Assured Commitment:

Ngo Dinh Diem's Official State Visit, 1957

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Foreword

When I first began this thesis, I knew I wanted to write on a topic related to the Vietnam War after taking various U.S. history courses. The reason I grew up in the United States is due to the consequences of the war. I am not here to engage in a moral debate about the war, but instead look back at the history of U.S. involvement in Vietnam and how it shaped U.S.-Vietnamese relations. South Vietnam's history is as much my history as it is for the United States. At first, I did not realize the scope of Vietnam War scholarship nor did I know much about 1950s Vietnam. I owe gratitude to my thesis advisor, Laura Kalman, Professor of History at the University of California, Santa Barbara, for helping me find a topic and seeing it to completion. I settled on Ngo Dinh Diem and his trip to the United States in 1957 because I knew little of Diem or the importance of his visit. It was interesting to show how about two weeks could determine the nearly two decades of U.S.-Vietnamese relations. I also must thank Professor Stephan Miescher and various readers for keeping me on track and improving my thesis with constant revisions. Much of my research could not have been completed without U.S. government archives, the University of California libraries, and the Dwight D. Eisenhower library and one of its archivists, Sydney Soderberg.

Introduction: More than Friends

On May 8, 1957, an iconic photo captured President Ngo Dinh Diem of South Vietnam, shaking hands with U.S. President Dwight D. Eisenhower and Secretary of State John Foster Dulles in Washington D.C. The photo documented more than just that moment, it signaled a change in U.S.-South Vietnam relations. Even though Office of Protocol briefings described Diem as an "introverted, lonely figure" with a "violent temper," he was a person that had "an almost messianic sense of mission" for South Vietnam.[1] His confidence was reflected in his accomplishments in the South over the past three years, an attitude he hoped would allow him to achieve his goals during the visit. If doubts about his leadership and government were raised, he dismissed them. He justified his policies on behalf of the Vietnamese people, firmly resolute in his decision-making.[2]

The U.S. press dubbed him the United States' "Miracle Man"[3] in Southeast Asia. His dress and demeanor were that of a clean-cut, Western-friendly figure with a grip on communism and the protection of U.S. foreign policy interests in Southeast Asia. Diem's second trip to the United States differed much from his first one. During his first visit, he solicited U.S. politicians, Catholics, and anticommunist sympathizers to build support for his bid to lead South Vietnam.

> *Viet-Nam is our newest and one of our staunchest friends in Asia. We have great reason to be satisfied with Diem's performance and, therefore, reason to show him highest level attention.* – Walter S. Robertson to John Foster Dulles, February 11, 1957.[4]

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[1] Seth Jacobs, *America's Miracle Man in Vietnam,* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004), 250.*
[2] In this thesis, I will refer to Ngo Dinh Diem by his first name, Diem, as it is much more commonly used among U.S. historians and topics related to Diem, South Vietnam, and the Vietnam War. Ngo is a common Vietnamese surname that can delineate many different individuals who are Vietnamese.
[3] Henry Luce, an American Friends of Vietnam and avid Diem supporter, had coined the term in his newspapers. The nickname became popular in the United States to describe Diem.
[4] Walter Robinson to John Foster Dulles, 11 February 1957, Foreign Relations of the United States, Vietnam: Volume I, Document 359.

The quote from Robertson showed a significant shift from the apprehension and uncertainty the United States felt when Diem took over the South in 1954. South Vietnam had come a long way from the First Indochina War and local threats to stability. By 1957, Diem seemed to have proven his worth. The U.S. State Department approved the Diem visit spanning May 5-21. This eleven day trip to the United States began in Washington D.C. and continued in six other cities that included Boston, New York, Knoxville, East Lansing, Los Angeles, and Honolulu.[5]

During his stay, Diem received extensive praise and gratitude in the cities he visited for his Christian piety, anticommunist views, and South Vietnam's stability. The media presented him as the beacon of piety and patriotism in Southeast Asia. His U.S. Catholic allies, the press, and the Vietnam Lobby that had formed around him during his exile in America from 1950 to 1953, used it to publicize American support for him. At times, it seemed as if the U.S. government believed the media's positive public portrayal of Diem even though the White House was well aware of problems with Saigon's government.[6] The Eisenhower Administration, and more importantly Congress, were deciding the fiscal budget and foreign aid appropriation for the incoming year. The new budget proposed slashing aid for South Vietnam, and Diem hoped to appeal to Congress directly prevent this. After all, Diem was their "man" in South Vietnam, who else was the United States to rely on?

The U.S. government had an excellent opportunity to present Diem to the American public and to a wider world as its immovable Southeast Asian ally to defend the "free world" against communism, like Korea's Syngman Rhee and the Republic of China's Chiang Kai-shek. Rhee and Chiang were not the most reliable U.S. allies, but the United States lacked other compliant Southeast Asian leaders who fought against communism in Asia. Rhee's autocratic

[5] "Ike Welcomes Diem at Airport," *The Washington Post and Times Herald*, in ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Washington Post (1877-1997), May 9, 1957.
[6] Seth Jacobs, *America's Miracle Man*, 13.

government survived the Korean War and remained functioning afterwards because of U.S. aid and troops. The corruption of Chiang's nationalist government on mainland China led to its downfall and the formation of the communist People's Republic of China (PRC). By 1949, Mao Zedong's Red Army had routed Chiang's nationalists, which forced them to evacuate to Formosa, off the coast of southeastern China. Despite Rhee and Chiang's shortcomings as leaders of their respective nation, the United States supported these autocratic or corrupt Asian leaders to deter the further spread of communism.[7] Diem became a part of the U.S. puzzle to contain communism, particularly in Southeast Asia. Diem had something neither Rhee nor Chiang possessed – partial anonymity in the United States that allowed him to lobby for the support of powerful American political and military players.

This thesis argues that Diem's 1957 state visit became instrumental in the Eisenhower Administration's decision to commit the United States to Diem and South Vietnam, which left the United States exposed to the challenges that arose as Southeast Asia and Vietnam's internal political stability unraveled. By examining various events, meetings, and interactions during his trip, the discussion will show how the U.S. officials adjusted to Diem and Saigon's antics to rule South Vietnam. During his visit, the meetings not only highlighted foreign aid concerns, but the Chinese minority law, and SEATO issues with Congress, Dulles, and other U.S. officials reinforced Diem's stubborn resolve and leadership for control over South Vietnam. The state dinners, parades, accolades, and speeches in Diem's honor through each city displayed acted as a sort of wedding reception as if the U.S. government showed its new bride off to Americans and the world. Since it was a celebratory occasion, government officials were often dissuaded from

[7]Jacobs, *Miracle Man,* 8-9.

criticizing Diem's policies or actions because South Vietnam was a young country and its leader "sensitive to such charges." [8]

Did the Eisenhower Administration truly believe what it said during the visit? A message to Congress to not cut foreign aid and a released joint statement by both presidents after the visit suggested the administration did. Yet why by 1957 was the Eisenhower Adminstration so ready to marry itself to Diem? How did Diem stand out from the rest of his competitors? Chapter one discusses how the Cold War context shaped United States involvement in Vietnam and the U.S. mission to find an alternative to Ho Chi Minh. The United States locked in on Diem before they even knew it. High-strung anticommunist rhetoric and preconceived U.S. racial prejudices in the 1950s left the administration with few attractive options other than Diem. Chapter two looks at Diem's beginnings, exile to the U.S., stubborn independence, and anticommunist credentials. Each revealed how he cleverly positioned himself to reach this point. Unlike other qualified Vietnamese candidates, Diem went directly to the United States first to seek its mentorship in Vietnam. The chapter also discusses his turnaround of South Vietnam's political insecurity, aggressive actions against sectarian insurgents, and rebuff of 1956 referendum elections to unite North and South Vietnam. Chapter three celebrates the joyous occasion in which Diem and the Eisenhower Administration displayed their public affection for each other and discuss privately current issues with their relationship. Diem as an individual and the America's investment in his government peaked with his official U.S. tour meant that the two country's future was intertwined until a harsh break off with the 1963 coup.

[8] Ibid, 15-19. 1950s U.S. racial conceptions broadly defined Asian and its people as "effeminate," which fits well in this narrative because it explains the imperfect relationship between the United States and Diem. Diem's Westernized character and Catholicism positioned himself above all other Asians, yet he was still subservient to his benefactor.

Diem was touted as a trustworthy Catholic who did not submit to communism. His speeches and the basis for his visit communicated that much of his government's control and stability relied on U.S. support. South Vietnam's president was the United States' key to challenging the Soviet and Chinese communist agenda in Southeast Asia. Confucianism and Buddhism were deeply embedded in Vietnamese culture and traditions. Unlike its other Southeast Asian neighbors, Vietnam mirrored East Asians countries like China, Japan, and Korea more because of Chinese occupation for nearly a thousand years. Diem seemed like the individual able to cross Vietnam's ancient heritage and lead it to become a modern Asian and democratic nation. U.S. foreign policy assumed that Asia and Asians, not ready for democracy, required the strongman to assert complete control over the country.[9] For the United States, South Vietnam represented the another important example of freedom for Asians at a time when many U.S. officials and Westerners thought Asians and minorities lacked the ability to grasp those concepts as fast as white or Western counterparts. Courting allies who upheld U.S. interests became the main priority. The Eisenhower Administration turned a blind eye to Diem's persecution of political dissidents and Buddhists, suppression of freedom of speech, and lack of political and economic reforms as long as Diem remained in control and opposed communism. While this policy helped the United States early on as the trip revealed, it suppressed any real efforts of political reform to stabilize South Vietnam. The United States vested all political stability in Diem.

The U.S. government groomed a Catholic to lead the Republic of Vietnam in a country whose population was ninety percent Buddhist and only ten percent Catholic. Unfortunately, Diem failed to build a real connection between himself and the majority of South Vietnamese. The trip hinted that as the U.S. press credited Diem with the major accomplishments in the

[9] Jacobs, *Cold War Mandarin,* 10.

region. Although some in Saigon did come to trust Diem and formed better relationships U.S. personnel, it represented a small minority.[10] The United States continued to give economic and military aid to the Diem regime with hopes to reinforce the fragile internal stability in South Vietnam. At the same time, Diem felt as if he had to convey some degree of political autonomy with public displays of disagreements towards American recommendations to show the Vietnamese and his critics that he was not a U.S. puppet. The United States allowed Diem's obstinacy to shape South Vietnam, foreshadowing steep political unrest. The U.S. officials overlooked Diem's defiance because they believed they had more to lose without him. For Eisenhower's government and scholars of 1950s Vietnam and the Vietnam War, his accomplishments in South Vietnam in a span of three years were impressive, but much of it impossible without the assistance of the United States.

As much as he sought the South Vietnamese people's respect, it was not their Vietnam, but his own Vietnam. Diem identified himself personally with South Vietnam and the United States did too. The visit reinforced the United States' false sense of security achieved in South Vietnam by 1957. During it, American media sources pressed the idea that Americans could support a foreign non-Western leader. Quick successive accomplishments of the Saigon government became accepted as long term maintenance of order and security. Persecution and pay-offs of politico-religious groups like Buddhist monks, the Cao Dai, or the Hoa Hao was the work of a staunch anticommunist Catholic bringing Christianity and modernization to a continent devoid of salvation and antiquated ancient cultures.[11]

[10] Jacobs, *America's Miracle Man*, 10-13.
[11] Jessica M. Chapman, *Cauldron of Resistance*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013), 196-203.

