave "sufficient forces… available for civil disorder control."[222] Still, for all the momentum behind the peace talks, there was no shortage of prominent voices calling for the pursuit of victory to preserve American honor and credibility.[223] As National Security staffer Sven Kraemer wrote, the public clamor for peace meant that "the image of the United States as a paper tiger is coming dangerously close to being universally accepted." "I am deeply afraid now," he continued," that cleverness and brilliant schemes, diplomatic finesse, and complex chess-board moves can no longer save us, externally or internally. We do not have to become 'brutal and primative,' but there has to be a very intense effort on our part to be less obvious in our search for accomodation and to at least give the appearance of being strong-willed and prepared to have recourse, at the moment of truth, to very strong action."[224]

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[220] Charles Mohr. "Vietcong Press Guerrilla Raids; Martial Law Declared by Thieu; Hue is Embattled." *The New York Times,* February 1, 1968, pp1, 14. See also Don Oberdorfer. *Tet! The Turning Point in the Vietnam War*. 2nd ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 2001): 158-161.

[221] Daniel Walker. *Rights in Conflict: "The Chicago Police Riot." The Official Report to the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence*. 1st ed. (New York: The New American Library, 1968).

[222] *The Pentagon Papers: The Defense Department History of the United States Decision-making on Vietnam: The Senator Gravel Edition. (*Boston: Beacon Press, 1971): 539.

[223] See for example Andrew L. Johns, *Vietnam's Second Front: Domestic Politics, the Republican Party, and the War*. (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2010); Sandra Scanlon, *The Pro-War Movement: Domestic Support for the Vietnam War and the Making of Modern American Conservatism*. (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2013).

[224] Sven Kraemer to Henry Kissinger, "A View to the Future," June 13, 1969. William J Baroody Subject Files: Issue Areas – General (2), box A74, MLP, GFL.

Seeking to appeal to both hawks and doves, Republican nominee for President Richard Nixon was vague about his plans for Vietnam, pledging only that he would "win peace with honor," a phrase designed to appeal to all sides of the political spectrum. Even after securing his party's nomination, the aspiring President was instructed by campaign advisor Pat Buchanan to avoid so much as mentioning "De-Americanization" – the withdrawal of American troops – for fear it would prompt conservatives to "raise hell on this Vietnam thing, [by] saying RN is making… the old Nixon swing to the left once the right gives him the nomination."[225]

Helped by his refusal to take a clear stance on the war, Nixon prevailed in the 1968 election, fending off challenges from both Hubert Humphrey on the left and George Wallace on the right. But while the ambiguous promises of "winning peace with honor" were encouraging to pro-war and anti-war voters alike, they did little to bring about a coherent strategy for improving the situation in Vietnam. Moreover, as President, Nixon soon discovered that the public discord over how to proceed was reflected within his own cabinet. In National Security Study Memorandum 1 (NSSM-1), one of the earliest documents produced by the administration regarding Vietnam, a clear division was revealed between a relatively optimistic faction consisting of the Sài Gòn Embassy and the various military commands, and the far more skeptical CIA, State, and Defense Departments. The most striking feature of NSSM-1, however, was its overall pessimism. The result of a series of questions on Vietnam put forth to the member agencies of the National Security Council (NSC), NSSM-1 reveals that profound doubts about the ability of the South Vietnamese government to defend itself and win popular support were universally shared within the cabinet, even by those who felt the war was still worth pursuing.

[225] Pat Buchanan. "Memo to RN," July 28, 1968. Richard Nixon Presidential Library, White House Special Files Collection, Box 26, Folder 7.

Among the concerns of the skeptics at State, Defense, and the CIA were the strength of North Vietnam and its guerrilla clients in the South; the persistent corruption and ineffectiveness of the Sài Gòn regime; the increasing financial burden of sustaining the war; and the growing domestic turmoil that it generated, issues which inspired Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird in particular to emerge as an advocate of rapid "Vietnamization" – the withdrawal of American troops in favor of South Vietnamese replacements. The "hawks" in the military and at the Embassy, on the other hand, insisted that the South Vietnamese government and military were making steady progress, and that several aspects of the conflict were now finally shifting in America's favor. But when pressed, even the hawks had to admit that the recent gains they were heralding had scarcely weakened Hà Nội's position, and that the decades-old project of forging a self-sustaining anti-communist bulwark in the South remained years if not decades away.

In a recent issue of *Diplomatic History* devoted to Vietnamization, one contributor lists a series of questions he feels "policymakers neglected to ask" about the state of the conflict in 1969, questions such as "what if Hanoi did not have a breaking point, or at least one that the United States could establish within the acceptable costs and boundaries U.S. policymakers had established? How might such knowledge have altered both the war-fighting and war-ending scenarios?"[226] In fact, these questions were posed in NSSM-1, and the responses suggested the worst – that there was little the United States could do to force concessions from North Vietnam. But the study received scant attention from a President who was determined to escalate the war regardless of his advisors' reservations. Nixon's early decision to intensify American operations against the North was taken even before the results of NSSM-1 were published, and once revealed to him, the study's grim conclusions had little impact on his conduct of the war.

[226] Marc J. Selverstone. "Editor's Introduction: the Politics of Troop Withdrawal." *Diplomatic History*, 34, 3, (June 2010): 467.

Furthermore, with their dissenting views on what had become official policy now exposed in writing, internal critics like Laird, Secretary of State William Rogers, and CIA Director Richard Helms were increasingly shut out of the decision-making process, their ultimately prescient advice on the futility of bombing North Vietnam and invading Cambodia and Laos left unheeded. Under Nixon then, as under Lyndon Johnson before him, the Vietnam War was less a case of "the best and the brightest" foreign policy minds succumbing to hubristic delusions, but rather, of a President gambling on an improbable breakthrough despite the misgivings of advisors who knew well how bleak the prospects were for victory.[227] Accounts of Nixon-era decision-making on Vietnam have thus far focused primarily on Nixon and National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger, understandable given the pair's predominant influence over foreign affairs.[228] But by examining instead the role of marginalized critics within the administration, this paper reveals that Nixon's attempts to intimidate Hà Nội were carried out in spite of doubts even from optimistic NSC members that escalation would do little to improve South Vietnam's prospects. NSSM-1, therefore, represents an unheeded call for caution which accurately foresaw many of the negative consequences of expanding the war. And when the dust finally settled in 1973, close to 20,000 Americans soldiers had been killed under Nixon's watch, the United States had caved to Hà Nội's demand that it retain its troops in South Vietnam, and Nixon's reputation as a statesman was severely challenged.

The Origins of NSSM-1

According to Daniel Ellsberg, the RAND corporation employee who would later leak the *Pentagon Papers*, the 1968 appointment of Henry Kissinger as Nixon's national security advisor

[227] On the Johnson administration see Fredrik Logevall. *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam*. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999).
[228] See for example Jeffrey Kimball. *Nixon's Vietnam War*. (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 1998) and Robert Dallek. *Nixon and Kissinger, Partners in Power*. (New York: Harper Collins, 2007).

represented an auspicious development in the recently-inaugurated peace process with North Vietnam. For if Kissinger's recent remarks on the conflict were anything to go by, a dramatic re-evaluation of the American commitment was forthcoming. In January, 1969, Kissinger published "The Viet Nam Negotiations," in which he argued that the Tet Offensive proved once and for all that the United States had failed to contest the widespread legitimacy enjoyed by the communist guerrilla network in the rural South. Consequently, a new American strategy was urgently required, namely, the negotiation of a settlement with North Vietnam. Ideally, for Kissinger, this would see the United States withdrawing its troops, with South Vietnam forced to accept the incorporation of the Hà Nội-sponsored National Liberation Front (NLF) into the political sphere – a "minimum and necessary concession" - upon pain of "an international presence to enforce good faith." Of course, the North Vietnamese would also be expected to withdraw their forces from the South, but in Kissinger's view, they would concede this point because of their confidence that the NLF would prevail in peaceful competition against the unpopular South Vietnamese regime. Should Sài Gòn prove unwilling to co-operate then Washington could simply form its own separate agreement with Hà Nội. "Ending the war honorably" was by now "essential for the peace of the world," Kissinger concluded, and the new administration should be given every chance to "move towards a peace."[229] As Ellsberg recalls, Kissinger's appointment created an "indelible impression… that President Nixon endorsed Kissinger's published ideas," resulting in a sense of cautious optimism that an end to the conflict was near.[230] And in Sài Gòn, his appointment as National Security Advisor sparked fears that the move was intended as the precursor to an immediate settlement with Hà Nội.[231] Aware that

[229] Henry A. Kissinger. "The Viet Nam Negotiations," *Foreign Affairs.* 47, 2, (January, 1969).
[230] Daniel Ellsberg. *Secrets: a Memoir of Vietnam and the Pentagon Papers*. (New York: Viking, 2002): 231.
[231] Airgram 52, "Political Developments in III CTZ During December," Saigon to Department of State, February 3, 1969, POL 18 VIET S, 1967-1969, CFPF, RG 59, NARA

Nixon sought to prolong rather than resolve conflict, Kissinger hastened to assure the incoming President of his loyalty: ""As you know," he wrote of the *Foreign Affairs* piece, "it was already in print when you appointed me."[232] As we shall see, Kissinger's views changed dramatically soon after he joined the administration, but it is nonetheless interesting to note that Nixon's primary advisor on Vietnam initially shared much of NSSM-1's pessimism.

Aware of Ellsberg's military and intelligence experience in South Vietnam, Kissinger appointed him to organize a series of projects that would culminate in NSSM-1. Ellsberg began by providing Kissinger with a list of questions he had prepared about the war, explaining that previous Defense Secretary Robert McNamara had used a similar list to expose disagreements within the Pentagon, thus discovering "where the bodies were buried," as Ellsberg put it. Using his new series of questions on Vietnam, Ellsberg continued, Nixon could mimic McNamara's tactics on a broader scale. By having his cabinet complete the questionnaire, the President would acquire documentation of any dissenting views, helping him to determine whether certain departments were exaggerating their contributions to the war. And, Ellsberg suggested, there was a second benefit: if he insisted that the cabinet branches prepare their responses independently of each other, Nixon could prevent his subordinates from conspiring to "snow [him] or mislead [him]… with a united front that papered over disputed issues." Kissinger "liked the sound of that," Ellsberg recalls, because it "would put the bureaucrats off-balance and on the defensive relative to the source of the questions – that is, Kissinger."[233]

In his memoirs, Kissinger avoids commenting on whether Ellsberg's questions served to satisfy such Machiavellian motives, describing the project as merely a way to "sharpen any disagreements so that we could pinpoint the controversial questions and the different points of

[232] Kissinger to Nixon, December 13, 1968, NSF, VSF, Box 70, Folder 9, RNL
[233] Ibid., 237.

view."[234] In this regard, NSSM-1 proved successful, no doubt because the respondents' uncertainty over Nixon's plans for Vietnam prevented them from using the questions to curry favor. Still, as we shall see, Kissinger's obsession with preserving his status as Nixon's primary foreign policy aide suggests that the more devious ambitions described by Ellsberg also informed his support for the proposal. In any case, impressed with Ellsberg's reasoning, the newly-appointed national security advisor approved the project. On January 21, 1969, a list of 28 questions was distributed to the CIA, the State and Defense Departments, the Sài Gòn Embassy, and three military branches: the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), the United States Military Pacific Command (CINCPAC), and Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV). Presented with hundreds of pages of responses in mid-February, Ellsberg and Kissinger aide Winston Lord prepared a digest of the replies, released back to the NSC on March 22.[235]

NSSM-1 Results: ARVN

Unlike the early Johnson years, when a coalition of influential statesmen including McNamara, Dean Rusk, McGeorge Bundy and Walt Rostow were united by their desire to expand the war, NSSM-1 revealed that Nixon's cabinet enjoyed no such unanimity over how to proceed.[236] But though the military and Embassy proved more hawkish than the CIA, State and Defense departments, the conclusions that emerged from Ellsberg's summary were uniformly stark. The Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) was one of several American-supported South Vietnamese institutions on the receiving end of criticism from all parties. A centerpiece of the American campaign in South Vietnam, the ARVN was established in 1955 following Vietnam's partition at the 1954 Geneva conference, and since its inception under Eisenhower it had benefited from considerable American financial and technical assistance. A major boost in

[234] Henry Kissinger. *The White House Years*. (Boston: Little, Brown, 1979): 238.
[235] Ellsberg, 239.
[236] Logevall, 78-79.

the United States' commitment came in 1961 when John F. Kennedy, resisting considerable pressure from his cabinet to send U.S. regulars to South Vietnam, instead approved the eventual deployment of more than 16,000 American military advisors to train their South Vietnamese counterparts.[237] But by 1965, the ARVN remained unable to fend off communist forces, prompting Lyndon Johnson to introduce conventional U.S. ground forces into the conflict for the first time, ostensibly to stall the communists until the ARVN could cope on its own. Millions of American soldiers later, the 1969 inauguration of yet another "Vietnam War" president served as a portentous occasion to review the performance of an army which had failed for the past fifteen years to fulfill its duty as the guarantor of a non-communist South Vietnam.

When asked to assess the South Vietnamese army, MACV, CINCPAC and the JCS – the military representatives tasked with completing Ellsberg's questionnaire – proved to be the most positive about the ARVN's progress. Among the American military commanders, few had a more vested interest in seeing the ARVN succeed than Creighton Abrams, appointed to replace William Westmoreland in the aftermath of Tet. As MACV commander, Abrams wasted little time in redesigning American tactics, abandoning Westmoreland's "Search and Destroy" model, in which U.S. troops worked to generate more casualties than the enemy could replace, in favor of a "Clear and Hold" strategy, which instead prioritized securing rural territory and seizing enemy supplies.[238] And as biographer Lewis Sorely argues, a post-Tet emphasis on strengthening the ARVN originated with Abrams, making the success of Clear and Hold and his reputation as a military commander contingent on the performance of the ARVN.[239]

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[237] National Security Action Memorandum no. 111. November 22, 1961. (*FRUS., Vietnam, 1961*): 656-657.
[238] Lewis Sorley. *A Better War: the Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America's Last Years in Vietnam*. (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1999): 20-21.
[239] Lewis Sorley. *Vietnam Chronicles: the Abrams Tapes, 1968-1972*. (Lubbock, TX: Texas Tech University Press, 2004): xix.

Accordingly, throughout its report, the military, and MACV in particular, stressed that the ARVN had made considerable progress in recent years, and that there were grounds for believing these positive trends would continue.[240] On the whole, MACV concluded, "government of Vietnam forces have shown an improved capability to conduct offensive mobile operations when given the means." The military also strove to deflect some of the criticism frequently levelled against the ARVN. Perhaps reflecting a sense of defensiveness about South Vietnamese soldiers' notoriously passive battlefield behavior, MACV argued that the ARVN was becoming more involved in night missions, long a source of apprehension for ARVN commanders, though it conceded that recent statistics almost certainly exaggerated the ARVN's true night-time activity rate. Responding to a recent spike in the desertion rate, the military countered that this was merely a temporary development, the result of a vast 1968 expansion of the ARVN which inevitably led to a "consequent high degree of immaturity and dilution of leadership."[241] Moreover, MACV maintained, punishments for desertion grew steadily more effective in 1968, to the point where the desertion rate was at its lowest since 1963. Somewhat less convincing was the military's response to allegations of widespread violence against civilians; when asked "what known disciplinary action has resulted from ARVN looting of civilians in the past year?," MACV acknowledged that only eight soldiers had been tried for offences against civilians in 1968, and six of the culprits had only received suspended sentences. Still, unlike the other respondents, the military insisted that there was "no firm evidence of widespread looting."

[240] MACV, CINCPAC and the JCS submitted a combined response to Ellsberg. The JCS, and especially CINCPAC often state simply that they concur with MACV's position. I use both MACV and 'the military,' in cases of consensus between the three branches, and use JCS and CINCPAC to refer to input from the Joint Chiefs of Staff or CINCPAC which is distinct from that provided by MACV.
[241] The result of the GVN's Decree Law 15, essentially a conscription act.

Hiccups aside then, the overall state of the ARVN was described by the military in positive, if measured terms. But beneath the surface of its praise, there were several indications from the MACV report that South Vietnamese forces were far from capable of confronting their Northern counterparts, even assuming that Vietnamization was deferred or abandoned. ARVN improvement, MACV admitted, "varies... to a large degree according to the combat support received from U.S. and limited [i.e.: elite] RVNAF sources."[242] This was particularly pronounced both in I Corps, where "U.S. support still plays a significant part in the success of [ARVN] forces," and in strategically-vital III Corps, where only "one third of the South Vietnamese Army-Manoeuver battalions conduct offensive operations effectively," and where many units were "ineffective due to lack of leadership at all levels, a fear of conducting squad and platoon semi-independent operations and a widespread lack of offensive spirit."[243] Vietnamese candidates for crucial high-skill-level positions such as helicopter pilots would continue to require training in the United States for some time, and even with improved South Vietnamese air and artillery forces, "U.S. support units will be required to make up RVNAF shortcomings." Still more revealing, in response to the question "to what extent could [the] RVNAF --as it is now --also handle a sizeable level of NVA forces without U.S. direct support?," MACV bluntly acknowledged that "continued U.S. material support… will be required indefinitely to maintain an effective force," and that a "continuing requirement for a U.S. presence in the form of a Military Assistance Advisory Group is anticipated also." Nonetheless, convinced of the ARVN's recent progress, the Joint Chiefs of Staff proposed that "in spite of its shortcomings, [ARVN] is today a powerful and effective force," one which would

[242] RVNAF – "Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces," used interchangeably with 'ARVN' in the responses.
[243] The United States military divided South Vietnam into four 'Corps,' with I Corps corresponding roughly with the Northern Border, II Corps the Central Highlands, III Corps the area around Saigon and IV Corps the Mekong Delta.

"provide the Republic of Vietnam with a force capable of dealing with the residual insurgency threat [NLF] once U.S. *and* NVA forces have withdrawn."[244]

That it deferred to the military on most NSSM-1 questions about the ARVN is a sign of the Sài Gòn Embassy's commitment to staying the course in South Vietnam, buoyed by the belief of ambassador Ellsworth Bunker that the United States was winning the war. Known as a staunch anti-communist for his role in helping to install pro-American regimes in Indonesia and the Dominican Republic, Bunker was selected by Lyndon Johnson in 1967 to replace Henry Cabot Lodge in Sài Gòn after Lodge had opposed the scale of U.S. involvement in Vietnam.[245] Suggesting that the appointment was meant to signal his resolve, Johnson used the occasion of Bunker's swearing-in to deliver what one historian describes as "probably the most definitive and strident defense of U.S. policy in Vietnam of his entire Presidency."[246] The President's faith in the new ambassador paid off when, days after the Tet, at a time when most Americans were reeling from the surprise attacks, Bunker dispatched a series of cables to Washington accurately describing events as a "massive military defeat" for the enemy.[247] In his first report for Nixon little more than a year later, Bunker cited improvements in South Vietnamese morale, heavy communist casualties at Tet, and the expansion of the ARVN as reasons why both he and "the Vietnamese… [saw] many reasons to hope that 1969 will be a good year."[248]

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[244] NSSM-1: Joint Chiefs of Staff Response. February 4, 1969. *Documents of the National Security Council*, Second Supplement, Third Reel. Paul Kesaris ed. (Frederick, MD: University of Maryland Publications). Italics are mine.
[245] Howard B. Schaffer. *Ellsworth Bunker: Global Troubleshooter, Vietnam Hawk*. (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2003): 163-164.
[246] William Conrad Gibbons. *U.S. Government and the Vietnam War: Executive and Legislative Roles and Relationships*. Part IV. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995): 607.
[247] Ellsworth Bunker. "Thirty-Seventh Weekly Telegram to the President," February 4, 1968. *The Bunker Papers: Reports to the President from Vietnam, 1967-1973*. Douglas Pike, ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990): 318-319.
[248] Ibid., 655.

Under Nixon, Bunker formed close ties with Kissinger, who favored the ambassador – "one of our great diplomats" – with secret updates from the Paris talks with North Vietnam.[249] He also developed a mutual sympathy with Creighton Abrams, sharing classified details from Paris with the general, who in turn pledged "never to take any major action without prior consultation with Bunker," according to Lewis Sorley.[250] Unsurprisingly, the Embassy's assessment of ARVN reflected both the ambassador's optimism about the war and his allegiance to Abrams. Like MACV, the Embassy cited "increased effectiveness of the security shield provided by the RF and PF [Regional Forces and Popular Forces]" due to better training, improved leadership, more-powerful weapons, and increased confidence.[251] Asked to elaborate, however, the Embassy admitted that "the appearance of improved RF and PF operations," was as much the result of changing enemy tactics as improved ARVN performance, with "a lower rate of terrorism and a lower level of VC military activity" recorded since September 1968.[252] On this point at least, the Defense Department concurred. Only 20% of RF/PF forces had ventured beyond their initial locations, the Pentagon claimed, indicating an unwillingness to challenge communist villages even in light of the recent communist retreat. Defense also regarded ARVN looting as a major concern, unlike MACV, which was satisfied with citing a lack of evidence about the scale of the problem.[253] For the Pentagon, such allegations of ARVN misdeeds were representative of a far more worrisome trend: the army's lack of respect for civilians. Given the ineffectiveness of South Vietnam's military leaders, Defense predicted that

[249] Secretary of State William Rogers, by contrast, was loathed by Kissinger, and was not informed about the talks until 1971. Schaffer, 243 and Kissinger, *White House Years*, 1366.
[250] Sorely, *A Better War*, 19.
[251] Regional Forces and Popular Forces were militia units assigned to protect rural districts and villages from communist infiltration.
[252] NSSM-1: Embassy Response, Q10a-2. VC – Viet Cong, a widely-used pejorative term for the NLF.
[253] The Secretary of Defense serves as the chief civilian authority over the military, with MACV, CINCPAC and the JCS all subordinate to the Defense Department. Thus, the Defense Department's NSSM-1 response, though in some places based on data from the MACV/CINCPAC/JCS response, represents an original contribution which frequently disputes the findings presented by the military.

ARVN contempt for civilians would continue "despite even the most concerted reform efforts," at a cost of "further alienat[ion] of the civilian population from the government's cause."

But poor leadership and civilian disdain were not the only reasons why Defense was dubious about ARVN's prospects. Under current conditions, the department judged, with the United States assisting the ARVN and the NVA supporting the NLF, modest progress was possible, though eliminating the NLF threat would require "a prolonged period of time." Key to the Pentagon's assessment of the situation however, was the length of the U.S. commitment. If the U.S. withdrew prematurely, it would force the ARVN to retreat, sacrificing "substantial rural areas" to the NLF even without NVA assistance. For the ARVN to sustain itself independently against the NLF, a successful U.S.-organized modernization campaign was essential, and a 1972 target date was already unlikely to be met despite efforts to accelerate the project. Against NVA regulars, the Defense prognosis was bleaker still. Even with U.S. air and artillery support, South Vietnam was deemed unable to defend itself from an attack by the North – a conclusion which, given the slow pace of modernization, implies that Vietnamization, especially at the pace proposed by the Nixon administration, was doomed absent a negotiated settlement with Hà Nội.[254]

For the State Department, on the other hand, the pace of RF/PF progress was scarcely worth mentioning in light of sustained poor leadership, low pay and thus, low morale. And while State agreed with MACV that the ARVN's desertion problem was partly due to its recent expansion, it challenged the notion that enforcement measures were an effective deterrent, arguing it that was precisely because they were known to be so slack that so many conscripts sought to escape. Likewise, while State affirmed the lack of firm evidence of ARVN looting, it denied that this provided a basis for dismissing the problem as exaggerated. Instead, the State

[254] NSSM-1: Defense Department Response, Q10-13

response cited rumours of rampant ARVN looting during Tet, especially in Huế. Assuming that "there is [also] considerable looting that goes unreported," State concluded that the practice was probably "endemic" throughout South Vietnam. Corruption also lingered within the ARVN, with only 3-4% of its promotions granted for battlefield competence as opposed to bribery or nepotism. On the whole, reports of recent progress did "not suggest a major military breakthrough," for in the eyes of the State department, the ARVN remained far too defensive-minded to effectively challenge communist forces, especially at night.[255]

Interestingly, given its dim view relative to the military's assessment, the State department was somewhat more positive than the Defense department in its long-term forecast for the ARVN. If both the NVA and the United States immediately withdrew, State saw the ARVN as capable of at least defending itself against the remaining NLF forces, optimism not shared by the Defense report. Continued logistical support for the NLF from the North, a far more plausible outcome, could also be countered with equivalent amounts of assistance from Washington until the modernization of the ARVN was completed. On the other hand, meaningful improvement of the South Vietnamese military remained a long-term objective, with State estimating that the ARVN required "a minimum of two years before structural and technical reforms can make any substantial contribution towards RVNAF fighting effectiveness." And in the event of a direct confrontation with a sizable NVA force, American air and ground support would be required indefinitely to prop up the still-fledgling ARVN.[256]

What, then, of the CIA? Much like the State Department, the agency held a comparatively positive view of ARVN's prospects against certain forms of communist opposition, surprising given that its judgement of recent ARVN performance was even more

[255] NSSM-1: State Department Response, Q10a-f.
[256] Ibid., Q11-13.

severe. For the analysts in Langley, continued American assistance was far more important than the level of NVA involvement in South Vietnam, yet even without U.S. military support ARVN was "able to hold its own and make some progress against VC *not* supported by the NVA."[257] Better still, with American forces deployed in reserve, the ARVN could "almost certainly hold its own and probably make substantial progress against the remaining VC main and local force units and guerrillas," an estimate exceeding even that of MACV in its optimism.[258]

Still, there was much to be done. The CIA regarded the ARVN as plagued by "inadequate leadership, lack of concern for adequate training, low pay scales, corruption, and the debilitating involvement of the military establishment in politics." Better ARVN firepower was offset by parallel communist advances, and the progress cited by MACV and the Embassy was distorted by heavy enemy losses during Tet, and by abnormally low ARVN casualties due to the communists' subsequent withdrawal. In most of South Vietnam, Americans "continue[d] to carry the major share of the conventional fighting burden," and in some areas, ARVN performance was declining. Little was done to punish crimes against civilians, assumed to be widespread, while the lack of meritocracy in the military was a major incentive for desertion, a far more serious problem for the CIA than for the other respondents. 2/3rds of ARVN attrition, the agency noted, was from desertion, which in some places had doubled in 1968 alone. In units slated for frontline duty after Vietnamization, the desertion rate of 35% was especially high, "rais[ing] questions concerning the commitment of the country to its own defence."

But nothing was more dire than the CIA's predictions for a cessation of American military and financial support. As it stood now, ARVN "ha[d] its hands full," and if U.S. ground troops pulled out, even with continued American air support, "the situation could soon return to

[257] Italics are mine.
[258] Presumably without NVA assistance.

what it was in 1965 when U.S. combat forces had to be sent to South Vietnam." The most ominous outcome – a total withdrawal of U.S. support, and the continued presence of the NVA in the South – was so troublesome that it was "difficult to foresee how this would come about." And yet it was this very scenario which most closely resembled the outcome of the 1973 settlement, which the CIA accurately guessed would "pose grave threat to the GVN's stability." It is possible that the GVN leaders, foreseeing this situation, would lose hope and the armed forces would disintegrate. Assuming, however, that the situation was stabilized, the prospects for the ARVN holding its own against VC forces – with their current level of NVA fillers – would be no better than even. Little progress would be made, and some areas would almost certainly be abandoned. Over time, the situation in the countryside would gradually deteriorate and the threat to populated areas would grow. In the end, the ARVN would probably suffer some serious defeats, with potentially important political consequences for the viability of the GVN.[259] Even with current levels of U.S. assistance maintained - unlikely in light of domestic anti-war sentiment - the CIA saw "no convincing case… for the ultimate defeat of the VC by the ARVN … so long as the VC are augmented by NVA fillers and supported logistically from North Vietnam." At best, the status quo would result in "guerrilla war… for a very long time." The 430,000 man ARVN might "hold its own" against the 60-100,000 strong NLF in the unlikely event that the North disengaged, but continued NVA involvement in the South would push the ARVN to its limits even with prolonged U.S. support, and an American withdrawal raised the spectre of a total military collapse.

The GVN

In the short-term, establishing the means for South Vietnam to defend itself was imperative – all U.S. agencies agreed on that. During the Tet Offensive, the NLF demonstrated

[259] GVN – Government of South Vietnam

that it could launch nation-wide attacks, however costly, while back home, tolerance for the current level of American commitment appeared to have reached its limits. Still, the U.S. goal of transforming the Sài Gòn regime into a locally-supported anti-communist bulwark, now fifteen years in the making, was an equally vital if slightly less immediate concern, especially if Vietnamization advocates like Melvin Laird got their way. But the problem of creating a broad base of support for a non-communist alternative was one which had plagued a series of South Vietnamese leaders ever since partition in 1954. Ngo Dinh Diem, still the country's longest serving leader, had been seen as so closely linked with the U.S. that he was routinely referred to as "Mỹ Diệm" – "American Diem."[260] His efforts to distance himself from the United States failed to earn him any real legitimacy in the countryside, rousing the ire of the Kennedy administration in the process. And his brutal suppression of anti-government protests proved the final straw, prompting an appalled Kennedy to endorse a rebel military faction, which seized power in November 1963, assassinating Diem in the process. South Vietnam saw ten changes of government between 1963 and 1965, and it was not until 1967 that a measure of stability was restored by a tenuous alliance between Vice-President Nguyen Can Ky and President Nguyen Van Thieu. While the Thieu regime was a clear improvement over the turbulence preceding it, U.S. officials disputed the extent of its legitimacy in the eyes of the South Vietnamese.

In the NSSM-1 assessments of the regime, the Embassy emerged as Thieu's most passionate defender. Asked to provide evidence that the President was broadening his support base, it cited Thieu's replacement of incompetent provincial chiefs with a new class of motivated and professional bureaucrats. Responding to concerns that the government was overrepresented by Catholics, the Embassy countered that Thieu had already done enough to promote diversity,

[260] Phillip Catton. *Parallel Agendas: the Ngo Dinh Diem Regime, the United States and the Strategic Hamlet Program, 1961-1963.* (Athens, OH: Ohio University, 1998): 36.

and that an excessive broadening of the cabinet with members of the Hoa Hao and Cao Dai sects, for example, was ill-advised since their goals did not serve the national interest and their candidates were unqualified. Of course, there was still a lot to be done. The Embassy accepted that despite some enthusiasm for his rural civil defense programs, Thieu struggled against the "tradition [which] persists from French colonial days that a true nationalist is by definition anti-government." The government remained corrupt, inefficient, and unable to project its authority across the entire country. Still, the initiation of peace talks between Washington and Hà Nội had had a salutary effect in Sài Gòn "in that it pre-disposed nationalists to look for ways of carrying more of the war burden themselves," and despite the many obstacles facing South Vietnam, the future under Thieu looked more promising than it had for some time.[261]

The State Department, on the other hand, represented the other side of the same coin, acknowledging some positive developments but concluding that the overall situation remained bleak. True, under Thieu, the GVN was stronger than it had been at any time since Diem. But this had as much to do with South Vietnamese citizens rallying around the flag after the trauma of Tet as it did with positive contributions from the regime. Among Sài Gòn elites, State described "a growing realization that [defeat of the NLF] is unattainable and that the inexorable trend is towards some sort of compromise settlement of hostilities and some kind of political competition thereafter." In light of this development, increasing popular support for the government was all the more essential, but it remained unlikely to be realized. As with Diem before him, Thieu was weakened by his perceived dependence on the United States, and contrary to Embassy claims, the peace talks weren't helping. Negotiation between Washington and Hà Nội had generated an outburst of speculation that the U.S. would install a new leader in Sài Gòn, resulting in reluctance to become involved with a government that might soon be replaced. But

[261] NSSM-1: Embassy Response, Q20-23.

the most serious concern for the State Department was the government's failure to tackle corruption in the countryside. Unlike the Embassy, State doubted Thieu's ability to reform the bureaucracy: "despite current efforts in this regard, there seems little prospect that in the near future the GVN will succeed in establishing a system fully emphasizing competence and quality of performance as the principal factors in influencing appointments and promotions within the Vietnamese civil and military services."[262] Though there was some evidence of improvement, the pace of progress was not sufficient to defeat the NLF in the political realm.

