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A Lesson from Vietnam, Part 3

by Wendy McElroy

“Counterinsurgency” became the new American buzzword and Vietnam became the testing ground, with American leaders looking to apply its lessons elsewhere — for example, in Cuba. The Kennedy administration developed a policy which broke the containment of revolution into three stages: first, military aid programs; second, counterinsurgency by which American troops and money would suppress revolutionary movements; and, third, limited war involving American troops. In May 1961, the *New York Times* stated,

United States authorities estimate that American military aid already covers 80 per cent of South Vietnam’s defense budget. In addition, economic assistance has totaled more than \$1.3 billion since 1955.

Kennedy still resisted sending American troops into Vietnam, comparing the introduction of troops to taking a drink. He told the historian and author Arthur Schlesinger, “The effect wears off, and you take another.” Schlesinger used the “quagmire” model to describe Vietnam: that is, sending troops would be like stumbling into quicksand. Meanwhile, Diem did not want American troops on South Vietnamese soil either because they threatened his own grip on the nation.

Kennedy decided to link increased military aid to stronger pressure for domestic reforms, including a campaign against government corruption. Diem reacted like a woman scorned. The South Vietnamese press erupted with anti-American articles that shocked the Kennedy administration. For the first time, State Department officials leaked their disenchantment with Diem to the American public.

Eventually Saigon did proceed with some minor reforms in exchange for increased American aid. But two tall hurdles remained for Diem: internal unity and international protest. The Americans helped with the latter. *Time* magazine described the process:

Less than one month ago U.S. officials had privately described Diem as an unpopular dictator. The new line was that Diem is “very popular among his people.” Last autumn, Nolting [Frederick E. Nolting Jr., ambassador to Vietnam] had personally asked Diem to fire some of his relatives, hold fair elections, and release non-Communist political prisoners. Now a high official called in newsmen and told them, unattributably, that there is no real need for reorganization of the Vietnamese Government because President Diem is “greatly respected among his people.”

On October 1, 1962, Diem opened the autumn session of the national assembly by asserting, “Everywhere we are taking the initiative.” The renewed “friendship” between Washington and Saigon lasted until the end of the year, when American demands for reform provoked a crisis. Diem dug in his heels, responding that Vietnam was not a protectorate. America was stymied by the lack of a better replacement for Diem and so their relationship was redefined to mean simply that one party would not take action without consulting the other.

A plan to contain the Viet Cong was then launched. Part of the plan involved the strategic hamlet program. All friendly peasants were to be forced into concentrated areas; thus, everyone outside these areas could be identified as “the enemy.” A similar program had been a great success when used by the British in Malaya. Some critics pointed to crucial differences between Malaya and Vietnam, not the least of which was that Vietnam had a common border with another communist country — China. Another difference: the revolutionaries in Malaya had been Chinese and easily segregated from the native population.

But American advisors loved the idea. They issued strategic hamlet pins, strategic hamlet matchbooks, strategic hamlet stamps, and strategic hamlet school notebooks — all bearing the strategic hamlet symbol — a flaming torch of freedom.

The peasants hated the idea. The assigned hamlets were too far from their ricefields and homes, where ancestors were buried. Moreover, the National Liberation Front of Vietnam (NLF) burned the hamlets, and the Saigon troops offered no protection. Peasants began to flee from government troops for fear of being herded into the concentrated areas; the hamlets themselves became infiltrated by communists, with some becoming NLF fortresses. Instead of communists being separated out, they were being created within.

The demise of Diem

The schism between Diem and his American supporters widened into an abyss. On February 12, the American ambassador in Saigon publicly prodded Diem to be more honest about problems within his regime. The *Times of Viet-Nam* — a mouthpiece of the Diem family — accused Secretary of State Dean Rusk of aiding the Viet Cong.