Prominent Vietnam War and 1950s Vietnam historians, like Fredrik Logevall and Seth Jacobs often declared the event as the highest point in United States-South Vietnam relations.[12] Most scholarship mentioned the visit arose during a time when Diem considered that the situation in South Vietnam had stabilized and the State Department jumped on it. Angier Biddle Duke, the head of the American Friends of Vietnam committee, attempted two times in 1955 to convince State Department officials to invite Diem for an official visit to the United States.[13] At the time, government observers thought it too untimely with Diem's shaky control over the South. The turnaround in South Vietnam from 1955-1957 from its factional and communist divisions leftover from the French colonial period commended praised. Timing and appearance of internal stability made his case more attractive after a while. Diem may have not been the best date, but the Uncle Sam warmed up to the idea over time. The United States put itself in position to move ahead with Diem at the helm of South Vietnam's future. The symbolic and public character of an official state visit to one of the world's superpowers bereft with state dinners, parades, honorary awards, and displays of goodwill placed Diem above his contemporaries in the developing world.

The Eisenhower Administration highlighted the Diem regime's successes in South Vietnam and downplayed the real issues, publicly at least, that slowly caused the country to collapse under his control and revealed an attitude future Administrations adopted as the growing dissension between the Saigon government and the South Vietnamese manifested while the United States escalated military operations against North Vietnam.

Praise for him during the visit sharply contrasted the scorn he received six years later as his dead body, clothed in a dirty, bloodied white sharkskin suit was dragged through the streets

[12] Fredrik Logevall, *Embers of War*, (New York: Random House, 2012), 666-670.
[13] Jacobs, *America's Miracle Man*, 249-252.

of Saigon by angry South Vietnamese. Most Vietnamese saw Diem's commonly worn white suits as odd and ostentatious. In a country full of peasants and a small number of educated Vietnamese elites from the vestiges of French colonialism, Ho Chi Minh's modest dress of khaki and slippers appealed to most Vietnamese more than Diem's Western appearance. He wanted the Vietnamese to see him as the symbol of a united Vietnam's future instead of Ho Chi Minh. In the end, the respect Diem gained extended to a minority that consisted of his family, government loyalists, and Catholics. His policies, administration, and repression since 1954 fueled the powder keg. Diem's death represented the frustrations many persecuted South Vietnamese harbored over his government. His blood-smattered white suit symbolized the overthrow of his regime, but highlighted the issues yet to come. The United States had permitted Diem to whitewash South Vietnam's internal stability problems using persecution, imprisonment, or other intimidation tactics and accepted his policies as "miracles." His actions to take control would distinguish himself from the South Vietnamese, but not as he had hoped. By the early 1960s, he became the rallying point for the Viet Minh communists, the National Liberation Army (Viet Cong), and persecuted Buddhists.

Many of the primary sources I used in this thesis were either declassified U.S. government documents or serials and newspapers from the 1950s. Most of these pieces come from the U.S. State Department, Dwight D. Eisenhower library, National Security Archives, U.S. newspapers, or press offices of Hanoi and Saigon. The history of the United States in Vietnam is well-documented and allowed for a more compelling thesis that examined thoughts and resolutions to issues in South Vietnam at the time. I had limited access however, to Vietnamese government or university resources. The few I did have were retrieved from the University of California libraries. My thesis does then present the Diem visit from a mostly American

perspective. The views of the South Vietnamese or Saigonese are as perceived by from a U.S. standpoint too. This should not take away much from the thesis because this is a topic in U.S. history and today's Socialist Republic of Vietnam does not hold Diem in high regard for his tenure as President of the Republic of Vietnam.

Mixed into the thesis were secondary sources from prominent Vietnam War historians and histories. The writings of Fredrik Logevall, Seth Jacobs, Jessica Chapman, and a few others helped to construct my understanding of the Vietnam War, not only from Lyndon B. Johnson's escalation in 1964, but also its beginnings at the end of World War II. Logevall and Jacob's books, *Embers of War* and *Cold War Mandarin* respectively, were heavily consulted as they best recounted the intricacies of U.S.-South Vietnam relations in the 1950s for me. While I share many opinions with these historians and extensive research has been done on the war, I hope my thesis adds more insight into the United States' relation with Diem and South Vietnam in the late 1950s through the 1957 visit.

Chapter One: 1950s Cold War Blues

In the 1950s, with the advent of the Cold War, Americans defined common themes that pervaded the United States' struggle against the Soviet Union. The United States mission to safeguard democracy and capitalism against totalitarianism and communism became part of a Cold War consensus.[14] The country's postwar prosperity, mass consumer culture, and fear of communism united the people under an umbrella of shared beliefs. These shared beliefs suggested to American intellectuals that capitalism worked for the West and would for the rest of

[14] Jacobs suggests that the U.S. idea of democracy was not as important in Asia and maintaining "free world" stability where the United States could exert its influence was the primary object to which I agree. Democracy was a "luxury" that a young nation like South Vietnam could not afford. Words like republic or democracy existed only in name.

the world too.[15] In the United States, Americans asserted their political and economic system brought them unprecedented wealth. These convictions formed an ideology that represented freedom to challenge communist influence. With its ideology, the United States could fulfill its "duty" to guide the development of foreign nations in the Cold War. The United States and its allies sought to oppose the Soviet Union and communism, and the Cold War featured the "free world" against totalitarian communism.

Vietnam however, remained out of the Cold War picture until the French lost at Dien Bien Phu. After World War II, the United States had more pressing concerns in Asia. United States focused its attention on the Chinese Civil War and the Korean War. This event sparked Republican criticism of President Truman for the "loss" of China.[16] The United States sent troops to Korea in 1950, but not to China earlier in 1945. Both events in Asia spurred fears of the rapid expansion of the communist sphere and even possible communist infiltration in the United States. Besides Korea and China, the main intention of United States' Cold War policy focused on rebuilding Western Europe. The United States left France to its own affairs in Asia because valued it their assistance to combating Soviet influence in Europe and as a NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) member.[17] For the United States, ties with its Western allies had more importance than appeals for independence from Third World figures like Ho Chi Minh. After World War II, American President Franklin D. Roosevelt wanted France to layout plans for Vietnam's road to independence. Through a trusteeship, Vietnam could gain independence eventually. His death in April 1945 however, prevented this option from coming to fruition as

[15] Steven M. Gillon, *The American Paradox,* (Boston: Wadsworth, Cengage Learning, 2013), 110-111.
[16] Lawrence, *The Vietnam War,* 37.
[17] "U.S. Involvement in the Franco-Viet Minh War, 1950-1954" in *The Pentagon Papers: United States-Vietnam Relations, 1945-1967,* (Washington D.C.: National Archives, 2011), vol. II.

Truman had little concern with colonial problems of U.S. allies.[18] Truman saw Indochina's future as a French issue. In addition, many French politicians believed that in order to quickly restore its economy and prosperity in the postwar period, it had to rebuild its empire by reclaiming Indochina and its other colonies worldwide.[19]

American prejudices additionally shaped their views of Asians and minorities prevailed in the 1950s. Although not Anglo-American or Western, Diem suggested the possibility that some Asian peoples, most likely the South Vietnamese, had the ability to progress under Western customs and possibly become democratic peoples through United States' guidance. These Asians moved beyond their ancient cultures and adapt to a Western style modernization that denounced communism and Cold War enemies. During Diem's tour, the American public and the Eisenhower Administration felt like they could trust him more as an Asian leader because of his political and religious beliefs. In the Cold War, religion played a major role against communism's godless concepts or Asia's non-Christian religions. Diem's Catholic faith verified his devoutness to an originally Western institution and showed Americans that he would never surrender to communism's antireligious sentiments.[20] To Americans, maybe Asians could wholly adopt U.S. ideas through politics and Christianity. He affirmed the belief that minorities and peoples in the Third World shared in the United States' postwar prosperity. If the United States could extend its influence to a country in a foreign and exotic as far away as Southeast Asia, then Diem represented one of many successful leaders the United States could groom in the Cold War.

[18] Lawrence, *The Vietnam War,* 30.
[19] "Evolution of the War, Aid for France in Indochina, 1950-54," in *Pentagon Papers,* vol. IV.
[20] Jacobs, *America's Miracle Man,* 15-33.

The First Indochina War and Two Vietnams

To understand the importance of Diem and the trip in US-South Vietnam relations, we have to look back at the post-colonial state of Vietnam after World War II and understand the United States' position in the context of the Cold War. This political situation created the communist North Vietnam and the "free" South Vietnam and allowed Diem to become Vietnam's miraculous savior.

Originally, Ho Chi Minh was a fervent Vietnamese nationalist who sought U.S. help after both World Wars to guide Vietnam to independence, but twice the United States and its allies rebuffed his efforts. He thought that U.S. proclamations of a nation's right to self-determination included Vietnam that would gradually win independence from French rule. In 1919, Ho Chi Minh turned to the Soviet Union after World War I when President Woodrow Wilson denied backing for Vietnamese independence. Although he became the face of Vietnamese nationalism, he made no true progress to gain U.S. support in Paris. Ho turned to Leninist ideology and its theories on peasant societies to achieve Vietnamese independence. Ho hoped to unite both the peasantry, which made up about ninety percent of the Vietnamese population, and wealthy nationalists and elites to dismantle colonial oppression, then later discarded them to achieve a full communist revolution. He moved to Moscow in 1923, but became uneasy as Soviet leaders wrote off Vietnam as an agricultural society unable to accomplish a true communist revolution without modernized industries. Ho Chi Minh did not completely press communist ideology and emphasized an independent Vietnam with nationalist overtones to appeal to a wider Vietnamese audience. [21]

[21] Mark Atwood Lawrence, *The Vietnam War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 8-23.

During World War II when Japanese occupied Vietnam, Ho was drawn to U.S. proclamations of self-determination and anticolonialism again. He became excited when the United States entered the war against Japan and saw it as another opportunity for American endorsement of an independent Vietnam. Ho knew after both world wars that Vietnam's future lay in the hands of global superpowers and he required the help of one side to establish an independent Vietnam. He and Viet Nam Doc Lap Dong Minh (Viet Minh) worked closely with the CIA predecessor, U.S. Office of Strategic Services, to liberate Vietnam from Japanese forces. The Viet Minh shared Ho's commitment to nationalism, instead of solely communism, to appeal to both Vietnamese moderates and radicals. After the war, Ho was convinced that the United States would support a provisional government if he and the Vietminh let it under a nationalist agenda. Unfortunately, the United States did not recognize an independent Vietnam and allowed France to recolonize it without consequence.[22]

France already had Cochin China, which consisted of the future South Vietnam while the Viet Minh controlled most of territory that made up North Vietnam. France asserted that it had every right to retake the territories under Viet Minh control. Immediately after the war, ideological divisions between North Vietnam and South Vietnam were precariously created that pitted the Viet Minh against French efforts to recolonize. By 1945 North Vietnam, known as the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV), received some help from the Soviet Union and other communist countries. In March 1946, Ho Chi Minh and French representative Jean Sainteny attempted to broker a compromise to recognize North Vietnam as an autonomous state within the French Union. Vietnamese nationalists and some of Ho's allies criticized the Ho-Sainteny Agreement as Vietnamese concessions to French control instead of true independence. The

[22] Lawrence, *The Vietnam War*, 22-26.