The Defense department also contradicted several Embassy conclusions. Asked whether the new provincial chiefs represented the "replacement of one clique by another," Defense dismissed the appointments as little more than an attempt to exclude Ky supporters, hardly an encouraging step towards broadening Thieu's support base. Still, the selections at least appeared to have been made "on the basis of competence from within a politically acceptable candidate group," perhaps the best that could be hoped for in a country where "competence and replacement of one clique by another are complementary terms, not opposing." That Thieu's politically-motivated appointments were deemed a "new and important development" hints at how low expectations were for some American agencies. And beyond this faint praise, the Defense report offered little to suggest that meaningful progress was being made. South Vietnam remained a place where the legitimacy of the government was "barely accepted," and where elections were seen "not as a competitive means for providing alternative leaders, but rather as a manipulatory process designed to confirm the existing minority group of power leaders." Strikingly, the report noted that many elites shared the GVN goal of minimizing communist influence in South Vietnamese society. But the government had yet to capitalize on this common cause, with anti-communist religious, youth, and ethnic minority organizations all

[262] NSSM-1: State Department response, Q20-23.

wary of association with the regime. Worse still, the majority of the peasantry was either ambivalent or opposed to the state, allowing the NLF a foothold in the countryside despite a rise in anti-communist sentiment after Tet. The quest to win hearts and minds in the rural South was not a zero-sum game, and thus far, Sài Gòn had failed to capitalize on waning peasant loyalty to the NLF. Even among government officials in the countryside, devotion to Thieu was often lukewarm, reflecting the lingering power of secret organizations and family ties in rural society. Indeed, the GVN could rarely rely on consistent support from its rural representatives, many of whom had friends or family in the NLF.[263]

Equally dismayed by the government's prospects was the CIA, which, like Defense, contended that the limited progress of 1968 would do little to improve the GVN's overall standing. Thieu's provincial appointments were again met with approval, but the CIA too qualified its praise by warning that their authoritarian implementation reflected South Vietnam's "basic problems of rural administration that are not amenable to quick or easy solutions." Elites tolerated the regime but showed little enthusiasm for it, and their disposition was unlikely to improve: according to the CIA, the "national temperament, social and political traditions and educational background" of the elite class meant that "the pleasures of carping, squabbling and internecine political strife prove[d] well nigh irresistible," except in the face of "imminent common danger," a remark reflecting the agency's frustration at the difficulty of replicating American forms of government in Sài Gòn. So apathetic were the Sài Gòn elites towards the GVN that it was only their loathing of communism that kept the country together: "were there not this general widespread aversion to communist domination," the CIA quipped, "the war probably would have ended (inevitably) in a communist victory years ago." Unsurprisingly, the agency found little of evidence that the GVN was increasing its support base, either in Sài Gòn

[263] NSSM-1: Defense Department response, Q20-24.

or in the countryside. Social mobility, which the NLF routinely delivered to its peasant constituents, was described as "prudent to envisage increased [by the GVN]…in terms of decades" rather than years. Even with an unlikely combination of "vigorous U.S. prodding and high level GVN concurrence," it was doubtful that the situation would improve, and if the U.S. withdrew, the "slow, fragile and evolutionary" progress achieved during the past few years would soon be wiped out. Echoing its bleak conclusions about the ARVN, the CIA dismissed the GVN's prospects in peaceful competition with the NLF, as it was neither "realistic [n]or prudent to expect that civilian groups alone can stand up to the communists with the next few years."[264]

Much of the agency's pessimism was informed by its analysis of the "Accelerated Pacification Campaign," launched in November, 1968. As we have noted, following the rejection of Westmoreland's request for 200,000 reinforcements in the spring of 1968, MACV, now led by Creighton Abrams, shifted its objective from enemy attrition to rural pacification. Instead of trying to generate more casualties than the communists could replace, U.S. and ARVN forces focused on securing rural villages, simultaneously depriving the NLF of supplies and building up support for the GVN. In practice however, as one historian notes, Accelerated Pacification often amounted to "indiscriminate artillery shelling and forced relocations of the civilian population [which] added to the woes of the hard-pressed peasantry."[265]

In any case, the Accelerated Pacification campaign is notable as one of two main instances where the NSSM-1 responses reveal interagency disagreement over methodology and statistical accuracy, as opposed to differing interpretations of the same data. For the CIA, the campaign represented a limited success yet to be consolidated. Thus, in 22 provinces, initial

[264] NSSM-1: CIA response, Q20-23
[265] David W.P. Elliott. *Revolution and Social Change in the Mekong Delta, 1930-1975.* Volume II. (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2003): 1128.

results appeared favorable, but in 5 provinces near Sài Gòn, the communists were arguably better off than before. Skeptical that the GVN's apparent progress was the result of a temporary communist retreat, the CIA regarded Accelerated Pacification as "not yet sufficient to alter the basic pattern of VC influence," a claim which MACV contested. The dispute lay in the different procedures used by each branch to determine the size of enemy forces. CIA estimates of NLF strength were usually higher than MACV assessments because they included irregular forces like NLF-organized youth assault groups and village defense teams, as these units "perform[ed] important military support functions… and are meaningful elements of the enemy's organised resistance." MACV on the other hand, discounted these forces, and collected intelligence only from 'hard' sources such as captured documents and prisoner interrogations, unlike the CIA which used statistics from specific regions to make predictions about the country as a whole. Consequently, the CIA placed total NLF strength at between 60,000-100,000, while for MACV the number was a rigid 59,000. The NLF's monthly recruitment rate was also a source of contention, with the CIA estimating 7,000 to 10,000 per month, and MACV insisting that enlistment had declined from 7,000 to 3,500 per month between January and October 1968.[266]

Had either of the two agencies fallen into Ellsberg's trap, exposed by NSSM-1 as having exaggerated their data? When evaluating the CIA and MACV's competing methods, it is important to consider that both sides' assessments were derived primarily from estimation, and as such, both were subject to inflation or under-representation respectively. On the whole though, CIA projections likely provided a more realistic picture of total enemy strength because unlike MACV, they included irregular communist forces and political operatives. Primarily concerned with military objectives, MACV's disinterest in non-military participants is ultimately short-sighted given the essential role of political cadres in a conflict where peasant loyalty

[266] NSSM-1 CIA Response, MACV response, Q8, 14.

equalled or exceeded the importance of victory on the battlefield. And by acknowledging only enemy forces accounted for by captured documents or interrogations, MACV overlooked the communist forces lurking outside the realm of the written record or the memories of the mostly low-level prisoners it had seized. Though the CIA may have erred on the side of exaggeration in using small data samples to create nationwide projections, it also erred on the side of caution.[267] Derived from a more-forgiving analytical procedure, MACV's opinion of the GVN was therefore more positive than that of the CIA, or of the State and Defence departments, both of which preferred the CIA's method (while the Embassy used MACV statistics). Thus, for MACV, Thieu was "by and large… considered legitimate and acceptable," a view which the CIA, State and Defense completely rejected. The military shared none of the others' concerns over the motives behind Thieu's appointments, and it maintained that overall, in light of recent military and political gains, the GVN now "deal[t] from a position of strength." Still, MACV acknowledged that its position was hardly unanimous; regarding what it saw as a slow but steady increase in GVN support, MACV conceded that "as with so many other questions, the pace at which this occurs is breathtaking in the eye of one beholder, snail-like in the eye of another."[268]

North Vietnam

And what then of North Vietnam, whose influence over Southern affairs, we have seen, was considerable if not decisive? Were there grounds for belief that a breakthrough might come through concessions from across the border? The question of Hà Nội's motives and intentions

[267] A recently-declassified internal CIA history of rural pacification in the South appears to confirm the agency's pessimism: "This sixth and final period (1969-1975) saw the gradual decay of the CIA-sponsored pacification programs, as the Vietnamese elected not to invest in them the energy and resources which the Americans were now withdrawing. The efforts to attract rural loyalty were the first to go, followed by the deterioration of the centralized campaign, known as Phung Hoang [aka the Phoenix Program], against the communist apparatus. Thomas L. Ahern, Jr. *CIA and Rural Pacification in South Vietnam*. (Washington, DC: Center for the Study of Intelligence, 2004): xvi.
[268] NSSM-1, MACV response, Q20-23.

again saw State, Defense and the CIA united by doubt, and opposed by the cautious optimists at the Embassy and the military. And again, the CIA and MACV disagreed over statistical methods. Disputes aside, the five respondents agreed that Hà Nội's presence in Paris reflected neither waning military power, nor a desire to save face after suffering the effects of American firepower. All five assumed that having entered negotiations, North Vietnam was now pursuing a strategy of 'talking while fighting' in the hopes of minimizing battlefield losses while securing some if not all of its goals - the withdrawal of U.S. troops, the preservation of NVA troop positions in South Vietnam, the incorporation of the NLF into the GVN, and if possible, the dissolution of the Thieu regime. And even if Hà Nội might now submit to favorable terms, the respondents warned that a treaty would not necessarily mean that the North had abandoned the goal of a unified communist Vietnam. As the State department noted, the North Vietnamese were well aware that the American public was turning against the war, suggesting that a settlement would provide only a temporary pause until Hà Nội felt it could resume its campaign unimpeded.[269] Still, American bombing had taken its toll on the North, with the Embassy in particular proposing that heavy casualties during recent bombing campaigns had brought Hà Nội to the table, in order to relieve U.S. pressure by securing a ceasefire. In a prediction which in hindsight reveals the extent to which the optimists underestimated Vietnamese determination, the Embassy even posited that "the prospects on the ground are bleak enough for them so that they will, in the end, make significant concessions (in terms of their own withdrawal) to get us out."[270]

The Embassy's confidence was tempered however, by the fact that neither China nor the Soviet Union, the main providers of North Vietnamese military and financial requirements,

[269] NSSM-1: State Department response, Q1
[270] NSSM-1: Embassy response, Q1.

appeared to have much leverage over their ally. Beijing, still absorbed by the frenzy of the Cultural Revolution, was alarmed by Hà Nội's abandonment of Maoist tactics during the Tet Offensive, and was eager to see its investment in North Vietnam devoted towards total victory against U.S., rather than a mere settlement.[271] But with Sino-Soviet tensions flaring, it recognised that it could only press the North Vietnamese so far in their dealings with the United States before pushing them into the Soviet camp. Likewise, the Soviet Union was both determined to bolster its revolutionary credentials by supporting North Vietnam, and attracted by the prospect of gaining a sympathetic ally on China's southern flank. By adroitly capitalizing on the Sino-Soviet split, the respondents determined, North Vietnam had secured a strong position for itself at the bargaining table, and was now relatively free from external pressure.

Another point of consensus was that the North was still very much able to orchestrate another nation-wide Tet-style attack, though of a smaller scale and with equally high casualties. Yet even here, despite their general agreement, the respondents described communist capabilities using very different language, reflecting the gap between their basic assumptions about the course of the war. According to the CIA, the communists "clearly ha[d] the capability of launching a large scale offensive now or at any time within the next six months," and even though heavy losses would be incurred, Hà Nội was committed to "convey[ing] the impression that there is little prospect for an early defeat or collapse of communist forces."[272] The military, on the other hand, also admitted that " the enemy has the strength to launch a large-scale attack within the next 6 months," but downplayed its likelihood, assuming that since the ARVN would be "almost certainly successful in expelling enemy forces lodged in a major urban center," a

[271] Nguyen, Lien-Hang T. "The Sino-Vietnamese Split and the Indochina War, 1968-1975." *The Third Indochina War: Conflict Between China, Vietnam and Cambodia, 1972-79*. Odd Arne Westad and Sophie Quinn-Judge ed. (London: Routeledge, 2006).

[272] NSSM-1: CIA response, Q9.

repetition of Tet would be suicidal.[273] Ultimately, both sides could claim some vindication. As the CIA had implied, February, 1969 saw yet another offensive against U.S. and ARVN positions, and as MACV had predicted, the communists were repulsed, sustaining heavy losses. Once again though the GVN failed to capitalize, in part because of a U.S./ARVN counter-offensive resulting in "widespread and often indiscriminate killing of civilians," as one historian puts it. By 1972, the NLF had recovered enough to launch yet another offensive, indicating that, years later, "a military defeat of the revolutionary forces [remained] unlikely."[274]

The question of whether Hà Nội still controlled both sides' casualty rates provides yet another example of how the agencies were divided by contrary interpretations of mutually-accepted facts. Hence, the Embassy boasted that "the allies can, to a considerable extent, pre-empt the enemy and can certainly defeat him when he does attack," despite accepting that "…he essentially controls the level of combat."[275] But for Defense, enemy control of casualty rates was no mere nuisance. By choosing the time and place of battle, communist forces were able to counter American advantages in numbers, firepower and mobility, prolonging the war and exploiting diminishing domestic support in the United States. So long as the U.S. failed to upset this balance, decisive victory remained elusive.[276]

The impact of bombing North Vietnam also divided the cabinet, though all sides agreed that it had thus far failed to reduce Hà Nội's strategic options, a portentous sign given that raising the intensity of American air strikes would form a key part of Nixon's efforts to coerce the enemy. Predictably, State, Defense , and the CIA downplayed the effects of the air war, with the CIA citing the strength of North Vietnam's air defenses and the successful evacuation of industry

[273] NSSM-1 MACV response, Q9.
[274] Elliott, 1138, 1132.
[275] NSSM-1 Embassy response, Q7.
[276] NSSM-1 Defense Department response, Q7

and civilians from the capital as reasons why the bombing "never reached proportions significant enough to limit Hà Nội's support for the war."[277] State also acknowledged these factors, citing the "striking tenacity of the North Vietnamese leadership and the disciplined if fatalistic response of the North Vietnamese people" as factors in Hà Nội's successful resistance of the American onslaught. Furthermore, State saw "little reason to believe that new bombing will accomplish what previous bombing failed to do," a clear warning that Nixon's "measures of great consequence and force" defied military logic.[278] Furthermore, mining the port of Haiphong, another ploy later adopted by the President, would fail to sever Hà Nội's supply chain, State and the CIA cautioned, as there were at least twelve other ports which it could turn to instead.[279]

By contrast, the military (and the Embassy, which deferred to MACV on the air war) maintained that the air strikes had "posed many strains on the war-making potential of North Vietnam," and insisted that the bombing had dampened the population's enthusiasm for the war. But when it came to supplies from the U.S.S.R. and China, even MACV admitted that though the unrestricted destruction of defenses, complete mining of all waterways, and destruction of all North-South bridges in the Hanoi/Haiphong area… could stop a substantial portion of the land traffic from China… the effort would be rendered ineffective if no corresponding action were taken to neutralize the enemy's use of Cambodian supply bases.[280]

This claim proved especially controversial, as the volume of shipping through Cambodia represented another clash over statistics between MACV and the CIA. In an attempt to stem the flow of weapons and material from North to South Vietnam, the United States had turned to

[277] NSSM-1 CIA response, Q28.
[278] NSSM-1: State Department response. The phrase "measures of great consequence and force" apparently featured in a personal letter written by Nixon to Ho Chi Minh in July, 1969, imploring the ailing communist leader to submit to U.S. demands. Richard Nixon. *RN: the Memoirs of Richard Nixon*. 2nd ed. (New York: Touchstone, 1990): 393.
[279] NSSM-1: State Department response, CIA response, Q28D.
[280] NSSM-1: MACV response, Q28.

bombing both officially-neutral Laos and northwest Vietnam, hoping to sever the famed Ho Chi Minh trail. Consistent with their usual skepticism, the Defense department and CIA concurred that "the enemy can continue to push sufficient supplies through Laos to South Vietnam in spite of relatively heavy losses inflicted by air attacks."[281] Indeed, in light of North Vietnam's ability to repair bomb damage and open alternate routes, the CIA was even convinced that "traffic in the Laotian panhandle is continuing at levels equal to, or slightly higher than, comparable periods in the past."[282] Based on this conviction, the CIA then reasoned that NVA troops in I, II, and III corps were likely re-supplied primarily by the Ho Chi Minh network in Laos. The implication was that the Cambodian port of Sihanoukville was of secondary importance in supplying South Vietnam, which made sense to the CIA since "although …the communists probably would take advantage of a means of channelling arms through Sihanoukville, we doubt that they would use a logistical system under foreign control as their primary supply route."[283]

Here however, the often-prescient intelligence agency was proven wrong. As usual, MACV challenged the CIA's analysis, arguing instead that Sihanoukville was "the primary Cambodian port of entry" for the communists, and that "the bulk of the evidence attests that enemy forces in southern South Vietnam receive their military supplies from Cambodia." Cambodian soldiers were probably complicit in the arms transfers, MACV speculated, a claim which even the normally silent CINCPAC reiterated.[284] In the end, it was later revealed that Sihanoukville was indeed a hub for weapons destined for South Vietnam, a development which, we shall see, had a significant impact on the balance of power within the administration.

NSSM-1 Conclusions

[281] NSSM-1: Defense Department response, Q29
[282] NSSM-1: CIA response, Q27.
[283] NSSM-1: CIA response, Q10
[284] NSSM-1: MACV response, Q10.

As we have noted, a summary of the NSSM-1 responses was presented back to the National Security Council on March 22, 1969. Since it was this version of NSSM-1 which both Nixon and Kissinger ultimately received, the main points of consensus are worth reviewing briefly here. To be sure, some positive developments were acknowledged by all participants, with the ARVN and the GVN credited with having made limited progress. By all accounts, the ARVN was now larger and better-equipped, enabling more-extensive operations and an increase in enemy casualties. Likewise, the GVN was in a stronger position than it had been for several years, thanks to a mild increase in support for Thieu, and modest efforts to reduce corruption.[285] But beneath the positive tone of certain participants, and despite the mutual recognition of a few encouraging developments, Ellsberg's summary of the study left little room for optimism. The strength of North Vietnam's position was universally accepted, with all respondents agreeing that the arrival of DRV representatives in Paris was not a reflection of military weakness, but rather, of Hà Nội's confidence that it could withstand American pressure long enough to achieve a favorable settlement. Worse still for the United States, China and the U.S.S.R. wielded scant leverage over North Vietnam, with Hà Nội skilfully exploiting the Sino-Soviet split by playing one communist superpower against the other. In the South, the recent reduction in communist operations was the result of a tactical withdrawal rather than a response to ARVN pressure, and with the communists still in control of casualty rates, there was little hope of reducing enemy forces. In spite of heavy losses sustained during Tet, the communists retained the capacity to launch similar if smaller nation-wide offensives.[286]

Still more serious, the few commonly-recognized ARVN and GVN reforms had failed to improve the bleak situation in the South. Despite recent progress, the ARVN faced "severe

[285] "Summary of Interagency Responses to NSSM-1." March 22, 1969. *FRUS.*: 139-142, 146-148.
[286] Ibid., 132-135.

motivational, leadership, and desertion problems," and was widely regarded as years away from being able to resist NVA or even NLF forces without significant American support, undermining the basic assumptions of Vietnamization. The overall state of the GVN was equally troublesome. Recent reforms, however encouraging, were insufficient in tackling corruption, nepotism and incompetence. The GVN was still weak in rural areas, many of which remained under de facto communist control. It had also failed to capitalize on anti-communist sentiment, with most ethnic minorities, Buddhist groups, unions, and professional organizations at best ambivalent about their government. Disillusioned, Sài Gòn's middle-class was attracted to the idea of incorporating the NLF into the political system, and in the event of this sort of peaceful political challenge with the communists, in the form of an election or a power-sharing agreement, the GVN was not expected to survive.[287] Even the United States was acknowledged to have struggled, with all parties agreeing that North Vietnam had thus far withstood U.S. efforts to stem the flow of weapons and soldiers into the South. Despite years of intense bombing against communist supply lines, the United States had achieved at best only temporary reductions in the flow of goods along the pipeline from China to North Vietnam, along the Ho Chi Minh trail through Laos and Cambodia, and into the communist strongholds of the South.[288]

Consequences

But perhaps the most striking feature of NSSM-1, an enormous project well over 700 pages long, was that it scarcely made an impact on Nixon's decision-making. Tellingly, the study goes unmentioned in the President's memoirs. How had such a monumental review of the most serious foreign policy crisis in decades been overlooked? As we have noted, by the time the study was complete, key decisions had already been made, ostensibly the result of renewed

[287] Ibid., 146-148.
[288] Ibid., 150-152.

communist aggression. As Kissinger recalls, "there was no consensus as to facts, much less as to policy… [but] before we could resolve our internal debate – or even conduct it – on February 22, 1969, Hà Nội pre-empted our analyses by launching a countrywide offensive in South Vietnam."[289] As the CIA anticipated, Hà Nội would risk yet more casualties to prove that no part of the South was safe. Nevertheless, there were by now several indications that Nixon had already determined to intensify rather than resolve the war. On December 26, 1968, the "Vietnam Alternatives Paper," a list of four basic options for Nixon to consider, was altered by a Kissinger aide so that it now identified levying threats as the preferred strategy for winning concessions from Hà Nội.[290] As John Prados notes, Nixon was immediately attracted to the idea – later known as "the Madman Theory"[291] – such that "the use of threat to influence Hanoi became central to his strategy."[292] On January 25, 1969, four days after NSSM-1 had been assigned, the NSC met to discuss Vietnam for the first time, a meeting which saw Nixon favoring intensification, demanding that "the ceasefire issue… be stricken from the U.S. negotiating menu," along with the option of unilateral U.S. withdrawal.[293] Five days later, Kissinger raised the idea of escalation with JCS Chairman Earle Wheeler. When Kissinger asked him how to "signal to the North that we might be considering a step-up or escalation of operations," the general replied that NVA positions were already bombed so often that it was impossible to increase B-52 strikes without a "loss of efficiency due to force fatigue." Instead he

[289] Kissinger, *The White House* Years, 238.
[290] During a meeting the same day with Kissinger to discuss the "Alternatives Paper", Ellsberg stated that it was "hard…to believe that new threats of escalation could have any effect on them. We actually bombed them for three years, and that didn't give us any bargaining power." Ellsberg, 234-235.
[291] Nixon aide H.R. Haldeman recalls the following conversation: "[Nixon] said, "I call it the Madman Theory, Bob. I want the North Vietnamese to believe I've reached the point where I might do anything to stop the war." H.R. Haldeman and Joseph DiMona. *The Ends of Power*. (New York: New York Times Books, 1978): 83.
[292] John Prados. *Vietnam: the History of an Unwinnable War, 1945-1975*. (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 2009): 289.
[293] "Minutes of National Security Meeting." January 25, 1969. *FRUS*.: 37-38.

proposed raids into Cambodia, though Melvin Laird, also present, cautioned that this "would represent a difficult political problem."[294]

Although the administration was by now clearly considering aggressive measures, the main impetus (or perhaps pretext) for intensification arrived with the February 22 offensive. Upon hearing the news, Nixon's "immediate instinct was to retaliate," he recalled, since the attack "was a deliberate test, clearly designed to take the measure of me and my administration at the outset."[295] Just two days earlier, Kissinger had presented the President with list of "contingency responses in the event the enemy launches a major attack in South Vietnam." One of these proposals, B-52 strikes against communist headquarters in officially-neutral Cambodia, soon came to form the centerpiece of Nixon's show of strength, despite Laird warning the President directly that internal critics of the scheme might "create, or attempt to create, difficulty for you and for all of us through contacts in the Congress and in the press who would likewise look with disfavor on this proposed action."[296] Regardless, Operation Menu - the bombing of Cambodia - began in March, resulting in some 600,000 deaths, and causing such severe destruction that by some accounts, the Khmer Rouge could not have prevailed without it.[297] Well before NSSM-1 was completed, the die had been cast, and the United States was on its way to drastically-increased air strikes against North Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos; invasions of the latter two; and as William Burr and Jeffrey Kimball describe, a simulated nuclear alert in the fall

[294] "Memorandum of a Meeting Between the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs, Secretary of Defense, and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff." January 30, 1969. *FRUS.*: 45-46.
[295] Nixon, *RN*, 380.
[296] "Memorandum from the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs to President Nixon." February 19, 1969, *FRUS.*: 68 and "Message from Secretary of Defense Laird to President Nixon." February 25, 1969, *FRUS.:* 78.
[297] Ben Kiernan. *How Pol Pot Came to Power: Colonialism, Nationalism and Communism in Cambodia.* 2nd ed. (New Haven : Yale University Press, 2004).

of 1969 intended to scare the U.S.S.R. into intervening to stop Hà Nội on Washington's behalf.[298]

Given NSSM-1's overwhelming pessimism about the prospects of bluffing or bombing North Vietnam out of the war, the document was of little use to an administration which had already committed to bullying Hà Nội into capitulating. And with Nixon and Kissinger convinced that a failure to match North Vietnam's every move with more violence "would appear to Hà Nội as a demonstration of weakness," it is hardly surprising that NSSM-1's warnings fell on deaf ears.[299] Of course, the initial objective of the project was less to provide policy options than to reveal pre-existing differences of opinion within the cabinet. But now that the CIA, State and Defense were on the record as having largely if unwittingly opposed what had become the President's policy towards Vietnam, the stage was set for Kissinger to consolidate his position as Nixon's primary foreign affairs advisor, which he did by simultaneously backing the President's decisions and marginalizing confirmed sceptics like Secretary of State William Rogers, CIA director Richard Helms, and to some extent, Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird. In part due to Kissinger's efforts, NSSM-1's often-accurate predictions, along with the department heads who had endorsed them, were gradually excluded from the decision-making process on Vietnam, increasingly the purview of the President and the National Security Advisor alone.

But why had the author of an article which had convinced Ellsberg that peace was imminent shifted so abruptly from pragmatist to hawk? Although a complete answer demands a more thorough examination than can be provided here, a few possible motives for the National

[298] Essentially, Nixon ordered a worldwide nuclear readiness test, consistent with "the Madman Theory," in the hopes that it would prompt the Soviets to panic, and thus act to restrain Hanoi. William Burr and Jeffrey Kimball. "Nixon's Secret Nuclear Alert: Vietnam War Diplomacy and the Joint Chiefs of Staff Readiness Test, October 1969." *Cold War History*, 3, 2, (January, 2003).

[299] "Memorandum from the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs to President Nixon," March 16, 1969. *FRUS.*: 121.

Security Advisor's rapid change of outlook are worth proposing. Perhaps Kissinger felt that by proving his loyalty to Nixon, he would be better equipped to moderate some of the President's more belligerent urges. A May 4, 1972 exchange with a clearly frustrated Nixon – one year after a fruitless concession at Paris allowing Northern troops to remain in the South - testifies to both the plausibility and necessity of Kissinger fulfilling such a role:

Nixon: "The only place where you and I disagree… is with regard to the bombing.

You're so goddamned concerned about the civilians and I don't give a damn. I don't care."

Kissinger: "I'm concerned about the civilians because I don't want the world to be mobilized against you as a butcher."[300]

As a German-Jewish immigrant, Kissinger's self-identification as a "perpetual outsider" made him prone to "sycophantic displays of loyalty", at least according to biographer Jeremi Suri, which may also explain his eagerness to push aside perceived rivals in a quest for Nixon's favor. In one telling passage, Suri describes how, as director of a seminar at Harvard during the McCarthy era, the future statesman opened other students' mail and reported the contents to the FBI as part of "a mechanism for proving his loyalty and his value as bridge figure between government and academia, as well as the United States and other societies."[301] In any case, as it grew clear that Nixon wanted to win rather than settle in Vietnam, Kissinger set aside his earlier scepticism, seizing opportunities to demonstrate his devotion to the President and working behind the scenes to undermine real or imagined adversaries in the administration. According to former aide Winston Lord, NSSM-1 represented a clear attempt to consolidate power by

[300] Cited in Ellsberg, 418-419.
[301] Jeremi Suri. *Henry Kissinger and the American Century*. (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007): 66, 128.

National Security Advisor, who commissioned the assignment as a sort of diversion to distract his perceived opponents. In a 1998 interview, Lord remembers that:

"[NSSM-1] was a genuine effort to say, look, we're a new Administration, let's review the bidding intellectually, to set our strategy for the next four years, and let's do this systematically and give everyone a chance to weigh in. And I think that was a genuine motive here. There was another motive, however, and that was to keep everybody so busy in the State Department, Defense Department, and elsewhere, that Kissinger and his staff could immediately get on with Vietnam, China, Russia, etc, while everyone was buried in this paper flow."[302]

Former Nixon speechwriter William Safire also recalls the extent to which Kissinger regarded colleagues like Melvin Laird and William Rogers and as competitors. In April, 1969, Safire remembers, Kissinger had taps installed on their staff members' phones in order to preview their conversations prior to NSC meetings, a move which "gave Henry a bureaucratic advantage, to say the least."[303] At once jealous and dismissive of Rogers, who he saw as a natural rival, Kissinger urged the President to ignore his Secretary of State, at one point demanding the right both to approve all of Rogers's speeches, and to bypass him by contacting his subordinates directly. Nixon, though displeased by Kissinger's persistence, nonetheless sided with him against Rogers, describing him as "ineffectual, selfish and vain," and the State Department as "soft," a conclusion no doubt informed by its sceptical views on Vietnam.[304]

A breaking point for the President came on March 8, 1969, when, against Nixon's wishes, Rogers implied to Soviet ambassador Anatoliy Dobrynin that the U.S. was considering four-party peace talks between Washington, Hà Nội, Sài Gòn and the NLF. A telephone call with

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302 Winston Lord. "Interview with Winston Lord." The Foreign Affairs Oral History Collection of the Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training. April 28, 1998.

303 William Safire. *Before the Fall: An Inside View of the Pre-Watergate White House.* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1975): 167.

304 John Ehrlichman. *Witness to Power: the Nixon Years.* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982): 296-300.

Kissinger later that evening revealed Nixon's fury, as the President scorned on the idea of negotiating without first winning concessions: "There is not going to be any de-escalation. State has nothing to do with that. We are just going to keep giving word to Wheeler to knock hell out of them… I can't tolerate argument from Rogers on this."[305] So marginalized was Rogers that according to Nixon aide John Erlichman, Kissinger's quip that he was "a danger to the world" became a self-fulfilling prophecy: "In fact, Rogers was cut out of so many policy decisions by Henry that it was dangerous for him to be speaking for the Administration… he was [so] often uninformed."[306] In 1971, Nixon and Kissinger even considered firing him, though they ultimately decided against it since by then, "Rogers [was] not enough of an issue," according to Kissinger.[307]

Another sidelined official was CIA director Richard Helms, though for Helms and the CIA, the waning of their influence had already begun prior to NSSM-1. In November, 1968, the CIA had published a report on the consequences of unilateral U.S. withdrawal. Defying the domino theory, it predicted that a settlement favorable to the communists would in fact do little to tip the balance of power in the region, as Hà Nội would be too preoccupied with rebuilding to pose much threat beyond its borders. If the U.S. assured its allies that it would guarantee their security, the damage to American prestige would be minimal, and the spectre of a 'red' Southeast Asia would go unrealized.[308] But this time the CIA was challenged not only by the usual suspects at MACV, but by influential State department officials as well. During the January 25 NSC meeting, Assistant Sec. of State for Far Eastern Affairs William Bundy was

[305] "Memorandum of Conversation Between Rogers and Dobrynin." March 8, 1969. *FRUS*: 94-94 and "Editorial Note," Ibid, 96-97.
[306] Ehrlichman, 296-300.
[307] Tape 620-008. *White House Tapes, Presidential Recordings Program*. Miller Center of Public Affairs, University of Virginia.
[308] "Southeast Asia After Vietnam." *National Intelligence Estimate, 50-68*. November 14, 1968.

asked by Nixon to comment on the report. Dismissing the CIA's judgement, Bundy confirmed the President's suspicions, insisting that "the nations [of Southeast Asia] would be appalled by U.S. defeat" in Vietnam. Laos and Cambodia would succumb almost instantly, he continued, and both Malaysia and the Philippines would be pushed to the brink of communist takeover.[309]

Already viewed with suspicion for failing to anticipate the Tet Offensive, the CIA's status continued to deteriorate under Nixon, especially after it was revealed that its estimates on the volume of supplies funnelled through Sihanoukville were mistaken. As it turned out, the full extent of Sihanoukville shipping exceeded the estimates of even the most pessimistic NSC observers, though the total number of weapons was still so small that it "could have been loaded aboard a single Great Lakes freighter," according to one impassive staff member.[310] Nonetheless, the humiliation endured by the agency was considerable, enough so that almost 35 years later, it was still publishing internal reports to account for its failure.[311] For Nixon, the incident was "further evidence of CIA bias" against the war.[312] And Kissinger, too, was no enthusiast of the agency, whose grim reports on Vietnam were at odds with the pair's determination to achieve a state of affairs they could be satisfied describing as a victory. According to one former staff member, the national security advisor could at times be spotted waving CIA intelligence reports, pacing and screaming "this isn't what I want!" In an especially blatant attempt to curb the agency's influence, Kissinger even took the unusual step of demanding that Helms be forced to leave NSC meetings once he had finished delivering his briefings.[313] Above all however, it was "Sihanoukville" which resonated, and from then on,

[309] "Minutes of National Security Council Meeting," *FRUS.*¸ January 25, 1969: 32.
[310] Kissinger, *White House Years*, 241-242, and Thomas Powers. *The Man Who Kept the Secrets: Richard Helms and the CIA*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979): 219.
[311] See Thomas L. Ahern, Jr. *Good Questions, Wrong Answers: CIA's Estimates of Arms Traffic Through Sihanoukville, Cambodia, During the Vietnam War*. (Washington, DC: Center for the Study of Intelligence, 2004)
[312] Ibid., 39.
[313] Ibid, 202-204.