Then came the final blow. In May, police in the religious city of Hue tore down Buddhist flags that commemorated the 2,506th anniversary of the Buddha’s birth. When a large and

peaceful crowd protested, government tanks opened fire, killing one woman and seven children. Mass protests erupted, with continuing police brutality.

On June 11, 1963, a 73-year-old monk set himself on fire in a Saigon street to protest Diem's policies against Buddhists. A series of immolations protesting Diem followed. The poignant photo of a burning monk dominated the front page of newspapers around the globe. While the world demanded an end to Diem, Madame Nhu — his politically powerful sister-in-law — casually dropped remarks about “barbecuing Buddhists” and offered to provide matches. On August 21, pagodas throughout South Vietnam were raided and more than 1,400 Buddhists were arrested.

The Buddhist crisis was Diem's downfall, for three reasons: the international community was outraged; many of South Vietnam's generals were Buddhist; and the one thing Washington would not tolerate in the name of containing communism was the open suppression of religion. Several generals opened secret communication with the United States in order to ascertain one thing: how would the Kennedy administration react to a coup? The answer came back; the United States would not approve a coup but it would support a new government.

Diem was murdered on November 1. In Saigon, mobs danced in the street. Thereafter, National Day would be celebrated on the date of his death.

But since Diem had liquidated most of his political opposition, there seemed to be no natural replacement for him. In Saigon, it was said, “two men constituted a party, three men a party and a faction.” Instability gripped the United States as well, with Kennedy's assassination three weeks later and Lyndon Johnson's assumption of the presidency.

On January 29, 1964, Gen. Nguyen Khanh staged a coup that left him in control of South Vietnam's government. Khanh was a virulent anti-communist and, thus, well liked by the United States, but his government had no internal support. Khanh took up residence by the Saigon River where he could flee by boat if necessary.

The Gulf of Tonkin and a long war

On August 7, 1964, Congress overwhelmingly endorsed a resolution supporting Johnson's wish to “take all necessary measures to repel any armed attack against the forces of the United States.” The resolution was a response to the Gulf of Tonkin incident in which the North Vietnamese reportedly fired on an American destroyer. The resolution was tantamount to a declaration of war.

Meanwhile, within South Vietnam, Khanh had severely restricted civil liberties. Rioting ensued and Khanh resigned, leaving Saigon in political shambles. Finally a new regime assumed power. This government — the fifth since Diem — survived longer than its predecessors. This was partly because Gen. Nguyen Van Thieu, who became commander in chief of the armed forces, was

well liked by the Johnson administration. Thieu later became president of South Vietnam, a position he held until the fall of Saigon in 1975.

South Vietnam was overrun by the communists largely because of the disastrous Diem regime established by the United States, which did not see beyond Diem's pro-American, pro-Christian veneer. Not understanding the culture, religion, or tribal structure of Vietnam, the Americans did not realize that Diem was systematically destroying the social networks that had held off communism for decades. He did so with the same motivation that possesses all political leaders; he wanted to maintain and increase his power.

America's fear of communism was so great that it rubber-stamped or openly encouraged the repressive policies that give rise to revolution. The economist John Kenneth Galbraith explained,

One of the errors of the cold war mystique has been to assume that the whole world is equally susceptible to Communism; this is nonsense. Wherever one has great social injustice, and if there is no good hope of change, then sooner or later there will be a response to the promise of Communism. On the other hand, where there are widely distributed land holdings, or there are tribal land holdings, the problem of such a highly organized system of Communism ... isn't going to happen.

In the end, America became unable to control Diem despite the flood of U.S. dollars going into his pocket. His mistakes compounded America's own miscalculations and drew both nations closer to open warfare with a man the United States had formerly supported, Ho Chi Minh.

In the best of circumstances, regime change most often goes astray owing to unintended consequences, popular resistance, and the almost-inevitable tension between the installed regime and the regime-makers. In a foreign and complex culture, forced regime change seems to be a formula for disaster no matter what the underlying intentions.

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