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The Vietnam Wars, Section 6

The Fall of Ngo Dinh Diem

The United States had been sending money, equipment, and a few men to Vietnam ever since the early 1950's. From 1960 to 1962, as the guerrilla war expanded, US aid increased. The US was not as yet willing to send in ground troops, although ARVN units going out on combat operations were often accompanied by US officers as advisors. US Air Force pilots, however, conducted direct combat operations in South Vietnam. Policy required that a Vietnamese go along on such flights, so the US could pretend that the missions were being carried out by the Vietnamese, with the Americans simply helping.

The top US officials in Vietnam tried to be optimistic, and tried to create the impression that Ngo Dinh Diem was a magnificent and popular leader who was winning the war. A few American reporters were saying that something was seriously wrong, but the US Embassy in Saigon did its best to discredit them. In 1963 it became apparent that the Embassy's optimistic view was not tenable. Diem's desire to avoid casualties was preventing the ARVN from taking the offensive in the countryside. The corruption and brutality of his officials were continuing to alienate the peasants. Diem was totally unresponsive to US suggestions that he reform his government.

The last straw came when conflict broke out between the government and the Buddhists. Ngo Dinh Diem and his family were Catholics (Diem's brother Thuc was the Archbishop of Hue), but the great majority of the South Vietnamese population was Buddhist. In the Spring of 1963, Archbishop Thuc persuaded local officials in Hue to enforce an edict forbidding the display of Buddhist flags during a major Buddhist holiday. The Buddhists, who remembered that Catholic flags had been widely displayed on a Christian holiday a few weeks earlier, refused to obey the government's ban and demonstrated in protest. Government forces opened fire on the demonstrators and nine people were killed. When the government refused to apologize, or even to admit that the dead had been killed by government fire, the conflict became acute.

Some Buddhist monks attracted world attention by an unusually bizarre form of protest against the policies of the government: they committed suicide by sitting down in conspicuous locations in Saigon, letting gasoline be poured over them, and burning themselves to death.

Soon students were demonstrating in support of the Buddhists. Students were arrested. Many of these students were the younger brothers and sisters of officers in the ARVN, and this helped to turn the ARVN against Diem.

The US government realized, in the summer of 1963, that the Diem government was hopeless. It was corrupt, incompetent, and dictatorial; hardly anyone in South Vietnam, even its own officers, liked or respected it very much. If the war against the Communists were to be won, Ngo Dinh Diem would have to go.

US officials in Saigon therefore began encouraging ARVN officers to overthrow Diem. Within a few months the officers were ready, and Diem was overthrown and shot. The Americans were distressed at his death--the US would have preferred to see Diem in exile, living off the tremendous wealth his family had accumulated in foreign bank accounts--but the officers who carried out the coup in November 1963 did not feel it would really be safe or desirable to leave Diem alive.