Helms was subject to constant replies of "yes, but that's what you said about Sihanoukville," his agency's pessimistic if often prescient concerns about the course of the war coming to be regarded as tainted.[314]

Melvin Laird was likewise viewed with suspicion by Kissinger and Nixon, though he proved more difficult to dismiss than Rogers or Helms in part because of the cogency of his appeals for Vietnamization. Both Laird and Nixon acknowledged the domestic popularity of "bringing the boys back home," with Nixon proposing on January 25 the withdrawal of 50,000 troops after four months to "buy time and perhaps some support".[315] But for Laird, Vietnamization was as much a financial as a political imperative. As Robert Collins has argued, by 1968, the cost of war had reached crisis proportions, with Lyndon Johnson vetoing proposed reinforcements for economic as much as political reasons. Had they gone ahead, the cost of the war would have increased by 40%, shattering projections for the upcoming budget, already described by Budget Director Charles Zwick as "a shock." Subsequent pressure on the U.S. dollar risked "a collapse… of the international monetary system," as one observer put it, so that in "improv[ing] the situation over there [in Vietnam]," the United States was "throw[ing] away the fruits of a generation of brilliant economic progress."[316] Chair of the Defense Subcommittee of the Appropriations Committee under Johnson, Laird was well aware of the spiralling costs of the conflict.[317] And indeed, beyond his contributions to the Vietnam War, one of his main

[314] Richard Helms, *A Look Over My Shoulder: a Life in the Central Intelligence Agency*. (New York: Random House, 2003): 392.
[315] "Minutes of National Security Meeting." January 25, 1969. *FRUS*.: 39-40.
[316] Robert M. Collins. "The Economic Crisis and the Waning of the American Century." *The American Historical Review*, 101, 2 (April, 1996): 396-422.
[317] Apart from Laird, the cabinet rarely discussed the economic consequences of the Vietnam war explicitly. Nonetheless, the war's contribution to the balance-of-payments deficit was regarded by the Treasury as a fundamental threat to global security. On December 15, 1969, for example, Treasury Secretary David Kennedy informed Nixon that European leaders were convinced that a failure to resolve the balance-of-payments problem would "imperil world confidence in the dollar and threaten the international monetary system." Consequently, the United States' "responsibility to stop inflation and use our leadership wisely is not limited to the citizens of our own

achievements as Defense secretary was decentralizing the budgeting process so that spending decisions could no longer be monopolized by powerful officials like Robert McNamara.[318]

A March 13, 1969 report from Laird to Nixon after a tour of South Vietnam reveals just how important Vietnamization was for the Defense secretary. Echoing NSSM-1's bleak prognosis, he reported that "none of our officials, either military or civilian, is under any illusion that the battle in South Vietnam can be brought to a military conclusion within six months, a year or even several years." Accordingly, Laird saw "no indication that we presently have a program adequate to bring about a significant reduction in the U.S. military contribution in South Vietnam," a sentiment shared by the MACV staff he met who assumed "that no reduction in U.S. personnel would be possible in the absence of total withdrawal of [NVA] troops." And yet, it was precisely this course of action – troop withdrawals - which Laird recommended, in spite of his certainty that it was unlikely to succeed. With budgetary concerns no doubt in mind, Laird urged Nixon to approve "the redeployment of 50–70 thousand U.S. troops from South Vietnam this year," as he "[did] not believe that our national interests, in the light of our military commitments worldwide, permit us to indulge in [MACV's] assumption [of no withdrawals]."[319] Acknowledging the boost this would give the communists, Laird proposed that the administration instead "confine ourselves to consideration of political and diplomatic alternatives." At first Nixon hesitated, recalling only 25,000 troops in July and refusing to commit to a timetable for Vietnamization, but in September he approved the withdrawal of 35,000, and in December, announced the return of 50,000 more by April, 1970.[320]

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country but is a responsibility to the world." "Memorandum from Secretary of the Treasury Kennedy to President Nixon." December 15, 1969. *FRUS: Foreign Economic Policy, 1969-1972*: 85-87.

[318] Lawrence J. Korb. "The Budget Process in the Department of Defense, 1947-77: the Strengths and Weaknesses of Three Systems." *Public Administration Review*, 37,4, (July-August 1977).

[319] Laird also saw troop withdrawals as "necessary to retain U.S. public support for our continued efforts in South Vietnam." "Memorandum from Secretary of Defense Laird to President Nixon." March 13, 1969. *FRUS*: 108-120.

[320] Kimball, 138-39, 150.

Even still, Laird was unsatisfied with the pace of Vietnamization and the level of spending on the war. In February, 1970, he returned to South Vietnam, where he informed South Vietnamese officials that "the major constraint on US involvement was now economic," and reported that a "significant portion of [his] discussions with the MACV and Embassy staffs was devoted to the budget realities which must be faced."[321] Less than two months later, Laird was again urging the President that in order to "keep the US burden within tolerable economic limits," he would not only have to "continue to reduce US forces in South Vietnam," but also lower "the present levels of tactical air and B–52 support," as they "cost $1.4 billion more than has been planned for in the budget." "With US military options constrained," Laird continued, the only options "available to maintain the momentum towards stability and self-determination for the South Vietnamese… [lay] in the political field." Perhaps, he suggested, it was time to consider a French proposal "to explore the possibilities of a conference on Indo-China."[322] Nixon ultimately heeded his secretary's calls for troop withdrawals, and by the end of 1971, more than 400,000 U.S. soldiers had been sent home. But when it came to Laird's support for "political and diplomatic alternatives" to military aggression, the President was less understanding. As we have noted, Laird had voiced concern about the consequences of interference in Cambodia months before Operation Menu had begun, convinced that "it would be impossible to keep the bombing secret, the press would be difficult to handle, and public support could not be guaranteed."[323] In spite of extreme measures to preserve the secrecy of the mission - the Pentagon's official records were manipulated, with pilots informed mid-flight that their payloads were to be dropped on different co-ordinates that the ones recorded in official logs – the

[321] Laird also hinted that Creighton Abrams' apprehension about further withdrawals cast doubts on his boast that the military situation in the South was "entirely satisfactory." "Memorandum from Secretary of Defense Laird to President Nixon." February 17, 1970. *FRUS*: 579-590.
[322] "Memorandum from Secretary of Defense Laird to President Nixon." April 4, 1970. *FRUS*: 763-764.
[323] Kissinger, *White House* Years, 244.

bombing was quickly discovered, much as Laird had expected."[324] Just two months into the campaign, the *New York Times* informed its readers of "Raids in Cambodia by U.S.," prompting Kissinger and Nixon to suspect a leak.[325] Given his reservations about the bombing, and his refusal to order American pilots to lie on their flight logs, Laird found his name at the top of the suspect list. As the story hit the newsstands, the Defense secretary was playing golf when he was ordered into the clubhouse to take an urgent phone call from Kissinger. "You'd better get in touch with the President," Kissinger informed him. "He's mad as hell that you leaked that story to the *New York Times*." "Go to hell," Laird replied, hanging up and resuming his game. As it turned out, the bombing was discovered by a *London Times* reporter who noticed countless craters out his window during a flight over Southeast Cambodia.[326]

Nonetheless, from then on, the secretary was regarded with distrust, and his motives were routinely questioned. As Nixon advisor John Erlichman remembers, Laird was seen as a "creature of the Congress," appointed because Nixon needed "downfield blocking on Capitol Hill… to ensure healthy defense appropriations and a free hand in Vietnam." The choice was a poor one though, since Laird, "a consummate Congressional game-player," had "personal ambitions that sometimes got in Nixon's way." The solution was simply to bypass him as much as possible, with Kissinger notably issuing the obfuscation orders for Operation Menu's to Laird's subordinates, the Joint Chiefs of Staff. "Laird knew this was happening," Ehrlichman claims, "be he didn't object, since Henry's gambit left [him] free to disown the operations."[327]

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[324] William Shawcross. *Sideshow: Kissinger, Nixon and the Destruction of Cambodia*. (London: Hogarth Press, 1986): 29-31.
[325] William Beecher. "Raids on Cambodia by U.S. Unprotested." *New York Times*, May 9, 1969.
[326] Dale Van Atta. *Melvin Laird in War, Peace and Politics*. (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2007): 179-181.
[327] Ehrlichman, 94-95.

In 1970, still unsatisfied with the impact of the bombing, Nixon ordered U.S. and ARVN ground troops into Cambodia, and again, Laird's warnings about the political consequences proved perceptive. Although the invasion was, by some accounts, a military success, the resulting public backlash - which saw six student protesters killed (including the four at Kent State), 450 university strikes, and three of Kissinger's staff resign in protest – indicated that the costs of escalation could not be measured in financial terms alone.[328] Nixon retained power after a decisive 1972 election win, but the illegality of his attempts to win the war, combined with a growing public awareness about events at the Watergate Hotel, insured that his second term would end prematurely in disgrace.

As the CIA, State, and Defense were marginalized, decision-making became concentrated in the hands of Nixon and Kissinger, who ignored the warnings issued both within and well after NSSM-1 in pursuit of a settlement they could sell as a victory. But what if the pair had paused to consider the advice of their colleagues? Could they not still have decided that with the ARVN years away from adequacy, the GVN plagued by corruption and a lack of legitimacy, and Hà Nội showing no signs of surrender, escalation was the last remaining option? Such a conclusion would have amounted to a grave misreading of NSSM-1, with most and often all of its participants advising against the aggressive signals ultimately employed under Nixon. Bombing of communist positions was already approaching theoretical maximums, but neither the flow of supplies nor the North's determination were expected to diminish any time soon. Hà Nội, as NSSM-1 anticipated, would again demonstrate a willingness to absorb immense losses, both on the battlefields of the South and in the fields and cities of the North, grounds for the State department to question whether bombing could ever be used to impose U.S. terms. Worse still,

[328] John M. Shaw. *The Cambodian Campaign: the 1970 Offensive and America's Vietnam War*. (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 2005): 154.

as the illegality of Nixon's forays into Cambodia became known, trust in the White House plummeted, and by the time he left office two years early, the President's reputation in foreign affairs was severely undermined. Looking back on the war in February 1972, Nixon pondered the idea that a settlement could have been forged in 1969, had he, as he put it, "declared… that the whole damn thing was the fault of Johnson and Kennedy, it was the "Democrats' War," and we're ending it like Eisenhower ended Korea, and we're getting the hell out, and let it go down the tube." But in defending the decision to prolong the war, the President could cite only the operations in Laos and Cambodia – "I don't think anybody else sitting in this chair would have ordered Cambodia or Laos" – militarily dubious endeavours that, if anything, only intensified public and congressional pressure to bring the conflict to a halt.[329] And when peace was achieved in 1973, it was the Americans who had conceded first, allowing NVA troops to remain inside South Vietnam, a situation which the CIA could scarcely contemplate three years earlier.

[329] *The Nixon Tapes 1971-1972.* Douglas Brinkley and Luke A. Nichter eds. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2014): 383.

CHAPTER 4

SAIGON GOES GLOBAL

On January 10, 1971, a South Vietnamese delegation arrived in Bangui, capital of the Central African Republic, escorted in style aboard President-for-Life Jean-Bédel Bokassa's private jet. Flanked by Vietnamese Foreign Ministry and Intelligence personnel, seventeen-year-old Martine Thị Nguyễn, a cement factory worker from the outskirts of Saigon, emerged from the aircraft and was seated at the center of a motorcade to the palace, where Bokassa and his cabinet were waiting. The President immediately pulled down her trousers – and, confirming that she indeed bore a telltale scar, embraced Martine before bursting into tears. It appeared Bokassa, a famously licentious French army sergeant posted to Saigon during the Franco-Vietnamese War, had reunited at last with his long-lost out-of-wedlock Vietnamese daughter.[330]

Martine Thị Nguyễn was not, however, the first mixed-race Vietnamese debutant presented as Bokassa's daughter on the Central African social scene. Two months earlier, Martine Nguyễn Thị Bái, a cigarette vendor living in a Saigon shack made from crushed soda cans, had been feted in Bangui with more much lavish celebrations, complete with several days of ceremonies, banquets, and balls. But when tabloid *Trắng đen* ("Black and White") revealed the first Martine to be an imposter, an enraged Bokassa threatened to retaliate by severing relations with Saigon and endorsing the Vietnamese communists. Matters were not helped when Fidèle Obrou, the first Martine's Central African husband from a hastily-arranged marriage, was sent to the firing squad for orchestrating a botched assassination plot against Bokassa.[331] Desperate to secure international recognition and counter Hanoi's impressive sympathetic

[330] Interview with Phan Công Tâm, Republic of Vietnam Central Intelligence Organization Director of the Office of Operation Plans/Assistant to the Commissioner for Special Operations. August 22, 2015.
[331] Brian E. Titley, *Dark Age: The Political Odyssey of Emperor Bokassa* (Montreal, 1997), 63.

African voting bloc, the South Vietnamese Foreign Ministry sprang into action, hoping to woo the mercurial President-for-Life back to fold. Assisted by *Trắng đen*'s sensationalized coverage of the search for Saigon's "African fairy-tale princess," Ministry officials managed to procure and dispatch the "real" Martine, cementing one of the Cold War's unlikelier partnerships.[332] And though the second "real" Martine's arrival was a more subdued affair, Bokassa nonetheless treated his guests by producing a guitar after several celebratory drinks, and serenading them in Vietnamese with a selection of 1940s bar tunes.[333]

Beyond merely an obscure if colorful episode in Cold War-era diplomacy, the encounter in Bangui reveals the surprisingly global scale of South Vietnam's diplomatic ambitions, belying the presumed insularity of a government often dismissed by foreign correspondents and subsequent scholars as little more than a puppet regime of the United States.[334] In fact, while diplomacy had not been a priority for President Ngô Đình Diệm (1954-1963) or during the turbulent period of coups, intrigue and regional insurrection that followed his deposal, the return to constitutional government in 1967 led to a rapid revival of interest in forging new international partnerships. After American peace negotiations with Hanoi and the spectre of a Democratic Party victory in the 1968 Presidential Election led to widespread doubts in Saigon over American intentions, the need for alternative alliances grew all the more imperative. As one Foreign Affairs Ministry planning memo puts it: "Since 1968, when the Paris peace negotiations began, we have been pushed into a new stage and the conditions of our diplomatic activities have changed. From 1965 to March, 1968, the United States completely focused on

[332] "Martine Bokassa, món quà xuân cho Jean Bedel Bokassa," *Trắng đen*, (Saigon, Spring 1971).
[333] Phan Công Tâm, "Testimony of a Senior Officer, Central Intelligence Organization," *Voices from the Second Republic of South Vietnam (1967-1975)*. K.W. Taylor ed. (Ithaca, NY, 2014), 28.
[334] See, for instance, David Halberstam, *The Making of a Quagmire: America and Vietnam During the Kennedy Era.* Revised ed. (New York, 1988), 16-19; James M. Carter, *Inventing Vietnam: the United States and State-Building, 1954-1968* (New York, 2008), 10-14.

military victory... We only needed to explain that our reason for fighting was to resist communism. But since 1968… the great majority of political observers no longer doubt that America will pull all of its military forces out of South Vietnam. Our destiny now lies in our own force and ability."[335]

Beginning in earnest in 1968, South Vietnam embarked on a sweeping worldwide campaign to rebrand itself as a progressive alternative to the communist North, hoping to secure new channels of support beyond Washington and attain international credibility after years of effectively ceding diplomacy and public relations to both the United States and the Vietnamese communists. At the heart of this effort was Saigon's apparent domestic political progress, beginning with a new constitution and nationwide elections for President and a new bicameral legislature in 1967. Almost from the outset however, the initiative faced all but insurmountable obstacles. The sheer scope of the endeavor pushed the Foreign Ministry's financial and administrative capabilities to the limit, with South Vietnamese envoys hindered by language barriers and often comically misinformed about their destinations. A series of ill-conceived associations with sympathetic but politically-toxic local fringe parties ensued, reinforcing rather than rehabilitating South Vietnam's pariah status.[336] Worse still, rather than promote Saigon's ostensible democratic transition, traveling delegates from the newly-established National Assembly seized on the international platform now afforded them to denounce President Nguyễn

[335] Phùng Nhật Minh, "Công tác Ngoại giao," August 27, 1971, HS1772, Phủ Tổng thống Đệ nhị Cộng hòa (hereafter PTTDIICH)/Vietnam National Archives Center II (hereafter VNAC2).

[336] Relations with Jean-Bédel Bokassa provide an instructive if extreme example: eyebrows were raised in Bangui's embassies when the President-for-Life celebrated his coronation as Emperor Bokassa I of the new Central African Empire with a $5 million two-ton solid gold throne and matching crown; an antique coach drawn by a costumed, French-trained Central African army equestrian unit; a $5 million royal jewelry bill; a nine-meter long $145,000 Napoleonic-era gown; and some 65,000 bottles of wine and of champagne. Total expenses amounted to a quarter of the national budget, though French officials who footed the bill protested that criticism of the ceremony's excesses "smacks of racism." The Quai d'Orsay changed its tune, however, after legislation requiring students to purchase uniforms from Bokassa-owned factories led to nationwide protests, whose perpetrators the Emperor allegedly tortured personally. Amid rumors of political rivals being fed to zoo animals or cooked and served to foreign dignitaries, France dispatched paratroopers to Bangui on September 20, 1979, bringing the short-lived Central African Empire to an end. Titley, *Dark Age*, 89-93, 125-133, 156-157.

Văn Thiệu's interference with the legislature. Beyond these administrative difficulties, South Vietnam also struggled to position itself in a rapidly changing region, where Sino-American rapprochement and reduced U.S. commitments saw Southeast Asian statesmen reconciling with Beijing and revising their strategic assessments of the Vietnam War.

But by far the biggest challenge to effective foreign policy was the profound contradiction between Saigon's diplomatic and domestic imperatives. In the wake of South Vietnam's contentious 1967 elections, incoming President Gen. Nguyễn Văn Thiệu partnered with vehemently anti-communist northern Catholic political groups, whose disciplined grassroots organization helped them triumph in the Assembly elections despite numerical disadvantages. Alarmed by developments in Washington and Paris, these newly-elected hawks hastened to assert themselves by condemning the peace talks and lashing out against a Foreign Ministry eager to present a progressive image to attract overseas support. On the other side of the spectrum, a coalition of mostly southern liberal religious and political groups pressed the government to play a constructive part in deliberations with Hanoi, anticipating that the United States would respond to an obstinate South Vietnam by excluding it from negotiations altogether. Exasperated by the two camps' deteriorating relations and increasingly dramatic exchanges, Nguyễn Văn Thiệu lost patience with civilian politics altogether, effectively binding himself to hardliners who accepted his growing authoritarianism in exchange for patronage and an intransigent position in Paris. This process culminated in Thiệu's blatantly rigged and widely condemned uncontested 1971 re-election. But in crushing Saigon's burgeoning if chaotic constitutional government, Thiệu betrayed the basic premise of South Vietnamese diplomacy, infuriating American congressional patrons and severely compromising South Vietnam's search for alternative partners. At a time when Sino-American rapprochement seemed to negate

Saigon's strategic importance, prospective allies saw few incentives for associating with a weak and unpopular regime. Thus, in simultaneously failing to address the internal shortfalls that necessitated indefinite foreign aid while repelling international observers with its domestic crackdown, the Thiệu government contributed greatly to the timing and the severity of the fateful 1973 U.S. settlement with North Vietnam.

While studies purporting to provide an "international" history of the Vietnam War date back over thirty years, newly accessible official Vietnamese sources have led to a wave of publications exploring Vietnamese perspectives of the war, though South Vietnam's Second Republic (1967-1975) remains almost wholly neglected.[337] This burst of output coincides with the overall trend in diplomatic history towards multinational archival research in which non-state actors play an ever more prominent role.[338] Particular attention has been devoted to the 1970s, when what one volume dubs the "shock of the global" - a series of interconnected political, economic and intellectual crises - forced heads of state to confront complex challenges stemming from a surge in global interdependence.[339] The conflict in Vietnam was a key factor in this prevailing sense of turbulence: "perhaps no other crisis contributed more to the global shock of the 1970s than the Vietnam War," writes historian Lien-Hang T. Nguyen, noting Vietnamese involvement in Central American and Africa.[340] During a recent keynote address, Nguyen goes

[337] See, for example, R.B. Smith, *An International History of the Vietnam War: Revolution vs. Containment, 1955-1961*. Vol. I. (New York, 1983); Edward Miller, *Misalliance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and the Fate of South Vietnam* (Cambridge, MA, 2013).
[338] Examples include Matthew Connelly, *Fatal Misconception: The Struggle to Control World Population* (Cambridge, MA, 2008); Erez Manela, "A Pox on Your Narrative: Writing Disease Control into Cold War History," *Diplomatic History*, 34, no. 2 (April 2010).
[339] ed. Niall Ferguson et al., *The Shock of the Global: the 1970s in Perspective* (Cambridge, MA, 2010).
[340] Lien-Hang T. Nguyen, "The Vietnam Decade: the Global Shock of the War," *The Shock of the Global: the 1970s in Perspective*, ed. Niall Ferguson et al. (Cambridge, MA, 2010).

further, suggesting that Vietnamese communists saw themselves as engaged in a common global struggle against the same structural forces contested by radical Palestinian women's groups.[341]

But while internationally-oriented studies of the Vietnam War have thus far focused on communist "people's" or "guerilla" diplomacy, in common with other accounts of Cold War-era conflicts whose protagonists prevailed by "internationalizing" local grievances to their advantage, Saigon's no less globally ambitious foreign policy after 1967 has thus far been all but ignored. Its political class however, present at the outset of non-alignment at the 1955 Bandung Conference, saw itself as embodying a global spirit of post-colonial national liberation, as determined if unsuccessful efforts to resist American influence attest.[342] Faced with its own "shock of the global" when American support grew uncertain after 1968, the Second Republic undertook a frantic if largely failed search for international assistance.

South Vietnam then represents an instructive counter to more familiar emblems of non-alignment, which succeeded where the Thiệu regime failed despite its similar pursuit of what one historian describes as "diplomatic revolution" – securing domestic objectives through external support and legitimacy.[343] As the diverse network of right-wing state and non-state actors which embraced South Vietnam suggests, the globalization of post-colonial struggles was hardly the exclusive preserve of the left, though progressive movements fared rather better attracting public and scholarly attention. Considering failed bids to internationalize local conflicts is critical however if we are to transcend a mere victor's history of diplomatic revolution, where global outreach becomes a teleological process which invariably propels local contenders to victory. At

[341] Nguyen, "Revolutionary Circuits: Toward Internationalizing America in the World," *Diplomatic History*, 39, no. 3 (June 2015): 420.
[342] Edward Miller, "The Diplomacy of Personalism: Civilization, Culture, and the Cold War in the Foreign Policy of Ngo Dinh Diem," *Connecting Histories: Decolonization and the Cold War in Southeast Asia, 1954-1962*. eds. Christopher E. Goscha and Christian F Ostermann (Washington, 2009), 381-385.
[343] Matthew Connelly, *A Diplomatic Revolution: Algeria's Fight for Independence and the Origins of the Post-Cold War Era* (New York, 2002).

a time when diplomatic history has grown ever more cosmopolitan to interpret an increasingly interdependent world, Saigon's revealing failure serves as a reminder that the pursuit of international legitimacy often proves elusive absent a demonstrable domestic support base.

Origins of Diplomatic Dependency

So poor were impressions of Ngô Đình Diệm's foreign policy stewardship that even his more ardent supporters despaired. Wesley Fishel, one of Diệm's earliest American proponents, lamented in the in-house journal of pro-South Vietnam lobby group American Friends of Vietnam that Diệm had "minimized the importance of international affairs for his country, and underestimated the contribution which a constructive diplomacy could make to his own cause."[344] A more recent Vietnamese-source based account by Edward Miller proposes a more nuanced assessment of Diệm's worldview, though Miller too characterizes foreign policy during the First Republic as "largely unsuccessful." South Vietnamese relations with non-communist neighbours were in some cases cordial, Miller notes, but apart from Malaya, never warm. Potential partnerships with Taiwan and the Philippines were hindered by South Vietnam's poor treatment of its ethnic Chinese population and incompatible views on U.S. relations, respectively, and after Diệm's 1963 assassination, neutralist states like India, Indonesia, Cambodia and Laos were cut off altogether for refusing to sever ties with North Vietnam.[345]

This approach, likened by American observers to Bonn's "Hallstein Doctrine" of suspending relations with states that recognized East Germany, ensured that through no real effort on Hanoi's part, opportunities to engage with much of Southeast Asia were effectively surrendered by South Vietnam, a setback which the Second Republic struggled to overcome. During the turbulent years of military coups and regional and religious polarization following

[344] William Henderson and Wesley R. Fishel, "The Foreign Policy of Ngo Dinh Diem." *Vietnam Perspectives*, 2, no. 1 (August 1966): 5.
[345] Miller, "Diplomacy of Personalism," 390-391, 394-396.

Diệm's ouster, South Vietnamese diplomacy essentially lapsed, at a time when the much-more internationally savvy Vietnamese communists made significant global public relations progress. Consular appointments were often selected to enrich elite military families; as a face-saving means of exiling out-of-favor commanders; or, especially in Laos and Thailand, as platforms for rival generals to expand their drug-smuggling empires. In 1967, when U.S. officials lobbied Foreign Minister Trần Văn Đỗ to appoint an Ambassador to Laos, the beleaguered statesman explained that his efforts had been thwarted for years by Prime Minister Gen. Nguyễn Cao Kỳ, who "wanted to …use this post for various profitable activities such as the gold and opium traffic." "Vientiane," Đỗ added, "was by no means the only post where he had encountered this problem."[346] Reports of official complicity in the narcotics trade complicated Saigon's most critical overseas alliance, as Americans increasingly pondered the pointed question posed by Senator Ernest Gruening in a speech titled "Corruption in South Vietnam: Must Our Boys Continue to Die to Protect It"?[347]

Its formal channels limited, South Vietnam instead resorted to domestic political machinations to project diplomatic signals, often by cooperating with ferociously anti-communist northern Catholic refugee groups. In February 1967, after Charles de Gaulle issued the latest periodic French proposal to end the war by neutralizing Southeast Asia, the Catholic Citizens Bloc staged an "Anti-Peace" rally at the Saigon Cathedral, burning effigies of de Gaulle,

[346] Telegram 10911 Saigon to State Department, November 11, 1967, POL 15-1 Viet-S, 1967-1969 Central Foreign Policy File (hereafter CFPF), box 2764, Record Group 59 (hereafter RG59), National Archives (hereafter NARA).
[347] Ernest Gruening, "Corruption in South Vietnam, IV – Must Our Boys Continue to Die to Protect It"? , *Congressional Record – Senate*, 90th Cong., 2nd. sess., March 8, 1968 (Washington, DC), 5863.

U Thant, William Fulbright, John F. Kennedy, and Ho Chi Minh.[348] Two days later, the French Consulate was stormed by a mob smashing and burning whatever it could lay hands on.[349] In Paris and Washington, suspicion that the government was behind the violence was confirmed when more moderate Catholic leaders, eager to distance themselves from the Consulate raid, made it known that they had declined invitations to join Gen. Nguyễn Cao Kỳ's Anti-Corruption Youth in attacking the compound.[350] On March 1, an irritated U.S. Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge warned de facto leader Kỳ that the episode made South Vietnam appear "immature and clumsy," noting that while "it was perfectly alright for people to parade and carry signs …what reminded everyone of communist techniques was when they broke into the Consulate General and started to burn and beat people up."[351] Three days later however, the state revealed its hand even more clearly with a Ministry of Education-sponsored stadium rally packed with students waving signs denouncing de Gaulle, who was once again burned in effigy.[352] Though France bore the worst of the diplomatically-motivated demonstrations, it was hardly the only country to face Saigon's less than subtle wrath. After India agreed to host the communist Provisional Revolutionary Government's (PRG) Nguyễn Thị Bình, Foreign Minister Trần Văn Lắm warned that "there are many Indians living in Saigon, and her visit might cause street demonstrations against them."[353] Sure enough, as Mme. Bình arrived in New Delhi, the Indian Consulate in

[348] Telegram 18953 Saigon to State Department, February 25, 1967, POL 23-8 Viet-S, 1967-1969 CFPF, box 2772, RG59, NARA.
[349] Telegram 19058 Saigon to State Department, February 27, 1967, POL 23-8 Viet-S, 1967-1969, CFPF, box 2772, RG59, NARA.
[350] Telegram 19045 Saigon to State Department, February 27, 1967, POL 23-8 Viet-S, 1967-1969, CFPF, box 2772, RG59, NARA.
[351] Telegram 19263 Saigon to State Department, March 1, 1967, POL 15-1 Viet-S, 1967-1969, CFPF, box 2763, RG59, NARA.
[352] Telegram 19546 Saigon to State Department, March 4, 1967, POL 23-8 Viet-S, 1967-1969, CFPF, box 2772, RG59, NARA.
[353] The Provisional Revolutionary Government was established in 1969 in opposition to the government of the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam). A successor to the National Liberation Front, it claimed to be the sole legitimate representative of the South Vietnamese people. Telegram 7135 Saigon to State Department, May 5, 1970, POL 1 Viet-S, 1970-1973, CFPF, box 2802, RG59, NARA.

Saigon was swarmed by students who tore down the Indian flag. The next day, U.S. Embassy reported that "a group of 'veterans' staged a second demonstration," prompting an angry Indian communique condemning "regrettable events" in Saigon.[354]

While such outbursts allowed the government to both signal displeasure and channel domestic anxieties abroad, they were hardly an effective means of pursuing overseas interests much less the basis of a coherent foreign policy, as cooler heads in the Foreign Ministry hastened to note. But when South Vietnam began seeking to repair its neglected diplomacy, with mounting urgency after U.S.-North Vietnamese peace talks commenced in 1968, it confronted a strategic landscape that had changed dramatically since the Diệm era, due in no small part to massive American escalation of the war on Saigon's behalf. Alarmed by a spiralling anti-war movement, the Johnson Administration sought to enhance the war's credibility by recruiting sympathetic heads-of-state and troop-contributing allies, effectively bypassing South Vietnam in the conduct of its own international affairs. This initiative, widely known as the "Many Flags" campaign, was explicitly premised on Saigon's ostensible efforts to implement progressive reforms like land redistribution, rural development, and transparent elections. Allied belligerents, for their part, pledged to proactively pursue a peace settlement.[355] Faced with growing political pressure over the war, the White House would often cite purported international support - "the strongest argument we have for our presence in South Vietnam is that other nations in the area want us there," offered Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara - when considering how to "sell our product to the American people," as Johnson put it.[356]

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[354] [Quotations in original] Telegram 12080 Saigon to State Department, July 28, 1970, POL 2 Viet-S, 1970-1973, CFPF, box 2803, RG59, NARA.; Telegram 12472 Saigon to State Department, 4 August 1970, POL 7 Viet N,1970-1973, CFPF, box 2816, RG59, NARA.

[355] "1966 Manila Summit Conference Joint Declaration," October 25, 1966, *Public Papers of the Presidents: Lyndon B. Johnson, 1966 vol. II* (Washington, DC, 1967), 1259-1265.

[356] "Notes of the President's Meeting," October 4, 1967, Digital National Security Archive, document #VIO1818.

In practice, however, newly-enlisted international advocates of the war were more likely motivated by the promise of American good graces and largesse than by informed strategic assessments, as an Embassy report on Malawi's declaration of solidarity with South Vietnam suggests: "While [Prime Minister Hastings Banda] correctly refers to rebellious elements of South Vietnam as Viet Cong, [he] terms those loyal to government as Viet Ming [sic]. Nevertheless, speech is …possibly of considerable local usefulness. Banda aware and concurs transmittal copies for exploitation to advance free world interests in any way possible."[357] And while the troop-contributing countries – Australia, New Zealand, Thailand, South Korea and the Philippines – were no doubt better informed about conflict's basic participants, they too explicitly linked participation to American military and financial aid.

In 1967 for instance, during negotiations to deploy Filipino engineers to Vietnam, President Ferdinand Marcos proposed that the United States not only feed, train, and equip the outgoing troops, but also provide hardware and instruction for their domestic replacements. Sensitive to perceptions of subservience, Marcos insisted that the Philippines provide its own security personnel, though he sought private U.S. assurances guaranteeing the safety of both the engineers and their mostly symbolic security guards. Other terms included direct American aid for two new national highways.[358] Thailand likewise demanded that the United States supply and defend its 12,000 volunteer soldiers, adding to some $2.2 billion of U.S. investment in Thailand between 1952 and 1972, which prompted critics like Singapore's Lee Kwan Yew to dismiss Bangkok as an "organ grinder's monkey."[359] The perception that an opportunistic

[357] Telegram 1130 Blantyre to State Department, January 10, 1967, POL 27 Viet-S, 1967-1969, CFPF, box 2772, RG59, NARA.
[358] Telegram 4926 Manila to State Department, December 1, 1967, POL 23-3 Viet-S, 1967-1969, CFPF, box 2772, RG59, NARA.
[359] Robert McMahon, *The Limits of Empire: The United States and Southeast Asia since World War II* (New York, 1999), 172.

Thailand sought only to exploit American patronage was not helped by the indifferent performance of its soldiers. South Vietnamese General Đỗ Cao Trí, for instance, created a diplomatic fracas when he excoriated the Thai troops' passivity: "regarding all the money that the United States has given them, why don't they give it to someone else who will use it for combat?"[360]

Philippine and Thai contributions were dwarfed, however, by that of South Korea, which dispatched a 50,000-strong force to South Vietnam, second only to the United States. Much like its Southeast Asian counterparts, Seoul expected ample compensation for its troubles. This would include some $5.5 billion in military equipment - destroyers, helicopter companies, F-4 jets, and howitzers – and economic aid between 1966 and 1973; roughly $400 million of supply contracts to South Korean firms between 1965 and 1968 alone; covering all Vietnam-related troop expenses, including a special $2 million annual kimchi budget (South Korean troops in Vietnam refused American rations); and, like the Philippines, a national highway.[361] Regarded by the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development as "not economically justified at this time," the highway project was of special importance for Park – he "thinks of little else at present," Secretary General for the President Yi Hurak informed the U.S. Ambassador in 1967.[362] Desperate to secure the deployment of a second South Korean division, which Washington explicitly requested to counter congressional charges of allied disinterest, the United States opened its pocketbook, agreeing to meet most of Park's terms. A 1972 Defense

[360] "Trích yếu: Bộ Ngoại giao Thái Lan đối với lời tuyên bố của Đô Cao Trí," July 29, 1970, HS1976, PTTDIICH/VNAC2. For a more complementary perspective see Richard A. Ruth, *In Buddha's Company: Thai Soldiers in the Vietnam War* (Honolulu, 2011).
[361] Tae Yang Kwak, "The Anvil of War: The Legacies of Korean Participation in the Vietnam War" (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 2006), 124; Gregg Brazinsky, *Nation Building in South Korea: Koreans, American, and the Making of a Democracy* (Chapel Hill, 2007), 136-144; Telegram 201874 State Department to Seoul, May 25, 1967, DEF 19-8 U.S. Viet-S, 1967-1969, CFPF, box 1907, RG59, NARA.
[362] Telegram 2821 Seoul to State Department, December 9, 1967, POL 27 Viet-S, 1967-1969, CFPF, box 2772, RG59, NARA.