French government refused both to give up Cochin China and argued the Vietnamese there determined their own fate by a future referendum or acknowledge the Ho-Sainteny Agreement.[23] Talks and negotiations broke down afterwards leading up to the First Indochina War.[24]

Major operations exploded in November 1946 in Haiphong, North Vietnam with the French retaining military superiority until the two sides fought to a stalemate in 1948. As the war continued, anticolonial anger among the rural peasantry resurfaced and helped the Viet Minh regroup and recruit additional Vietnamese to its cause in the countryside. Most Viet Minh forces were based in the countryside and mountains with plans to retake cities and fortified French positions when the chance arose. Meanwhile, the French hoped to foster continued support for its colonial government by selecting Bao Dai the Vietnamese, as a figurehead, to lead France's State of Vietnam. The French also aimed to popularize international support for the war. The French eventually asked the United States for financial and military aid to continue fighting. The Department of Defense revealed that French policy up until 1953 did not care for negotiations with the DRV and wanted to defeat Viet Minh forces to rebuild its empire at any costs. French policy caused the United States to bear the French army's financial burden in the war because of France's significance in the fight against communism in Europe.[25] Although the United States had the means to push France to give Vietnam independence, it missed the chance to do so and continued funding the French war campaign. As the United States gave France millions in aid for the war, it indicated the beginnings of U.S. financial investment to the region.

At the same time, the United States expected that French victory in Indochina would mark quick withdrawal after communist forces were defeated. French defeat however, led the

[23] Lawrence, *The Vietnam War*, 23-40.
[24] William R. Haycraft, Unraveling Vietnam, (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2005), 45-47.
[25] "Evolution of the War, Aid for France in Indochina, 1950-54," in *Pentagon Papers*, vol. IV.

way for Diem to become the successor of American foreign aid to the French in South Vietnam and revealed, as time wore on, the United States' investment in creating South Vietnam as a beacon of "free world" democracy in Southeast Asia. In addition to the "loss" of China, Vietnam and the rest of Southeast Asia became a part of "containment" and Eisenhower's "domino theory" logic. In 1950 and as the First Indochina war wore on, the perspective on Indochina changed. The Joint Chiefs of Staff viewed the region as important to protecting United States position in Japan and its Indian and Australian allies.[26] In 1954, the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu by the Viet Minh affirmed that U.S. presence must remain in Vietnam to prevent the Vietminh from turning all of Vietnam into an independent communist state.

After the First Indochina War and French governmental departure from Vietnam in 1954, the Geneva Agreement's terms made Vietnam central to the Cold War consensus. The Geneva Agreement divided Vietnam at the seventeenth parallel into Ho Chi Minh's communist North Vietnam and a United States-backed "free" South Vietnam with democratic elections planned in two years' time to unite the two countries. In a way, the United States oversaw the development of Southeast Asia's political environment for Diem's rise because it had placed complete faith in the French to defeat the Viet Minh. All the conditions were in place for an anticommunist and U.S.-friendly Vietnamese to lead South Vietnam. The United States began its search for a suitable bride in South Vietnam as they had quite a few from which to choose.

The stubbornness the French demonstrated in postwar negotiations for a united Vietnam under the umbrella of their empire in Indochina was a solution first accepted by the United States because it kept France's trust in Europe and had an ally in Southeast Asia to deter communism. The United States decision to back France however, propagated Ho Chi Minh as the face of

[26] "Evolution of the War, Aid for France in Indochina, 1950-54," in *Pentagon Papers*, vol. IV.

Vietnamese nationalism with no comparison in sight after the war. After French colonial meddling in Indochina since the nineteenth century, the ideological conflict bred by the Cold War and Vietnamese desire for self-government shaped the conditions for two Vietnams in the mid-1950s.

Chapter Two: Diem's Faith and Anticommunism

Many events in Ngo Dinh Diem's early life shaped his later convictions. One way or another, his anti-French, pro-US, anticommunism, and strong Catholic views developed before his presidency. Diem, who was born in 1901, came from a Roman Catholic family that converted in the seventeenth century. Ngo Dinh Kha, Diem's father, was a high-ranking mandarin in the Vietnamese emperor's court that helped the family become politically powerful. Diem's father placed utmost emphasis on teaching his children the Catholic faith.

As a young boy, Diem attended a French Catholic school. He studied French and Chinese classics and rose at 5:00 every morning to pray. At the age of fifteen, he entered a monastery to become a priest, but quickly left. A journalist later remarked that Diem viewed the Catholic Church as an ill-fit for his "own unbending will," mostly his stubborn and independent determination.[27] Later he refused to accept a scholarship to study in Paris, but stayed in Vietnam to study at the Hanoi School for Law and Administration in 1917. His devotion to Catholicism was apparent at an early age and throughout his life. He likely remained celibate until his death, which elevated his perceived purity and piety to the American and Vietnamese public. Beginning in 1921, Diem became a low level mandarin within the emperor's bureaucratic service, but quickly rose through the ranks to become a district chief over about 300 villages. Like his father, he became a mandarin bureaucrat who governed according to Vietnamese emperor's rule. He

[27] Joseph G. Morgan, *The Vietnam Lobby*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1997) 1-5.

displayed early on his intelligence and capability of excelling at a variety of jobs. When he left the civil service for twenty years from 1933 to 1953, he continued to attend Catholic mass daily and indulged in hobbies like hunting, photography, and prayer. His political inactivity in an official capacity helped to strengthen his image as an ideal Vietnamese nationalist because he refused to work with Emperor Bao Dai and the French colonialist.[28]

In 1933, Emperor Bao Dai chose Diem as the minister of the interior, an extraordinary rank for someone only at thirty-two years old. Yet when Diem requested that he receive actual power, French authorities denied it. Diem criticized Emperor Bao Dai for fronting French control of Vietnam and resigned in frustration over French intervention in Vietnamese government affairs. Since the mid-nineteenth century, French colonialism had continually fostered discontent among the Vietnamese population. The French elevated a small percentage of Vietnamese to run their puppet government. [29] The handful of Vietnamese elites included Diem and foreshadowed his distance from the peasant Vietnamese population. The westernized Vietnamese elite knew of Diem before his rise, but many Vietnamese were unfamiliar with him when he came to power. His experience in the French-controlled Vietnamese bureaucracy further strengthened his resolve that the Vietnamese could never govern themselves under the French.

Similarly, many South Vietnamese politico-religious groups, the North Vietnamese, and Diem's other critics saw him as a puppet of the United States during his own regime, as he had viewed Bao Dai and the French twenty years earlier. Diem's early political career also revealed the development of his independent streak in decision making and his relationship with the United States. Perhaps the legacy of the French and Bao Dai affected Diem so intensely that he

[28] Jacobs, *Cold War Mandarin*, 18-25.
[29] Jacobs, *Cold War Mandarin*, 24-25.

occasionally leaned toward more assertive decision making that he viewed as correct, even against the advice of the U.S. officials.

Throughout Diem's life, Ho Chi Minh's Viet Minh personally attacked the Ngo family and these tragic events contributed to form Diem's anticommunist stance. The Viet Minh killed a few of Diem's immediate family members like his brother, Ngo Dinh Khoi, for collaboration with the Japanese during World War II. Even during his bureaucratic service as district chief, Diem confronted communists from Ho Chi Minh's Revolutionary Youth Association. He placed spies among them and arrested others. He feared that the Vietnamese puppet government's ineptitude and restriction by the French would lead to future communist victory.[30]

In February 1946, Diem's supposed meeting with Ho Chi Minh greatly reinforced his disdain for communism. In 1945, shortly after the war ended, Viet Minh agents captured Diem and took him to Ho on the edges of the northern Vietnam border. Ho aimed to convince Diem to join his newly proclaimed provisional government. Ho offered Diem the Minister of the Interior position because he admired Diem's administrative abilities and nationalist reputation. Ho wanted to work with Diem to rebuild Vietnam independent of colonial control. Diem distrusted Ho for what the Viet Minh did to Ngo family members and hundreds of others, for bringing further instability to Vietnam, and did not appreciate being held as Ho's prisoner.[31] He refused any alliance with Ho and the Viet Minh, and the episode confirmed his future anticommunist position. His background was that of a person that had challenged communism constantly and did not ever wane to its influence, and instead always fought back.

The First Indochina War increased Diem's reputation as a politically independent Vietnamese nationalist since he took no sides in the war. Instead, he attempted to form a political

[30] Jacobs, *Cold War Mandarin,* 24-25.
[31] Jacobs, *Cold War Mandarin,* 22-24.

organization called the Nationalist Extremist Movement to oppose both the French and Viet Minh. Although the group failed to gain traction, it displayed Diem's beliefs for a non-French and anticommunist Vietnam that could only be led by him. It reinforced his pristine record without any elements of subversion he later used to present himself to his U.S. supporters as the ideal candidate for South Vietnam's premiership. In 1950 however, the Viet Minh called for Diem's death because the Viet Minh saw him as a possible rival nationalist to Ho. Diem sought out French protection, who refused to help him. Diem then fled with his eldest brother, Ngo Dinh Thuc, to Rome for a religious pilgrimage. In reality, he feared for his life if he stayed in Vietnam and moved quickly to find support abroad, mostly in the United States, for a Vietnam he would govern.[32]

Exile and Courtship

> *"You know who's going to fix you up in Vietnam? He's here in this country now – that's Ngo Dinh Diem."*
> – Justice William O. Douglas, 1952

Before his 1957 presidential visit to the United States, he met key individuals and lobbies that supported his cause. Diem's exile began in the United State in the summer of 1950 and lasted for four years until June 1954, when he returned as premier to Bao Dai's State of Vietnam. Diem reached out to Vietnamese, French, and U.S. citizens to promote his plan for an independent Vietnam, which Diem wanted to lead. In the United States, he found many U.S. political leaders and private citizens ready to back his cause. It was however, not love at first sight.

Ngo Dinh Diem and Ngo Dinh Thuc, with his position as a Catholic bishop, both plotted Diem's ascent to power as South Vietnam's prime minister in 1954 and then president in 1955. To accomplish his goal, Diem sought out assistance from powerful private U.S. citizens to help

[32] Jacobs, *America's Miracle Man,* 25.

him make his case to the U.S. government with individuals like Senator Mike Mansfield and Justice William Douglas. Diem's influence had not extended to the Eisenhower Administration yet. He successfully pushed his political agenda further by seizing upon the communist scare and Catholicism – with his credible anticommunist position – that captured the United States.

Given Cold War challenges, U.S. diplomats searched for Vietnamese nationalists to prevent the Viet Minh from uniting Vietnam under communist leadership. The fear of communism allowed Diem and his brother to meet influential U.S. individuals. The U.S. Foreign Service Office in Saigon and Tokyo described Diem and Thuc as notable leaders in Vietnam's Catholic community with "anti-French, anti-communist, progressive, [and] liberal" leanings. These reports won two brothers political audiences in Washington. State Department representatives in Washington were not as keen on Diem as their U.S. counterparts in Saigon and Tokyo.[33] In a meeting with U.S. officials, Thuc's position as a Catholic bishop and well-spoken rational made him seem more impressive and credible when they discussed Vietnam. On the other hand, James Webb criticized Diem for only concerning himself "furthering his own personal ambitions" instead of trying to fix "complex problems facing his country today."[34] Even before the United States backed him, Diem implied that only the United States could settle the problems in Indochina through him. According to Diem, the United States had the resources to assist the Vietnamese and State Department officials foresaw that the fate of Vietnam lay with its people united under a national government. If Diem could foment nationalist fervor among the South Vietnamese and eliminate the influence of local factions, then there was a possibility that Diem could replace Ho as the face and leader of Vietnam.

[33] Morgan, *The Vietnam Lobby*, 3.
[34] James R. Webb to Donald Heath, 28 September 1950, FRUS Volume VI: 1950 East Asia and the Pacific, 886.

