

Vietnam: The Fall of Diem



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- Early 1963
 - Dissatisfaction with Diem's government continued
 - Kennedy and his advisors eventually agreed that Diem's government was too flawed to survive
- Main Reasons:
 - Viet Cong operations within South Vietnam
 - Brutal crackdown against Buddhist demonstrators
 - Failure to rally the population against the communists



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- Viet Cong Gains
 - Used terrorism and dissatisfaction with Diem's government to gain large numbers
 - Eventually launched attacks on strategic locations throughout the south
 - Government installations
 - Military outposts
 - Villages
 - Strategic Hamlets



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- Viet Cong Gains
 - ARVN came under increasingly harsh criticism
 - U.S. officials complained that Diem's military leadership was reluctant to move against the Viet Cong
 - Also believed that many ARVN soldiers were actually secret Viet Cong agents
 - Historian Bruce Palmer: *"The whole country had been penetrated by the Viet Cong, from the palace down to the platoons."*
 - Despite over 12,000 U.S. military advisors and personnel, the ARVN continued to struggle against the Viet Cong



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- Battle of Ap Bac
 - January 2, 1963
 - Ap Bac: small town approximately 35 miles southwest of Saigon
 - During the course of the battle, a small Viet Cong battalion defeated a much larger ARVN force supported by armored vehicles, heavy artillery, and U.S. helicopters
 - Viet Cong soldiers were able to escape after shooting down several U.S. helicopters

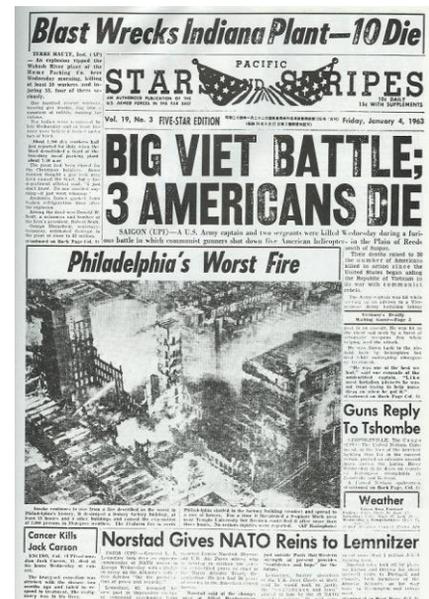
- The defeat validated American concerns about the capabilities of the ARVN



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- Battle of Ap Bac
 - Military advisor John Paul Vann witnessed the battle
 - Submitted an angry report, harshly criticizing the ARVN forces
 - “A damn miserable performance”
 - Labeled ARVN officers as cowards and stated soldiers showed no willingness to fight
 - Became further outraged when he learned the South Vietnamese government lied about what happened to claim victory

- Vann secretly informed reporters of the true outcome of the battle
 - Media began to doubt the reports of U.S. advisors and officials in Vietnam



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- Diem Creates More Crisis

- Spring 1963
 - American officials urged Diem to:
 - Introduce policies that would help Vietnam's struggling peasant population
 - Eliminate corruption in the military and government
 - Show more respect to the Buddhist population
- U.S. hoped that by making these changes, the Diem government could regain support throughout the South



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- Diem Creates More Crisis

- Diem ignored the advice of the U.S.
- The military and political situation continued to get worse
- By mid-1963, members of the Kennedy administration were fiercely divided over whether the U.S. should continue to support Diem



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• The Buddhist Crisis

- May 1963
 - President Diem travels to Hue to celebrate the 25th anniversary of his brother's promotion to archbishop of the Catholic Church
 - As part of the celebration, Catholic-themed flags were displayed throughout the streets
 - A few days later, Diem banned members of the Buddhist population from flying their own flags as part of a religious holiday
 - Thousands of Buddhist demonstrators took to the streets in protest
- May 8, 1963
 - Diem's soldiers attacked Buddhist demonstrators with clubs, tear gas, and gunfire
 - As many as 40 demonstrators were killed in the violence



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• The Buddhist Crisis

- Diem government blamed the Viet Cong for the violence and never accepted responsibility
- The general population was not fooled and new demonstrations organized by Buddhist leaders began throughout South Vietnam



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- The Buddhist Crisis

- June 11, 1963

- Buddhist monk Quang Duc sat down in the middle of a busy intersection
 - He crossed his arms and legs and began to pray as another monk poured gasoline over his head
 - Then, Duc lit a match and set himself on fire in protest of Diem's treatment of Buddhism