Department report reveals the scale of the spoils, with the two South Korean divisions alone costing the United States more in 1969 than combined Soviet and Chinese assistance that year to North Vietnam.[363] Small wonder then Defense Minister Yi Tong Won would describe Seoul's Southeast Asia policy as "digging for gold in the jungles of Vietnam."[364]

Unlike the quiescent Thai and Philippine contingents, South Korean soldiers quickly distinguished themselves with a wave of civilian atrocities throughout Central Vietnam.[365] "They don't use kid gloves, and I applaud that, though I don't say we should use the same tactics," Brigadier General John Chiasson explained to a delegation of congressmen.[366] But South Korean disregard for civilians posed increasing problems for the Nguyễn Văn Thiệu government, with a 1969 episode - in which monks in Ninh Thuận were slaughtered for resisting their pagoda's use as rendezvous spot for Korean soldiers and their prostitutes – drawing 15,000 demonstrators to the funeral and provoking outrage in the Assembly and the press.[367] Even state officials like Quảng Ngãi Province Chief Bùi Hoành privately complained that the Korean soldiers "consider everyone as VC," with Hoành alleging that his staff members had been fired at and in one case beaten to death.[368] In response, the United States reassigned the South Korean divisions to sparsely populated hills, soothing civilian relations but negating their military value. Seeking to cut costs, Defense Secretary Melvin Laird proposed withdrawing the two divisions altogether, complaining that it would cost $243 million in the 1972 fiscal year "just to have them

[363] The U.S.S.R and China contributed $535 and $220 million respectively in 1969, a year when U.S. war-related expenses were estimated at over $30 billion. "Preliminaries to a Net Assessment of the Vietnam Conflict," William J Baroody Subject Files: Vietnam, Preliminaries to a Net Assessment of the Vietnam Conflict, September 14, 1972, box A101, Melvin Laird Papers (hereafter MLP), Gerald Ford Library (hereafter GFL).
[364] Kwak, "Anvil of War," 84.
[365] Heonik Kwan, *Ghosts of War in Vietnam*, (New York, 2008).
[366] Airgram A-172, "Resume of Briefings for U.S. Elections Observers Group," Saigon to State Department, September 1, 1967, POL 14 Viet-S, 1967-1969, CFPF, box 2760, RG59, NARA.
[367] Telegram 21149 Saigon to State Department, October 21, 1969, POL 23-8 Viet-S, 1967-1969, CFPF, box 2772, RG59, NARA.
[368] Telegram 275 Danang to State Department, April 3, 1967, POL 12 Viet-S, 1967-1969, CFPF, box 2755, RG59, NARA.

stationary."[369] But hoping to maximize the apparent public relations benefits of by now nominal allied contributions, Henry Kissinger prevailed in prolonging the South Korean presence until 1973, a rare occasion when Laird was bested on financial matters pertaining to the war.[370]

Compounding matters were the allies' very different domestic priorities. While Bangkok and Seoul broadcast the rewards of intervention in Vietnam to demonstrate tangible returns for their constituents, Manila, where anti-American sentiment ran high, kept its enticements obscure, lest President Marcos be accused of militarism or mercenary behaviour from critics back home.[371] "He might plunge 33 million Filipinos into a suicidal war… just to affirm one's loyalty to a Texan," warned one Manila paper.[372] In response, Marcos insisted that U.S. incentives be recorded as "adjustments," the Manila Embassy reported, so that he could "later impart idea that he drove a hard bargain with the U.S. on the Philcags [Philippine Civic Action Group] - should he wish to do so for his own domestic reasons."[373] These intricacies posed a challenge for South Vietnam's eager but inexperienced diplomats. While planning a1970 Troop-Contributing Countries summit, Foreign Minister Trần Văn Lắm provoked a scandal in Manila by formally inviting the Philippines, which was portraying its role in the war as strictly civilian. Worse still, Lắm summoned Malaysia and Japan as witnesses, jeopardizing longstanding plans to have them serve as "impartial observers" in a future ceasefire and compromising what was meant to have been a private gathering. Fortunately, poor communication in the Foreign Ministry insured

[369] National Security Memorandum for Undersecretary of State, Deputy Secretary of Defense, and Director of Central Intelligence, June 18, 1971, Department of Defense Papers Historical Project Files (C Series), box C36, MLP, GFL.
[370] National Security Decision Memorandum 161, 5 April 1972, *Foreign Relations of the United States* (hereafter *FRUS*), 1969-1976, vol. XIX, part 1, Korea, 1969-1972, eds. Daniel J. Lawler and Erin R. Mahon (Washington: Government Printing Office, 2012), doc. 132.
[371] Telegram 80084 State Department to Manila, Bangkok and Seoul, December 6, 1967, POL 23-3 Viet-S, 1967-1969, CFPF, box 2772, RG59, NARA.
[372] Telegram 5810 Manila to State Department, December 29, 1967, POL 23-3 Viet-S, 1967-1969, CFPF, box 2772, RG59, NARA.
[373] Telegram 5284 Manila to State Department, December 6, 1967, POL 23-3 Viet-S, 1967-1969, CFPF, box 2772, RG59, NARA.

Kuala Lumpur' invitation had not actually been delivered as scheduled, while a relieved Tokyo was happy to accept Lắm's retraction. "Although he was not a young man," Lắm was recorded admitting, "there were still things he was learning as he went about his new job, and perhaps he had been at fault by trying to 'strike the iron while it was hot.'"[374]

All of this meant that with South Vietnam largely preoccupied by domestic upheaval until the advent of the Second Republic in 1967, the terms and conditions of its most important regional relationships were negotiated in Washington rather than Saigon. This rendered the government an incidental player in its own foreign affairs, enabling it to ignore potential regional partners like Indonesia from behind the diplomatic and economic safety of the American umbrella. And though neighbours were happy to accept generous inducements to fight on South Vietnam's behalf, Saigon's clearly subordinate status did little to bolster its legitimacy, strategic value, or future prospects absent American support. Behind closed doors, the other troop contributors were dismissive if not contemptuous of their putative ally, with South Korean officials, for instance, lamenting to Melvin Laird that South Vietnam's leaders "simply didn't have the will and the desire to meet their problems."[375]

South Vietnam on the World Stage

Though elections and a new constitution brought an end to the post-Ngô Đình Diệm anarchy, the outcome of another no less critical contest - the 1968 U.S. Presidential Election – loomed large, as did impending negotiations between Washington and Hanoi. So important was the result of the U.S. showdown that, according to Director of Central Intelligence Linh Quang Viên's analysis, even a Democratic Party primary win for peace candidate Robert Kennedy could

[374] Telegram 028302 State Department to Saigon, February 26, 1970, POL 7 Viet-S, 1970-1973, CFPF, box 2809, RG59, NARA.
[375] "Memorandum for the Record: Vietnamization Meeting with Secretary Laird," William J Baroody Subject Files: Historical Project Vietnamization Meetings, August 10, 1971, file 1971 (4), box A73, MLP, GFL.

lead to collapsing morale and mass desertions in the South Vietnamese army.[376] And though Saigon's preferred candidate Richard Nixon ultimately prevailed after persuading new President Nguyễn Văn Thiệu to stall the peace talks, Nixon's narrow victory underscored South Vietnam's susceptibility to external developments over which it had little control. A 1970 report by Presidential Special Advisor on Foreign Affairs Nguyễn Phú Đức identified chronic dependence on the United States for military, financial and political support as Saigon's most pressing foreign policy concern. Noting that more than half a million American troops in Vietnam had yet to bring the war to a close, Đức warned that the situation was "disadvantageous for our side in terms of the political and psychological aspects, because U.S. and world opinion has a tendency to compare the strength of a great power like the United States with a small country like North Vietnam, and in the face of this gap, they pressure the U.S. to withdraw early one way or another without paying enough attention to the fact that North Vietnam is the invading enemy." "The pressure of U.S. public opinion has forced us to show goodwill towards peace," he continued, "while the communists invade unrepentantly."[377]

But regardless of the unsavory perceptions that American patronage engendered, South Vietnam had little choice but to clutch the double-edged sword of U.S. aid due to a structural inability to live within its means – a fact Đức neglected to include in his report. Consider, for instance, the 1970 National Budget: plagued by corruption, woeful tax collection rates, and a massive but rarely effective military, South Vietnam faced projected 20% spending increases despite having collected less than 30% of anticipated expenses in tax revenue the previous year.[378] Exacerbating matters, the United States suffered financial challenges of its own when, in

[376] Linh Quang Viên, "Thượng nghị Sĩ Robert Kennedy Quyết định Tranh chức Ứng cư viên," (Undated), HS1600, PTTDIICH/VNAC2.
[377] Nguyễn Phú Đức, "Vấn đề Chiến tranh và Hòa bình," July 29, 1970, HS1691, PTTDIICH/VNAC2.
[378] Tổng Nhà Ngân sách và Ngoại viên, "Ngân sách Quốc gia Tài khóa 1970," undated, HS80, PTTDIICH/VNAC2.

1968, years of increased American exports and expenditures to promote the war prompted a run on the dollar against the price of gold.[379] Though Richard Nixon relieved the pressure to some extent by withdrawing from the Gold Standard in 1971, the gold crisis meant that for the first time, the United States approached the limit of its capacity to sustain South Vietnam. Nixon increasingly found himself subject to the spending restrictions proposed by Defense Secretary Melvin Laird, who regarded the war as something of a distraction from the Soviet challenge. Vietnam, Laird wrote, was "purely and simply …one of the major reasons the Soviet Union has been able to make such marked military strides relative to the United States during the past few years," framing the issue in a manner that no Cold War-era President could dare to neglect.[380] In any case, responding to both economic and political imperatives, which South Vietnam's dire reputation only intensified, the United States began redeploying troops out of Vietnam in 1969. Dubbed "Vietnamization" to suggest a constructive South Vietnamese role in the process, U.S. withdrawal instead proved disastrous for the South Vietnamese economy, both increasing Saigon's share of the defense burden while depriving citizens of a crucial source of economic activity – providing services for American troops. Perhaps a necessary compromise to prolong congressional support for the war, Vietnamization generated simultaneous inflation and unemployment in South Vietnam, with military expenses skyrocketing even as economic opportunities withered.

Faced with eroding U.S. economic, military, and political support, South Vietnam cast its gaze abroad, seeking alternative partners to fill the yawning fiscal void. In August 1968, newly-

[379] "The sending of more troops to Vietnam would risk 'a collapse… of the international monetary system,'" as one observer put it, so that in "improv[ing] the situation over there [in Vietnam]," the United States was "throw[ing] away the fruits of a generation of brilliant economic progress." Robert M. Collins, "The Economic Crisis and the Waning of the American Century," *The American Historical Review*, vol. 101, 2, (April, 1996): 414-415.
[380] "Memorandum for the President – Redeployment of U.S. Forces from Southeast Asia," Melvin Laird to Richard Nixon, April 3, 1971, Vietnam Subject Files (hereafter VSF), folder 4, box 84, National Security Files (hereafter NSF), Richard Nixon Library (hereafter RNL).

appointed Foreign Minister Trần Chánh Thành delivered a speech at the new Vietnam Council of Foreign Relations, established to spearhead Saigon's global public relations campaign by promoting South Vietnamese perspectives and interests abroad. Shattering the "Hallstein" doctrine, Thành proposed a "policy of presence" in neglected neutral countries like France, Cambodia, Indonesia and India, prioritizing restored full consulates in all four countries while pursuing normalized relations. Bolder still, Thành called for a settlement in Southeast Asia based on the 1954 and 1962 Geneva Conferences - a daring proposal indeed given that predecessor Trần Văn Đỗ had been dismissed after similar remarks saw him excoriated in the National Assembly. From now on, Thành concluded, South Vietnam would strive for peaceful coexistence with its neighbours, including North Vietnam provided Hanoi renounce interference and aggression.[381] His remarks, U.S. Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker noted with satisfaction, represented the beginning of a new era in South Vietnamese foreign relations, where positive diplomacy was no longer the sole preserve of the communists.[382]

Despite these encouraging first steps, the government faced considerable challenges reforming its long-neglected foreign service. Basic tasks like recruiting personnel with adequate language skills were a persistent problem, to say nothing of finding statesmen familiar with overseas local affairs. Two high profile delegations to Malaysia in 1968 and 1969 were both largely ignored, for instance, after it emerged that the Vietnamese visitors barely spoke English.[383] Likewise, a lengthy and expensive 1967 Latin American tour by former Ambassador to Washington Vũ Văn Thái saw his team arrive in Rio de Janeiro speaking neither Spanish nor

[381] Trần Chánh Thành. *Viet-Nam's Foreign Policy and Consolidation of Legitimacy: Briefing Summary of Speech: August 20, 1968,* (Saigon, 1969).
[382] Telegram 35948 Saigon to State Department, August 21, 1968, POL 15-1 Viet-S, 1967-1969, CFPF, box 2765, RG59, NARA. For Communist international public relations efforts see Brigham, *Guerrilla Diplomacy.*
[383] Airgram A-701, "Vietnamese Assembly Delegation Visits Malaysia," July 24, 1968, POL 7 Viet-S, 1967-1969, CFPF, box 2754, RG59, NARA; Airgram A-114, "Republic of Vietnam Parliamentary Delegation Visits Malaysia," Kuala Lumpur to State Department, February 4, 1969, POL 7 Viet-S, 1967-1969, CFPF, box 2755, RG59, NARA.

Portuguese, only to discover that the government had shut down for the duration of his stay to celebrate Carnival.[384] Six years later, the Brazil mission was singled out by Budget and Finance Committee Chair Hồ Văn Xuân, who demanded the Foreign Ministry cut costs by recalling unqualified staff, alleging that the Rio consulate was conversant exclusively in Vietnamese.[385] Even the capable Washington Embassy was stretched to its limits managing a procession of National Assembly tours to far-flung destinations like Salem, Oregon or Fairbanks, Alaska, featuring representatives who, as usual, struggled to communicate in English.[386] Designed to raise awareness of Saigon's purported democratic reforms, these parliamentary delegations proved a particular burden for the foreign service. By 1970, diplomats were demanding that Prime Minister Trần Thiện Khiêm curtail the practice, arguing that the tours drained Foreign Ministry coffers, sparked media accusations of "junketeering," and impeded Assembly proceedings by leaving insufficient legislators on hand to approve new bills. One assemblyman, a Ministry memo noted, had made six one-month international trips in the past year alone.[387]

Closer to home, the Foreign Ministry found it difficult to coordinate with the departments tasked with economic development, prompting an exasperated President Thiệu to complain to his cabinet that "this creates a difficult situation to watch: on the one hand, the government and the people of Vietnam demand international funds, and on the other, the delegates who call themselves representatives of the people do not have a single project or program to vie for the world's assistance."[388] Perhaps unsurprisingly then, the Foreign Ministry's reputation was less than prestigious, as a 1970 report on department performance suggests: "We need a system…

[384] Telegram 7301 Rio de Janeiro to State Department, January 17, 1967, POL 17 Viet-S, 1967-1969, CFPF, box 2769, RG59, NARA.
[385] "Ngoại giao Việt Nam: Nguyễn Phú Đức," *Sóng thần*, October 24, 1973.
[386] Telegram 023109 State Department to Saigon, February 13, 1968, POL 7 Viet-S, 1967-1969, CFPF, box 2754, RG59, NARA.
[387] Ibid; "Việc xuất ngoại có tính cách tụ vụ của các Dân biểu và Nghị sĩ," October 9, 1970, HS7687, PTTDIICH/VNAC2.
[388] "Hội đồng Tổng Trưởng 11-4-1969," April 11, 1969, HS79, PTTDIICH/VNAC2.

which avoids the situation of having employees who work temporarily and perfunctorily in Vietnam, and who only look to find ways to leave for foreign countries quickly, so they can contribute little to the national cause, and just enjoy themselves."[389]

Inexperience coupled with Saigon's controversial reputation saw a tendency towards association with already-sympathetic and often questionable right-wing organizations. In Washington, veteran Ambassador Bùi Diễm took the lead, partnering with Young Americans for Freedom to curate member tours of South Vietnam, and making plans to deploy pro-war Vietnamese students and veterans to the United States to shout down American protestors.[390] Asserting that "the war to determine the survival of our people is in America," the Defense Ministry's Psychological and Political Warfare Bureau also sprang into action, proposing a new speakers' series, the Vietnamese American Council. The selection of familiar partisans like Wesley Fishel and the Free Pacific Association's Raymond de Jaegher as headliners, however, was neither novel nor especially inspired.[391]

As word of Saigon's initiative spread, the Ministry was repeatedly solicited by a procession of conservative fringe groups. Right-wing talk-show *Twin Circle Headline* approached Nguyễn Phú Đức in 1970, noting that "about 40% of [our] programs are in defense of your government and a free South Vietnam," including "a formal debate with Prof. Jonathan Mirsky… [who] is no friend of freedom." "Unless help is forthcoming," host Daniel Lyons pleaded, "we are going to drop the program in 400 cities next month …If something around $10,000 could be promised …we could survive through the winter."[392] The World Anti-Communist League sought $2 million for "Vietnam Report," a monthly English-language

[389] "Cải thiện Ngành Ngoại giáo," August 1970, HS1690, PTTDIICH/VNAC2.
[390] "Hội Young Americans for Freedom," March 3, 1970, HS1743, PTTDIICH/VNAC2.
[391] "The Vietnamese American Council," Nha Chiến tranh Tâm lý Chánh trị, Bộ Quốc phòng, October 2, 1969, HS7660, PTTDIICH/VNAC2.
[392] Letter from Daniel Lyons to Nguyễn Phú Đức, October 13, 1970, HS1971, PTTDIICH/VNAC2.

bulletin to "popularize Vietnamese political perspectives on the world stage." Arguing that South Vietnam should instead target "the bloc standing in the middle," Nguyễn Phú Đức dismissed the League as "a far-right organization with very limited range," overruling Prime Minister Trần Thiện Khiêm.[393] Elsewhere, more noble-minded but naïve benefactors drained Ministry time and resources, perhaps none more than Freedoms Foundation President Dr. Kenneth Wells. The founder of "Loyalty City" and "Gadsden," model Vietnamese "Freedom Villages" for internally-displaced refugees, Wells exasperated Washington Embassy staff by promising dozens of charities that Saigon would finance an upcoming Vietnam tour – without first seeking Ministry confirmation.[394] Conceding that it might be "bad politics to discourage a friend," Bùi Diệm nonetheless advised that Wells "was a bit too concerned with seeking publicity …[while] his project was too expensive and required too much preparation."[395] Months later, the Embassy received a frantic telegram after Saigon was belatedly informed of Wells' plan to "send twenty-four million repeat twenty-four million 'coffee cans'" to Vietnam. "The coffee cans," Private Secretary Hoàng Đức Nhã explained, "are empty cans in which Welles [sic] intends to stuff with home everyday utensils like hammer, nails, screwdrivers etc." "PresiRep [Nguyễn Văn Thiệu] asks you to immediately tell Dr. Welles [sic] to drop his plan," the cable continued. "PresiRep has never asked him nor did PresiRep consent to the whole plan of sending coffee cans… the airlift or shipping of these cans to Vietnam will exceed the capacity of US [United States] and would not be very proper."[396]

Further afield, South Vietnam was similarly beguiled by right-wing fringe groups with limited broader appeal. Noting "dramatic circumstances" resulting in a spate of anti-leftist

[393] "Tài trợ cho Tập san "Vietnam Report," March 31, 1971, HS1843, PTTDIICH/VNAC2.
[394] Gadsden was named to honor Gadsden, Alabama, whose Gold Star Mothers of Etowah County were the project's first donors. George Butler, "Another 'Freedom Village' in Making," *Gadsden Times*, May 4, 1970.
[395] Telegram 0101 AMBAVINAM to Hoàng Đức Nhã, October 1, 1969, HS7686, PTTDIICH/VNAC2.
[396] Telegram 584 Hoàng Đức Nhã to AMBAVINAM, April 2, 1970, HS1751, PTTDIICH/VNAC2.

juntas, a firm representing South American military dictatorships suggested that "the moment for a trip to Latin America, for better diplomatic contacts and understanding of your country's problems, is favorable." "I have mostly friends in the newspaper field," the invitation continued, "[and] I am sure they can be very helpful even on the local political field."[397] South Vietnam also featured prominently in Rhodesian propaganda warning that "communist designs in Vietnam are no different from their designs in Southern Africa."[398] Some ill-chosen affiliations risked making things considerably worse. In 1970, desperate to boost his domestic stature through the impression of American grassroots support, Nguyễn Cao Kỳ agreed to speak at a rally for Carl McIntire, a Christian-fundamentalist broadcaster described by detractors as "viciously anti-Catholic and anti-Semitic …and support[ed] by Fascist fringe groups." "I should like to urge you as strongly as I know how," implored a distressed Wesley Fishel, "to cancel this ill-destined trip to the United States."[399] Under intense Ministry pressure, Kỳ reluctantly relented, only to horrify a "totally downcast" Bùi Diễm days later by dispatching his wife instead. When mysterious last-minute engine troubles grounded her flight, State Department officials could scarcely contain their delight: "McIntire had already gleefully announced the lady's imminent arrival," one cable gloated; "The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away."[400] And in Denmark, the appointment of Võ Đình Khoái as Ambassador backfired after Khoái appointed the editor of *Reflex*, a bankrupt far-right magazine, to run South Vietnam's information office. An ad recruiting mercenaries to fight on Saigon's behalf resulted in a flood of angry newspaper

[397] Letter from Interco Press Agency to the Republic of Vietnam Permanent Observer of the United Nations, December 17, 1973, HS2094, PTTDIICH/VNAC2.
[398] Rhodesia Ministry of Information, Immigration and Tourism, *Red for Danger in Africa* (Salisbury, 1967).
[399] Letter from Wesley Fishel to Trần Văn Lắm, September 10, 1970, HS1692, PTTDIICH/VNAC2.
[400] Telegram 162661 State Department to Saigon, October 2, 1970, POL 7 Viet-S, 1970-1973, CFPF, box 2809, RG59, NARA.

responses, prompting a government statement reiterating that the scheme was prohibited by Danish law.[401]

Beyond administrative limitations and scant awareness of overseas sensitivities, the Foreign Ministry also struggled to adapt to a changing regional strategic environment thrown into chaos by the onset of Sino-American rapprochement. As news of Henry Kissinger's landmark 1971 trip to China reached the capitals of Southeast Asia, it created what the National Security Advisor described as a "shockwave."[402] Already attentive to the so-called Nixon Doctrine, America's regional allies scrambled to reassess their relationships with Washington, and above all, with Beijing. In Malaysia, reactions were relatively calm given that Kuala Lumpur had positioned itself as "non-aligned" since 1968. Beijing's 1973 pledge to curtail support for the Malaysian communist movement paved the way for rapid normalized relations by 1974.[403] Singapore's Lee Kwan Yew also reacted positively to the news, though he complained about "the surprise element." Although fears of PRC influence within Singapore's Chinese population delayed recognition until 1990, the Singaporean Prime Minister acknowledged the wisdom of Nixon's decision: "the situation had to be faced," he wrote, "and this is the time."[404] As early as 1968, Lee was offering his oft-cited interpretation that regardless of the outcome in Vietnam, the war had "bought time for the rest of Southeast Asia," thereby minimizing the regional impact when China's isolation ended.[405] And in Indonesia, which Nixon described as "the big prize" of Southeast Asia, news of Sino-American rapprochement was also unexpectedly

[401] Airgram A-136, "Slowdown in Plans to Open GVN Information Office in Copenhagen; Scandinavian Mercenaries to Aid GVN?" Copenhagen to State Department, May 8, 1970 POL 7 Viet-S, 1970-1973, CFPF, box 2809, RG59, NARA.
[402] Memorandum from Henry Kissinger to Richard Nixon, 14 July 1971, *FRUS*, 1969-1976, Vol. XVI, China, 1969-1972, ed. Steven E. Phillips (Washington: Government Printing Office, 2006), doc. 144.
[403] Ang Cheng Guan, *Southeast Asia and the Vietnam War* (New York, 2010), 92-95.
[404] Ibid.
[405] Tellingly, and much to Saigon's dismay, this line of reasoning values the peripheral effects of the war considerably higher than the fate of South Vietnam itself. Lee Kwan Yew, *From Third World to First: The Singapore Story 1965-2000* (New York, 2000), 467.

measured. President Suharto surprised U.S. Secretary of State William Rogers during a 1969 visit by informing him that, given Indonesia's geography, he did not regard China as a major threat to its security.[406] Foreign Minister Adam Malik meanwhile affirmed that Jakarta recognized the necessity of U.S. troop withdrawals from the region, though he cautioned against proceeding too quickly and called for increased American aid to make up the slack.[407]

With the strategic logic that had prompted it suddenly undercut by revived Sino-American relations, the Vietnam War now seemed considerably less important to South Vietnam's putative regional partners, assuming the United States continued to provide political support and largesse. Only in Thailand, where economic growth was most contingent on the U.S. military and fears of Chinese subversion were ripe, were Vietnamization and rapprochement with Beijing seen as cause for alarm. [408] And as Henry Kissinger pithily suggested, in a remark that would have shocked the previous generation of Cold War strategists, "if we withdraw from Thailand, the Thai won't fight [China]…maybe we shouldn't want the Thai to fight. History will not stop if Thailand goes back to being a neutralist country."[409] As Saigon reached out to its neighbors then, it confronted a region in transition whose core strategic assumptions were increasingly questioned. Reporting from the latest Asia and Pacific Council (ASPAC) summit in 1972, Saigon's Ambassador to Seoul warned that "the conference… could mark a decisive turn in the history of the organization. ASPAC could emerge changed not only in its goals and objectives but in its very nature. An ASPAC acceptable to Red China and also communist countries and so-called 'neutrals' could affiliate."

[406] Telegram from Secretary of State Rogers to State Department, 5 August 1969, *FRUS*, 1969-1976, Vol. XX, Southeast Asia, 1969-1972, ed. Daniel J. Lawler (Washington: Government Printing Office, 2006), doc. 273.
[407] Telegram from the Embassy in Jakarta to the State Department, 29 July 1969, *FRUS*, 1969-1976, Vol. XX, Southeast Asia, 1969-1972, ed. Daniel J. Lawler (Washington: Government Printing Office, 2006), doc. 272.
[408] McMahon, *The Limits of Empire* 172.
[409] Minutes of a Defense Program Review Committee Meeting, 29 July 29 1971, *FRUS*, 1969-1976, Vol. XXXIV, National Security Policy, 1969-1972, ed. M. Todd Bennett (Washington: Government Printing Office, 2011), doc. 189.

"Unlike the last reunion," he continued, "Korean and Japanese representatives abstained from mentioning [communist] aggression."[410] Against the backdrop of an expansive communist offensive against South Vietnam, the ASPAC proceedings reveal once-likeminded if aloof regional powers now prioritizing restored relations with China, an objective which overt association with South Vietnam threatened to disrupt.

The newly-established Association of Southeast Asian Nations' (ASEAN) position on Vietnam is also particularly instructive. An anti-communist alliance whose membership loosely overlapped with more security-oriented Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), ASEAN in theory represented an excellent opportunity for the equally vehement anti-communist Saigon regime to find common cause with its neighbors. Accordingly, after taking office in 1969, Foreign Minister Trần Văn Lắm identified the ASEAN region as a priority for his department: "We cannot stand all by ourselves, alone… we also cannot rely forever on the assistance of a far-away friend like America, whose social structures, economy, and people's lifestyles are completely different than ours. Therefore we need to find friends next to us immediately. We need to connect with the countries which are also in challenging situations like us to create a strong bloc."[411] But despite the Ministry's eagerness to partner in pursuit of ostensibly shared interests, ASEAN members proved surprisingly cool to Saigon's membership appeals. Singapore Foreign Minister Sinnathamby Rajaratnam was found "lacking in sympathy" by a jilted South Vietnamese delegation after he warned during a 1969 ASEAN conference that expanding too quickly to include South Vietnam would see the association's "potentiality" exceed its "capacity."[412]

[410] Mật diện đến số 4509, June 8 1972, HS1919, PTTDIICH/VNAC2.
[411] Trần Văn Lắm, "Hiệp hội các Quốc gia Đông Nam Á-Châu (ASEAN)," March 7, 1970, HS1681, PTTDIICH/VNAC2.
[412] Ibid.

In response, irritated Presidential Special Advisor on Foreign Affairs Nguyễn Phú Đức spurned a 1971 Singaporean proposal to open a South Vietnamese trade office, dismissing Singapore as "just a tiny country with a smaller population than Saigon." Proceeding to list a litany of grievances, Đức recalled that in addition to rejecting South Vietnam's ASEAN membership, Singapore opposed U.S. intervention in Laos and Cambodia, and refused to open an Embassy despite South Vietnamese representation in Singapore since 1954.[413]

Indonesia, on the other hand, sought to boost its regional prestige by issuing proactive if vague public appeals for peace in Vietnam.[414] As such, Jakarta was happy to consider accepting South Vietnam into ASEAN – provided not only North Vietnam but also the Provisional Revolutionary Government be admitted too. [415] This proposal was anathema to the very premise of Saigon's diplomacy, which rejected out of hand communist claims that the P.R.G. represented South Vietnam's sole legitimate government. And unlike Singapore, Indonesia could hardly be disregarded as "just a tiny country." Fortunately for Saigon, Trần Văn Lắm reported, Indonesia had "turned towards the free world" with the 1965 extermination of at least half a million suspected Communist Party sympathizers, and was now privately sympathetic to South Vietnamese concerns. Still, Lắm cautioned, because "[Indonesian] public opinion was still poisoned by communist propaganda," restoring relations with Jakarta required careful clandestine diplomacy.[416] This delicate understanding was jeopardized when Lắm's predecessor Trần Văn Đỗ accidently disclosed the ongoing secret talks with Suharto, dooming parallel American efforts to enlist the General's help in moderating Hanoi's position.[417] Relations with

[413] Nguyễn Phú Đức, "Tân Gia Ba muốn mở một Tòa Đại diện Thương mại tại Sài Gòn," October 8, 1971, HS1975, PTTDIICH/VNAC2.
[414] Guan, *Southeast Asia and the Vietnam War*, 80.
[415] Trần Văn Lắm, "Hiệp hội các Quốc gia Đông Nam Á-Châu (ASEAN)," March 7, 1970, HS1681, PTTDIICH/VNAC2.
[416] Trần Văn Lắm, "Phái đoàn Indonesia," October 17, 1969, HS2053, PTTDIICH/VNAC2.
[417] Telegram 4285 Jakarta to State Department, January 26, 1968, POL 15-1 Viet-S, CFPF, RG59, NARA.

Jakarta gradually recovered, though there was little South Vietnam could do to maneuver Singapore or Indonesia's strict public stances on ASEAN membership.

Perhaps unexpectedly for an association of anti-communist recipients of ample American military aid, ASEAN also took initiative, suggesting the warring Vietnamese parties resolve their differences peacefully through the vaguely-specified "neutralization" of the region.[418] To that end, sounding rather similar to Charles de Gaulle, Thai Foreign Minister Thanat Khoman proclaimed Southeast Asia "a region of peace" in a 1971 address, requesting that "foreign powers stop intervening in the region and respect its neutrality."[419] Initiated largely at Malaysian and Indonesian behest and with the enthusiastic support of the Philippines, the peace plan was thin on details and never likely to win favor in Hanoi, led alone Saigon. Nonetheless, ASEAN's progressive public stance elucidated both the shifting strategic priorities prompted by thawing U.S.-China relations, and the growing diplomatic and domestic dividends of association with the pursuit of peace.

Privately dismissive of ASEAN's speculative solution on the not unreasonable assumption that Hanoi would never cede footholds in South Vietnam, Saigon's foreign policy corps still acknowledged the wisdom of paying lip-service to such proposals in keeping with its campaign to project a constructive image.[420] But the President and his Council of Advisors, motivated in part, as we shall see, by domestic political calculations, instead overruled the diplomatic consensus, countering with assertive foreign policy principles of their own. Dubbed the "four noes," a phrase that could scarcely have run more counter to the premise of positive diplomacy, Thiệu's pledge to forbid territorial concessions, negotiations, coalition government,

[418] Special ASEAN Foreign Minister's Meeting, "1971 Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality Declaration," November 27, 1971. http://cil.nus.edu.sg/rp/pdf/1971ZoneofPeaceFreedomandNeutralityDeclaration-pdf.pdf (accessed August 15, 2015).
[419] Trần Văn Lắm, "Tuyên ngôn Trung lập hóa Đông Nam Á," November 12, 1971, HS1921, PTTDIICH/VNAC2.
[420] Nguyễn Phú Đức, "Đề nghị để vãn hôi hòa bình tại Việt Nam," July 31, 1972, HS1922, PTTDIICH/VNAC2.

and communist or "neutralist" activity precluded even the appearance of considering ASEAN and others' peace plans. Though his gesture may have reassured an anxious domestic base, it only reinforced South Vietnam's perceived recalcitrance, prompting colleagues like Lower House Defense Committee Chair Trần Văn Đôn to insist that the four noes "be recast in a more positive context to appeal to international opinion."[421] The Foreign Ministry, meanwhile, maneuvered to mitigate the damage, diluting the impression of intransigence by enlisting Laos and Cambodia in a joint response condemning the ASEAN plan.[422]

But while Saigon's apparent obstreperousness was out of touch with the new regional zeitgeist, the failure to inspire neighborly solidarity owed more to an incongruous strategic transition. Its symbolic value eroding as the Domino Theory's currency waned, South Vietnam offered little to an area recalibrating geopolitical assumptions in anticipation of China's restored standing. Likewise, though Saigon's repressed opposition shared ASEAN's zeal for negotiations with the North, the notion of a settlement based on regional neutrality held little appeal for the hardline supporters of a President grasping for military and political survival.[423] With shifting regional calculations elevating both the international rewards and domestic costs of appearing to embrace peace, the Foreign Ministry struggled to balance these competing imperatives, its efforts undercut at home while forsaken abroad.