In autumn, Diem and Thuc left for Europe, where Diem briefly went to France to seek support for an independent Vietnam. He initially contacted Bao Dai to serve as the emperor's premier, but retracted because he feared French interruption. At the end of the year, Diem returned to the United States and lived at the Maryknoll Seminaries for the next two and half years. He continued to meet with the State Department, this time with a more moderate rhetoric. State officials correctly saw him as disconnected from the current events in Vietnam. Diem had avoided public service for over two decades, denigrated both the French and Viet Minh, and was a part of the small educated Vietnamese elite. Yet, he still remained an option because he was Catholic and anticommunist.

Diem's Catholicism allowed him to contact influential U.S. Catholic clergymen during his exile. New York Archbishop Cardinal Francis Spellman was strongly anticommunist and angered by the situation in Korea and China. He feared Vietnam could become another communist victory in Asia. An indispensible individual to expanding Diem's contacts in the United States, he met Diem at the Maryknoll Seminary. Spellman was not listed officially among Diem's early U.S. patrons, but Thuc suggested both men met in as early as 1950.[35] Spellman's biographer however, John Cooney, did write that he played an important role in helping Diem's political career. Spellman worked with Joe Kennedy and major U.S. publishers to create a pro-Diem lobby in Washington D.C.[36]

According to Mike Walsh of the Maryknoll Seminary Archives, after World War II, Diem established contact with Father Tom O'Melia in South China or Hong Kong. Spellman most likely coordinated Diem's stay at Maryknoll Seminary with Father O'Melia. Around 1950

[35] Morgan, *The Vietnam Lobby*, 5-10.
[36] John Cooney, *The American Pope*, (New York: Times Books), 239-245.

in Hong Kong, O'Melia introduced Diem to Superior General, Bishop Raymond A. Lane of Maryknoll Seminary. Bishop Lane facilitated and endorsed Diem's stay in the US from 1951 to 1953 by providing him with letters of introduction and visas for the trip. Diem's brother paid for travel expenses. In 1951, Diem arrived at Maryknoll Seminary in Lakewood, New Jersey, supposedly to learn English.[37] As he had done as a boy at the French Catholic school, he adhered to a strict morning routine of prayer that impressed others there. Father O'Melia, acted as an interpreter for Diem in various meetings. Republican senator James H. Duff also almost landed him a meeting with John Foster Dulles in 1953. Instead when Diem and O'Melia were supposed to meet with Dulles, Dulles' staff had informed them that he had cancelled. Although this was a failed instance in securing high level American support, Diem's religion would serve him well to establish power base in other political arenas.

In addition to Father O'Melia, Belgian Catholic missionary Raymond de Jaegher assisted Diem too. De Jaegher had done missionary work in China until 1949, then relocated to the United States and became the regent Seton Hall University's Far East Institute. He arranged a meeting for Diem with General William J. Donovan, the former director of the Office of Strategic Services. De Jaegher summarized Diem's background and plans for Vietnam to Donovan. Douglas and CIA operative Edward G. Lansdale later worked with Ngo Dinh Nhu, Diem's brother, to run the Front for National Salvation to increase support for Diem's movement.[38]

Diem continued to campaign for Vietnam among political activists, Catholics, journalists, scholars, and politicians. He had met Peter White in New York Senator William Benton's office

[37] Mike Walsh, Email message regarding Ngo Dinh Diem's stay at Maryknoll Seminary, November 15, 2013.
[38] Morgan, *The Vietnam Lobby*, 6-12.

and impressed by his French and connection to liberals and conservatives. White introduced Diem to Christopher Emmet, a vocal opponent of fascism and communism, who helped him meet sympathetic congressional members. Emmet urged Christian Herter of Massachusetts to appeal to other lawmakers like Walter Judd and Mike Mansfield to help Diem. Emmet also advised Diem to take a moderate stance on France's involvement in Vietnam so as not to alienate congressional requests for aid. The United States funded France's effort in the First Indochina War. The United States prioritized France as a Western and NATO ally in the Cold War for a recovering Europe over Vietnamese outcry for independence.[39]

Besides Catholics and U.S. government lawmakers who provided a strong backbone to his coalition in the United States, journalists reported Diem's story and calls for a free Vietnam. He gained the support of *The Reporter* and Gouverneur Paulding who established a close friendship quickly. *The Reporter* later wrote positively of Diem to the U.S. public when he came to power in 1954. Diem also met an acquaintance of Paulding, Irish Catholic journalist Gary MacEoin, who shared Paulding's conviction and was interested in the social and economic conditions of developing nations. Later another U.S. journalist, Sol Sanders, saw what Foreign Service officials found in Diem. Sanders had worked in Thailand and Vietnam for many years since 1946. After meeting Diem, it gave him hope that a communist alternative existed to Ho Chi Minh and Vietnam's chance to build a nationalist government. Sanders lauded Diem's for his incorruptible nature, which subsequently did not hold up as it became a major issue for his administration in 1954.[40]

[39] Morgan, *The Vietnam Lobby*, 4-12.
[40] Morgan, *The Vietnam Lobby*, 6-7.

Another essential group of Diem's supporters included the U.S. academic community, especially those with a focus in Asian studies. First, Diem contacted Brandeis University political scientist I. Milton Sacks, but had formed better ties with Wesley R. Fishel. Originally, Diem and Fishel became acquainted in Japan in 1950. Fishel attended Northwestern University and then earned his Ph.D. from the University of Chicago in 1948. Although Fishel became one of Diem's most prominent supporters, he lacked the resources to help Diem until he worked at Michigan State University in 1951. This relationship was crucial for Diem as it pushed the development of the Michigan State Advisory Group for South Vietnam in 1954. However, the extent of their relationship prior to 1954 continues to remain vague because Fishel left no personal accounts of the 1950s, and State Department files did not mention Fishel until Diem came to power.[41] In the summer of 1954, Diem asked Fishel to come to the State of Vietnam to help him with government operations and Fishel proved invaluable.

In Diem's remaining months in the United States, he met Supreme Court Justice William G. Douglas, who favored Diem as a future reliable ally in Indochina. On May 8, 1953 Mike Mansfield and John F. Kennedy befriended Diem through Douglas. Among his new political allies, Diem restated his anticolonialism and anticommunism. Towards the end of the year, he told his United States audience he planned to go to France to seek additional help from the community of Vietnamese nationalists and French sympathizers. By now, the United States looked more promising for Diem than France.[42] With no one else to turn to in Indochina, the United States pre-emptively backed Diem's regime before it began. Despite setbacks soon after his return to Vietnam in 1954, later his 1957 visit publicly confirmed to the United States that over time, their initial sentiments were more than correct. The United States viewed Asia as a

[41] Morgan, *The Vietnam Lobby*, 11.
[42] Morgan, *The Vietnam Lobby*, 7-8.

continent steeped in antiquated Confucian and Asian religious traditions. United States concern to create a nationalist Vietnamese government in Southeast Asia overrode Diem regime's management of South Vietnamese political and instead highlighted Saigon's ability to withstand communism subversion in the global context. The Eisenhower Administration eventually backed Diem as an Asian who understood Western thought and beliefs. They overlooked his personal ambitions for South Vietnam and favored his vision Vietnam. The American public related more easily with his character because of his Christianity and anticommunist beliefs.

Diem established himself as the United States' only acceptable hope in South Vietnam and the region. With his Catholicism and anticommunism, he easily fit into the Cold War paradigm. Diem's hatred for the French won favor with the United States because it enabled the United States to say it was engaged in an anticolonial struggle and because it meant the United States could influence him to escalate the struggle against the North Vietnamese. Diem scoffed at any neutralization options for a peaceful North and South reunification. France warned the United States that it would suffer similar defeat like they did in the First Indochina War if it continued in South Vietnam.[43] Eisenhower's Administration threw its support behind a candidate it viewed with skepticism, but had no other choice to support lest Ho Chi Minh win the 1956 referendum elections to unite Vietnam under a communist government. Diem seemed like the ideal partner in the United States' ideological fight against communism at the outset.

[43] Fredrik Logevall, *Choosing War,* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: California University Press, 1999), 89.

The Republic of Vietnam: A Rocky Relationship

When he accepted the premiership under Bao Dai, Diem made no deliberate mention of the United States in a statement on June 18. He was "determined to the lead the way… with the peoples of France and Viet-Nam and of other free countries."[44] The road ahead for Diem was a treacherous one in South: the Binh Xuyen ran most of Saigon, the Cao-Dai operated in the east, and the Hoa-Hao occupied the west. Even at the end of the First Indochina War, the France directed the Vietnamese National Army (VNA) and competing factions exerted tremendous influence. South Vietnam's economy relied on French currency and infrastructure to stay afloat in the war's aftermath. Many Chinese in Vietnam still had preferential status by the French to conduct business.[45]

Diem's arrival on June 26 in South Vietnam was very telling of his future leadership and relationship with the Vietnamese. The description of his landing characterized his introverted and insular nature. Bao Dai had paid for numerous demonstrators to greet Diem at Tan Son Nhut Airport, but only a handful was present. The average Vietnamese knew little of Diem and they did not learn much more after he took office either. Only some French officials, representatives from the U.S. embassy, and a few hundred Catholics attended. He scanned the area and managed a somber wave, then quickly headed to his limousine. The Vietnamese that gathered along the Rue General de Gaulle, hoping to see their new prime minister, were sadly misled. The motorcade drove through Saigon and into the Norodom Palace without a glimpse of Diem.[46]

Edward G. Lansdale, one of Diem's most trusted U.S. advisers in the 1950s, insisted in retrospect that Diem missed a major moment to meet his people or build a personal connection

[44] Ngo Dinh Diem, "Statement of June 18, 1954," in *Major Policy Speeches*, (Saigon: Press Office of the Republic of Vietnam, 1956), 5-6.
[45] Phuc Thien, "Ngo Dinh Diem of Viet-Nam" ed. by Douglas Pike (Saigon: Press Office of the Republic of Vietnam, 1956), 5-10.
[46] Jacobs, *Cold War Mandarin*, 40-42.

with them. Jacobs writes, "He was less concerned with commanding affection than respect." Diem had never been a man of the people and that did not change now.[47] As many U.S. and French critics have said, Diem always operated in his own world removed from reality. Gaining Vietnamese respect was priority in his mind, something Bao Dai sorely lacked. Diem's statement and reserved return proved that South Vietnam, although financially propped up by the United States, under his regime would develop according to his own vision.

Diem's appointment baffled and disconcerted many French and Vietnamese.[48] Phan Huy Quat, Tran Van Huu, and Nguyen Van Tan, other anticommunist and more experience politicians, seemed more practical. Out of the three alternatives to Diem, Phan Huy Quat had the most potential to become prime minister. Phan was the Minister of Defense under Bao Dai a few years earlier. He co-founded the anti-French and anticommunist Nationalist Party of Greater Vietnam. By the time the Viet Minh had forced his followers south, he had cemented his position as a nationalist. Phan, Tran, and Nguyen had spent most their time vying for support in either Vietnam or France. As French influence waned after the Battle of Dien Bien Phu, the United States took a more active role in Vietnam. These men lacked the advantage and contacts Diem had forged during his exile. Only U.S. aid would continue to flow into Vietnam if Bao Dai appointed someone the Eisenhower Administration favored. Although the U.S. officials had not publicly committed itself to Diem in the summer of 1954, it implied that they wanted him for the job.[49]

U.S. interests and Vietnamese Catholics had solidified the support for Diem. Catholics and refugees from North Vietnam who feared retaliation from the Viet Minh fled to the South.

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[47] Jacobs, *Cold War Mandarin*, 42.
[48] Although press evidence and documents released from South Vietnam's Press Office in 1950s should not be taken as absolute factual accounts of Diem's actions due to some of its propagandistic nature, it offers great insight and understanding into what Diem and Saigon believed they were accomplishing.
[49] Jacobs, *Cold War Mandarin*, 38-39.