- The pictures quickly appeared in the U.S. and around the world

- Most Americans were stunned and began to focus more on the situation in Vietnam
 - Also triggered a wave of intense national criticism against Diem's government
 - President Kennedy: *"No news picture in history has generated as much emotion around the world as that one"*

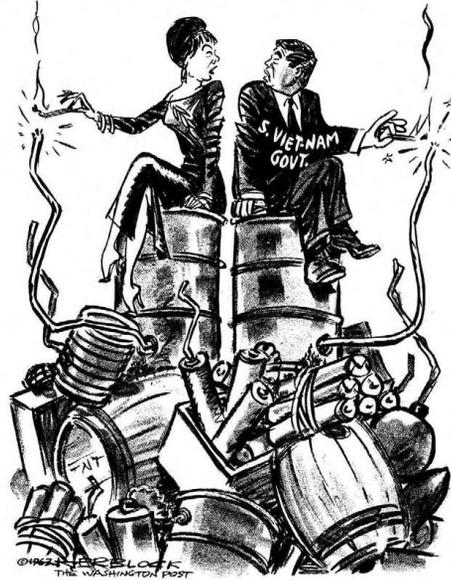


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“Those Crazy Buddhists—Setting Fire To Themselves”

• The Buddhist Crisis

- President Diem and his family reacted defiantly to the criticism
 - Ngo Dinh Nhu: *“If the Buddhists want to have another barbeque, I will be happy to supply the gasoline”*
 - Madame Nhu: *“If the Buddhist burn thirty women, we shall go ahead and clap our hands.”*
- These remarks horrified President Kennedy and other U.S. officials
 - Pleaded for Diem to send Madame Nhu out of the country
 - Also urged Diem to remove Ngo Dinh Nhu, citing his corruption and brutal use of secret police



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• Demonstrations Across South Vietnam

- As the summer passed, more demonstrations occurred
- Diem government began to use violence in an effort to stop the unrest
 - Peaceful demonstrators were attacked by soldiers armed with rifles, clubs, and tear gas
 - Other protestors were kidnapped in the middle of the night and never seen again
- August 21, 1963
 - Diem government declared martial law and launched a massive crackdown across South Vietnam aimed to stop the Buddhist demonstrations once and for all



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• Demonstrations Across South Vietnam

- Nhu's troops stormed Buddhist temples
 - Arrested approximately 1,400 monks and nuns
 - In Hue, 30 monks and students were shot or clubbed to death in the raids
 - Madame Nhu observed one of the raids and later called it "the happiest day of my life."
- The government crackdown fails to stop anti-Diem movements across South Vietnam



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• Henry Cabot Lodge Arrives in Vietnam

- August 1963
 - Henry Cabot Lodge replaces Frederick Nolting as U.S. ambassador to Vietnam
 - After reviewing the situation, Lodge quickly concludes that Diem's regime will not last
 - He sends a top-secret message to Kennedy outlining his assessment of Diem
- Lodge's report disturbed Kennedy, who was hoping to see Diem's government saved
- Administration officials begin to prepare for the end of Diem regime



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• Diem's Last Days

- September 1963
 - Kennedy publicly expresses his concerns about the situation in South Vietnam during an interview with Walter Cronkite
 - Around this same time, a group of South Vietnamese military officers join together in a plot to overthrow Diem
- October 1963
 - Lodge secretly informs the group of officers that the U.S. government would not oppose a change in government
 - This gave the officials the confidence they needed to begin their operation



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• Diem's Last Days

- November 1, 1963
 - The generals use a strong military force to seize control of several strategically important outposts in Saigon and other areas of South Vietnam
- Initially, Diem and Nhu refuse to surrender
 - Eventually tried to sneak away from the palace at night, but were captured
 - Both men were executed shortly after
- Madame Nhu escaped execution by being in the U.S. at the time of the coup



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- Diem's Last Days

- President Kennedy is stunned and upset when he learns of Diem's murder
 - He believed that South Vietnam was better off with new leadership, but he had no intentions of killing Diem and his brother
- Today, the U.S. role in the overthrow of Diem is a source of debate
 - Some claim that it was necessary for Kennedy to withhold support for Diem during the coup
 - Others believed the overthrow of Diem was a terrible mistake