Domestic Paradoxes

In the spring of 1966, the second Buddhist uprising in three years saw the cities of Đà Nẵng and Huế effectively lost to central government control after anti-military protests by monks, students, teachers, civil servants and even the Mayor of Đà Nẵng. Order was restored

[421] Telegram 17397 Saigon to State Department, November 2, 1971, POL 15-1 Viet-S, 1970-1973, CFPF, box 2813, RG59, NARA.
[422] Nguyễn Phú Đức, "Đề nghị để vãn hôi hòa bình tại Việt Nam," July 31, 1972, HS1922, PTTDIICH/VNAC2.
[423] Tran Thi Lien, "The Challenge for Peace Within South Vietnam's Catholic Community: A History of Peace Activism," *Peace & Change* 38, no. 4 (October 2013).

only by force following weeks of intense street-to-street fighting. Dangling a carrot after brandishing the stick, Prime Minister Nguyễn Cao Kỳ sought to mollify a skeptical public by promising elections and a new constitution. His pledges were also intended to reassure voters in the United States, where doubts about the war were fuelled by the revived Buddhist-led insurgency. During a 1966 encounter in Honolulu, President Johnson spelled out in explicit terms for Kỳ and his generals that continued support for South Vietnam hinged on the appearance of domestic reform.[424] Well aware of the growing global audience, liberal politicians like Lý Quí Chung leveraged American scrutiny into military concessions on the constitution, calculating that pressure to present Johnson with a finished draft at the upcoming Guam Conference would force Kỳ's hand.[425]

To be sure, the elections scheduled for September 1967 were a considerable gamble for the United States and the South Vietnamese military, risking the possibility that political competition could spiral out of control, in turn provoking another counterproductive military coup. We "ought to take out coup insurance against this risk," one White House memo suggested.[426] But given the growing pressure for reform from constituents on both sides of the Pacific, Washington and Saigon had few alternatives. "The next two or three years will be crucial for the Vietnamese and American people," observed Phan Quang Đán, a respected politician known for his arrest and torture under Ngô Đình Diệm. "The new government must have wide popular support," Đán reiterated, "so it can undertake necessary reforms and introduce new programs."[427] Still, while the elections were an acknowledgment that Saigon's credibility

[424] "The Declaration of Honolulu," February 8, 1966, *Public Papers of the Presidents: Lyndon B. Johnson, 1966 vol. I* (Washington, DC, 1967), 153-157.
[425] Lý Quí Chung, *Hồi Ký Không Tên* (Ho Chi Minh City, 2004): 109-110.
[426] "Memorandum on Action Program to Promote a Favorable Political Evolution in Saigon," White House to State Department, January 13, 1967, POL U.S.-Viet-S 1967-1969, CFPF, box 2670, RG59, NARA.
[427] Telegram 15816 Saigon to State Department, January 17, 1967, POL 15 Viet-S, 1967-1969, CFPF, box 2768, RG59, NARA.

abroad was contingent on popular support at home, they were intended strictly to legitimize rather than replace the incumbent authority. As Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge argued, "the military is the only group which has experience or competence in managing the country… [they] will need to run the country for some time, and if we give any real power to civilians, the military will overthrow the government."[428]

Given these conservative objectives, it was perhaps unsurprising how quickly the public relations component of the September contests was tarnished. Reports from the provinces of threats, harassment, and the transfer or demotion of civilian candidate supporters soon reached the capital, prompting appeals for American intervention to guarantee a fair result.[429] Press censorship, meanwhile, proceeded without interruption despite having been proscribed since April by the new constitution. The repression of their peers drew the predictable ire of American correspondents, with the *Washington Evening Star*, for instance, reporting that "erratic, illogical and arbitrary" military censorship was imposed even on the remarks of both the Foreign Minister and Prime Minister Kỳ himself.[430] Unable to air grievances at home, Saigon's increasingly savvy opposition turned instead to American outlets, with candidates like Âu Trường Thanh providing copy for anti-war ads in the *New York Times*. "Is this what 12,000 Americans have died for"? inquired one example complete with reproductions of censored *Saigon Post* columns.[431] And when the Embassy finally prevailed upon the generals to relax press censorship in June, an outpouring of anti-military articles immediately followed.[432] Before it had even formally begun then, the election had already been discredited by the very audience whose

[428] Telegram 17704 Saigon to State Department, February 9, 1967, POL 14 Viet-S, 1967-1969, CFPF, box 2757, RG59, NARA.
[429] Võ Long Triều, *Hồi ký Tập hai: Đệ nhị Việt Nam Cộng Hòa* (Lexington, KY, 2010), 70.
[430] Richard Critchfield, "Saigon's Censors Busy in Spite of Constitution," *Washington Evening Star*, May 2, 1967.
[431] National Committee for a SANE Nuclear Policy, "Is This What 12,000 Americans Have Died For"? *New York Times*, July 18, 1967.
[432] Telegram 03738 Saigon to State Department, August 16, 1967, POL 14 Viet-S, 1967-1969, CFPF, box 2758, RG59, NARA.

loyalty it was staged to recover. As Lower House candidate Lý Quí Chung recalled, "nobody believed the election would be carried out honestly."[433]

Sure enough, amid reports of rampant electoral fraud, the military capitalized on its vast financial and organizational advantages, administering victory against a divided civilian field, albeit with just 34% of the vote. The big surprise was a second place showing for lawyer Trương Đình Dzu, who cleverly campaigned for peace negotiations only after his candidacy was approved. Days later, he was detained on "politically-motivated" five-year-old currency trading charges, according to the Embassy, and then placed under indefinite "protective custody" following the 1968 Tet Offensive. By now a well-known symbolic figure, Dzu's questionable arrest further undermined the compromised rehabilitation of South Vietnam's dismal international image.[434]

Promoted as ex post facto validation of the war, the elections instead served only to complicate South Vietnam's rebranding campaign, confirming rather than debunking unflattering global perceptions. The *New York Times* dismissed the proceedings as a "farce," while the *Baltimore Sun* labelled them "a grim comedy." The British *Guardian* offered a slightly more charitable interpretation, describing the contest as "less of a charade than expected."[435] International election monitors came away equally unimpressed. Sa Kwang Uk, a judge chairing the South Korean Central Election Management Committee tasked with overseeing the Assembly vote, shared his observations in *Chosun Ilbo* newspaper: "There were neither watchers, nor voters' slips. Anyone producing a citizenship card was issued 59 ballot papers

[433] Lý Quý Chung, *Hồi ký Không Tên*, 114.
[434] Telegram 20174 Saigon to State Department, February 22, 1968, POL U.S.-Viet-S, 1967-1969, CFPF, box 2670, RG59, NARA; Charles Joiner, *The Politics of Massacre: Political Processes in South Vietnam*. (Philadelphia, 1974), 268. For Embassy view of charges against Trương Đình Dzu see Airgram A-568, "Arrest of Prominent Vietnamese Lawyer," Saigon to State Department, March 29, 1963, POL 6-1 S VIET, 1963, CFPF, box 4046, RG59, NARA.
[435] "Editorial: Heads we Win, Tails you Lose," *New York Times*, August 3, 1967; "Editorial: Grim Comedy," *Baltimore Sun*, August 4, 1967; "Editorial: Less of a Charade than Expected," *The Guardian,* September 6, 1967.

representing candidates. Each voter chose seven and deposited them in ballot boxes. The remaining 52 he threw away. The remaining ballot papers, if just put into the boxes, could have been counted as valid… the tallies results were simply radioed or telephoned from counties to provincial seats, and onto Saigon for final summing up… if an election were held in Korea that way, popular protests would rock the whole nation."[436] Australian External Affairs Minister Paul Hasluck, meanwhile, regretted that South Vietnam had "so quickly undermined the positive image that came as a result of announcing the election."[437] Within South Vietnam, however, expectations had always been tempered. Trần Văn Tuyến, a prominent lawyer associated with the Vietnamese Nationalist Party perhaps best captured the prevailing mood: "I am anxious to note that the Second Republic is deficient at its very beginning and that its existence is seriously threatened at its very birth… but in the midst of the current political chaos, having something in hand is better than void and nothingness."[438] And indeed, despite blatant military interference, the elections nonetheless brought an end to the tumult subsuming South Vietnamese politics after Diệm's assassination, restoring a legal basis, however haltingly observed, for military rule. Still, as a platform for public promotion and for distancing South Vietnam from its communist competitors, the exercise was a substantial disappointment.

Having surprised observers by supplanting rival Nguyễn Cao Kỳ, Nguyễn Văn Thiệu's position was still by no means secure even as he assumed the Presidency. Aloof, uncharismatic, and with no regional or religious base, he enjoyed less military support than the gregarious Kỳ. Instead, presenting himself as a sober and responsible statesman, Thiệu calculated that by

[436] Airgram A-145, "Vietnam Elections: Comments by Chairman of Korean Central Election Management Committee," Seoul to State Department, September 19, 1967, POL 18 Viet-S, 1967-1969, CFPF, box 2760, RG59, NARA.
[437] "Memorandum of Conversation: Foreign Secretary Paul Hasluck's call on Under Secretary Katzenbach," October 12, 1967, POL 14 Viet-S, 1967-1969, CFPF, box 2761, RG59, NARA.
[438] Trần Văn Tuyên. "Vài Ý nghĩa về Cuộc bầu cừ 3 Tháng 9," *Chính luận*, September 16, 1967.

professing to uphold the constitution, he could neutralize Kỳ's esteem in the armed forces by securing American backing, at a time when the United States sought above all to forestall further coups.[439] Meanwhile, partly to undermine Nguyễn Văn Lộc, Kỳ's consolation choice for Prime Minster, Thiệu fostered ties with the Assembly's northern Catholic refugee bloc, which resented the appointment of a southern P.M. Helmed by the Greater Solidarity Force and the Nhân Xã Party, the northern Catholic deputies boasted a potent regional identity, zealous anti-communism, and a disciplined village-level network enabling their sweep to legislative power despite being outnumbered. Their intensive lobbying forced Nguyễn Văn Lộc's resignation during the chaos of the Tet Offensive, which Thiệu likewise exploited to replace Kỳ's military partisans with loyalists of his own.[440] By the end of 1968, the President enjoyed substantial authority over the armed forces.

But the National Assembly was an altogether different matter. Emboldened by Nguyễn Văn Lộc's demise, northern Catholic legislators were disgruntled when successor Trần Văn Hương, another more-eminent southerner, was selected to counterbalance Thiêu's reliance on Assembly northerners.[441] Foreign Minister Trần Chánh Thành also found himself under mounting parliamentary pressure despite impeccable anti-communist credentials as architect of Ngô Đình Diệm's notoriously excessive "Denounce the Communists" campaign.[442] At a time of heightened alarm over impending U.S.-North Vietnamese negotiations, Thành's call for South Vietnam to assume a constructive peace stance rather than cede proceedings to third parties set

[439] September 21, 1968, for instance, saw one of several meetings where Embassy staff warned Kỳ that "another coup would mark the end of American help to Vietnam." Telegram 38867 Saigon to State Department, September 27, 1968, POL 15-1 Viet-S, 1967-1969, CFPF, box 2762, RG59, NARA.
[440] Telegram 27239 Saigon to State Department, May 15, 1968, POL 15-1 Viet-S, 1967-1969, CFPF, box 2765, RG59, NARA; Telegram 27359 Saigon to State Department, May 15, 1968, POL 15-1 Viet-S, 1967-1969, CFPF, box 2763, RG59, NARA.
[441] Telegram 25386 Saigon to State Department, May 4, 1968, POL 15 Viet-S, 1967-1969, CFPF, box 2763, RG59, NARA.
[442] Miller, *Misalliance*, 133.

off alarm bells among Assembly hardliners. After a series of heated Senate interpolation sessions, Thiêu relented in August 1969, replacing Hương and Thành with retired general Trần Thiện Khiêm and former Diệm partisan Trần Văn Lắm respectively.[443] Trần Chánh Thành's fate provides an instructive example of the Second Republic's foreign policy contradictions. As we have seen, Thành and his colleagues reasoned that repairing Saigon's public image in response to global war-weariness required re-engaging neglected neighbors and conditioning clamors for peace to its advantage, citing events like the Tet Offensive to cast the communists as inveterate belligerents. But though their approach paid modest dividends abroad, it was intolerable to the Assembly's influential hawks.[444] Caught between constituents at home and abroad with dramatically divergent expectations, Thiệu struggled to satisfy both parties, his rhetoric oscillating from moderate or militant according to its audience.

Irritated by Assembly interference with his political agenda, Thiệu lashed out against liberal parliamentarians, in part to signal straying supporters without targeting them directly. Instead, the trumped-up arrests of prominent figures like Trương Định Dzu, Ngô Công Đức and Trần Ngọc Châu achieved an unlikely consensus against the abuse of executive power. Capitalizing on disproportionate overseas influence over Vietnamese domestic affairs, once-irreconcilable deputies reached out abroad, tapping global networks established during previous Assembly promotional tours to publicize the plight of their imprisoned colleagues.[445] Once a focal point of state public relations, South Vietnam's elected representatives now challenged the

[443] "Đại Tướng Khiêm Tân Thủ tướng," *Chính Luận,* August 24-25, 1969.
[444] The Phan Quang Đán affair is likewise illustrative: after defeat in the 1967 election, Đán embarked on a well-received United States speaking tour promoting the Second Republic. At Stanford University, he stated that South Vietnam should take initiative negotiating with the National Liberation Front rather than wait passively for an imposed settlement. Back in the Upper House, Đán's remarks were condemned as treasonous, with Senators demanding his immediate dismissal and imprisonment. This in turn sparked a backlash in Washington where Secretary of State Dean Rusk declared himself "personally appalled" by Saigon's response, warning of a "serious catastrophe" if Senate demands were heeded. Telegram 212148 State Department to Saigon, July 31, 1968, POL 15-4 Viet-S, 1967-1969 box 2768, CFPF, RG59, NARA.
[445] "Hai Nghị sĩ Viếng thăm Hoa Kỳ," April 21, 1971, HS1792, PTTDIICH/VNAC2.

basis of the very campaign they had been dispatched to endorse. By late 1969, the clash between legislature and executive was causing serious harm to the President's domestic agenda, with Austerity Tax and Land Reform bills – both seen in Washington as tests of Thiệu's ability to rule – delayed for months by Assembly grandstanding over political prisoners.[446] Ascendant over the military but exasperated by insubordinate opposition, Thiệu seized upon the 1971 Presidential Election to "smash the treasonous, demagogic rhetoric of a minority of defeatists," as an internal planning document put it, conspiring to preclude Nguyễn Cao Kỳ from contending and ordering the military bureaucracy to implement a victory in the provinces.[447] The scheme backfired when challengers Kỳ and Dương Văn Minh obtained Thiệu's written vote-rigging instructions and withdrew their candidacies in protest.[448] Ignoring a horrified White House, Thiệu proceeded apace, reframing the now-uncontested election as a referendum on his rule. Months later, using the pretext of Emergency Powers legislation after the communist Easter Offensive, he imposed severe restrictions on political parties and the press, effectively ending South Vietnam's brief experiment with limited democracy.[449]

Opposition parties were predictably outraged, with Vũ Văn Mẫu's Buddhist slate teaming with Senate Chairman Nguyễn Văn Huyền's mostly-Catholic Lily group to condemn the

[446] On December 20, 1969, the eve of a crucial Senate Agriculture Committee meeting on the Land Reform Bill, a government-orchestrated mob attacked the Lower House to protest its refusal to strip Trần Ngọc Châu's parliamentary immunity. The following day, Agriculture Committee Chair Nguyễn Văn Chức cancelled the meeting to hold a press conference accusing Thiệu of complicity. Passage of the Land Reform act was delayed by several months. Telegram 25248 Saigon to State Department, December 29, 1969, E 12 Viet-S, 1967-1969 CFPF, box 684, RG59, NARA.

[447] "Tài Liệu Hướng Dẫn về Việc Lập Kiến Nghị Đệ Trình Tổng Thống." HS5652, PTTDIICH/VNAC2.

[448] The Khánh Hòa Province Chief, for instance, lamented that Thiệu had "put in writing what should have been done orally." Telegram 15088 Saigon to State Department, September 20, 1971, Vietnam Country Files (hereafter VCF), folder 3, box 157, NSF, RNL.

[449] Airgram A-143, "Text of New Decree-Law on the Press," Saigon to State Department, August 14, 1972, POL 5 Viet-S, 1970-1973, CFPF, box 2808, RG59, NARA; Telegram 13675 Saigon to State Department, September 18, 1972, POL 12-5 Viet-S, 1970-1973, CFPF, box 2810, RG59, NARA.

proceedings.[450] And even once-stalwart loyalists saw the election as a point of no return. Ambassador-to-Washington Bùi Diễm, perhaps Saigon's most connected and effective representative, recalled the debacle as the moment when "the search for a vivifying national purpose was finally discarded in favor of the chimerical strength of an autocrat." Confiding in Secretary of State William Rogers that he was "very much at loose ends… over his inability to gain sympathetic support from traditional friends of Vietnam in the U.S.," the despondent diplomat considered requesting a transfer to Tokyo.[451]

The President could also hardly claim ignorance of the diplomatic fallout from arrogating power. For some time, confidants like his cousin, Private Secretary Hoàng Đức Nhã, had stressed that action against "corruption and social justice" was paramount in "improving the attitudes of the American people towards Vietnam."[452] By mid-1971, citing public disgust with both the elections and official complicity in drug trafficking, South Vietnamese intelligence reported that "America is no longer concerned with South Vietnam's survival."[453] Likewise, Senators Mansfield and Aiken alerted Trần Văn Đỗ that Saigon should anticipate "difficulties in maintaining funding levels," insisting that "South Vietnam needs to prove to the American public that it has a 'viable future.'"[454] Senator Henry Jackson, once described by Ellsworth Bunker as "one of the strongest and most stalwart supporters of [Nixon's] Vietnam policy," went further, declaring he would "reserve my position regarding future U.S. military and economic aid" should the referendum proceed."[455] And Jackson was just one of many Vietnam defectors

[450] "Thuyết trình của Nghị sĩ Vũ Văn Mẫu tại Thượng Nghị viện," September 22, 1971, HS5686, PTTDIICH/VNAC2.
[451] Bui Diem, *In the Jaws of History*, (Boston, 1987): 293; Telegram 178333 State Department to Saigon, September 28, 1971. VCF, box 157, folder 3, NSF, RNL.
[452] Hoàng Đức Nhã. "Nhận xết về dư luận dân Mỹ," June 1968, HS1581, PTTDIICH/VNAC2.
[453] "Tình hình Hoa Kỳ - Báo cáo tháng 8/1971," undated, HS1830, PTTDIICH/VNAC2.
[454] "Phúc trình về những Tiếp xúc của Trần Văn Đỗ," December 12, 1971, HS1828, PTTDIICH/VNAC2.
[455] Telegram 14645 Saigon to State Department, September 11, 1971, VSF, box 119, folder 2, NSF, RNL; "Speech by Senator Henry Jackson," September 10, 1971, HS1792, PTTDIICH/VNAC2.

from both parties who cited conditions in South Vietnam as the basis for their withdrawn support. Days after Thiệu's re-election, the Senate defeated a proposed $565 million aid bill for Saigon, the absence of which, a South Vietnamese spokesman warned "would probably mean a communist victory in short order." "Our economy is totally dependent on American aid," a government economist added.[456] Even Anna Chennault, broker of the secret 1968 pledge with Nixon to sabotage negotiations, advised Thiệu "as a friend" that the Republican Party was "losing patience" with his "failure to achieve the participation or support of nationalist elements." "I think they are looking for an excuse to get out," she warned, "and time is running short."[457] With congressional and public support dwindling in no small part due to Saigon's dismal domestic performance, Nixon and Kissinger hastened to deliver a settlement in time for the 1972 U.S. Presidential Election, complete with the concessions that would jeopardize South Vietnam's survival.

The election also dealt a blow to what remained of the Many Flags campaign. In New Zealand, one of just two allies covering their own military costs, the unopposed contest imposed severe constraints on Wellington's ability to sustain its support. Already facing a domestic backlash, Prime Minister Keith Hollyoake informed Thiệu that "in defence of New Zealand's role in South Vietnam …he [had gone] to some lengths to state [his] confidence in the reality and the validity of the elections." A one-man ballot would jeopardize his government's position, Hollyoake implored, which "had not gone uncontested," and would "create embarrassment and difficulty for South Vietnam's closest allies …blur[ring] the sharp differences of approach and intention which, for New Zealand and other supporters of South Vietnam, have always been

[456] "South Vietnam Imperiled by Senate's Aid Refusal," *Baltimore Sun*, October 31, 1971.
[457] Letter from Washington Embassy to President Thieu, June 26, 1972, HS1907, PTTDIICH/VNAC2.

apparent between the authorities in Saigon and Hanoi."[458] Though New Zealand's token presence hardly tipped the military balance, the beleaguered Thiệu regime could ill-afford to squander Wellington's status as one of Saigon's few democratically-elected advocates.

After the fateful 1973 settlement with Hanoi, the Foreign Ministry was ordered to "shed skin," as Foreign Affairs Committee member Cao Văn Tường put it, proposing austerity's familiar refrain of "doing more with less" to compensate for dwindling American aid, which despite reductions remained substantial at $700 million for fiscal year 1975.[459] Desperate to plug gaping holes in the budget, South Vietnam scrambled for alternative aid sources, spearheaded by a lavish 1973 world tour featuring the President and a ninety-member entourage.[460] But the delegation was spurned at virtually every stop, rendered politically toxic by Thiệu's disappointing domestic record. In West Germany, identified with Japan as one of two states with the means to offset U.S. cutbacks, government spokesmen sought to appease protestors by categorizing Thiệu's arrival as a mere "gesture of courtesy," insisting his visit would last no more than a few hours. Unmoved, demonstrators hurled cobblestones at police, wounding 35 officers and causing extensive property damage. Behind the scenes, it took considerable American Embassy pressure before a reluctant Bonn relented. "For reasons of security," Thiệu was granted a fifty-minute meeting at a secluded military airport, where his hosts explained that "we need you to help us help you."[461] Arriving in Tokyo, the party was likewise informed that "while Japan was very concerned with assisting South Vietnam, [Thiệu] still needed to deal with a number of related problems, including left-wing protests… and a number of internal difficulties

[458] "Letter from Prime Minister Hollyoake to President Thieu," August 30, 1971, HS1964, PTTDIICH/VNAC2.
[459] "Phái đoàn Bộ Ngoại giao Điều trần về Ngân sách 1975," November 28, 1974, HS2013, PTTDIICH/VNAC2.
[460] The delegation's size was intended convey overseas prestige in order to assuage anxious domestic onlookers. Interview with Phan Công Tâm, August 22, 2015.
[461]Telegram 05322 Bonn to State Department, April 11, 1973, POL 7 Viet-S, 1971-1973 CFPF, box 2810, RG59, NARA.

caused by the economic situation."[462] Canberra, a longstanding troop contributor, was even more curt, with Prime Minister Lance Barnard refusing to permit entry after declaring that Thiệu was "not welcome and [would] not be given any aid."[463] And Mexico, with little at stake, allowed a South Vietnamese delegation to study Mexican land reform only after American lobbying, and on condition that its presence remain secret.[464] So noxious was the Thiệu regime that even oil companies balked at offshore exploration in Vietnam, with a spokesman for Standard Oil of New Jersey explaining that he was "most anxious to avoid a situation in which oil company interests were alleged to be a reason for continued U.S. involvement in Vietnam."[465]

Effectively dooming the search for overseas solidarity and alternative partners, the unopposed election fiasco exposed the conceptual failings of South Vietnam's global outreach campaign. In courting external assistance and legitimacy to compensate for internal military, economic and political shortcomings, the Thiệu regime essentially confused the causal links between its foreign and domestic affairs. Given its stratospheric aid requirements and dwindling strategic value, only unimpeachable local support could attract the staggering foreign contributions that Saigon expected from diplomacy. Conceived in part to assure patrons for whom promoting democracy was more than mere euphemism for advancing American interests abroad, the 1971 election instead confirmed for many that South Vietnam was beyond salvation.

"A Great Ad Campaign only makes a Bad Product Fail Faster"

Despite the imminent withdrawal of the last American troops from Vietnam, Foreign Minister Trần Văn Lắm professed an astonishingly optimistic view of Saigon's position in

[462] "Viện trợ Nhật Tài khóa 1973 và 1974," November 29, 1973, HS7681, PTTDN, TTLTQD2.
[463] Telegram 6838 Canberra to State Department, April 20, 1973, POL 7 Viet-S, 1971-1973, CFPF, box 2810, RG59, NARA.
[464] Telegram 3899 Mexico to State Department, May 31, 1973, POL 7 Viet-S, 1971-1973 CFPF, box 2810, RG59, NARA.
[465] Memorandum from State Department to Henry Kissinger, "Status Report on Petroleum Exploration in South Vietnam," July 23, 1971, VCF, box 156, folder 2, NSF, RNL.

January 1973. Looking ahead, Lắm predicted that "the program of Vietnamization will be completed, and we will realize the success of our policies of self-strengthening and resilience." He boasted of his Ministry's achievements the previous year, which included "preparing world opinion to support us… by denouncing communist terrorism," "consolidating efforts to tighten friendships in Southeast Asia and Africa," and "expanding the presence of South Vietnam around the world." A source of particular pride was the fact that all Southeast Asian states save Myanmar had opposed the PRG's inclusion at the latest Non-Aligned Foreign Ministers Conference, one of 168 international gatherings in 1972 featuring South Vietnamese representation. The Ministry had also organized delegations to Senegal, Ghana, Ethiopia, Liberia and Kenya, and established formal diplomatic relations with Israel, with Venezuela and Iran expected to follow suit. Though the forthcoming settlement with Hanoi posed an existential challenge, the Minister promised that his department could secure "massive international aid to rebuild South Vietnam… while guarding against threats to its sovereignty."[466]

With South Vietnam's Ministries increasingly supplanted by Thiệu's Council of Advisors, Lắm's report was as much a plea for his department as a dispassionate analysis, reflecting the global scale of Saigon's outreach along with vestiges of the high hopes once vested in foreign affairs. Behind closed doors however, the Ministry's prognosis was decidedly more sober. Undermined by domestic developments contradicting the basic premise of its diplomacy, South Vietnam's quest to elicit overseas political support produced limited results. And despite prescient efforts to reduce dependence on the United States, the Thiệu regime remained perilously exposed to the whims of American voters. Four years after Richard Nixon's narrow 1968 victory had accelerated Saigon's worldwide public relations agenda, "the future of Vietnam" one analyst wrote, "still more or less hinges on the result of the November 1972

[466] "Bộ Ngoại giao năm 1972 và Công tác Chính yếu 1973," January 10, 1973, HS1853, PTTDIICH/VNAC2.

election."[467] Even foreign policy professionals questioned the benefits that the far-flung campaign might bring. Phan Công Tâm, an intelligence officer who accompanied Martine Bokassa to Bangui, recalls wondering "why my government cared so much for its image in a country that had no connection with the defense of South Vietnam at this critical time."[468] Phùng Nhật Minh, meanwhile, prioritized internal reform above chasing alternative patrons: "From now on, the task of overseas information should be ranked second. The first and most important task, which demands the most attention, brainpower and expense, has to be activities which will strengthen our national forces to satisfy the two requirements of preserving security and development."[469]

Although the last stages of American involvement in the Vietnam War are often seen as a fiscal clash between Congress and the White House, Nguyễn Văn Thiệu's authoritarianism – which compromised the entire stated purpose of the war – was a critical factor provoking the spending cuts that hastened Vietnamization and impelled the 1973 settlement with North Vietnam. Struggling to reconcile the divergent demands of foreign and domestic constituents, Thiệu pursued repressive stability at the expense of a cacophonous constitutional system, ultimately damaging his credibility both at home and abroad. When South Vietnam's journalists and legislators, the very emblems of the state's self-proclaimed redemption, seized the global platform afforded them to instead decry the "dictatorial, corrupt, rotten policy of Nguyễn Văn Thiệu," as one opposition bloc put it, the effect was devastating, bringing to mind perhaps the adage that "a great ad campaign only makes a bad product fail faster."[470] In alienating domestic and therefore international onlookers, Saigon was condemned to continued isolation, vulnerable

[467] Lưu Vĩnh Lữ, "Cuộc Bầu cử Mỹ," undated, HS1904, PTTDIICH/VNAC2.
[468] Phan Công Tâm, "Testimony of a Senior Officer," 29.
[469] Phùng Nhật Minh, "Công tác Ngoại giao," August 27, 1971, HS1772, PTTDIICH/VNAC2.
[470] Airgram A-047, "Anti-Thieu Proclamation by Lower House People's Society Bloc," Saigon to State Department, March 13, 1973, POL 15-2 Viet-S, 1970-1973, CFPF, box 2814, RG59, NARA.

to a unilateral American settlement and left with no realistic diplomatic alternatives. To be sure, an effective foreign policy was just one of many prerequisites for South Vietnam's always unlikely survival, subordinate, as we have seen, to building a broad local support base. And indeed, despite an impeccably cosmopolitan scope, Saigon's failed bid for legitimacy from abroad amid spiralling discontent at home suggests that effective diplomacy requires sound domestic foundations.

CHAPTER 5

THE EXTINGUISHMENT OF ALTERNATIVES: THE 1971 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

On December 18, 1970, W. R. Smyser and John Negroponte, two analysts at the National Security Council, submitted a report commissioned by their supervisor, Henry Kissinger, assessing the upcoming South Vietnamese Presidential election scheduled for October 3, 1971. "You should know," they informed their boss, "…that this will be the first meaningful presidential contest in the history of Vietnam" – a remark which both alluded to South Vietnam's long tradition of fraudulent elections, and reflected the Nixon administration's desire to see a fairer and, from its perspective, less embarrassing outcome the next time around. Penned during a period of growing doubt in Washington about South Vietnam's ability to compete against the communists, the report nonetheless contained some encouraging surprises. "For the returning visitor," Smyser and Negroponte observed, "the single most striking element in South Vietnam's political life today is the degree to which the institutions of the 1967 constitution have taken hold." The pair also noted approvingly the emergence of a "loyal opposition to the present military government," consisting of a new generation of politicians who were "strongly nationalist …more free than their predecessors of anti-colonial scars and complexes… idealist, but also quite pragmatic," and most importantly, under "no illusions that they can profitably collaborate with the communists."[471]

For proponents of America's commitment to South Vietnam, this was welcome news indeed. After more than two frustrating decades of support for unpopular Sài Gòn regimes, the ostensible U.S. goal of fostering a democratic alternative with enough nationalist credibility and

[471] W.R. Smyser and John Negroponte. "Memorandum for Dr. Kissinger – The Internal Situation in South Vietnam." December 18, 1970. *Richard Nixon Presidential Library (RNL)*, National Security Files (NSF): Vietnam Country Files (VCF), folder 151, box 2.

popular support to withstand the communists now seemed somewhat more realistic, a promising development after the years of tumult that followed the 1963 coup against Ngô Đình Diệm.[472] Although most U.S. officials were unwilling to see President Nguyễn Văn Thiệu replaced – even in a fair election - they were hopeful that more opposition involvement in public affairs might enhance Thiệu's legitimacy, helping to win back dwindling public support for his government on both sides of the Pacific.

But rather than signify Sài Gòn's transition toward democracy, as the Nixon administration had hoped and as Congress increasingly demanded, the 1971 election instead represented the culmination of Thiệu's efforts to obliterate his rivals and consolidate his control. An ardent nationalist, Thiệu regarded the contest as an opportunity to consummate his vision for South Vietnam, which he defined during his campaign as "resolving the war, building democracy and regenerating society."[473] Indeed, the incumbent leader could list progressive initiatives such as his showpiece "Land to the Tiller" land reform campaign, marred though it was by delays, corruption, and the difficulty of overcoming the prestige enjoyed by the communists, who had already implemented de facto land redistribution several years earlier. Though not unsympathetic to citizens' concerns however, Thiệu and his small circle of advisors held patronizing attitudes toward their predominantly rural constituents, whom they saw as largely inert, parochial and suitable only for instruction rather than consultation. His critics, on the other hand, were dismissed with contempt, denounced as dangerous if not treasonous for presuming to question the President's repressive behaviour.

[472] For the origins of the United States' commitment to South Vietnam, see Mark Atwood Lawrence. *Assuming the Burden: Europe and the American Commitment to War in Vietnam.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005
[473] "Tài Liệu Hướng Dẫn về Việc Lập Kiến Nghị Đệ Trình Tổng Thống." *Vietnam National Archives Center II (NACII)*, Đê Nhị Cộng Hòa II (DIICH), Phủ Tổng Thống (PTT), folder 5652.

With peace candidate Trương Đình Dzu already imprisoned at the President's behest, and the communists constitutionally prohibited from participating in spite of estimates that they would command between ten to thirty percent of the vote, the election, from the outset, could hardly be considered a fair reflection of South Vietnamese political inclinations.[474] And though neither of Thiêu's two primary challengers, generals Nguyễn Cao Kỳ and Dương Văn Minh, were regarded as serious threats to his re-election, the President stacked the odds even further in his favour, ignoring ever-more frantic warnings from U.S. Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker and howls of protest from Americans and Vietnamese alike.[475] In addition to ordering his subordinates in the provinces to sabotage Kỳ and Minh's campaigns and harass their followers, Thiêu arranged for his supporters in the National Assembly to pass a law requiring signatures of support from at least 40 Assembly members or 100 provincial councillors - the latter of whom often owed their positions to presidentially-appointed province chiefs. The scheme appeared to backfire when Kỳ and Minh, citing blatant interference, withdrew their candidacies in August 1971, resulting in considerable embarrassment for the White House. Thiêu was undeterred however, reframing the now-uncontested election as a referendum on his rule. Despite predictions of mass protests should the one-man contest proceed, Nixon and Kissinger ultimately backed South Vietnam's divisive leader, fearing a return to the anarchy of the post-Diệm years were Thiêu to fall, and unwilling to see their own unilateral efforts at securing "peace with honor" compromised by new leadership, dismayed though they were by Thiêu's clumsiness.