Diem estimated about 10,000 refugees wanted to come south when in reality, almost one million. From the port of Haiphong in August 1954, North Vietnamese refugees migrated to South Vietnam over the span of 300 days with the help of the U.S. navy and French vessels in Operation Passage to Freedom. The resettlement program was a huge success for U.S. propaganda in denouncing the North Vietnamese government and displaying the allure of the "free world." The operation was a major victory for Diem because it increased the Vietnamese Catholic population in Saigon to almost one million.[50] Many of these Catholics were placed government and administrative position and showed Diem's tendencies for choosing loyal, but inexperienced individuals over qualified and skilled ones.

Edward G. Lansdale had already been in South since June 1 to prepare U.S. operations in Vietnam. He and his CIA team, officially the Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) and under the pretense of the Saigon Military Mission (SMM), conducted paramilitary and anti-North Vietnamese assignments to bolster the Diem regime. Lansdale was crucial to the stability of Diem's government in the beginning. J. Lawton Collins landed in Vietnam five months later in November as Eisenhower's special representative. Collins' opinions of Diem and Saigon contrasted the efforts Lansdale invested in Diem. Collins had advocated, like French opinions, for Diem's removal.[51] The United States was in a precarious situation as two of its most important advisor in South Vietnam disagreed on the support of its leader in office.

In October 1954, the White House formally addressed Ngo Dinh Diem for the first time after the initial success of Operation Passage to Freedom. The letter from the White House was also a response to concerns for Ho Chi Minh's possible victory in the 1956 referendum elections. Diem's refusal to sign the Geneva Agreement in July 1954 opened up the possibility for a

[50] Jacobs, *Cold War Mandarin*, 43-46.
[51] Haycraft, *Unraveling Vietnam*, 46-53.

popular anticommunist leader to confront Ho on equal footing in the elections. Eisenhower tested the waters in the letter notified Diem of an aid program in development. The aid however, came with prerequisites that Diem had to maintain the "standards of performance" and political stability in South Vietnam under the scope of his government. [52] Eisenhower extended to Diem the invitation to demonstrate himself as a proponent of the "free world." Uncle Sam was quite cautious when looking for a new partner to share in his free world prosperity.

In 1955, the United States allocated more funds directly to South Vietnam than it had to all Associated States of Indochina in the past four years. Whereas the United States had given $24.9 million to the French Associated States of Indochina in 1954, it allocated $77.5 million for South Vietnam alone. The goals of aid in Vietnam were to finish the second stage of refugee settlement. The aid went to technical assistance programs like public administration and increased production for agriculture and local industries. The U.S. economic aid program in 1955 had one overall objective: to shore up widespread support for the anticommunist government.[53] The United States had confirmed its commitment to South Vietnam amidst doubts of Diem's leadership.

U.S. support for Diem changed substantially after he defeated the Cao Dai, Hoa Hao, and Binh Xuyen sects throughout 1955. Diem handled the sects aggressively against the recommendations of his U.S. advisors. All three sects had consolidated into one political group, the United Front, to demand political representation in Diem's government. Diem's paranoia and refusal to decentralize his tasks frustrated Collins to no end as time wore on. Diem tried to manage many tasks by himself, no matter how menial. Secretary of State Dulles told Collins the United States had no other alternative candidate, although Eisenhower gave Collins the authority

[52] Letter from Eisenhower to Diem, (Washington D.C.: Nation Security Archives), Oct 10, 1954.
[53] "FY 1955 Program of Economic Aid to Associated States of Indochina," in J. Lawton Collins Papers, 1896-1975, Box 24, (Abilene, KS: Dwight D. Eisenhower Library), October 14, 1954.

to recommend replacements.[54] The Battle of Saigon from September to October to retake the city, the Dinh-tien-Hoang and Nguyen Hue Operations from January to May 1956, and Lansdale massive pay off of Cao Dai leaders to not trouble Diem's regime brought the internal stability needed to South Vietnam in this period of time.[55] These victories embodied the culmination of vested U.S. interests in Diem and not only sustaining South Vietnam's government. Dulles, on behalf of Washington, had no qualms of Diem's potential.

Diem's political philosophy for Vietnam embodied his stubborn and uncompromising nature. Could a war torn country recently freed from centuries of occupation so easily embrace western democracy? As Phuc Thien wrote, Vietnam would "bear his personal imprint." Something was either good or evil to Diem. Neutralism fell under the "evil" category as it did nothing to stop communism, a vicious system according to Diem. His philosophy explained his uncompromising conviction: freedom or communism, United States or France, order or anarchy. Diem had to bring Vietnam to moral balance and social progress before Western democratic principles could develop.[56] South Vietnam in 1956 required full independence to move on to democracy. It somewhat gave U.S. officials an alibi for Diem's rigging of elections and rejection of the 1956 Geneva Agreement's referendum elections. His maneuvers to uplift the Catholic minority in the South, challenge the sects, and repudiate the referendum all indicated his outlook for Vietnam and attempts to woo Uncle Sam.

[54] Jacobs, *Cold War Mandarin*, 69.
[55] Logevall, *Embers of War*, 621-635.
[56] Phuc Thien, "President Ngo-Dinh-Diem's Political Philosophy," (Saigon: Review Horizons), 3-13.

Chapter Three: Diem's the One! Triumphant Return, 1957

By May 1957, it had been four years since Diem last set foot in the United States. The visit marked triumph for him and his U.S. supporters. During his exile in 1950, he was another small-time Asian diplomat vying for U.S. Congressional and Catholic allies.[57] Vietnam and Indochina had sat in the backdrop of Cold War politics, their fates in the hands of the French, while the United States turned its focus to Cold War issues elsewhere. The trip showed that Diem directed his attention now towards maintaining the country's economic security and rate of recovery. South Vietnam's government could manage domestic affairs better and brace for Viet Minh invasion better. Cutting U.S. aid hampered South Vietnam's stability and preparedness to combat North Vietnamese or Chinese aggression. With the trip, Diem could demonstrate his leadership and appeal directly to the U.S. public and supporters for more significant political and economic recognition. This public celebration however, that tied the Eisenhower Administration to Diem, signified the United States' most formal and vocal commitment to Vietnam with no way to back down. It influenced Southeast Asian and Vietnam foreign policy for the coming decade. The United States would not surrender what it proudly built up so easily.

Diem showed that the United States could successfully promote freedom in South Vietnam and lay inroads to democracy for non-Western countries. The spotlight on Diem as South Vietnam's undisputed leader never looked brighter. The United States accepted that Diem had pulled off more than any other Vietnamese in his position could. In the eyes of many Vietnamese, not much had changed.[58] Diem and the United States had only replaced Bao Dai and France. Whatever the people's concerns were, they were irrelevant since the United States main objective to maintain stability in South Vietnam was through Diem.

[57] Logevall, *Embers of War*, 617.
[58] Jacobs, *Cold War Mandarin*, 66-75.

During his return to the United States, Diem attracted praise as "the conquering hero, America's loyal ally." He had led the South against the communist North as he clamped down on the opposition. On February 22, 1957, an assassination attempt on Diem at Ban Me Thuot Fair in the central highlands, 180 miles southwest of Saigon, almost prevented the trip.[59] A bullet wounded the Land Reform Minister, Do Van Cung, under his breast bone and he required surgery. Luckily for Diem, the would-be assassin's gun had jammed after the shot hit Do. As *Le Journal d'Extrême-Orient* of Saigon reported, Diem scanned the crowd "with his sharp and heavy look in an attitude of the most striking impassibility," then began his speech without reservation after the incident. The rest of the time there, Diem was stoic as he walked around the fairgrounds, refusing any extra security and continuing to speak with his entourage and the fair's attendants.[60]

Diem attended the fair to promote the effectiveness of the new settlement programs throughout sparsely populated areas in the country.[61] Saigon newspapers had maintained a near blackout of the assassination attempt for almost twenty-four hours and only later admitted that Diem was the intended target. At the time, the apprehended suspect's identity was unclear because he carried multiple identification cards, investigators were unsure if he was part of an organized communist plot or the Cao Dai sect. Later reports identified him as a member of Cao Dai.[62] The investigation discovered that another suspect worked with the young man, but was not found. Diem came close to death, yet showed no fear. He earned some of the respect he so deeply craved from the Vietnamese people for his courage. Observers watched once again as if some unstoppable force guided South Vietnam's future through him, for better or worse. While

[59] "Assassin Bullet Misses S. Vietnam President," *The Washington Post and Times Herald*, February 23, 1957.
[60] "South Vietnam Head Escapes as Gunman Fires at Him at Fair," *New York Times*, in ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times, February 24, 1957.
[61] "South Vietnam Head Escapes," *New York Times*, February 224, 1957.
[62] "Madness in Vietnam," *New York Times*, February 24, 1957.

criticism did arise over Diem's tedious micromanagement that caused slow or ill-informed government decision making, his vision (although unclear) remained unchallenged.[63] Regardless, U.S. officials and newspapers perpetrated Diem's "Miracle Man" status throughout the visit. Uncle Sam and Diem would officially tie the knot without a hitch.

Diem had accepted long ago that his position left him susceptible to armed threats and death. After all, he had survived direct confrontation with Ho Chi Minh and the Viet Minh. Instead, he kept calm and remained steadfast in the face of these dangers. He continued to travel all over South Vietnam with limited security personnel. A *New York Times* article reported that despite the dangers, Diem felt like he had the duty to meet his citizens. This was perhaps, a U.S. impression, as Diem's past history (arrival to South Vietnam in 1954) and personality suggested he sought limited interaction with actual South Vietnamese. His leadership however, transcended concerns for his own life. He brought order to a violent and disorderly South Vietnam. Communism and sectarian violence's "sheer madness" had to face Diem, "the cause of liberty and progress."[64] The press's representation of Diem reflected the U.S. government's own convictions that Asian countries require a strong leader to espouse ideas of freedom and democratic to the mostly unaware Vietnamese people. By the time of the visit, the press's stories directed the U.S. public to see Diem as the symbol and passionate leader of "Free Vietnam."

Married to Money, Diem's Motives

The more South Vietnam stood out from the rest of its Southeast Asian counterparts, the more value was placed on Diem's opinions, especially his views on the capabilities of North Vietnam and noncommunist Southeast Asian countries. Uncle Sam accorded additional trust to

[63] "Man from Vietnam," *New York Times,* May 5, 1955.
[64] "Madness in Vietnam," *New York Times,* February 24, 1957.

his new number one in the region. On May 6, Roberts told Dulles that the United States needed to show it understood Diem's long-standing concerns for general stability and internal security. Robertson suggested Dulles or White House staff gauge Diem's views and reasoning on certain South Vietnamese domestic affairs issues. These topics included the Chinese minority law, land reform, Vietnam's position in Southeast Asia, South Vietnam's currency exchange rate, and present U.S. military aid and troop level.[65] In each of these cases, the State Department prepared recommended U.S. action and possible South Vietnamese response. While Diem may have established political order, many social and economic problems still required solutions and explanations.

