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## **A Lesson from Vietnam, Part 2**

**by Wendy McElroy**

With American encouragement, Diem defied the deadline for a national election. This signaled the beginning of a struggle to the death with Hanoi. Until then, the North had waited to see whether Ho could be voted into power. The communists themselves were brutal and had violated various terms of the Geneva Accords, but they had not openly confronted the South.

Now Diem openly confronted them. Although the Accords prohibited reprisals against “former resistance members,” the Diem regime began to crack down on those Viet Minh who had not already gone North. Between 1955 and 1959, perhaps as many as 75,000 people were executed in South Vietnam as communists or communist sympathizers. Many were demonstrably neither. Diem’s Presidential Ordinance No. 6 in 1956 provided for the indefinite detention in concentration camps of anyone found to be a “danger to the state.” The Ordinance hit noncommunists the hardest because they tended to be more visible and more easily apprehended.

The term “Viet Cong” emerged. Coined by Diem himself, the term originally meant nothing more than “Vietnamese communist”; later on it would be applied to virtually any opponent of Diem, communist or not.

Caught between the Viet Cong and Diem, peasants began to desert their villages, especially isolated ones. A large mass of landless peasants is a classic base for communism and this was what South Vietnam now contained.

The situation worsened under Diem’s land-reform policies. By the end of the Indochina War, the Viet Minh had redistributed the property of many large landowners without offering compensation. The landowners wanted their properties back. Diem consulted an American expert, Wolf Ladejinsky, who produced a new land-reform program that limited land ownership to 245 acres. Former landowners received compensation. Rents were reduced. But from the peasants’ point of view, Diem was reducing rents that the Viet Minh had abolished. Diem was selling land that the Viet Minh had given away. Moreover, as a reward for their loyalty, Catholics were given the most desirable property — even if it belonged to others. Diem’s land policy alone did more to further communism than any Northern propaganda.

In evaluating the overall political situation, David Hotham, the Vietnam correspondent for the *London Times* and *The Economist*, wrote,

The chief hope of defending the south from communism was that somebody should succeed in uniting all the genuinely anti-Communist nationalist elements into a regime which would have the confidence of the southern people. Had that been done, the bastion would have been strong. But this is precisely what has not been done. Instead of uniting it, Diem has divided the south. Instead of merely crushing his legitimate enemies, the Communists, he has crushed all opposition of every kind, however anti-Communist it might be. In so doing, he has destroyed the very basis on which his regime should be founded. He has been able to do this, simply and solely because of the massive dollar aid he has had from across the Pacific, which keeps in power a man who, by all the laws of human and political affairs, would long ago have fallen.

American aid rebuilt highways, railroads, and canals, and brought a slight increase in agriculture to South Vietnam. But mostly, American aid made South Vietnamese officials rich. By 1957, rumors of corruption had reached such proportions that Nhu — Diem's brother — took out ads in Saigon newspapers to deny them. This fueled the rumors. As did the constant rise in gold reserves. By December 1960, Saigon had a currency hoard of \$216.4 million, which many believed should have been expended on schools and hospitals.

### **Results of American aid**

Diem accepted American money but he did not continue to welcome American advice or consultation. His reports to the United States continued to be misleading. For example, visiting officials were shown model villages rather than the real countryside. Perhaps this sham reflected the Vietnamese disdain for American advisors.

A Vietnamese official exploded,

Most of your advisors do not speak Vietnamese and do not know our ways and our culture. They cannot eat our food, for it makes them sick. Do they know about our country? No! How can they know? They stay here only one or two years at most, spend their free time with other Americans and devote much of their attention either to vacation or preparing to go home. Many are here just to make money and advance their careers.

On January 1, 1961, the Buy American program commenced, to sharp criticism. Through this program the South Vietnamese were supposed to give preference to American goods. But, as the *Times of Viet-Nam* observed, the Japanese were able to provide almost everything the United States did at one-fourth the cost.

South Vietnamese society was becoming united in its anti-Americanism while, at the same time, it was disintegrating into student riots, government paralysis, and Buddhist demonstrations.

Communists now infiltrated almost every level of society. In Saigon, even the Boy Scout units had to be dissolved.

Diem responded by creating special military tribunals, which dealt out the death penalty for a wide spectrum of crimes. Such criminals included

anyone who intentionally proclaimed or propagated, by no matter what means, unfounded news on prices ... or [the] future economic situation in the country or outside, likely to provoke economic or financial disturbance in the country.

In November 1960, John F. Kennedy became president. Since Diem was considered to be a puppet of Eisenhower, many Vietnamese expected Kennedy to discard him. The revolt that emerged was unsuccessful because Kennedy stood behind Diem, but the fallout from the revolt was important. The United States began to doubt Diem, and the communists were encouraged to promote the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam, called the NLF, a broad and popular coalition. The NLF soon governed many areas of South Vietnam, taking by night what the Saigon forces claimed by day. The NLF grew for one simple reason: it had popular support because it stood for a united Vietnam free from the “foreign devil.” Ho Chi Minh and other Northern leaders had been in the front line of the fight for independence. Diem was inextricably linked with foreign domination.

The 1961 presidential elections in South Vietnam were meant to prove Diem’s popularity to the United States but the results were never in doubt. According to official figures, the voter turnout was 75 percent with Diem receiving 88 percent of the vote. How Diem received a 90 percent majority in the outlying provinces under communist control was not explained.

One thing was becoming evident: merely supporting an anticommunist regime did not work. A special task force was created to reassess American policy toward revolutionary movements in the Third World. The definition of “war” itself had to be re-examined to take into account revolutionary warfare.

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