[474] Running on a platform that called for negotiations with communists to end the war, Dzu had shocked American and Vietnamese observers alike during the 1967 election, finishing second with over 800,000 votes. James McAllister. "A Fiasco of Noble Proportions." *Pacific Historical Review*, vol. 73, no. 4 (November 2004). For estimates of communist support see "Communist Political Strength." NTM/BP-1, May 28, 1969. *RNL*, NSF: Vietnam Subject Files (VSF), box 72, folder 1.

[475] Smyser, for instance, felt that "the odds favour Thieu somewhat," while Negroponte argued that "he is virtually certain to win." "Memorandum for Dr. Kissinger – The Internal Situation in South Vietnam." December 18, 1970. *RNL*, NSF: VCF, folder 151, box 2.

In the end, the anticipated anti-Thiêu demonstrations were much tamer than anticipated, as anger gave way to despondency on the part of South Vietnam's fledgling "loyal opposition" movement. And in light of Thiêu's authoritarian instincts and the White House's disinclination to employ what little leverage it had toward achieving a more-representative contest, the outcome was perhaps never in doubt. Still, refusing to tolerate meaningful competition in an election he was already widely favoured to win came with serious consequences for the increasingly isolated President. Though his attempt to provide an alternative anti-communist vision of modernity based on land reform, economic development, and improved communication between Sài Gòn and the provinces was not without appeal or support, South Vietnam's administrative structures were plagued by corruption and incompetence – a problem that the increased concentration of power under the President only exacerbated. Absent the scrutiny that a loyal opposition was ideally equipped to provide, these fundamental flaws went unaddressed, much to the consternation of anti-communist reformers who would later argue that Thiệu's heavy-handedness helped tip the balance in favour of the communists. Furthermore, for all his efforts to resist external pressure and assert South Vietnam's independence, the government's inability to perform basic functions such as collecting taxes left Thiệu utterly dependent on foreign economic and military assistance, a problem which alienating the legislatures in Sài Gòn and Washington by running unopposed hardly helped to resolve. The election marked a point of no return for South Vietnam, marginalizing its burgeoning opposition movement, and ensuring that its fate would be determined by a leader who was autocratic, aloof, and both unable and unwilling to address his nation's urgent needs.

For several years now, historians of South Vietnam have called for the "Vietnamization of Vietnam War studies," as one article puts it, arguing for the necessity of consulting

Vietnamese sources in order to overcome the limits of earlier "American-centered" approaches to the war, which saw key debates hinging on American goals and motives, and in which Vietnamese or other non-American actors "typically played only marginal roles."[476] This welcome effort to develop Vietnamese perspectives has contributed to a far more thorough, nuanced understanding of South Vietnamese politics, the result of a series of new studies on Ngô Đình Diệm's First Republic.[477] Thiêu's Second Republic (1967-1975), however, has received far less attention from both United States and Vietnam specialists alike.[478] Much of what has been published on this equally critical stage of the war has focused on the military dimensions of the conflict, including a recent revival of the long-standing argument that American blunders were the decisive factor in South Vietnam's ultimate collapse. After the communists' heavy losses during 1968 Tet Offensive, "there came a time when the war was won," as one such account contends, only for the United States to withdraw its support prematurely, thus snatching defeat from the jaws of victory.[479]

Though recently declassified sources from the Nixon administration suggest that the military struggle was in fact considerably more balanced even after Tet, a far more serious problem with this interpretation is that it both overlooks the equally vital competition for

[476] Ed Miller and Tuong Vu. "The Vietnam War as a Vietnamese War: Agency and Society in the Study of the Second IndochinaWar." *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, 4, 3, (Fall, 2009).
[477] See, for instance, Philip Catton. *Diem's Final Failure: Prelude to America's War in Vietnam*. Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 2002. Ed Miller. *Misalliance: Ngo Dinh Diem, The United States, and the Fate of South Vietnam.* Cambridge, Mass. Harvard Unversity Press, 2013. Jessica Chapman, *Cauldron of Resistance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and 1950s Southern Vietnam*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013 among several examples.
[478] For a recent exception see John Prados. *Vietnam: The History of an Unwinnable War, 1945-1975*. Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 2009.
[479] Lewis Sorley. *A Better War: The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America's Last Years in Vietnam*. New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1999: 217. See also Robert Thompson. "Military Victory, Political Defeat: the Failure of U.S. Strategy in Vietnam." *International Defense Review*, no. 6, December 1974. Ulysses S. Grant Sharp. *Strategy for Defeat: Vietnam in Retrospect*. San Rafael, CA: Presidio Press, 1978. Mark Moyar. *Phoenix and the Birds of Prey: the CIAs Secret Campaign to Destroy the Viet Cong*. Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1997.

political legitimacy in post-Tet South Vietnam, and diminishes the extent to which the Republic of [South] Vietnam (RVN) controlled its own destiny – a gap which this chapter hopes to address by drawing on research at both the Richard Nixon Library and the National Archives Center II in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. Well aware of the consequences, Thiệu nonetheless opted to win the election "a bit too well," as one U.S. diplomat remarked dryly, rejecting compromise and consensus with his fellow anti-communists in favour of increasing his control, which alienated his international benefactors and made enemies out of once "loyal" opponents at a time when political unity against communist pressure was essential.[480]

South Vietnamese Politics

First and foremost for Smyser and Negroponte when it came to the politics of "responsible opposition" was undoubtedly the Progressive National Movement [*Phong trào Quốc gia Cấp tiến*]. Established in 1969 by a pair of professors, Nguyễn Văn Bông and Nguyễn Ngọc Huy, the Progressive National Movement sought to provide "loyal opposition" to the military government, offering domestic policy critiques in a spirit of constructive cooperation. It championed the new 1967 constitution, which attempted to win back an ambivalent public with elections and a national assembly. Unlike Saigon-centered rival parties, the Progressive National Movement also strove to establish a true national grassroots presence, building on its core support in the Mekong Delta's provincial towns. Ironically, given Trương Đình Dzu's indefinite incarceration for transgressing the bounds of acceptable opposition, the Progressive National Movement likewise enjoyed explicit Tân Đại Việt endorsement, and hoped to build on grassroots Tân Đại Việt political infrastructure in the prosperous towns of the Mekong Delta.

[480] William H. Sullivan. "Memorandum for the files," Vietnam Ad Hoc Working Group Meeting, October 7, 1971. *RNL*¸NSF: VSF, box 157, folder 6.

Still, had contemporary Vietnamese readers been presented with Smyser and Negroponte's report, they would undoubtedly have found it wildly enthusiastic. After all, the enduring, fundamental religious and regional confict at the heart of South Vietnamese politics continued to linger. In 1967, either content to back the military or wary of a triggering a backlash by selecting another Catholic President, Catholic organizations had instead devoted their efforts to the concurrent Senate election, somewhat obscured by the clamour surrounding the heated Presidential campaign. Taking advantage of a hopelessly divided field (with 48 ten-member slates competing for six places), an Ấn Quang election boycott, and a disciplined parish-level network that could deliver mass turnout for pre-approved candidates, northern Catholic groups succeeded in electing all three of their sponsored slates, along with a largely-northern sympathetic fourth list fronted by the Revolutionary Đại Việt's Nguyễn Ngọc Kỳ.[481] So decisive was the victory that some prominent northern Catholics such as "Construction" [*Xây Dựng*] newspaper publisher Nguyễn Quang Lâm "seemed even a little embarrassed" by the results, the Embassy recorded. "Two Catholic slates would really have been enough, three would have been just right, but four are a bit too much, posing potential danger to the 'equilibrium of the nation,'" he reportedly remarked, noting that he had already "counseled Catholic senators against forming a bloc in the Upper House."[482] Eager to avoid provoking lingering Ngô Đình Diệm-era sensitivities to perceived Catholic conspiracies, Nguyễn Quang Lâm also published a series of editorials insisting that there had been nothing sinister about the Catholic slates' good showing.[483]

[481] Nguyễn Văn Huyền's "Lily" [*Bông huệ*] slate, Nguyễn Gia Hiên's Greater Solidarity Force slate, and Huỳnh Văn Cao's "Vietnam Sky" [*Trời Việt*] slate.
[482] Telegram 6754, Embassy Saigon to Department of State, 23 September 1967, POL 15-1VIET S, 1967-1969, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.
[483] See, for example, "Hoài nghi có lý và hoài nghi vô lý" [Reasonable and Unreasonable Suspicions], *Xây Dựng* [Construction], September 10-11, 1967.

The publisher's calls for restraint would go largely unheeded, however, with his colleagues in the legislature proving rather less judicious in exercising their new powers. As Nguyễn Văn Thiệu assumed the Presidency, his position remained far from secure, with Vice-President Nguyễn Cao Kỳ still enjoying considerable sympathy within the military, and with much of the civilian opposition too distressed by the nature of ARVN's victory to consider cooperating with the President. Calculating that the United States would not accept another military coup (which effectively eliminated Nguyễn Cao Kỳ's primary means of recourse), Nguyễn Văn Thiệu initially opted to court the northern Catholic-dominated National Assembly, helping to enhance his image as a sober, responsible statesman who respected the new constitution. But the informal northern Catholic bloc that controlled the Upper House was determined to exact a substantial price in exchange for their support, leveraging Nguyễn Văn Thiệu's initial weakness into political capital which they wielded against a succession of politicians they regarded as either too southern or too soft on communism.

The first to fall at the Senate's behest was Prime Minister Nguyễn Văn Lộc, a southern Nguyễn Cao Kỳ supporter whose appointment had been something of consolation prize for the embattled Vice-President. Pressured into resigning to pre-empt a no-confidence vote in the Assembly, Nguyễn Văn Lộc was replaced in May 1968 by former Presidential candidate Trần Văn Hương, in a bid by Nguyễn Văn Thiệu to extend an olive branch to the restive southern opposition.[484] Instead, the appointment – a "heavy disappointment," according to Lý Quí Chung – had the opposite effect of utterly discrediting Trần Văn Hương among southern political observers, with even his former campaign manager Võ Long Triều dismissing him as "an old man with ambition but no knowledge… who understood nothing about the political situation in

[484] "Change-over Ceremony between Former and New Prime Minister," *Vietnam Press*, May 26, 1968.

the south."[485] Worse still, the appointment of a second consecutive southern Prime Minister engendered significant resentment among northern political groups. In a December 1968 conversation with an Embassy source, Trần Vỹ and Lê Trọng Quát, both former Ngô Đình Diệm-era officials and current Nhân Xã Party members, warned that Trần Văn Hương's cabinet "consists largely of technicians with no political identity, and Huong's personal cronies." Should the Prime Minister fail to implement a "broadening of the cabinet to include real nationalist elements like the Nhân Xã, Revolutionary Đại Việts, [and] northern Catholics," Lê Trọng Quát continued, "nationalist political elements will have no choice but to strive for Huong's removal, which they could bring about within six months."[486] As it turned out, Lê Trọng Quát had overestimated the northern parties' political strength – but only by two months. On August 22, 1969, amid mounting Assembly attacks against the Prime Minister, Nguyễn Văn Thiệu requested Trần Văn Hương's resignation, replacing him with retired general Trần Thiện Khiêm and bringing the fleeting era of civilian Prime Ministers to an abrupt end.[487]

Even former Ngô Đình Diệm-era officials were not spared the Assembly's wrath, particularly in the Foreign Ministry which, in a bid to improve South Vietnam's belligerent image abroad, had started to issue tentative peace positions intended mainly for international consumption. Trần Văn Đỗ, serving his second stint as Foreign Minster (a post he had held earlier until 1955), was excoriated by Assembly militants after suggesting that the government regard negotiations with the National Liberation Front as an internal matter, similar, he noted, to

[485] [*thất vọng nặng nề*] Lý Quí Chung, *Hồi Ký Không Tên*, 118; [*…một ông già có tham vọng mà không có kiến thức… không hiểu gì về tình hình chính trị miền Nam*] Võ Long Triều, *Hồi ký Tập Hai*, 65.
[486] "Neo-Can Lao Nhan Xa Party Presses for Cabinet Changes," Airgram A-1127 from Saigon to Department of State, 19 December 1968, POL 15-1 VIET S 1967-1969, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.
[487] "Đại Tướng Khiêm Tân Thủ tướng" [General Khiem New Prime Minister], *Chính Luận* [Political Discussion], August 24-25, 1969; "Telegram 16998, Embassy Saigon to Department of State, 22 August 1969, POL 15-1VIET S, 1967-1969, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.

how Ngô Đình Diệm had managed the Hòa Hảo and Cao Đài religious groups.[488] Accused in the Senate of "creating difficulties for the Assembly in rousing the spirit of the people," "committing a sin against the nation and the people," and "[being] confused like a little child," Trần Văn Đỗ was ultimately forced from office in May 1968.[489] A Caravelle Manifesto signatory however, he had undoubtedly always been suspect in the eyes of the northern Catholic-controlled Senate.

His replacement Trần Chánh Thành, on the other hand, was not only a former Cần Lao member but also the architect of Ngô Đình Diệm's notoriously excessive "Denounce the Communists" [*Tố cộng*] Campaign.[490] But despite impeccable anti-Communist credentials, Trần Chánh Thành was also quickly targeted for parliamentary censure after redoubling his predecessor's efforts by calling for a "policy of presence" in neglected neutral countries like France, Cambodia, Indonesia and India before the Viet-Nam Council on Foreign Relations, a new information service established to promote South Vietnam abroad and counter the communists' global public relations success.[491] Trần Chánh Thành countered by successfully charging "Freedom" [*Tự Do*] publisher Phạm Việt Tuyền with libel for printing Senator Trương Tiến Đạt's allegation that he was "a senior member of the Community Party."[492] But his July 12, 1969 suggestion to foreign journalists that non-communist National Liberation Front members could theoretically participate in elections without contravening Article 4 of the Constitution (prohibiting "every activity designed to publicize or carry out Communism") prompted renewed

[488] Telegram 25453, Embassy Saigon to Department of State, 23 April 1968, POL 15-1VIET S, 1967-1969, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.
[489] [*tạo khó khăn cho Quốc hội trong việc động viên tinh thần toàn dân… mang một tội trọng đối với quốc gia dân tộc… lúng túng trước vấn đề như một trẻ nít*] "Thượng viện buộc Ngoại Trưởng Đỗ phải 'treo áo từ quan'" [Senators Press Foreign Minister Do to "Hang Up His Boots"], *Trắng Đen* [Black and White], 5 May 1968.
[490] Miller, *Misalliance*, 133.
[491] Trần Chánh Thành. *Viet-Nam's Foreign Policy and Consolidation of Legitimacy: Briefing Summary of Speech, August 20, 1968.* Saigon: Vietnam Council on Foreign Relations, 1969.
[492] [*một cán bộ Cộng sản có nhiều tuổi đảng*] "TNS Trương Tiến Đạt yêu cầu Tổng thống giải nhiệm ngay Ngoại trưởng Trần Chánh Thành vì ông này đã từng là 'Cán bộ Cộng sản có nhiều tuổi đảng'" [Senator Truong Tien Dat Demands President Expel Foreign Minister Tran Chanh Thanh Because He Was a "Senior Member of the Communist Party"], *Tự Do* [Freedom], December 2, 1968; Telegram 6359, Embassy Saigon to Department of State, 4 April 1969, POL 29VIET S, 1967-1969, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.

Assembly accusations that he was making "concession after concession" to the other side.[493] Replaced with more lasting effect in August 1969 by another former Cần Lao member, Senator Trần Văn Lắm, Trần Chánh Thành represented yet another victim of the relentless hyper-partisanship that plagued the early Second Republic.

Even the shock of the 1968 Tết Offensive brought only a brief respite from the bitter sectarian infighting, with an initial wave of anti-communist solidarity inspiring South Vietnam's parties and political groups to explore methods of uniting against the suddenly immediate communist threat. But as the violence gradually subsided, so too did the impetus for political cooperation. The fledgling coalitions which emerged in response to the Tết Offensive quickly aligned along familiar partisan axes, amounting to little more than loosely-organized rival blocs replicating established competing political constellations. Thus, when Trần Văn Đôn invited the Greater Solidarity Force to join his National Salvation Front [*Mặt trần Dân tộc Cứu nguy*] coalition, Nguyễn Gia Hiên refused because, as he reportedly explained to a C.I.A. asset, "no Catholics can participate in a political organization that includes Ấn Quang Buddhists… [and] that includes among its officers General Mai Huu Xuan, who killed former President Diem."[494] Instead, the G.S.F. opted along with the Revolutionary Đại Việt and Nhân Xã parties to enter Nguyễn Văn Thiệu's pro-government National Social Democratic Front (N.S.D.F.) [*Mặt trận Quốc gia Dân chủ Xã hội*], likewise established in response to the Tết Offensive, hoping to secure cabinet positions and other attendant powers and privileges assumed to be on offer as rewards for supporting the President. Predictably, the formation of a state-sponsored front

[493] "Premier to Reshuffle Cabinet," *Vietnam Press* (Evening ed.), no. 4933, July 18, 1969; [*Mọi hành vi nhằm mục đích tuyên truyền hay thực hiện chủ nghĩa cộng sản đều bị cấm chỉ*] "Constitution," Airgram A-559 from Saigon to Department of State, 27 March 1967, POL 15-5 VIET S 1967-1969, CFPF, RG 59, NARA; Telegram 5936, Embassy Saigon to Department of State, 28 March 1969, POL 15-1VIET S, 1967-1969, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.
[494] Intelligence Information Cable 57857, "Decision of Catholic Senators not to Participate in new National Salvation Front," Central Intelligence Agency, 23 February 1968, File: Government of South Vietnam - National Salvation Front 1968-1969 (1), National Security Advisor Files (NSAF), NSC Vietnam Information Group: Intelligence and Other Reports (NSC VIG), 1967-1975, Gerald Ford Presidential Library (GFL).

dominated by northern Catholic parties led to renewed fears of "Diệmist" politics, with even Prime Minister Trần Thiện Khiêm warning of the perils should the N.S.D.F. be perceived as "a semi-clandestine pro-government organization along the lines of the Can Lao."[495] And sure enough, a spurned Trần Văn Đôn seized on the symbolic occasion of South Vietnam's National Day [*Ngày Quốc Khánh*] (the November 1 anniversary of Ngô Đình Diệm's ouster) to warn against Buddhist alienation, echoing his complaints to the US Embassy that the N.S.D.F. was compromised from the start by excluding "the people who made the coup against Diem in 1963… and the most important religious element in the country, the Buddhists."[496]

Perhaps the clearest demonstration of the Diệmist political brand's toxicity was the abrupt and instructive collapse of the Nhân Xã Party, in spite of the primarily non-partisan Ngô Đình Diệm revival discussed in the first chapter. While the Party's 1968 inauguration had raised wary eyebrows in Sài Gòn, in Central Vietnam, where memories of confrontation over Ngô family rule were especially raw, the backlash was immediate, and fierce. Đà Nẵng, for instance, a city with over 400,000 residents but, according to a US Consulate report, "only 450 buildings [with] city water [and] woefully inadequate …refuse collection, paved roads, and public health facilities," barely managed to contain violent clashes between pro and anti-Ngô Đình Diệm loyalists on National Day, 1972. With resentment already simmering between Mayor Nguyên Ngọc Khôi (the former Cần Lao commander of Ngô Đình Diệm's Presidential Guard) and an

[495] Telegram 22752, Embassy Saigon to Department of State, 13 November 1969, POL VIET S, 1967-1969, CFPF, RG 59, NARA. These suspicions of the N.S.D.F. were, it turned out, mostly unwarranted; funded by the C.I.A. to promote political pluralism, the N.S.D.F.'s coffers were, according to Presidential Special Advisor Hoàng Đức Nhã, largely plundered for personal use by members of the Nguyễn Văn Thiệu government. See Frank Snepp, *Decent Interval: an Insider's Account of Saigon's Indecent End Told by the C.I.A.'s Chief Strategy Analyst in Vietnam.* Twenty-fifth Anniversary Edition (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 2007): 15.

[496] "Bài Phát biểu của Nghị sĩ Trần Văn Đôn trong cuộc họp kỷ nhiệm Cách mạng 63, ngay 30-10-69 tại Sài Gòn" [Address by Senator Tran Van On October 30, 1969, During 1963 Revolution Commemoration] *Điện Tín* [Telegram], November 1-2, 1969; "Telegram 21879, Embassy Saigon to Department of State, 31 October 1969, POL 15-1 VIET S, 1967-1969, CFPF, RG 59, NARA; Telegram 10063, Embassy Saigon to Department of State, 22 May 1969, POL 7 VIET S, 1967-1969, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.

ARVN garrison that concealed a "secret pro-Buddhist organization among ARVN officers and men whose pro-Struggle sympathies have retarded their promotion," National Day was inevitably a tense affair in a town once "ruled with an iron hand by the Cần Lao Party under Ngô Đình Cẩn," as the Consulate put it.[497] The mysterious overnight appearance on Đà Nẵng streets of banners reading "Mourn President Ngo Dinh Diem's death for the fatherland;" "The spirit of Ngo Dinh Diem endures forever and the people remember it gratefully as a positive example for all men;" and "President Ngo Dinh Diem is immortal," among other selections, enraged ARVN Buddhists, who made clear their intent to remove the offending slogans by force. The timely intervention of Ấn Quang's Thích Minh Tuấn, who privately assured the Consulate that the Mayor's Nhân Xã-dominated "Đà Nẵng Committee to Defend the Republican Regime" was almost certainly responsible, helped placate the agitated soldiers and prevented street-fighting between ARVN and the Police, though not before Thích Minh Tuấn likewise made known his determination to "resist anyone who attempts to reverse the 1963 Revolution."[498]

If a hostile Buddhist reaction against Nhân Xã was to be expected, the frosty reception afforded the Party from fellow Catholics was all the more telling, revealing once again the noxious character of Ngô Đình Diệm's political legacy, whatever his personal merits may have been. Nhân Xã's July 1968 unveiling in Huế was boycotted by the city's Archbishop, while local Catholic luminaries like Lower House Deputy Nguyễn Lý Hương and "Hope" [*Hy Vọng*] magazine publishers Nguyễn Văn Dương and Bùi Thế Cẩn spurned the Party's membership invitations.[499] Nguyễn Gia Hiên likewise vetoed Greater Solidarity Force cooperation with Nhân

[497] "Politics in Danang City," Airgram A-7 from Saigon to Department of State, 5 January 1970, POL 18 VIET S 1970-1973, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.
[498] Telegram 15579, Embassy Saigon to Department of State, 1 November 1972, POL 23-8 VIET S, 1970-1973, CFPF, RG 59, NARA; Telegram 15715, Embassy Saigon to Department of State, 3 November 1972, POL 15 VIET S, 1970-1973, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.
[499] Telegram 32952, Embassy Saigon to Department of State, 18 July 1968, POL 18 VIET S, 1967-1969, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.

Xã, explaining to a C.I.A. contact that he had quit the Cần Lao years ago "because of its lack of true political organization and inadequate programs." "As a political party," he reportedly quipped, "the Can Lao had been 'lousy.'"[500] And Sài Gòn Archbishop Nguyễn Văn Bình was no less dismissive when courted by Nhân Xã – "I told them plainly that the Can Lao page of Vietnamese history has been turned," he remarked, warning that Nhân Xã would serve only to help the communists score propaganda victories, and that exclusively Catholic political groups were a non-starter in a majority Buddhist society.[501]

Like so many non-communist parties before it, Nhân Xã also fell victim to fragmentation, with a pro-Nguyễn Văn Thiệu faction led by Ngô Khắc Tỉnh and Lê Trọng Quát abandoning the Trương Công Cừu wing of the Party in 1971 to form the People's National Reconstruction Force [*Lực lượng Nhân dân Kiến Quốc*]. Asked about his departure, Lê Trọng Quát could not resist a parting shot: "the existing concept of the Nhan Xa as a re-emergence of the Can Lao is not viable," he replied, "[and] the tradition of secret cadre organization [is] outmoded."[502] And indeed, despite impressive turnout for its outwardly apolitical Ngô Đình Diệm memorials, when it came to recruitment, the Party struggled to overcome decidedly negative perceptions of their fallen champion's politics. In Phước Tuy Province, for instance, where influential local Party boss Phạm Văn Thước served as Provincial Council Chairman and was regarded by the US Embassy as the "most widely-respected of local government officials," total Nhân Xã province strength stalled at just 70 members. "Most people fear politics," Phạm Văn Thước admitted, "remembering political repressions of former times." Despite rallies in Phước Tuy featuring

[500] Intelligence Information Cable 50209, "Efforts of Former Can Lao Members to Build a New Political Party," Central Intelligence Agency, 23 September 1969, File: Government of South Vietnam – Nhan Xa Party 1969-1973, NSAF, NSC VIG, GFL.
[501] Telegram 26312, Embassy Saigon to Department of State, 3 May 1968, POL 12 VIET S, 1967-1969, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.
[502] "Formation of People's National Reconstruction Force," Airgram A-15 from Saigon to Department of State, 5 February 1971, POL 12 VIET S 1970-1973, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.

both Ngô Khắc Tỉnh and Trương Công Cừu, "the educated class," the Embassy noted, "continues to view the Party with some suspicion. Well aware that Nhan Xa is closely linked to the former Can Lao Party of President Diem's reign, many civil servants appear to hesitate to join the new party."[503] Similarly, although Nguyễn Văn Thiệu ultimately refrained from formally adopting Nhân Xã as his official government Party, his association with senior Party officials like Ngô Khắc Tỉnh likewise proved controversial. Former Cabinet Minister Trần Đình Nam, regarded by Embassy contacts as an authority on Central Vietnamese politics, proclaimed that inviting Nhân Xã to join the N.S.D.F. was a "major blunder." "Nhan Xa is controlled mainly by rich ex-Can Lao people who prospered under Diem," he remarked dismissively. "They have little popular support to give the President, and, having access to the coffers of the GVN, the President has no need of their money."[504] Beset by fragmentation and the lingering stigma of association with Ngô Đình Diệm, the remaining rump Nhân Xã faction was dealt an abrupt final blow in January 1973 when Trương Công Cừu illegally fled to France, reportedly to help his seventeen-year-old son evade ARVN conscription.[505]

The Spectre of Imposed Elections

Such prolonged disharmony among non-communist constituents posed a considerable political threat given that the idea of imposing North-South elections to resolve the conflict had long appeal to concerned international parties hoping to bring about a rapid end to the conflict. Throughout the 1960s, French President Charles De Gaulle floated the idea of "neutralizing" Vietnam by staging a conference of great powers where the terms of a new coalition government

[503] Phước Tuy roughly corresponded with contemporary Bà Rịa-Vũng Tàu. "Political Parties in Phuoc Tuy Province," Airgram A-42 from Saigon to Department of State, 30 January 1971, POL 18 VIET S 1970-1973, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.
[504] "Comments of Dr. Nam on President Thieu's New Alliance," Airgram A-309 from Saigon to Department of State, 17 June 1969, POL 15 VIET S 1967-1969, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.
[505] Telegram 4645, Embassy Saigon to Department of State, 21 March 1973, POL 15-2 VIET S, 1970-1973, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.

would be determined along the lines of the 1962 Geneva Conference which had neutralized and thus rendered covert the ongoing war for Laos.[506] Unsurprisingly, the Thiệu government's response to De Gaulle's proposed power-sharing arrangement with the communists was lukewarm, with then-Foreign Minister Trần Chánh Thành rejecting the French President's latest offer after a conversation with the French Consul General, on the grounds that "it was clear… that he favors the other side."[507] A 1972 British initiative at the height of the Easter Offensive to approach the Soviet Union in order to reconvene the Geneva Conference met a similar fate, with Negroponte persuading Kissinger to oppose the idea on the grounds that it would "raise false hopes, confuse our friends in Indochina, and would likely serve no useful purpose until the gut issues have been hammered out directly with the DRV."[508] In an article published six years earlier, Kissinger himself had called for settlement which would see Sài Gòn forced to accept the incorporation of the Hà Nội-sponsored National Liberation Front (NLF) into the political sphere – a "minimum and necessary concession" - upon pain of "an international presence to enforce good faith."[509] Forced to backtrack after his appointment as Nixon's National Security Advisor, Kissinger reminded his boss that "as you know, [the article] was already in print after you appointed me."[510]

Popular enthusiasm for elections, both in South Vietnam and the United States, where Congress controlled much of the Thiệu regime's finances, meant that Sài Gòn also had to be prepared should Hà Nội issue a surprise call for elections, a prospect which, however unlikely, Thiệu could hardly be seen to refuse. To that end, both the State Department and the National

[506] Pierre Journaud. *De Gaulle et le Vietnam: La Reconciliation, 1945-1969*. Paris, Tallendier, 2011.
[507] "French Interest in 'Helping' the RVN in the Negotiations," Bunker to State, April 1969. *RNL*, NSF: VCF, box 136, folder 3.
[508] John Negroponte to Henry Kissinger. "The British on Geneva Conference." May 16, 1972. *RNL*, NSF: VCF, box 160, folder 1.
[509] Henry Kissinger. "The Viet Nam Negotiations," *Foreign Affairs.* 47, 2, (January, 1969).
[510] Henry Kissinger. "Memorandum for the President-Elect." December 13, 1968. *RNL*, NSF: VSF, box 70, folder 9.

Security Council devoted substantial resources to contingency plans in response to a surprise communist proposal, while U.S. Ambassador Bunker spent much of 1969 urging Thiệu to broaden his support base. "What would happen," Bunker inquired, "if the enemy suddenly proposed a political settlement which the RVN would be unable to refuse, and by which they might be rushed into an open political contest?"[511] Thiệu responded in what Ambassador to the United States Bùi Diễm described as "his usual way," which was "to agree, acquiesce, and make promises, then wait and see what would happen."[512] But the problem became ever more urgent, especially after the June 1969 establishment of the Provisional Revolutionary Government (P.R.G.), the communists' new political front, which was regarded in Washington as a possible precursor to a call from Hà Nội for new elections.[513] Forced to clarify his position, Thiệu confirmed that he would allow for new elections to take place - provided that they occur within the confines of the 1967 constitution, which outlawed communist participation in government, an inherently contradictory position that elicited letters of protest from Congress.[514]

By 1969 however, there were rather more important problems than theoretical elections for Thiệu to worry about. The habitual RVN tactic of using underhanded legal manoeuvering to narrow the scope of permissible opposition was a source of growing concern in Washington, where legislators were predictably alarmed by the South Vietnamese President's habit of having their friends in Sài Gòn thrown in jail. Trương Đình Dzu, the peace candidate who had achieved impressive results at the polls in 1967, had been sentenced at Thiệu's behest to five years of hard labour in 1968 for the crime of proposing a coalition government.[515] A letter-writing campaign

[511] "Pres. Thieu's Views on Political Mobilization." Bunker to State, March 1969. *RNL*, NSF: VCF, box 136, folder 1.
[512] Bui Diem. *In the Jaws of History*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987: 276.
[513] "Formation of Provisional Revolutionary Government in Vietnam." Richard Sneider to Kissinger, June 10, 1969. *RNL*, NSF: VSF, box 67, folder 4.
[514] Jacob Javits to Henry Kissinger. May 8, 1969. *RNL*, NSF: VCF, box 137, folder 2.
[515] Prados, 336.

by his family in the United States had attracted considerable sympathy in Washington however, with Senators Howard Baker and Jacob Javits championing the imprisoned politician's cause.[516] Well aware of the public relations implications, Bunker urged Thiệu to consider Dzu's release, which "would obviously have a good effect in the U.S.," though he concluded in a report to the State Department that such was Thiệu's determination to marginalize Dzu that he faced certain re-arrest even if he were to be pardoned.[517]

The case of another well-connected representative in South Vietnamese government, Trần Ngọc Châu, who faced a twenty-year prison sentence on Thiệu's orders, proved even more frustrating for the White House. Once again forced to confront mounting congressional pressure to secure Châu's release, the Nixon administration lobbied in vain with Thiệu, whose dislike of Châu apparently dated back to a quarrel that originated while the two had been roommates years earlier.[518] Determined to make an example of Châu's appeals to his American friends for assistance, Thiệu proceeded with the sentencing regardless of the consequences, which, according to a 1970 National Security Council report, included the disgust of his entire cabinet, widespread demonstrations, and several Thiệu supporters distancing themselves from the President over the affair.[519]

Rather than improve the government's stability as Thiệu had anticipated, the persecution of Dzu, Châu, and several other RVN officials contributed to growing political unrest which emboldened his political and military rivals, and helped trigger the mass student protests of 1970. Trần Văn Đôn, a General who also held a seat in the Senate, emerged as a vocal critic of Thiệu's

[516] Bryce Harlow. "Memorandum for Colonel Haig." October 27, 1969. *RNL*, NSF: VCF, folder 140, box 1.
[517] "Bunker to Thieu," November 15, 1969 and "Bunker to State," November 8, 1969. *RNL*, NSF: VCF, box 140, folder 4.
[518] John Holdridge. "Memorandum for Dr. Kissinger re Tran Ngoc Chau." December 10, 1970. *RNL*, NSF: VCF, box 151, folder 1.
[519] Ibid., and Holdridge. "Memorandum for Dr. Kissinger re Report from Mr. Everett Bumgardner." April 13, 1970. *RNL*, NSF: VCF box 145, folder 2.

authoritarianism, accusing the government, which would "hate to see this war come to an end," of profiteering from the conflict, and advocating a "non-aligned" stance for South Vietnam and "a period of peaceful political competition" with the communists during a 1969 speech in front of several hundred followers.[520] Đôn's remarks were interpreted as the first step in a possible military coup by Kissinger, who instructed Bunker to inform Đôn, Kỳ and Dương Văn Minh that the United States "would not continence any activity designed to lead to the overthrow of the present government," which suggests that even within the military, Thiệu's position was far from assured.[521] Regardless of its intended purpose, Đôn's appeal to the public by calling for a negotiated settlement – a tactic echoed by Minh during the 1971 campaign – reveals the persistence of anti-war sentiment in South Vietnam despite Thiệu's stubborn attempts to eliminate those who dared to question the military struggle against the communists.