While the public press labeled Diem the "Miracle Man" for the order he created in South Vietnam in 1955 and 1956, Diem privately confided with his U.S. counterparts that the recent domestic security was unstable because of the new communist strategy in Asia. Prior to 1956, China advocated a policy of peaceful coexistence that had shifted to a competitive and aggressive one, which North Vietnam had adopted too. The United States and South Vietnam rejected the Geneva agreement's conditions for 1956 free elections to unite both North and South Vietnam and neither China nor the United Kingdom (even though they were the agreement's primary facilitators) enforced them, the U.S. government speculated increased communist operations in South Vietnam as a response.[66] South Vietnam's rapid progress and order had alarmed the PRC and DRV, but now the communist allies knew where to exploit the South's weaknesses. Phnom Penh, Cambodia became the headquarters for communist activities against South Vietnam thanks to the Soviet and Chinese Communist Aid Mission to carry out these aims. Diem and Dulles discussed Cambodia's effects on Vietnamese security at Washington's

[65] Letter from Walter S. Robertson to John Dulles, White House Central Files, Box 73, Dwight D. Eisenhower Library, May 8, 1957.
[66] Memo, Ngo Dinh Diem Briefing Book, box 73, White House Central Files, May 8, 1957.

Blair House. The United States was convinced that the Southeast Atlantic Treaty Organization (SEATO) and South Vietnam coordination could tackle any communist aggression effectively throughout Southeast Asia.

State Department reports believed land reform was one important way to foster Saigon's influence throughout the countryside and improve internal economic security. U.S. State officials recommended Diem to advance this policy because it empowered the people with opportunities and livelihoods without fear of falling to communism. After the First Indochina War, a handful of landlords still owned most of the agrarian land in South Vietnam. The United States knew the Saigon government had not reformed the land policy previous implemented during French rule. French Indochina's land policy supported large absentee land holding that kept many swaths purposely untouched. If Diem's government promoted private ownership and gave families hectares of land to cultivate on their own, it could widen his political base. U.S. land reform analysts assessed that small private land ownership and farming would make the Vietnamese more self-sufficient and likely to invest in the country's industrial and infrastructural capacities. Land reform weakened the possibility of communist sabotage because small Vietnamese land would exert economic and social control over their own lives since Diem's government gave them the opportunity.[67] In theory, these South Vietnamese would develop an allegiance to a national South Vietnamese government that looked after their basic needs as opposed to local sects.

In an official meeting on Thursday, May 9, with Eisenhower from 11:13 a.m. – 12:05 p.m., Diem outlined the primary concerns that he faced in keeping South Vietnam afloat. Diem said to Eisenhower that he had advanced internal security to achieve reasonable safety within the country, even amidst doubts from some U.S. officials that his Saigon government would not last

[67] Memo, Land Reform, in Ngo Dinh Diem Visit, White House Central Files, May 8, 1957.

long. Interestingly though, the U.S. Position Papers suggested that Diem feared internal collapse most while his conversation with Eisenhower indicated otherwise. The possibility of a Northern invasion could occur at any time. A military build-up from about 150,000 to 170,000 with low-paid conscripted troops, without increasing expenditures, provided more advantages to combat Northern aggression and better internal state security.

While the communist DRV had at the moment over 400,000 men ready to fight, the North Vietnamese people resented the steep taxes to maintain its large military.[68] Both mandatory conscription in the South and improved ground forces would solve any DRV or PRC attack. Air support was considered impractical because of low cloud cover on visibility and atomic weapons were eliminated as an unreasonable option.[69] Yet Diem still hoped that the North Vietnamese people might overthrow the Ho Chi Minh government in favor of the South. Diem predicted the chance of North Vietnamese discontent would force the Viet Minh to demobilize some of their military since it stifled the Northern economy. Perhaps Diem wanted to suggest to his North Vietnamese counterparts that his nationalist spirit and reputation now rivaled that of their "Uncle Ho." A united Vietnam under Diem could be possible, especially with U.S. guidance and aid. Or maybe, Diem believed he could exert more internal control with bigger ground force as his success in defeating the Binh Xuyen in Saigon suggested. After all, Diem seemed to come a long way from the inexperienced administrator U.S. officials saw him as three years ago.

Diem also stressed that the United States must not cut foreign aid to Vietnam. U.S. aid had propped up the country and government in Saigon. Diem reiterated this point throughout his

[68] Memo, Ngo Dinh Diem Visit, US Aid and Force Levels, box 73, White House Central Files, May 8-10, 1957.
[69] Memo, General Discussion of Situation in North Viet-Nam by President Ngo Dinh Diem, FRUS Vietnam: Volume I, Document 375.

visit, including during his joint speech to Congress and at the Luncheon with the National Press Club. Without the aid, South Vietnam could not keep domestic control and among its neighbors. President Eisenhower moved, not making any promises, as Diem spoke of defense plans and requested more aid.

SEATO, Security, & Freedom

Throughout the visit and even en route to Los Angeles, Diem and Tran Van Chuong, Vietnamese Ambassador to the United States, continued to doubt SEATO and U.S. assistance if communists stormed South Vietnam. Diem for the most part, only listened in on the conversation between Chuong and Elbridge Durbrow, U.S. Ambassador to South Vietnam. Chuong worried that the U.S. government would not consider the use of nuclear weapons, as shown by the military response in the Korea War and Dien Bien Phu. Other Asian representatives doubted immediate U.S. government and SEATO response for any one Asian country too.[70]

While Diem listened in on most of the conversation, he thought the United States must entertain the use of nuclear weapons in certain situations and that the United States should continue to develop better nuclear weapons. Diem and Chuong also raised the same disputes Diem mentioned in his talk with Eisenhower on May 9. Chuong added that U.S. commanders had vowed their military units would aid Vietnam if needed, but these were lofty promises as it was not their decision. Durbrow reassured Diem and Chuong that the United States acted if necessary. He cited the Sixth Fleet's movement in the Eastern Mediterranean to handle the Jordan Crisis, which Diem and Chuong agreed.[71]

[70] Memo, Doubtful SEATO and American Aid, May 17, 1957, *FRUS*, Document 385.
[71] Memo, Doubtful SEATO and American Aid, May 17, 1957, *FRUS*, Document 385.

By May 1957, the United States and SEATO military initiative trained South Vietnamese troops to defend against North Vietnamese assault. North Vietnam was well-prepared for battle with 380,000 soldiers in heavy divisions with artillery as opposed to South Vietnam's 150,000 men in light divisions. State Department analysts expected that Diem wanted more aid to train 20,000 to 30,000 troops. The State Department thought the United States should entertain his request, but also remember its other Cold War commitments and U.S. public and Congressional economic concern.[72] Diem would have difficulty seeking military aid when Congress proposed foreign aid cuts for all recipients in the 1958 fiscal budget. The United States would not pursue this issue unless Diem or his representatives mentioned it.

The 1954 Geneva Agreements restricted South Vietnam from full SEATO membership. Nevertheless, the United States wanted to include South Vietnam in SEATO as a non-military participant. South Vietnam had sent a representative to participate in a 1957 meeting in Australia, where the South's presence was well-received. South Vietnam could send their leaders or speakers to attend SEATO events, receive regular briefings on ongoing activities from Thailand, and increase Vietnamese involvement in SEATO civil and security committees. The United States proceeded cautiously in this initiative as to not anger Cambodia, India, or the United Kingdom, but these proposals showed that it sought to expand South Vietnam's role as a more vocal anticommunist ally.

Diem also displayed his interests in American investment into South Vietnam when he toured the General Petroleum Refinery in Torrance and additional installations in Santa Fe Springs. After his stop in Los Angeles, Diem would head back to Honolulu at 11 p.m. and then later South Vietnam aboard military aircraft.[73] In Honolulu on May 20, Admiral Felix B. Stump

[72] Memo, Ngo Dinh Diem Visit, US Aid and Force Levels, box 73, White House Central Files May 8-10, 1957.
[73] "Diem of Vietnam Calls Asia Key to Free World," *Los Angeles Times*, May 19, 1957.

offered his views on Diem's concerns over South Vietnamese troop increase and the possibility of using nuclear weapons – issues previously discussed in Washington D.C. with Eisenhower and on the way to Los Angeles with Durbrow. After Diem outlined his military strategy to Admiral Stump, Stump replied that Eisenhower and Dulles had said many times the United States was prepared for any communist offensive against "free world" countries. Stump asserted that the United States would not restrain itself like it did in Korea and that nuclear weapons remained on the table, but not against heavily populated civilian areas. He reassured Diem and Chuong that U.S. military capacity, including other SEATO nations, would avert any communist advance. Even at the end of the visit, doubt still loomed effectiveness of SEATO nation intervention in South Vietnam.[74]

When the meeting concluded, South Vietnamese and U.S. parties proceeded to a military review. Chuong asked Stump in his office if he believed the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) should add 20,000 more soldiers at Diem's behest. Stump responded to Chuong, like Eisenhower did to Diem. He told Chuong that the question demanded more attention before the U.S. government made a decision since Congress controlled the incoming fiscal budget. Throughout the trip, Diem's questions about aid were left vaguely answered. He returned to Vietnam with no answer other than that his request for continued aid lay with Congressional approval and U.S. economic outlook. Diem demonstrated that although he was thankful of U.S. support and aid during the visit, it was South Vietnam's lifeline.[75]

Eisenhower did not want to violate the Geneva agreement's troop restriction for North and South Vietnam or pledge funds that Congress controlled. Instead Eisenhower reassured

[74] Memo, Doubtful SEATO and American Aid, May 17, 1957, *FRUS*, Document 385.
[75] Memo, Doubtful SEATO and American Aid, May 17, 1957, *FRUS*, Document 385.

Diem that SEATO would defend South Vietnam from any attack. Diem was skeptical about SEATO assistance because only Thailand and the Philippines could respond quickly enough to a crisis in South Vietnam. According to Diem, well-trained Viet Minh commandos would keep both countries preoccupied with defense. He stressed that fielding a well-equipped South Vietnamese ground force would defeat them. Eisenhower replied that sustaining a powerful military required a great deal of commitment. The Eisenhower Administration's responsibilities ranged from Korea to NATO, and other Third World countries. Eisenhower viewed the situation from a global perspective and understood the priority of South Vietnam, but also that the United States "must use [its] best judgment in allocating the resources [it] can make available."[76]

Nationalism: The Chinese Minority in South Vietnam

After Diem's address to Congress on May 9, Vice President Nixon hosted a luncheon in the old Supreme Court chamber in Diem's honor in the Capitol. Diem then headed back to the Blair House at 4:30 p.m. to meet with Dulles. On August 21, 1956 Diem's government had enacted a decree saying that Chinese born in Vietnam to Chinese parents were Vietnamese.[77] The Republic of China (Taiwan/Formosa) had asked the United States to discuss the decree during the visit.[78] Privately, Dulles raised the issue of Decree 48 to dispel any misunderstanding between US allies. Diem insisted that most of South Vietnam's Chinese accepted the legislation without controversy. Saigon's Chinese Legation and foreign Chinese organizations only fomented trouble by calling South Vietnam's Chinese traitors. Those groups misunderstood the difference between nationality and order in the Chinese naturalization policy.

[76] Memo, Doubtful SEATO and American Aid, May 17, 1957, *FRUS*, Document 375.
[77] Chinese Minority Problem, Ngo Dinh Diem Visit, box 73, White House Central Files, May 8-10, 1957.
[78] Chinese Minority Problem, May 8-10, 1957.