While Thiệu could rely on the White House to dissuade the small but influential faction of discontented generals from public criticism and backstage scheming, the student protests that erupted in the spring of 1970 were an altogether different matter. Motivated by a wide range of grievances including "deteriorating standards of living, especially for [the] fixed income class; an underlying anti-war sentiment; idealistic opposition to social disparities between those who suffer and those who profit from war;… repugnance at [the] pervasiveness of corruption… and [the] example of overseas brethren," according to a May 1970 report, the students took control of the streets for several weeks before what Bunker referred to as "a dose of cold water administered by authorities" – including the likely torture of ten students by Sài Gòn police – finally curtailed the protesters' momentum, if not their anger.[522] Privately, many within the

[520] Bunker to State, "Oct. 30 Speech by Tran Van Don." October 1969. *RNL*, NSF: VCF, box 139, folder 3.
[521] Kissinger to Bunker, December 1, 1969. *RNL*, NSF: VSF, box 65, folder 5.
[522] Bunker to State, "Student Situation Quieter." May 1970. *RNL*, NSF: VCF, box 146, folder 4. The RVN produced a report denying the use of torture, though Deputy Ambassador Berger doubted its claims, noting that only three of

Nixon administration shared the students' concerns. In an October 1969 memo from Kissinger to Nixon, for instance, the National Security Advisor observed that while the U.S. had long insisted that Sài Gòn tackle its rampant corruption, "it appears that the RVN is not moving very hard on the issue," citing the recent example of a Thiệu loyalist in the army who saw his punishment for corruption dramatically reduced "for apparent political motives" before his sentencing.[523] Even within his own government, there was increasing dismay over Thiệu's lack of leadership and unwillingness to confront the growing list of crises he faced. During a January 1970 conversation with diplomat William Sullivan, Ambassador Diễm described a recent visit to Sài Gòn where he was shocked by the "deteriorating political situation" he encountered, which he likened to "the sort of discontent that welled up again President [Ngô Đình] Diệm," an ominous comparison indeed. Thiệu, Diễm alleged, had become "a prisoner of the palace …institutionalizing his natural shyness into official austerity," and refusing to meet even with senior government officials like Senator Đặng Văn Sung or former Prime Minister Phan Huy Quát. And though the Ambassador conceded that the President was an "effective administrator," he concluded the conversation by pressing Sullivan not to "minimize the importance of situation."[524]

In response, Bunker arranged for another meeting with Thiệu, reminding him of Nixon's "frank concern" over South Vietnam's persistent corruption, poor military leadership, and lack of political unity."[525] But instead of tackling these issues directly, Thiệu instead opted to shoot the messengers, beginning with a new law (Luật số 019/69) permitting the confiscation of

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ten students were allowed to testify and the police were not questioned. Berger to State, "Status of Investigation of Saigon First Precinct Police Torturing Students." May 13, 1970. *RNL*, NSF: VCF, box 146, folder 4.

[523] Henry Kissinger. "Memorandum for the President – Corruption in South Vietnam." October 7, 1969. *RNL*, NSF: VSF, box 74, folder 3.

[524] "Amembassy Saigon to Amembassy Paris." January 2, 1970. *RNL*, NSF: VCF, box 142, folder 4.

[525] Bunker to State, "Discussion with President Thieu," January 30, 1970. *RNL*, NSF: VCF, box 142, folder 4.

newspapers deemed "prejudiced against national security, public order, and traditions and customs," and culminating in the "dose of cold water" at the hands of the police, which he hoped would reduce the intensity of the student protests.[526] As the demonstrations began to subside, the embattled President defended his actions in a defiant speech in Vũng Tàu. Accusing "some newspapers and some political groups" of doing everything they could to undermine his prestige, Thiệu reassured his audience that he remained confident he still held the trust of majority of the population. Although democracy "entailed the right to replace bad officials with good officials," he continued, it "should not be construed to mean the right to replace good officials with bad officials," including "communists, neutralists, or people who advocate coalition," whom he condemned as "the same people who were lackeys of the French and who are now lackeys of the communist Chinese."[527] In many ways echoing the rhetoric of Nixon's famous "Silent Majority" speech, Thiệu presented a vision of democracy in which all but the most aggressive responses to the war were proscribed, and in which participation was limited to the simple ratification of pre-approved "good" officials and policies. In a revealing interview with Belgian newspaper *Le Soir,* Thiệu appeared to negate the need for a binding political ethos altogether: "what would I do with a party? It wouldn't help me to govern since I'm already president. I have a million soldiers and a million civil servants at my disposal. I'll win or lose, but do you really believe that I will be better armed for success with ten, twenty, fifty thousand activistes in a political party?"[528]

In addition to a vague political platform, in contrast with the Diệm regime which promoted extensively its prevailing philosophy of "Personalism," Thiệu also cut an inscrutable

[526] Phiên họp Hội Đồng Nội Các (thâu hẹp) – Hội động thảo luận về thể thức thi hàng luật số 019/69. January 8, 1970. *NACII*, DIICH, PTT, folder 119.
[527] Bunker to State. "Speech by President Thieu 12 May 1970 at Vung Tau Training Center." May 12, 1970. *RNL*, NSF: VCF box 146, folder 4. (Original speech could not be located at National Archives Center II).
[528] Telegram 4092, Embassy Brussels to Department of State, 2 September 1970, POL 15-1 VIET S, 1970-1973, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.

figure. His aloof, austere personality left even close aides unsure of his motives and intentions. One intelligence officer recalls the President returning home alone each night by helicopter, away from his family, to a secluded villa visible across the river from a district where top government employees and their families lived and socialized. Never once did he entertain offers to join in the festivities.[529] For subsequent researchers, the President's silence is also reflected in official correspondance, a formidable challenge for scholars seeking to better understand the famously reclusive executive. In official South Vietnamese records at the National Archives Center II in Hồ Chí Minh City, Thiệu's thoughts, impressions and insights are notable absent in the majority of available records, save for occasional scribbled comments in the margins. In any event, while cracking down on the students and branding his opponents as lackeys may have temporarily pushed the problem of civil unrest to the backburner, street protests were far from the only dilemma that he faced, and by forcefully dismissing rather than addressing the demonstrators' concerns, he exacerbated the challenge of securing American economic aid considerably.

Although South Vietnam had always relied on American assistance notwithstanding the efforts of its nationalist leaders to secure greater independence, the first manifestation of the crisis caused by the burden of financing the conflict occurred in the United States when, in 1968, years of increased American spending and exports to promote the war prompted a run on the U.S. dollar against the price of gold.[530] Though Richard Nixon would eventually relieve the pressure to some extent by removing the United States from the Gold Standard, the crisis meant that for the first time, America was reaching the limit of its ability to support South Vietnam

[529] Interview with Phan Công Tâm, August 22, 2015

[530] Failure to reduce the balance-of-payments shortfall risked "a collapse… of the international monetary system," as one observer put it, so that in "improv[ing] the situation over there [in Vietnam]," the United States was "throw[ing] away the fruits of a generation of brilliant economic progress." Robert M. Collins. "The Economic Crisis and the Waning of the American Century." *The American Historical Review*, 101, 2 (April, 1996): 396-422.

financially. Nixon soon found himself forced to adhere to spending restrictions proposed by Defense Secretary Melvin Laird, who demonstrated that U.S. expenses in Vietnam were, "purely and simply, …one of the major reasons the Soviet Union has been able to make such marked military strides relative to the United States during the past few years" – a problem that no Cold War President could dare to neglect.[531] Long overshadowed by Henry Kissinger, Laird's ability to persuade Nixon to accept rapidly-shrinking means of waging war suggests that he was in some ways arguably as influential as the National Security Advisor. Indeed, key Nixon initiatives such as "Vietnamization," the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Vietnam, were inspired as much by Laird's convincing appeals for fiscal prudence as they were by domestic political pressure.[532]

If the reduction of American spending on the war represented a challenge for the United States, it was tantamount to disaster for the government of South Vietnam, which remained utterly dependent on U.S. assistance. According to a 1970 NSC report, the RVN had never managed to pay for even half of its military budget, and by 1969 the United States was providing 71% of South Vietnam's defence costs.[533] With its chronic inability to raise tax revenue outside of a few urban centers, the RVN was no match for the communists' rural administrative network, which continued to collect taxes effectively throughout the South, including in regions officially regarded as being under government control.[534] The withdrawal of U.S. troops beginning in 1969 further complicated the problem, forcing the RVN to increase defense spending to compensate for the departing Americans, leading to soaring inflation which devastated citizens

[531] Melvin Laird. "Memorandum for the President – Redeployment of US Forces from Southeast Asia." April 3, 1971. *RNL*, NSF: VSF, box 84, folder 4.
[532] See for instance Melvin Laird, "Memorandum for the President – Vietnam." April 4, 1970. *RNL*, NSF: VSF, box 95, folder 6.
[533] K. Wayne Smith. "Memorandum for Dr. Kissinger – Vietnamese Economy." September 2, 1970. *RNL*, NSF: VCF, box 149, folder 2.
[534] According to the November 1971 'Pacification Attitude Analysis System' survey, 59% of urban and 68% of rural inhabitants paid no taxes to the RVN. "Bunker to White House, November 22, 1971. *RNL*, NSF: VCF, box 158, folder 2. For Communist taxation see Theodore Eliot Jr, "Post Cease-fire Reporting," May 30, 1973. *RNL*, NSF: VSF, box 108, folder 5.

on fixed incomes, a group that included core RVN supporters such as bureaucrats and soldiers, who saw their wages decline in real terms relative to inflation.[535] Worse still, given that a significant share of South Vietnam's economic activity revolved around providing services to capitalize on American soldiers' comparatively-high spending power, reduced U.S. troop levels led to a general recession, further compounding the RVN budget shortfall.[536]

Resolving the budget crisis was a major concern for the Thiệu cabinet, which devoted substantial energy to finding a solution, eventually settling on a combination of reduced spending and a new austerity tax.[537] Here too though, Thiệu's refusal to delegate power would cost him. With the burden of paying the austerity tax falling primarily on city-dwellers, government employees, students and soldiers, all of whom were already squeezed by inflation, the government further alienated its most supportive constituents, notwithstanding the President's rhetorical allusions the widespread support he was certain he enjoyed in the countryside. Having worked for so long to discredit his opposition, Thiệu was unable to share the blame for his deeply unpopular fiscal measures, becoming a lightning rod for criticism and compromising his ability to implement signature reforms. Angry over taxation and the plight of Trần Ngọc Châu, elected representatives in both houses spent the first half of 1970 holding Thiệu's "Land to the Tiller" program hostage, demanding that the government increase compensation to affected land owners, which, given the budget crisis, they knew it would be unable to provide.[538] In the end, the bill for paying off the landlords was footed by the United States, though even this once

[535] Smith, "Memorandum for Dr. Kissinger – Vietnamese Economy."
[536] William Sullivan. "Vietnam Ad Hoc Group Report on Effect of Vietnamization on the Vietnamese Economy." February 21, 1970. *RNL*, NSF: VSF, box 91, folder 5.
[537] See, for instance, "Chương trình Hội động Tổng Trưởng Ngày 15-9-1969." *NACII*, DIICH, PTT, folder 80.
[538] John Holdridge. "Memorandum for Dr. Kissinger – Latest Status of the Land Reform Bill." January 8, 1970. *RNL*, NSF: VCF, box 142, folder 1.

seemingly inexhaustible source had been reduced by combination of America's own budget pressures and Congressional antipathy for the Thiệu regime.

The level of hostility in Washington toward Thiệu took even Bunker by surprise, who confessed to Prime Minster Trần Thiện Khiêm after a 1969 visit to Washington that he had been shocked at just how negative South Vietnam's image had become. Warning Khiêm that the RVN was partly to blame for "the general impression …that there is hardly any progress at all," the Ambassador insisted that the government address a series of important concerns, including "political opponents in jail, arbitrary censorship of the press, the bogging-down of the attack on corruption, the failure of the government to broaden its base, the stalling of land reform, lack of progress on political organization, [the] failure of president's Advisory Council to materialize, and the black market."[539] As usual, Thiệu sought to deflect American calls for reform, instructing Ambassador Diễm to devote himself to securing U.S. additional funding, at times losing his temper when Diễm reminded him that financial assistance was increasingly linked to democratic progress.[540] In fact, the Ambassador was only one of several Thiệu associates who warned the President that he could ill-afford to alienate his American supporters; as early as 1968, Hoàng Đức Nhã, one of Thiệu's most-trusted advisors listed "corruption and social justice" as a primary concern in a report on "the attitudes of the American people towards Vietnam."[541] Thiệu's staff in the United States also kept a close watch on developments in Congress, ensuring that he was well aware of plans by the Democrats, in control of both houses,

[539] Bunker to State, "Improving South Vietnam's Image/Truong Dinh Dzu." November 13, 1969. *RNL*, NSF: VCF, box 140, folder 4.
[540] Lien-Hang T. Nguyen. *Hanoi's War: an International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam.* Chapell Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012: 221.
[541] Hoàng Đức Nhã. "Nhận xết về dư luận dân Mỹ đối với vấn đề VN." June 1968. *NACII*, DIICH, PTT, folder 1581.

to accelerate troop withdrawals and reduce spending on the war, in part a reflection of widespread dissatisfaction with the RVN's repressive policies and poor performance.[542]

Eventually even Nixon and Kissinger began to doubt whether Thiệu could turn things around. By the spring of 1970, at the height of the student movement and with the RVN's economic prospects looking as bleak as ever, Kissinger received a progress report from two of his most-trusted advisors, Lawrence Lynn and Robert Sansom, who had recently returned from a fact-finding trip to Vietnam. Using a new system of evaluating government authority in the countryside, the pair concluded that the pace of pacification had slowed considerably in recent months, and that the RVN controlled only slightly more than half of its territory. Due to the effective infiltration of North Vietnamese units, communist infrastructure remained largely intact, while South Vietnamese security forces were found to have performed well only when supported by American troops. A decline in popular approval of the communists after Tet had failed to generate increased support for the RVN, and on the whole, in rural areas it was "far more likely that the RVN will lose control than it is that they will significantly increase it." Furthermore, the pair concluded that "it is unlikely that RVN forces will be able to replace U.S. forces" – alarming news given the steady pace of Vietnamization.[543]

The report confirmed Kissinger's growing pessimism about the situation in South Vietnam, his doubts dating back to at least September 1969.[544] No longer certain that the United States could force concessions from Hà Nội, he prepared a list of "alternative strategies" for his boss to consider, which consisted of two main options: a more-rapid withdrawal of U.S. troops in

[542] Nguyễn Hữu Chi. "Chủ Trường của đảng Dân Chủ về vấn đề Việt Nam." February 2, 1970. *NACII*, DIICH, PTT, folder 1747 and Trần Văn Lăm, "Bài điều trần của Thượng Nghị Sĩ Hatfield trước Ủy Ban Ngoại Giao Thượng Viện Hoa Kỳ," June 23, 1971. *NACII*, DIICH, PTT, folder 1829.
[543] Lawrence E. Lynn Jr. and Robert L. Sansom. "Summary of Report on Trip to Vietnam." January 18-30, 1970. *RNL*, NSF: VSF box 92, folder 2.
[544] Jeffrey Kimball. *Nixon's Vietnam War*. Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 1998: 158-163.

exchange for a negotiated settlement with North Vietnam; or, absent indications that the other side was willing to compromise, a gradual unilateral withdrawal, which would "leave the political future to a contest between the South Vietnamese." Should the President opt for the second strategy, he warned, "the U.S. exodus from the South [would be] irreversible, and the RVN [could] never stand on its own." Though Kissinger argued that an ultimate decision could still be deferred, his acceptance in principle of abandoning Thiệu to his fate marked a turning point in both he and Nixon's thinking on the war.[545]

Finally, the Operation Lam Son 719 debacle in the spring of 1971 cast further doubt on Thiệu's ability to "stand on his own," raising concern in the White House that even congressional hawks were now turning against the war.[546] Intended to demonstrate the success of Vietnamization by showcasing the Army of the Republic of Vietnam's (ARVN) fighting ability, as well as improving Thiệu's prospects during the upcoming election, the White House envisioned an ARVN assault on communist positions in Laos, supported by U.S. aerial and artillery bombardment. Beginning in early February, the campaign was quickly compromised by Thiệu's growing concern over South Vietnamese casualties, which he feared might trigger unrest in Sài Gòn. After a communist counter-offensive saw ARVN Rangers facing heavy-pressure, Thiệu ordered his airborne divisions to capture the abandoned town of Tchepone, presumably so that the President could declare victory and retreat before sustaining further casualties. Apparently instructed by Thiệu to "go in there just long enough to take a piss and then leave quickly," ARVN forces seized the town on May 7 and left the following day, the beginning of a

[545] Henry Kissinger. "Memorandum for the President – Alternative Vietnam Strategies." July 20, 1970. *RNL*, NSF: VSF, box 91, folder 4.
[546] William E. Timmons. "Memorandum for the President re Troop Withdrawals." April 1, 1971. *RNL*, NSF: VCF, box 153, folder 5.

general retreat initiated almost a month earlier than Washington had hoped.[547] The retreat soon devolved into a rout, with ARVN forces exposed to the full fury of the battle-hardened communist units, resulting in photos in American newspapers of ARVN soldiers clinging to the rungs of U.S. helicopters to hasten their escape, and generating considerable embarrassment for the White House. In a bid to control the damage, Bunker launched a public relations campaign to counter the mostly negative media reports, but behind closed doors Nixon's cabinet was leveling many of the very accusations that the Ambassador struggled to deny.[548] Dispatched to Laos to investigate the situation firsthand, Kissinger's military advisor Alexander Haig informed the White House that "ARVN enthusiasm for the conflict is almost completely lacking," arguing that the goal of remaining in Laos to disrupt enemy supply lines was no longer realistic, and that all further effort to retreat should be undertaken while a dignified exit was still possible.[549] Thus, as the October election approached, Thiệu was faced with intensified criticism both at home and abroad, even as his government's weakening position and serious financial difficulties left him ever more vulnerable to congressional retaliation against his heavy-handed measures.

Thiệu Sets the Stage

In December 1970, South Vietnamese newspapers began to report on a proposed new law from the President that would restrict eligibility in the upcoming election to those who could secure the signatures of at least 40 National Assembly representatives or 100 Provincial or District Councillors. If passed, the law would represent an enormous advantage for Thiệu, who reserved the right to appoint his own Province Chiefs (who usually wielded decisive influence over the election of local Councillors) in spite of popular demands that they be elected, and, as the Deputy U.S. Ambassador pointed out, in spite of the fact that such appointments were

[547] Kimball, 245-246.
[548] Bunker to William Rogers. "Ref. State 51947." March 28, 1971, *RNL*, NSF: VSF, box 85, folder 1.
[549] Haig to Kissinger. "Situation in Laos." March 19, 1971. *RNL*, NSF: VSF, box 84, folder 4.

arguably unconstitutional.[550] The media reaction was almost universally negative. Conservative and usually pro-government *Chinh Luận*, published by prominent Senator Đặng Văn Sung, for instance, speculated that representatives might protest their own Assembly were the Lower House to pass the "childish and despicable" bill, while *Dân Chủ Mới* published a list of actions that might be used to prevent the laws from passing.[551] *Tin Sáng* warned that if the law were approved, the assemblymen would be "judged severely in the court of public opinion," while other outlets went further still, alleging that were it not for cheating and bribery in 1967, Thiệu might well have lost.[552] In February, the President responded by tightening the existing 019/69 law regulating the press, and, as debate over the controversial election law grew heated during the Spring of 1971, he would eventually resort to silencing papers that were supportive of Nguyễn Cao Kỳ's candidacy altogether.[553]

As usual however, in attempting to suppress public discussion of his unpopular policies, Thiệu's interventions served only to increase tensions, with Kỳ and Minh, whose electoral prospects would clearly be hindered by the new law, condemning the proposed bill in the strongest possible terms. With Kỳ regarded as incapable of amassing adequate signatures (which the U.S. Embassy suspected had been Thiệu's intent all along), and with Minh hinting in May that he might drop out of the race altogether, the prospect of a one-man election began to set off alarm bells in Washington.[554] Yet again, Bunker arranged to meet with Thiệu to warn him that he would have to confront substantial international pressure were the law to pass, especially if his rivals withdrew, prompting the President to reply, "with animation bordering on anger," that

[550] Berger to State. "Election of Province Chiefs." October 21, 1971. *RNL*, NSF: VCF, box 157, folder 6.
[551] "Nghị Viện sẽ biểu tình phản đối DB nếu HV làm việc 'trẻ con, hèn hạ.' *Chinh Luận*, December 23, 1970 and "Ba Phương Cách để Hủy bỏ Luật Bầu cử." *Dân Chủ Mới*. December 29, 1970. *NACII*, DIICH, PTT, folder 5761.
[552] "Tòa án công luận xét tội các dân biểu và nghị sĩ." *Tín Sáng*. April 21, 1971 and "Nếu Không Gian Lận T. T. Thiệu đã bị loại khỏi cuộc bầu cử 1967." *Tin Mật*. (undated). *NACII*, DIICH, PTT, folder 5761.
[553] "Biên Bản Tóm Lược: Phiên họp Hội Đồng Nội các ngày 8-2-1971." *NACII*, DIICH, PTT, folder 140 and "Bunker to State – Meeting with General Minh." August 19, 1971, *RNL*, NSF: VSF, box 119, folder 3.
[554] Bunker to State. "Presidential Election Law." May 1971. *RNL*, NSF: VCF box154, folder 4.

Minh and Kỳ were certain to run.[555] Significant opposition from the Upper and Lower houses ultimately failed to block the law's passage however, and when it was finally ratified on June 3, Bunker could have only himself to blame, given that he had organized C.I.A. funding for Thiệu's political campaign, and that the C.I.A.'s ten agents in the Lower House had used their ability to "stimulate legislation" in order to ease the bill's approval.[556]

Legislative scheming however was just the tip of iceberg in Thiệu's bid to secure re-election. Behind the scenes, he began to mobilize an extensive apparatus of local partisans and supporters who would bear responsibility for realizing his ambition to use the election to "smash the treasonous, demagogic rhetoric of a minority of defeatists," using a wide variety of underhanded and often outright illegal tactics.[557] Dividing his district, municipal and provincial networks into "floating" and "submerged" cells, Thiệu then issued a detailed set of instructions for "mobilizing the election of the President and supporting Lower House candidates." "Floating" supporters were assigned tasks that could be performed overtly, such as distributing posters, delivering speeches and reporting opposition violations back to headquarters in Sài Gòn. "Submerged" cadres, on the other hand, were tasked with keeping their affiliation secret in order to analyze the political composition of their districts, then "corner and paralyse the opposition blocks," through bribery, accusations of Communism, "exploiting blemishes," and forcibly relocating opposition supporters outside of their districts so they could no longer "conveniently operate." The two groups were also instructed to recruit additional members, with "submerged" members encouraged to uncover "undesirable behaviour that can be used to threaten potential recruits with prosecution" as a means of "forcing them to follow us, or at least preventing them

[555] Bunker to State. "Vietnam Presidential Election." June 1971. *RNL*, NSF: VCF box 155, folder 3.
[556] Thomas L. Ahrens Jr., *The C.I.A. and the Generals: Covert Support to Military Government in South Vietnam.* C.I.A. Publication, released 2009: 102.
[557] "Tài Liệu Hướng Dẫn về Việc Lập Kiến Nghị Đệ Trình Tổng Thống." *NACII*, DIICH, PTT, folder 5652.

from daring to work for the opposition." Teachers, religious leaders, Rural Development cadres, soldiers and police were seen as particularly promising targets, the latter regarded as especially good at "submerged activities, in particular, cornering and paralysing the opposition." Finally, Thiệu's cadres were asked to mail their instructions back to Sài Gòn, and reminded that they were forbidden from quoting or reproducing them in any form.[558]

Province and District Chiefs also received instructions from the President's office, asking that they too "support the President's second term" by creating favourable conditions for National Assembly members who sided with Thiệu, attempting to persuade undecided representatives, and by "paralysing" those who favoured opposition candidates. "The primary goal of collecting signatures from each assemblyman," they were reminded, was to "prevent them from providing signatures for other campaigns."[559] The following day, a new set of directives arrived, providing advice on how to keep secret the documents they had already received from the President's office.[560] Thiệu also supervised an extensive campaign to bribe National Assembly members, outlined in a "secret mobilization plan" that also repeated calls for his cadres to monitor opposition activities, and to ensure that on Election Day, local voting booths were administered by Thiệu loyalists alone. The most important thing for cadres to remember, the documents warned, was to keep supportive Assembly members who had not received payments from learning that their colleagues had been remunerated, lest they become "unsatisfied" and "half-hearted" in their support for the Thiệu campaign.[561]

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[558] "Tài Liệu Hướng Dẫn Các Độ, Tỉnh, Thị-Trường trong Việc Thiếp Lập Kế Hoạch Vận-Động Tranh Cử Tổng Thống và Yểm Trợ Ứng cử viên Dân biểu 1971." *NACII*, DIICH, PTT, folder 5652.
[559] "Trích yêu v/v Tranh thủ các Nghị Viện Đô, Tỉnh, Thị." June 7, 1971. *NACII*, DIICH, PTT, folder 5652.
[560] "Huấn Thị Điều Hanh Căn Bản Danh Riêng Quý Vị Đô, Tỉnh, Thị-Trường trong Việc Bảo Mật Tài Liệu Liên Quan đến các Cuộc Vận Động Bầu cử Hạ Nghị và Tổng Thống 1971." June 8, 1971. *NACII*, DIICH, PTT, folder 5652.
[561] "Trích yếu: Phát động Thực Hiện kế hoạch Vận động Mật và Yểm Trợ Dân biểu." Undated. *NACII*, DIICH, PTT, folder 5652.

Although the "secret mobilization" papers distributed across the country contained an exhaustive list of directives intended to keep their contents secret, the sheer scope of the operation ensured that the documents almost inevitably came to light. During an August meeting with Bunker, Minh presented the Ambassador with hard evidence of election fraud (which he had already shown to the British Consul), imploring the United States to pressure Thiệu into accepting fairer elections. Initially sceptical of the documents' authenticity (though he acknowledged that most of Minh's allegations were probably true), Bunker later concluded that Minh's evidence was probably legitimate after a conversation with the leader of Khánh Hòa province, who had chastised Thiệu for "putting in writing what should have been done orally."[562] At least for now, Minh had yet to publicly release the documents and he still pledged he would remain in the race as long as the United States wanted him to, but there was a growing panic at the Embassy in Sài Gòn, where the chances that Minh would drop out and release his evidence were presumed to be extremely high.[563]

For weeks, the State Department had been dreading Minh's withdrawal should Kỳ fail to secure qualification for the race. But given the rampant harassment and intimidation of the opposition, and Thiệu's less than subtle manipulation, Kỳ's prospects of securing the minimum number of signatures were slim, especially in light of his credible allegations that his attempts to collect signatures from his supporters - of whom he claimed to have the requisite number – had been compromised. On July 13, Kỳ ratcheted up the pressure, publishing an open letter which accused Thiệu of hypocrisy by promising to resolve the war, regenerate society and build democracy when he had in fact allowed the conflict to "fall into an inescapable position," stood by while society grew "more and more unjust," and "violated every democratic principle and

[562] "Bunker to State – Minh's Documentary Evidence of Election Rigging." September 20, 1971. *RNL*, NSF: VCF, box 157, folder 3.
[563] "Berger to Bunker and Sullivan – Minh and the Elections." August 17, 1971. *RNL*, NSF:VCF, box 156, folder 3.

threatened every basic democratic right."[564] With Minh's participation far from certain and seemingly contingent on Kỳ, who was now accusing the Americans of having lied to him about the election and making ominous references to inevitable coups should Thiệu run unopposed, the Embassy launched a renewed campaign to prevail upon Thiệu to arrange for Kỳ's inclusion, which would require Supreme Court Approval.[565] Desperate to secure Minh's candidacy albeit for the sake of appearances and hoping to mollify Kỳ, who was reportedly preparing in secret for a violent showdown with the President, Bunker met with Thiệu on July 15th. Though claiming to sympathize with the embattled leader, Bunker reiterated the "crucial importance of fair and free elections in terms of continued American support," which Thiệu responded to with his usual combination of reassurances followed by inaction.[566] Two weeks later, though with no better luck, the Embassy proposed that Thiệu arrange for some of his supporters to endorse Kỳ instead, if only to guarantee a full slate come Election Day.[567]

On August 4, Bunker again threatened Thiệu with the spectre of reduced American aid, reminding him that although Nixon intended to provide South Vietnam with assistance "for an indefinite period" even after U.S. troops had left, his ability to do so was contingent "on what congress will vote and what the American public will support." But with Kỳ no closer to being allowed to run and Minh growing impatient with the constant harassment of his supporters, even Bunker, the perpetual optimist, was beginning to have doubts: "What I am deeply concerned about now," he cabled the State Department, "is that everything we have sought so hard to achieve may now be in jeopardy."[568]

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[564] "Phó Tổng thống Việt Nam Cộng Hòa gửi Tổng thống Việt Nam Cộng Hòa." July 13, 1971. *NACII*, DIICH, PTT, folder 5677.
[565] "Berger to State – Ky Representations of Election." July 1971. *RNL*, NSF: VCF, box 155, folder 5.
[566] "Bunker to State – Meeting with President Thieu, July 15, 1971: Elections." July 17, 1971. *RNL*, NSF: VCF, box 155, folder 5.
[567] "Bunker to State." July 28, 1971. *RNL*, NSF: VSF, box 119, folder 3.
[568] "Bunker to State – Elections." August 4, 1971. *RNL*, NSF: VSF, box 119, folder 3.

The decisive moment came on August 19, when Minh surprised Bunker by informing him that he would indeed announce his withdrawal the following day. The Ambassador desperately tried to convince him to remain in the race, warning Minh that the American people would "conclude that the Vietnamese people … are incapable of developing a free and democratic government and that there is no point in continuing American support for this country." But Minh had had enough, and Bunker's exhortations that he had a responsibility to stand and lose the obviously rigged election fell on deaf ears.[569] On August 21st, one day after Minh's formal withdrawal, the Supreme Court belatedly ruled that Kỳ could participate after all, though with Minh now out of the running, Kỳ took great pleasure in attempting to further humiliate Thiệu by announcing his own withdrawal two days later, arguing that the election "could not escape from the framework of a conspiracy that had been orchestrated in advance."[570] Washington's worst nightmare – a one-man Presidential referendum – had come to pass.

In the weeks leading up to the election, officials in Washington scrambled to prepare for what might happen. Sài Gòn was reportedly "seething with political activity," with rumours of mass resignations, military dissatisfaction, and assassination plots spreading through the streets and cafes of the capital, prompting the Nixon administration to prepare contingency plans if indeed Thiệu were to be eliminated or deposed in a coup.[571] As for how to respond to the now uncontested election, American options appeared limited. A National Security Council estimate proposed three possibilities after Kỳ dropped out; postponing the elections until a new election

[569] "Bunker to State – Meeting with Minh." August 20, 1971. *RNL*, NSF: VSF, box 119, folder 3. Though it long been speculated that Bunker offered Minh a $3 million payment in exchange for staying in the race, a recent C.I.A. study found the claim to be "probably fictitious." Thomas L. Ahrens Jr., *The C.I.A. and the Generals: Covert Support to Military Government in South Vietnam.* C.I.A. Publication, released 2009: 105.

[570] "Tuyên cáo của Liên danh Nguyễn Cao Kỳ - Trường Vĩnh Lễ." August 23, 1971. *NACII*, DIICH, PTT, folder 5677.

[571] "Holdridge to Kissinger – Vietnam Elections: Where We Stand Now." September 9, 1971. *RNL*, NSF: VCF, box 157, folder 2 and "Bunker to State." October 7, 1971. *RNL*, NSF: VSF, box 119, folder 1.

law could be passed, which neither Kỳ, Minh, or possibly even Thiệu would accept, and which would effectively make the U.S. responsible for what followed; imposing a new caretaker government, which would satisfy Minh and Kỳ but which Thiệu would never accept, and which might lead to "civil disorder, army unrest, and possibly a coup;" or, accepting uncontested elections, which would "give us almost intolerable problems in the U.S."[572]

Profoundly disappointed though they were by Thiệu's clumsiness, the majority of officials in Washington still supported him, and, with the South Vietnamese political situation now regarded as all but incorrigible, accepting his flawed referendum rather than confronting the unknown were he to be removed appeared to be the best of America's unpalatable options. Having spent the summer alternately threatening and pleading with the President to at least allow for the appearance of a fair election, Bunker concluded there was little else the United States could do but distance itself as much as possible from the election and accept the inevitable result. Thiệu "knows what he wants," the Ambassador concluded, "despite the obvious stupidity of some of his actions."[573] Secretary of State William Rogers concurred, noting that with the elections already thoroughly compromised in the eyes of the American public, the United States might as well accept Thiệu rather than risk further instability, assuming a stance of detached neutrality in the hope of deflecting responsibility for the fiasco away from Washington.[574] And as Kissinger would later reveal, at the highest levels of U.S. government there had been no serious consideration of alternatives to Thiệu, and no question of allowing him to fall, public affectations of neutrality notwithstanding. "Neither Nixon nor I," he recalled "was prepared to

[572] Holdridge to Kissinger – Vietnam Elections: The Contingency Options." August 22, 1971. *RNL*, NSF: VCF, box 156, folder 1.
[573] "Holdridge to Kissinger – Bunker's Telegram." August 24, 1971. *RNL*, NSF: VCF, box 156, folder 1.
[574] "Rogers to Berger – Vietnamese Presidential Election." August 24, 1971. *RNL*, NSF: VCF, box 156, folder 3.

toss Thiệu to the wolves."[575] Though a change in government by election would have both nullified Hà Nội's insistence on Thiệu's removal and dramatically improved South Vietnam's prospects of continued American assistance, Nixon and Kissinger were by now concerned primarily with continued U.S. troop withdrawals, and were unwilling to see the pace of Vietnamization compromised by instability in Sài Gòn.

Preoccupied above all with stability, and afraid that South Vietnamese political security was so precarious that even minor disruptions might bring the entire system tumbling down, the United States once again made choices which rendered its ostensible goal of promoting democracy in Vietnam all but impossible. By remaining loyal to Thiệu regardless of his behaviour and refusing to consider alternatives, Washington effective provided the South Vietnamese leader with a blank check, abandoning what little leverage it still had. Rather than countenance the uncertainty inherent in embracing meaningful democracy, Nixon instead opted for measures that may have prolonged stability in Sài Gòn for the time-being, but which did nothing to encourage the regime to resolve its fundamental weaknesses. And as the polls closed on October 3, revealing a 94% victory for the incumbent with anticipated protests mostly failing to materialize, Thiệu's gamble that the United States would prioritize above all else the stability that he promised to deliver appeared to have paid off handsomely.

Extinguishing the Alternatives

Consistent with the relative under-representation of the Second Republic in Vietnam War scholarship thus far, the 1971 election has often been regarded as a reflection of continuity rather than change, an event in which dubious legal justifications were devised in order to formally sanction pre-existing realities of power. But while the view from Washington may have suggested the preservation of stability, previously overlooked Vietnamese perspectives reveal

[575] Henry Kissinger. *The White House Years*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1979: 1035.

that for contemporary South Vietnamese, the election marked a point of no return on their nation's descent toward authoritarianism and incompetence, greatly contributing to its ultimate military defeat. Thiệu's victory saw power become even more concentrated in the hands of a government whose unpopularity and incompetence rendered it unable and often unwilling to resolve the long list of existential problems that the country faced, which included corruption; poor military and dismal administrative performance; a lack of authority in the countryside; and widespread civilian apathy if not outright contempt. And as far as the once "loyal" opposition was concerned, the threat to South Vietnamese democracy posed by the Thiệu became almost equivalent to the spectre of communist takeover.

For Ambassador Bùi Diễm, October 1971 was the moment when "the search for a vivifying national purpose was finally discarded in favor of the chimerical strength of an autocrat."[576] In a conversation with Secretary of State Rogers the despondent Ambassador revealed that he was "very much at loose ends," confiding in Rogers that he had recently requested a transfer to Tokyo.[577] With Thiệu now confirmed as the only candidate, the consequences of ignoring Diễm's persistent warnings about the risks of running unopposed quickly become apparent. Letters to the editor in American newspapers were overwhelmingly negative – "a farce of an election," read one such example – prompting former friends of South Vietnam in Congress to turn against the war.[578] On September 10, for instance, influential anti-Communist Senator Henry Jackson [D-Wash], "one of the strongest and most stalwart of [Nixon's] Vietnam policy," according to Bunker, delivered a speech denouncing the uncontested election. Meanwhile, in the House, Lester Wolff, the sponsor of a resolution calling for Congressional oversight of the voting, announced that he had cancelled his plans to observe the

[576] Bui Diem, *Jaws of History*, 293.
[577] "State to Saigon." September 1971. *RNL*, NSF: VCF, box 157, folder 3.
[578] Alan MacRobert. "Elections in Vietnam." *The New York Times*, September 10, 1971: 34.

elections, which "will be a farce… regardless of the final form they take," for which he felt Bunker was to blame.[579] With Congress now less inclined than ever to approve economic assistance for the cash-strapped regime, it could hardly have come as a surprise in Sài Gòn when Bùi Diễm reported that a preliminary Congressional foreign aid bill for Vietnam was $200 million short of what the Nixon administration had requested.[580] Given the desperate economic situation that he faced, Thiệu could ill-afford even moderate reductions in American aid, though his government was by now so politically toxic that even oil companies were unwilling to invest in offshore exploration in South Vietnam, with a spokesman for Standard Oil of New Jersey informing the State Department that he was "most anxious to avoid a situation in which oil company interests were alleged to be a reason for continued U.S. involvement in Vietnam."[581]

The "Many Flags" campaign, Lyndon Johnson's attempt to increase the legitimacy of the war by encouraging regional participation, also suffered as a result of the election, hindering South Vietnam's struggle to achieve international legitimacy at a time when the P.R.G. was starting to win diplomatic recognition.[582] In New Zealand, which had contributed a small number of troops in support of the war, Thiệu's decision to run uncontested caused severe damage to Sài Gòn's relations with Wellington. An August 30 letter from Prime Minister Keith Hollyoake informed Thiệu that "in defence of New Zealand's role in South Vietnam, he [had] placed particular weight on the elections that are being held this year… going to some lengths to state [his] confidence in the reality and the validity of the elections." Running unopposed, Hollyoake warned, would jeopardize New Zealand's support, which "had not gone uncontested,"

[579] "Bunker to State – Meeting with Thieu," September 11, 1971, *RNL*, NSF: VSF, box 119, folder 2 and "Holdridge to Kissinger – Election Developments." August 23, 1971, *RNL*, NSF: VCF, box 156, folder 1.
[580] Bui Diem to Tran Kim Phuong, No. 0501-VT/M. November 5, 1971. *NACII*, DIICH, PTT, folder 2162.
[581] "Eliot to Kissinger – Petroleum Exploration in Vietnam." July 23, 1971. *RNL*, NSF: VCF, box 156, folder 2.
[582] Robert Brigham. *Guerrilla Diplomacy: the NLF's Foreign Relations and the Vietnam War.* Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999: 87.

and would "create embarrassment and difficulty for South Vietnam's closest allies …blur[ring] the sharp differences of approach and intention which, for New Zealand and other supporters of South Vietnam, have always been apparent between the authorities in Sài Gòn and Hà Nội."[583] And while aid from New Zealand would hardly tip the balance in the war against Hà Nội, the political legitimacy that accompanied diplomatic support from Sài Gòn's dwindling number of allies was an asset that Thiệu could ill-afford to squander, especially as Sino-American rapprochement prompted the states of Southeast Asia to improve their relations with Beijing, further diminishing South Vietnam's strategic significance.

But it was in Sài Gòn where disappointment over the uncontested election was most profound. The optimism noted in Smyser and Negroponte's report on the "loyal opposition" movement gave way to bitterness and despondency, as politicians once eager to cooperate with the government became increasingly outspoken against it. Worse still, the window of opportunity for political reform afforded by the communists' tactical military retreat after Tet seemed to be closing. As a U.S. intelligence report on the military situation during the buildup to the election revealed, conditions in all four military regions were deteriorating due to poor ARVN performance, the collapse of the Phoenix and Chieu Hoi Programs, unlimited enemy infiltration in some areas, and widespread corruption and civilian disillusionment.[584]

Well aware of the seriousness of the situation, leading politicians began to speak out against the President. Addressing the Upper House in September, respected Buddhist Senator Vũ Văn Mẫu declared that problem of cheating during elections was now more grave than ever, and that future of the Second Republic and democracy in South Vietnam was severely threatened

[583] Keith Hollyoake. "Letter to Nguyen Van Thieu." August 30, 1971, *NACII*, DIICH, PTT, folder 1964.
[584] "Status of Pacification: Republic of Vietnam." Prepared by the Office of the Assistant Chief of Staff for Civil Operations and Rural Development Support (CORDS). September 19, 1971. *RNL*, NSF: VCF, box 157, folder 1.

by Thiệu's decision to run unopposed.[585] Shortly before his assassination in a Communist attack, Professor Nguyễn Văn Bông, founder of the Professional Nationalist Movement, had likewise condemned Thiệu's behaviour. During a conversation with William Sullivan, Bông spoke of his "great dismay" over Thiệu's decision, arguing that the President was in a "severely isolated corner" which he "needed to move rapidly to break out of… if he was to prevent a serious decline in his ability to govern."[586] Special Assistant to the Vice-President Đặng Đức Khoi was similarly "full of doom and foreboding" during a September 2 meeting with Sullivan, warning that students, Buddhists, war veterans, and even soldiers and Catholics would turn against the government if Thiệu persisted, and calling for American intervention, "the only action which could preserve Vietnam from this disaster."[587]

Spiralling despair over the trajectory of the Nguyễn Văn Thiệu regime also saw the invocation of Ngô Đình Diệm's name as pejorative shorthand for political depravity. When Nguyễn Văn Thiệu outlined plans for a new pro-government party during an April 1969 address to the Assembly, "most Senators," an eyewitness reported, "whether speaking in support of the President's initiative or not, expressed concern less the President repeat the mistake of former President Diem and fashion a pro-government party which would then be used for his personal aggrandizement."[588] More ominous still were the unconstitutional arrests of high-profile opposition deputies like Trần Ngọc Châu and Ngô Công Đức, with the latter's May 1971 detention prompting a Lower House resolution demanding his release, and the condemnation of his "unacceptable" and "political" confinement even in independent but habitually pro-

[585] "Thuyết trình của Nghị sĩ Vũ Văn Mẫu tại Phiên Khoáng đại Thượng Nghị Viện ngày 22-9-71." September 22, 1971. *NACII*, DIICH, PTT, folder 5686.
[586] "State to Saigon." September 1971. *RNL*, NSF: VCF, box 157, folder 3.
[587] "State to Saigon." September 1971. *RNL*, NSF: VCF, box 157, folder 3.
[588] Telegram 7268, Embassy Saigon to Department of State, 16 April 1969, POL 15-1 VIET S, 1967-1969, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.

government "Political Discussion" [*Chính Luận*] and "Construction" [*Xây Dựng*].[589] Former Minister of Information Tôn Thất Thiện warned US Embassy officials that the incident marked the "beginning of the end" for the Second Republic, comparing Ngô Công Đức's captivity to the 1960 arrest of Phan Quang Đán at Ngô Đình Diệm's behest.[590]

By now, even senior government officials had started to echo the tenor if not the tone of radical student protestors, whose communiques routinely accused Nguyễn Văn Thiệu of "re-establishing the despotism of the 1963 Ngo Dinh Diem regime."[591] In December 1969, Ambassador-to-the-United States Bùi Diễm requested a private meeting "as 'Citizen Diem' rather than Ambassador" with veteran diplomat William H. Sullivan, in which he relayed his "concern over the deteriorating political situation which he found in Saigon during his recent visit there." Likening the current atmosphere to "the sort of discontent which welled up against President Diem... in 1962," Bùi Diễm warned that "the catalyst for Diem's ultimate overthrow was relatively minor, but was able to draw on all those other sources of discontent which were already in existence." "His fears were compounded," Sullivan noted, "by [the] comparison which he noted between life styles of Thieu and Diem. He felt Thieu was becoming a 'prisoner of the Palace' and that he was 'institutionalizing his natural shyness into official austerity.'" Concerned that his American counterparts were "inclined to minimize [the] significance of this situation and concentrate instead on [the] need for 'effective government," Bùi Diễm again

[589] [*không bao giờ chúng tôi có thể chấp nhận*]; [*đòn chính trị*] Although affirming its "intense opposition to Ngô Công Đức's demagogic and deceitful political views" [*Chúng tôi đã từng kịch liệt chống đối "lập trường chánh trị mị dân, bịp bợm của DB Ngô Công Đức"*], *Xây Dựng* "felt the need to immediately confirm: we can never accept (or ignore)… the government's behavior towards this individual" [*Chúng tôi cần phải xác định ngay rằng: không bao giờ chúng tôi có thể chấp nhận (hay làm ngơ)… cách xử sự của chánh quyền hiện nay đối với cá nhân ông*] "X.D. nghĩ gì về vụ Ngô Công Đức?" [What Does Xay Dung Think About the Ngo Cong Duc Case?] *Xây dung* [Construction], 3 June 1971; *Chính Luận*, meanwhile, described the episode as "a black scar on our so-called legally-based democracy" [*...một vết đen bôi thêm lên chế độ mệnh danh là dân chủ pháp trị*] "Thêm một vết đen" [Another Black Scar], *Chính Luận* [Political Discussion], 4 June 1971.

[590] Telegram 8983/1, Embassy Saigon to Department of State, 8 June 1971, POL 2-5 VIET S, 1970-1973, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.

[591] Telegram 3791, Embassy Saigon to Department of State, 13 March 1971, POL 29 VIET S, 1970-1973, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.

ominously "raised comparison with President Diem, who… was [also] 'effective' right to the end."[592]

No doubt aware that he lacked his predecessor's anti-French and newly-uncovered anti-American nationalist credentials while sharing his aloof and uncharismatic image, Nguyễn Văn Thiệu exploited his control over the Supreme Court and National Assembly with legislation effectively guaranteeing his already likely re-election in 1971. The ensuing contest was a public relations disaster, marking a point of no return for the Nguyễn Văn Thiệu regime. Seeking to disqualify Nguyễn Cao Kỳ by compelling candidates to win endorsements from mostly pro-Nguyễn Văn Thiệu assemblymen and province chiefs (a provision he had condemned as unconstitutional when suggested by Nguyễn Cao Kỳ in 1967), Nguyễn Văn Thiệu instead opted to run unopposed when both Nguyễn Cao Kỳ and Dương Văn Minh dropped out in protest after the Palace's written vote-rigging instructions to Province and District-level officials inevitably surfaced.[593] A brief wave of demonstrations by students, veterans, opposition politicians and religious and ethnic minority groups quickly gave way to despondency and sardonic resignation. "Comparisons with Diem are now often heard," the US Embassy reported, while *Saigon Post* columnist Trần Nam, taking his morning stroll on Election Day, recorded overhearing the following: "'The late President Ngo Dinh Diem,' a wag said, 'could have turned in his eternal resting place to exclaim, 'comrade, you beat me!'"[594]

Perhaps the most serious consequence for the incumbent President, however, was the permanent breakdown of his de facto alliance with the northern Catholic political groups that

[592] Telegram 000746, State Department to Embassy Saigon, 2 January 1970, POL 15-1 VIET S, 1970-1973, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.
[593] See, for instance, George McT. Kahin, "Nixon and the PRG's 7 Points," *The American War in Vietnam*. Jayne Werner and David Hunt eds. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Southeast Asia Program, 1993): 58-65.
[594] Telegram 16571, Embassy Saigon to Department of State, 16 October 1971, POL 14 VIET S, 1970-1973, CFPF, RG 59, NARA. Trần Nam, "Off the Record: Quiet Polling Day," *Saigon Post*, October 6, 1971.

dominated the Senate. By running unopposed, Nguyễn Văn Thiệu achieved the unlikely feat of uniting South Vietnam's chronically-divided opposition, with the Catholic Greater Solidarity Front and Greater Republican Masses Party [*Chánh Đảng Đại chung Cộng hòa*] endorsing a Buddhist-sponsored September communique calling for his immediate withdrawal.[595] Motivated both by disgust – political operative Đặng Đức Khôi, for instance, complained to a C.I.A. contact that "he had been a strong supporter of Ngo Dinh Diem until the last few months… and his revulsion against Thieu is now stronger than his final revulsion against Diem – as well as a fear of 1964-style scapegoating and reprisals, other Catholic luminaries and organizations lined up to follow suit.[596] Pax Romana, the Catholic intellectual group that had agonized over its position on Ngô Đình Diệm, was unequivocal when it came to Nguyễn Văn Thiệu, issuing a public statement on September 13 denouncing the election as "lacking in democracy and popular enthusiasm," and warning that "the people have almost lost confidence in Thieu's leadership.

The following morning, Sài Gòn Archbishop Nguyễn Văn Bình awoke to find his house surrounded by hundreds of angry parishioners demanding that he revoke his July 31 call for heavy Catholic voter turnout. After a week of intense grassroots campaigning, the Archbishop relented, affirming in a September 22 "Construction" [*Xây Dựng*] interview that "the faithful are duty-bound to oppose elections that are fraudulent and lacking in democracy."[597] "We would like to support Thieu," he explained to Catholic Senator Pauline Nguyễn Văn Thơ, "but we

[595] Telegram 15478, Embassy Saigon to Department of State, 21 September 1971, POL 23-8 VIET S, 1970-1973, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.
[596] Intelligence Information Cable 400746, "Plans and Attitudes of Vice-President Nguyen Cao Ky and his Presidential Campaign Staff," Central Intelligence Agency, 13 August 1971, File: Government of South Vietnam – Government of South Vietnam - Nguyen Cao Ky 1967-1973, NSAF, NSC VIG, GFL.
[597] [*Khi nhận thấy có gian lận và thiếu dân chủ thì bổn phận của người tin hữu là phải chống đối]* "Đức TGM lên tiếng trong bài phỏng vấn của XD về bầu cử 3-10" [The Archbishop Speaks Out in Xay Dung Interview About the October 3 Election], *Xây Dựng* [Construction], 22 September 1971.

cannot if he continues his present course. He won't give us the chance to help him."[598] Meanwhile, in the Senate, Huỳnh Văn Cao's northern Catholic-dominated pro-government "Vietnam Sky" [*Trời Việt*] slate broke ranks, partnering with Senate Chairman Nguyễn Văn Huyền's moderate Catholic "Lily" [*Bông huệ*] bloc to pass a resolution with 28 of 31 votes declaring the election to be "against the public will," and "likely to bring overall disaster to South Vietnam."[599]

His re-election secured if forever resented, Nguyễn Văn Thiệu hastened to crush what remained of the opposition. Taking advantage of the 1972 communist Easter Offensive, the President exploited the Emergency Powers legislation he was granted after protracted Senate resistance by imposing Decree Laws 007 and 060, effectively silencing the press and disbarring independent political parties (including all three Senate lists), respectively. What little popular sympathy remained for Nguyễn Văn Thiệu promptly evaporated. Speaking to a US Embassy source who "had never seen him so seemingly dejected by a political event," Conservative Đại Việt Senator and "Political Discussion" [*Chính Luận*] publisher Đặng Văn Sung threatened to shutter his newspaper rather than see it become a "prostitute" of the administration. Having supported both the election law signatures provision and the Emergency Powers bill, which explicitly stated it could be applied only to matters of defense, security, economics and finance, Đặng Văn Sung now warned that "South Vietnam was entering a new Diem-type dictatorship."[600] In "Political Discussion" [*Chính Luận*], he attempted an uncharacteristically defiant stand, penning an August 11 editorial excoriating the "unconstitutional" newspaper legislation, levelling familiar comparisons with the Ngô Đình Diệm era, and depicting Nguyễn

[598] Telegram 15620, Embassy Saigon to Department of State, 29 September 1971, POL 14 VIET S, 1970-1973, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.
[599] Telegram 15537, Embassy Saigon to Department of State, 28 September 1971, POL 2-5 VIET S, 1970-1973, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.
[600] Telegram 11660, Embassy Saigon to Department of State, 9 August 1972, NSF, VCF, Box 161, Folder 3, RNL.

Văn Thiệu as "emerging alone… above a sea of mute, subservient South Vietnamese people." "What do the people think of the true nature of the Second Republic of Vietnam?" he inquired rhetorically, "and what will be the ideal for them if they wish to sacrifice their lives in the struggle against communist dictatorship? Once they review everything, they will realize that nothing remains."[601] In response, the government pre-empted the despairing Senator's recurring threats to boycott publication, seizing the August 11 edition and charging "Political Discussion" [*Chính Luận*] with violating Article 28(a) ("jeopardizing national security and public order") and Article 29 ("publishing information, documents or arguments aimed at extolling the theories, policies or actions of communism or pro-communist neutrality") of the new press code. "Police efforts to confiscate the edition were thorough," remarked the US Embassy, which obtained a secret draft from Đặng Văn Sung himself, "and no copies reached the streets."[602]

With the media now firmly under executive control, Nguyễn Văn Thiệu turned his attention to filling the political void left by Decree Law 060. Having long since lost patience with the fragmented and quarrelsome political groups marginalized by his recent emergency fiats, Nguyễn Văn Thiệu proceed to unveil the Democracy Party [*Đảng Dân chủ*], the long-awaited manifestation of the pro-government party he had hinted at to growing degrees of apprehension since taking office. Like the Cần Lao Party before it, the Democracy Party was divided into overt and covert cells. The Party's public façade consisted of popular but mostly powerless public notables, including Party Chairman Trần Minh Tùng, described as "a docile southerner who will cause no problems" by Revolutionary Đại Việt Senator Nguyên Văn Ngãi. De facto Party control, on the other hand, was wielded by the clandestine apparatus, helmed by

[601] "Settling the Press Issue with a View to Preparing for a Political Struggle," *Chính Luận* [Political Discussion], 11 August 1972. (US Embassy Translation). File: Press, 1967-1972 (7), NSAF, NSC VIG, GFL.
[602] "Editorial on New Press Decree Law," Airgram A-154 from Saigon to Department of State, 28 August1972, File: Press, 1967-1972 (7), NSAF, NSC VIG, GFL.

Nguyên Văn Ngãi and political advisor Nguyễn Văn Ngân and staffed primarily by military and police officials, whose involvement was kept nominally secret in line with constitutional stipulations proscribing their membership in political parties.[603]

Starting in earnest in the fall of 1972, a wave of civil servants and soldiers complained of coercive tactics employed to compel them to join the Party, including arbitrary dismissal, prosecution on trumped-up charges, conscription (for government workers) or transfers to insecure communist-controlled areas.[604] Nguyễn Bé, the highly-regarded Director of the National Training Center [*Trung tâm Huấn luyện Cán bộ Quốc gia*] in Vũng Tàu, was perhaps the most high-profile victim, purged in February 1973 for both refusing to join and refusing to allow the Vũng Tàu school to train Democracy Party cadre. Interviewed shortly after his departure, he declared that "the Democracy Party is intended simply to perpetuate President Thieu in power and has no greater national purpose and no independent ideology that will appeal to the Vietnamese people."[605] Revolutionary Đại Việt organizer Nguyễn Bảo, on the other hand, projected blasé pragmatism in response to involuntary Đại Việt cadre recruitment into Democracy Party ranks: "Now we return to the secret ways of the French era …We Vietnamese are a family-oriented people, and, though sometimes necessity forces us to play the whore [i.e.: the Democracy Party], we always come back to our family [the Revolutionary Đại Việt Party]." Admittedly dismayed by Nguyễn Văn Thiệu's recent "obstruction of free elections," Nguyễn Bảo professed a surprising degree of confidence in his party's fortunes following Decree Law 060. "Because many Revolutionary Đại Việt members have infiltrated the Thieu regime by

[603] "Democracy Party Development," Airgram A-236 from Saigon to Department of State, 19 December 1972, POL 12 VIET S 1970-1973, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.
[604] Ibid.
[605] "Colonel Nguyen Be Leaves the Vung Tau National Training Center," Airgram A-1 from Saigon to Department of State, 2 March 1973, POL 15 VIET S 1970-1973, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.

'joining' the Democracy Party," he noted, "the Revolutionary Đại Việt Party is now stronger and has a more intimate understanding of GVN internal workings than before."[606]

From its inception, the Democracy Party drew predictable comparisons to Ngô Đình Diệm's Cần Lao. Trần Kim Tuyến, an early Cần Lao architect before turning against his patron, was one of many to observe the obvious parallels, although, speaking to a US Embassy source, he emphasized a fatal flaw in both the Cần Lao and the Democracy Party's genesis:

"Those who want to build parties like the Can Lao or Democracy Party start from the premise that the Communist Party is the source of strength in communist regimes, and that this example should be copied. But they turn the development sequence on its head. Whereas the Communist Party is created first, develops, then seizes power, and finally establishes an administration as an extension of its power, those who established the Can Lao and now want to create a Democracy Party think they can reverse the sequence by having an established administration create a political party. It took some of the Can Lao organizers including himself [Trần Kim Tuyến] four years to see their error, according to Tuyen, while some never did."

The result of repeating the Cần Lao Party's mistakes, the former intelligence director predicted, would be the "exacerbation of corruption, ineptitude and favoritism, which will help the communists."[607] Trần Kim Tuyến joined a litany of former high-ranking Cần Lao officials whose objections to the Democracy Party's forced enlistment were recorded, including former Agriculture Minister Lê Văn Đông, who "sharply objects to the coercive aspects of recruiting;" labor leader Trần Quốc Bửu, who believed "Thieu was making a serious mistake in pressuring civil servants and others to join;" and even Đà Nẵng Mayor Nguyễn Ngọc Khôi, who, despite his

[606] "The Revolutionary Dai Viet Party is Alive and Well and Living in Dalat," Airgram A-105 from Saigon to Department of State, 13 August 1973, POL 12 VIET S 1970-1973, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.
[607] "Democracy Party Development," Airgram A-236 from Saigon to Department of State, 19 December 1972, POL 12 VIET S 1970-1973, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.

enthusiasm for directing state resources to serve Nhân Xã, drew the line at mandatory Democracy Party membership, stating that he was "adamantly opposed to any such effort, citing the example of Ngo Dinh Diem and the Can Lao."[608]

But for most South Vietnamese observers, the Democracy Party's failings were a matter of substance rather than strategy. And with his apparent embrace of the Cần Lao precedent, Nguyễn Văn Thiệu appeared to put the finishing touches on South Vietnam's abrupt political decay, heightening an already pervasive sense that the glimmer of optimism which the Second Republic once represented had been extinguished. No party's fate better reflects the transition than the instructive demise of the Progressive National Movement [*Phong trào Quốc gia Cấp tiến*], a Party that emerged proclaiming its devotion the concept of loyal opposition. Established in 1969, the Progressive National Movement pledged subservience to the President on foreign policy and defense, limiting itself to domestic policy suggestions in a spirit of overall cooperation. Founded against a backdrop of growing concern over Nguyễn Văn Thiệu's intentions, Party elders were undeterred: "They wouldn't dare try to close us down and return to the days of President Diem," asserted Chairman Nguyễn Văn Bông during the Party's Biên Hòa Province inauguration.[609] Three years later, the group found itself effectively legislated out of existence by Decree Law 060. Nguyễn Văn Thiệu was "acting as if he did not need the people with him," concluded despondent Party Secretary General Nguyễn Ngọc Huy, who interpreted the Emergency Powers acts as a clear indication that "the Thieu administration intended to revive 'Diem dictatorship.'"[610] Beleaguered Senate Chairman Nguyễn Văn Huyền, "long considered 'Mr. Upper House' for his influence in the chamber" according to a US Embassy report, likewise

[608] Ibid; Telegram 19961, Embassy Saigon to Department of State, 28 December 1971, POL 15-1 VIET S, 1970-1973, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.
[609] "Progressive Nationalist Movement in Bien Hoa Province," Airgram A-537 from Saigon to Department of State, 29 October 1969, POL 12 VIET S 1967-1969, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.
[610] Telegram 11632, Embassy Saigon to Department of State, 8 August 1972, NSF, VCF, Box 161, Folder 3, RNL.

found his "Lily" [*Bông huệ*] group all but precluded by Decree Law 060 from contesting the 1973 Senate elections. "They have viewed their role as essentially a 'brake' on the President's natural authoritarianism, and as the last remaining guardians of a robust democratic spirit," concluded an eyewitness account of the group's final Upper House session. "A departing member remarked," the report continued: "that the 'noble experiment' at constitutionalism launched in 1967 - at American urging, he noted pointedly - was turning sour. He had been surprised in 1967, he said, at the number of qualified people who 'engaged themselves' enthusiastically in the experiment by running for office that year. These were individuals who had earlier withdrawn from political participation in the late 1950s, when Diem's rule began to turn authoritarian. These 'good' people are retreating once again, the senator commented, once more waiting for some watershed before engaging themselves."[611] Long before its final military collapse then, the Second Republic was judged by its most committed proponents to have ended in unmitigated political failure.

In Washington however, reaction to Thiệu's emergency legislation was rather more complicated, resulting in a heated debate between the White House and the State Department over how to respond to recent developments in Sài Gòn. The dispute concerned an August 1972 State Department cable instructing Bunker to warn the President that his recent measures would "create a domestic issue in the United States of dangerous dimensions," and that a "picture here of an increasingly autocratic RVN could have a seriously adverse effect on the prosecution of current U.S. policies respecting Vietnam." But before the message could be delivered, Kissinger's office intervened, arguing that the telegram was "a prime example of [the State Deparment] … imposing their judgement of American political reactions on the Thiệu regime."

[611] "The Old Guard Leaves the Upper House," Airgram A-137 from Saigon to Department of State, 23 July1973, POL 15-2 VIET S 1970-1973, CFPF, RG 59, NARA.

Instead, the National Security Council's position was as follows: "Our overall reaction to State's concern over a more authoritarian government in South Vietnam is: so what? Since we have long criticized the disorder of South Vietnam's politics, should we now urge Thiệu to ease off on measures designed primarily to remedy the South's chronic permissiveness?"[612] Still convinced that Thiệu's increasingly despotic rule represented the safest way to ensure the withdrawal of U.S. troops and a settlement with Hà Nội, Nixon and Kissinger had once again turned their backs on South Vietnam's besieged democracy movement. But while the N.S.C. prevailed in preventing the telegram from being delivered, it was the State Department's reasoning that would prove to be more prescient, with Congress imposing a series of aid reductions and approving the 1973 War Powers Act, terminating American operations in Laos and Cambodia which in turn seriously jeopardized South Vietnam's military security.

Meanwhile, in Sài Gòn, the anguish of the anti-communist opposition only intensified as conditions continued to deteriorate. An Embassy conversation with former Deputy Foreign Minister Trần Văn Đỗ revealed spectacular levels of corruption, which by now permeated most aspects of day-to-day life in South Vietnam. The civil service, Đỗ alleged, was "a mess from top to bottom," with civil servants unwilling to assume responsibility, leaving every issue to be "bucked upstairs." On the other hand, Thiệu refused to delegate control, preoccupying himself with minor decisions that would be better left for his staff. Incompetence went largely unpunished, in the civil service and in the army, which, Đỗ estimated, would require more than one million soldiers to hold off even a "guerrilla force" of 250,000 North Vietnamese, placing an enormous strain on the county's finances. "Corruption," Đỗ declared, "was rampant – for example, there were no mailboxes in Vietnam because the postmen were so corrupt they would

[612] William L. Stearman. "Memorandum for General Haig re Instructions to Ambassador Bunker on Recent Political Developments in South Vietnam." August 18, 1972. *RNL*, NSF: VCF, box 161, folder 3.

steal stamps off the envelopes and resell them. The tax collectors were so corrupt you had to bribe them to accept your tax payments… even a license plate for a vehicle was unobtainable without a bribe." After a meeting with Đỗ, Thiệu had promised to deal with the problem, but the former Deputy Minister had little faith that the President would take action. "I have known Đỗ for several years," the Embassy officer concluded, "and I have never seen him so voluble or so concerned."[613] With an estimated 800,000 people unemployed by 1973 and the country facing a new wave of inflation due to global oil price increases, Thiệu again raised income taxes, this time retroactively applying the new rates, which predictably set off a new round of protests. And when he began seeking to change the constitution to allow for a third term of office, the howls of outrage grew louder still.[614] In February 1975, with the war now heating up once again, the newspaper *Nhân Dân* published a petition signed by a number of high-profile supporters calling on Thiệu to face charges of "crimes against the state, against the army, against peace and against the people," a reflection of a profoundly divided and disillusioned society that regarded its own government as almost equal to the Communist invaders in the threat that it posed to democracy.[615] "South Vietnam in the final days before the collapse was like a patient going through political delirium," a pair of former ARVN generals recalled, "unable to tell truth from falsehood, and clamoring for Thiệu's resignation without an idea of who would take his place or what would be the future course of the nation."[616] As Communist forces marched toward Sài Gòn in the spring of 1975, they approached a city plagued by internal strife, bitter animosity toward its government, and an overwhelming sense of despair.

[613] "Whitehouse to State – RVN Negotiations in Paris." June 26, 1973. *RNL*, NSF: VCF, box 164, folder 3.
[614] Hinh and Tho, *The South Vietnamese Society*, 148.
[615] "Cáo Trạnh Chánh Trị." *Nhân Dân*, February 1, 1975. *NACII*, DIICH, PTT, folder 7668.
[616] Hinh and Tho, *The South Vietnamese Society*, 151.

Motivated by a decidedly illiberal vision of democracy, in which the role of South Vietnamese citizens was to receive rather than provide direction, Thiệu shared his Northern counterparts' authoritarian instincts, though he lacked their organizational capabilities, his heavy-handed measures in the name of stability instead resulting in rampant corruption, economic crisis and South Vietnam's growing international isolation. In Washington, the United States likewise opted for perceived stability, backing Thiệu in order to ease its withdrawal from the war, abandoning political pluralism in the process. Still, given Washington's marginal leverage even if Nixon and Kissinger had been more democratically inclined, responsibility for the fate of South Vietnam lay squarely on the shoulders of its leaders. Corruption and administrative ineptitude left the RVN in an almost perpetual state of financial crisis, with even the most independent-minded leaders forced to rely on assistance that was controlled by the U.S. Congress. But though he was well aware that congressional support was conditional on democratic progress, Thiệu instead opted to consolidate his authority at the expense of the opposition movement, sacrificing the possibility of sufficient U.S. assistance for the sake of concentrating executive power while doing nothing with his control over the state to address its many problems. In the end, at South Vietnam's decisive moment, the embattled leader found himself isolated both within and beyond his nation's borders, unable to resist the communist invasion, and with only himself to blame.

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