On May 10 in Washington, the National Press Club hosted Diem as an honorary guest. The question about the Chinese minority decree surfaced as Diem answered questions from the press.[79] By May 9, local born Chinese, about 500,000, had to submit alien registration cards. Approximately 300 of the affected Chinese attacked the commission offices for the third time in less than a week.[80] In response to the unrest, he insisted the decree revived a tradition that the French suspended during their occupation. Prior to the French, Vietnamese nationality law considered all born in Vietnam to be Vietnamese citizens. The Nationalist Chinese Legation's rioting in South Vietnam simply represented a misunderstanding in policy and tradition.[81] Diem told Dulles and Robertson that the Chinese in South Vietnam were anticommunist or noncommunist because of Diem's anticommunist regime, unlike Cambodia, Thailand, or other Southeast Asian nations, which matched State Department propositions.[82]

Diem furthermore, contended that Vietnamese and Chinese shared common origins in culture, language, and history anyway, which made any type of assimilation easy. The Vietnamese Ambassador, Tran Van Chuong, had Chinese ancestry like many other Vietnamese according to Diem. Although China influenced much of Vietnamese culture, the Vietnamese never considered themselves Chinese and adapted Chinese traditions to become distinctly Vietnamese. The Vietnamese rebelled each time they had to live under any sort of Chinese occupation.[83] Diem's comments could be dismissed as nothing more than political maneuvering and skirting U.S. criticism.

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[79] "Diem Bids for Increase in U.S. Aid to Viet-Nam," *The Washington Post*, May 11, 1957.
[80] "Chinese Mob Legation In Saigon, *The Washington Post*, May 7, 1957.
[81] "Diem Bids for Increase in U.S. Aid to Viet-Nam," *The Washington Post*, May 11, 1957.
[82] Memo, Chinese Minority Problem, May 9, 1957, FRUS, Document 375.
[83] Ross Marlay and Clark Neher, *Patriots and Tyrants*, (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999) 84-85.

State Department briefings however, indicated that the Chinese in Vietnam felt threatened because the measures outlawed the Chinese from twelve specific occupations. The Chinese argued feared diminished livelihoods and forced assimilation into Vietnamese culture, which they equated to systematic persecution.[84] Although Diem had positive press coverage throughout the trip, many major media outlets still recognized that Diem answered questions vaguely or refused to delve into the specifics of a topic on his leadership or South Vietnam. State Department memos analyzed the major obstacles Diem's decree could cause not only for South Vietnam, but the United States, and attempted to provide solutions to manage the political fallout.

In some instances, Diem pandered to U.S. Cold War attitudes, as he had when he sought support for premiership during his exile, to ensure continued financial assistance. The press was impressed by his refusal to accept a neutralist foreign policy, his anticommunist stance, and criticism of U.S.-Chinese relations at the luncheon.[85] He criticized other Asian countries that hoped communists and capitalists could coexist peacefully through a non-alignment or neutralist policy. He claimed the current political state of Asia did not allow for a passive policy to flourish, "since communism is not neutral," reaffirming his own political philosophy. Confrontation between capitalist and communist adversaries divided nations into two camps. If a country refrained from the ideological conflict, then it would allow communism to grow unchecked and cause the world to plunge into chaos. His speech at the luncheon repeated the points for aid at continued levels like in Congress the day before: the friendship with the United

[84] Letter from Walter S. Robertson to John Dulles, Box 73, White House Central Files, May 8, 1957.
[85] "Vietnam Chief Scorns Coexistence with Reds," *New York Times*, May 11, 1957.

States allowed for the South to persevere through the difficulties as a newly independent country, while being able to meet communist aggression head on. [86]

A letter from Undersecretary Robertson to Secretary of the State Dulles revealed that the Chinese minority dilemma could have more subsequent repercussions than Diem cared to convey at the Blair House, with the press, or at the luncheon. The State Department expressed apprehension for Diem's decree and its effects on U.S. financial support and South Vietnam's economic recovery. State Department Position Papers anticipated part of Saigon's law included eliminating the Chinese's privileged status they received during French colonization. State Department analysts implicated the Chinese business owners in Vietnam focused on their economic endeavors and did not care for politics anyway.[87] If the overseas Chinese in South Vietnam favored business over political interests and Diem said they were anticommunist anyway because of him, why did Decree 48 exist? If Diem hoped that Decree 48 earned him the respect of ordinary Vietnamese, then it might have at the expense of U.S. foreign aid. Efficient use of U.S. aid meant giving it to Chinese in South Vietnam who had well-established business operations in 1957 from French occupation.

From the U.S. perspective, Diem's push to consolidate power against the Chinese created more problems than solved them. Chinese dissent could unravel the benefits of U.S. assistance and turn overseas Chinese towards communist subversion and support, adding another problem to cripple South Vietnam's relative internal stability. This came at a time when the Taiwan's credibility decreased and communist China's legitimacy as the representative of overseas Chinese grew.[88] Diem believed Taiwan had minimal influence among overseas Chinese and their fears of communist subversion were impractical after what he achieved. He credited his efforts in

[86] "Diem Warns Asia on Neutral Role," *New York Times*, May 11, 1957.
[87] Chinese Minority Problem, Ngo Dinh Diem Visit, May 8-10, 1957.
[88] Chinese Minority Problem, May 8-10, 1957.

South Vietnam with preventing overseas Chinese in Saigon from falling to communist pressure, with no Taiwanese contribution at all.[89] These comments reinforced Diem's conviction that South Vietnam was one of the United States' most vital allies in Asia. And why not? U.S. officials valued his political commentary and every American city in turn showcased and honored him with parades, awards, and dinners in his honor for his achievements in South Vietnam. A healthy relationship required both sides to give concessions, not matter how hesitant the United States was to give it to Diem.

Perhaps, Diem's choice and Decree 48 did not come without warrant. It aimed to return control of South Vietnam's economy to Vietnamese people. Diem insisted that the before French colonization, the Chinese were Vietnamese citizens and Chinese community had never existed. When the French arrived, they implemented tax laws that favored the Chinese and gave them economic dominance, like preferential treatment in the Bank of Indochina.[90] The decree fitted into Diem's agenda for anticommunist and nationalist Vietnam (which the United States emphasized) by providing more Vietnamese opportunities in the economy and reducing the possibilities of communist Chinese infiltration. The State Department however, disagreed with Diem's implementation. U.S. officials feared that if too many Chinese lost their jobs without qualified Vietnamese replacements, it wasted incoming U.S. economic capital because the replacements lacked the business acumen or experience of their Chinese predecessors.

Other Southeast Asian countries had to contend with the economic reach of overseas Chinese communities too. The United States had enough experience to recommend caution with the Chinese minority and for South Vietnam to avoid the same plight. State Department officials suggested South Vietnam deviate from its neighbors' common trend of harsh policies against

[89] Memo, Chinese Minority Problem, May 9, 1957, *FRUS*, Document 378.
[90] Memo, Chinese Minority Problem, May 9, 1957, *FRUS*, Document 378.

overseas Chinese for fear of reprisal from the PRC government. The Eisenhower Administration, American and Vietnamese Catholic allies including Diem's brother, Ngo Dinh Thuc, and other foreign advisers counseled Diem's government to proceed cautiously. However, he bitterly viewed the United States and his other allies as betraying him, siding with the Chinese. Diem did not concede while the United States wanted to diffuse the situation with minimal controversy.

The State Department had previously written to Saigon about problems with Decree 48 in an informal memo, but Diem disregarded it. The U.S. conversation with Diem on the Chinese minority problem showed that although the United States was well-equipped to help Saigon address the issue, it allowed Saigon to continue to act with little oversight. This relationship dynamic would become a recurring theme throughout US-South Vietnam relations. For the United States, South Vietnam was its golden child in Southeast Asia to spread U.S. prestige and attract other Third World allies into its Cold War camp. Decree 48 was discussed publicly and privately in newspapers and government records, yet the United States expected no commitment from Diem to enact any formal changes, but instead only hear U.S. advice on it. South Vietnam's quick turnaround from despair bought Diem credibility and time. This issue would not hamper the visit and the U.S. had faith Diem could rectify it later. The United States cornered itself to lose more if its officials had upset Diem and lost his trust by pushing him to reform too much at once.

Above Its Neighbors

Despite existing domestic problems, South Vietnam had to move forward as a "free world" stronghold. State Department analysts suggested that South Vietnam had to convey its superiority to North Vietnam through its accomplishments and global recognition as a bastion of the "free world." South Vietnam could ensure internal stability and promote its success by

developing a nationwide radio network to broadcast government policies. Radio facilities benefited not only South Vietnam, but surrounding free nations because Saigon could broadcast its progress abroad. The State Department fully supported South Vietnam's request to implement this program as quickly as possible.[91]

South Vietnam had the ability to guide the development of "free" countries in Southeast Asia. After all, Diem had cemented his country's place as an Asian proponent of the United States' supposed democratic leadership. In another meeting, State Department official Robertson and US Ambassador Elbridge Durbrow asked Diem how South Vietnam could help Laos. He wondered if South Vietnam had the means to help Laos deter North Vietnamese aggression. Unlike South Vietnam, Diem argued newly independent Southeast Asian nations had trouble in developing a political identity separate from their colonial pasts.[92] Vietnamese advice on Laos' internal stability during the visit was a prime example that Diem had established South Vietnam as credible authority on Southeast Asian politics and a leader in the region.

The Laos question only helped solidify South Vietnam's cause as the region's political heavyweight. [93] Besides Laos, Cambodia began to try and replicate South Vietnam's successes, but faced the same postcolonial problems. Both Robertson and Diem agreed that the communist threat in Cambodia worsened because Phnom Penh became the center of communist activities. Diem's naturalization of Chinese nationals in may have had a positive outcome for his own country, but it shifted the problem to Cambodia, where Chinese and Vietnamese communists hoped to use the population of 300,000 Chinese overseas there to assist them. Other Southeast Asian leaders lacked the political security South Vietnam had because of continued colonial

[91] Memo, Chinese Minority Problem, May 9, 1957, *FRUS*, Document 378.
[92] Memo, Vietnamese Assistance in Stabilizing Laos, May 10, 1957, *FRUS*, Document 382.
[93] Ngo Dinh Diem Visit, Chinese Minority Problem, May 8-10, 1957, Position Papers.

influence, which increased likelihood of communist infiltration.[94] Despite all the issues Diem dealt with, it looked like the trust Eisenhower's Administration placed in Diem had put South Vietnam miles ahead of his contemporaries and the visit was a reward that complemented his success for it.

A legitimate communist China gave both South Vietnam and the United another important reason to establish a close alliance and allowed Diem to draw more American support. Diem benefitted from Vietnamese xenophobia against the Chinese and the US agenda to deter communism. Both Eisenhower and Diem discussed in a meeting on May 12, 1957 that China's military buildup posed the biggest threat to the "free countries" of Asia, especially South Vietnam.[95] The possibility of increased PRC military and political support to North Vietnam meant Southeast Asia required more attention. United States and South Vietnam concerns of a communist China and North Vietnam alliance were not shortsighted. Like the United States, China hoped to project global influence for countries in struggles for national independence or communist revolution.

A Joyous Occasion

In Washington, the administration wanted to show its gratitude to Diem. The additional locations on Diem's trip showed his own religious and political commitment to the United States and added to the benevolence that developed in U.S.-South Vietnam ties. He depicted himself as the sole person responsible for bringing order and stability to South Vietnam, even if it meant the persecution of political and religious opponents. He forged authoritative order and this gave the

[94] Memo, Situation in Cambodia, May 10, 1957, *FRUS*, Document 380.
[95] James E. Warner, "Statement by Two Presidents Holds Communist China Endangers Peace," *The Washington Post*, May 12, 1957.

United States and South Vietnam the ability to focus its attention on Ho Chi Minh and North Vietnam – at least, it seemed like this.[96]

As *New York* Times reporter Russell Baker said regarding the visit's purpose, the trip revealed the Eisenhower Administration's appreciation for Diem and its "liking for him and what he has done."[97] Although one of the main reasons for the visit was to highlight Diem's success in South Vietnam, the Eisenhower Administration also showed its commitment to developing nations if they furthered U.S. interests globally. Diem would preserve U.S. foreign policy interests by tackling communism while promoting democracy and capitalism in his own country to make South Vietnam a symbol of freedom and U.S. friendship among developing nations. Diem's visit acted as the showcase for US support and the extent of its willingness to support all anticommunist efforts.

President Diem landed in Honolulu at 4:27 p.m. on May 5 in preparation for the beginning of his state visit. On Monday the next day, the president and his ten officials flew to San Francisco where Eisenhower's plane, the *Columbine III*, took them to Washington on Wednesday.[98] The White House and the State Department prepared extensively for Diem's official visit from May 8 to 19, 1957. Government officials encouraged journalists and reporters to cover all parts of his visit in-depth. The four day visit in Washington consisted of a state dinner, a speech by Diem to a joint Congress, meeting with the National Press Club, private discussions with President Eisenhower and Secretary of State Dulles, and a formal dinner for Eisenhower at the South Vietnamese embassy.

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[96] Logevall, *Embers of War*, 667.
[97] "Ike Welcomes Diem at Airport," *The Washington Post*, May 9, 1957.
[98] "Ike's Plane to Bring Diem to U.S.; Seeks Aid," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, in ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Tribune, May 6, 1957.

Unusual for Eisenhower, he met Diem at the Washington National Airport in the MATS Terminal, which illustrated the high priority U.S.-South Vietnam relations had in 1957 and the Eisenhower Administration's invested interest to protect Southeast Asia from communist threat.[99] After formal greetings and photographs, Diem received full military honors with a 21 gun salute at the airport.[100] According to Eisenhower, Diem represented "world patriotism of the highest order." At 12:25 p.m., the U.S. army, navy, marine, and air force units escorted Diem and Eisenhower on their way to the Blair House, the United States' official guest house. The two presidents accompanied by the military escorts drove through the Memorial Bridge, up 23rd Street to Constitution Avenue, east to 15th Street and West on Pennsylvania Avenue to the Blair House. Secretary of State Dulles met with Diem there and expected to discuss South Vietnamese economic problems and the conditions for future US aid. After their meeting, other events on Wednesday that afternoon included Diem going to the Arlington National Cemetery at 3 p.m. to pay respects to the Tomb of the Unknown Solider and Mt. Vernon to lay a wreath on George Washington's tomb.[101]

After their meeting at the White House ended, Diem spoke to a joint session of Congress in order to convince its members to not slash aid to South Vietnam for the next fiscal year. The speech was one of the most significant parts of Diem's trip because U.S. economic assistance guaranteed his political power. He argued that the legacy of colonialism made recent independent Asian nations vulnerable. Many newly independent Asian nations were impoverished and underdeveloped, they were susceptible to communism or fascism. South Vietnam's political future was fragile too because it did not have any economic and technical

[99] "Ike Welcomes Diem at Airport," *The Washington Post*, May 9, 1957.
[100] Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, Dwight D. Eisenhower: "Remarks of Welcome to Ngo Dinh Diem, President of Viet-Nam, at the Washington National Airport," May 8, 1957, *The American Presidency Project*, http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=11031.
[101] "Ike Welcomes Diem at Airport," *The Washington Post*, May 9, 1957.

self-expertise, but United States to assist in the process. Diem underlined the crucial importance of South Vietnam's geopolitical and economic position in Asia. Diem argued that French colonialism, the end of the First Indochina War, and the proximity of communist China and North Vietnam contributed to South Vietnam's important position. He claimed that independence, peace, and economic growth allowed South Vietnam to avoid anarchy or the sacrifice of individual liberties. His appearance at Congress symbolized the most valid engagement between the United States and South Vietnam. All the public events across the country thereafter portrayed the celebration for the union between Uncle Sam and the "newlywed." Diem would introduce his South Vietnam to his American family in various cities.

On the last part of his U.S. tour Diem spent May 17-18, 1957 in Los Angeles, California. He arrived in a government plane in Los Angeles around 7 p.m. with an entourage that included his aides, government mental assistants, State Department and other U.S. officials. Mayor Norris Poulson, his wife, and Robert L. Minckler, president of General Petroleum Corp., welcomed them at Los Angeles International Airport. Upon his arrival, Mayor Poulson gifted Diem a scroll and welcome book while Mrs. Poulson gave Mrs. Tran Van Chuong, the wife of the Vietnamese ambassador, a bouquet of flowers. Through Diem's stay in Los Angeles, Minckler served as the president's official host. California Governor Goodwin Knight greeted Diem and his company at the Ambassador Hotel, where they stayed for their duration in Los Angeles.[102]

The Los Angeles World Affairs Council organized a banquet at the California Club to honor Diem that evening. Again at the banquet, he underlined South Vietnam's importance to safeguarding Asia from various communist threats from China, North Vietnam, the Soviet

[102] "President Diem Arrives for One-Day Stopover," *Los Angeles Times*, in ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Los Angeles Times (1881-1990), May 18, 1957.

Union, or Laos. He did not mention the specifics required to strengthen Asian countries against communist agitation, but instead stressed that these countries had to look inwards to become self-sufficient and truly independent. A nation like South Vietnam could not rely solely on its allies to succeed, but it had Diem for that very reason.

As the visit in Washington D.C. ended on May 12, Diem flew to New York City on Eisenhower's plane, *Columbine III,* and landed at La Guardia Airport at 9:15 a.m. He continued after to St. Patrick's Cathedral for 10 a.m. mass. After lunch with John D. Rockefeller III in Tarrytown, New York, Diem would stop at the Maryknoll Seminary in Ossining, New York. He attended church and had breakfast at Cardinal Spellman's residence during the trip too. Highly publicized dinners and enormous parade for him filled his schedule. Diem's Catholicism and nationalism were center stage in the United States' biggest and most populated city.

The next day, the city welcomed Diem in a grand parade that went from Bowling Green to City Hall. He stated he felt very welcomed due to seeing ordinary everyday New Yorkers waving and applauding him during the parade. One policeman claimed over 100,000 were at the parade, another boasted 250,000.[103] Mayor Robert Wagner met Diem at the steps of City Hall while the Vietnamese and American national anthems sounded. The widespread presence of everyday Americans showed the goodwill Eisenhower spoke of, but also indicated that the Cold War and South Vietnam were significant issues for the even "secretaries, shop girls, office boys." They knew who they had to support to give communism one less advantage. After the parade, Mayor Wagner and the Council of Foreign Relations hosted a reception for Diem at the Waldorf-Astoria hotel, at the behest of the State Department.[104] The Mayor said that Diem was

[103] The New York Times gives separate estimates of 100,000 and 250,000 from the opinions of two different cops monitoring security for the parade. Both are listed here to show that large numbers did congregate to see Diem.
[104] "City to Greet Diem," *New York Times,* May 5, 1957.

"a man 'to whom freedom is the very breath of life itself.'" Diem's celebrity-like status in the parade and appearance of large crowds in a way revealed the peak of enthusiasm for U.S. success in guiding its developing allies and maintaining widespread impact. The parade demonstrated the large scale efforts of the government and press in tying public opinion to not only Diem, but Vietnam for the forthcoming future.

In other parts of the trip, Diem expressed his fondness for loyalty as he returned to the institutions and people that had support him during his exile. Diem dined at Seton Hall University in South Orange, New Jersey in the evening where he would receive an honorary degree, given to him by the Catholic Archbishop of Newark.[105] De Jaegher took Diem in during his exile at the university. He sought to show that as an Asian and man of the East, he could absorb Western ideas as he recited parts of South Vietnam's constitution. He thanked Seton Hall for helping to contribute to creating a South Vietnam that embodied common values in "Eastern and Western civilizations" with Diem symbolizing the marriage between two cultures.[106]

He later met with some of his most avid supporters in New York. The American Friends of Vietnam and the International Rescue Committee (IRC) invited Diem as the guest of honor to a dinner at New York's Ambassador Hotel presided by Henry Luce and Cardinal Spellman. IRC president, Angier Biddle Duke, gave him an award to commemorate Vietnam's help of Hungarian refugees. Diem acknowledged his success in part of the help of his early US supporters, the IRC, US military advisors, and journalists and publishers who viewed Vietnam as a symbol of freedom for all of Southeast Asia.

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[105] "Diem Due in City for a 3-Day Visit," *The New York Times*, May, 12, 1957.
[106] Ngo Dinh Diem, "Address at Seton Hall upon receiving the degree of Doctor of Law," in *The Emergence of Free Vietnam*, (Saigon: Press Office of the Republic of Viet-Nam, 1957) 19-21.

While Diem acknowledged economic assistance and appreciation of foreign aid, he emphasized in this speech the benefits of U.S. moral aid and the "solidarity of free men." He defined moral aid as a program and agenda that further human progress through general goodwill of a people. Diem's speech expressed the extent in which the Vietnam Lobby assisted him to morally increase South Vietnam's stability. To Diem, the American Friends of Vietnam included anyone in the United States dedicated to improving conditions in South Vietnam the best they could. He thanked U.S. press magnate Henry Luce for portraying South Vietnam's cause sympathetically. Operation Passage to Freedom, the help of Catholic and Protestant relief workers, the U.S. Army Training Mission, and sponsors of the University of Hue all received recognition as key pieces that helped Diem's regime when it was most fragile.[107] He stressed the appreciation that the AFV had helped his government from the very beginning, even when he doubted himself, and how their work served to inspire South Vietnam's youth and intellectual. The visit overall confided to the AFV that their efforts to back Diem earlier in the decade were not in vain.[108]

Reporters had emphasized characteristics that portrayed Diem as devoutly religious, Western-dressed, and a symbol of freedom to the U.S. public. His religion became one of his most important assets for his public image to the U.S. government. *New York Times* reporter Robert Alden casted Diem's return Maryknoll as triumphant and sympathetic in his May 13th, 1957 article. Despite his usual serious expression and character, Alden wrote the Catholic leader seemed excited on his return to the seminary while greeting students and priests. A resident said on Diem's first day there, he "cleaned like the rest of us." The press in many different situations

[107] Diem, "Address before the International Rescue Committee and the American Friends of Vietnam," *Free Vietnam*, 29-34.
[108] Morgan, *The Vietnam Lobby*, 51-52.

wanted to depict Diem as a person, although Asian, that the U.S. public shared similar passions with in daily life and religion. They all shared the same humility that came with their faith. Diem, the president of South Vietnam, established himself as a Western compatriot, even playing golf occasionally. Diem was truly "an Asian we [could] live with" and seemed like any other American. Diem said that Maryknoll helped him developed the blueprint for South Vietnam's constitution and inspiration to bring the Vietnamese people freedom.[109] Diem's return to Maryknoll bore political motives too. He used religion as an advantage to solidify his political foundation. The reporter worked to communicate Diem's excellent leadership and Catholic inspiration gained from religious U.S. institutions. Diem's Catholic minority in Vietnam and the Christian majority in the United States had no doubts after his return to Maryknoll that they could trust him to protect Southeast Asia from godless communism.

Briefly for day, the official state visit stopped in Knoxville, Tennessee. He toured the Tennessee Valley Authority, the first by a foreign dignitary since the start of the Eisenhower Administration, for more information on South Vietnam's own hydroelectric infrastructural projects.[110] Then he spent two days in Michigan, first in Detroit to request support from American industry leaders to improve living standards for the South Vietnamese. He praised the strength of U.S. industries as crucial to upholding freedom and helping South Vietnam defend itself from slavery to communism. A banquet was held to commemorate Diem's success and arrival before he explored the Ford Motor Company Plant in Dearborn. Second, Diem would go to East Lansing to accept the honorary degree. For the first time, a foreign head of state was on campus at Michigan State University. The university excused students from classes to allow

[109] Robert Alden, "Diem, Here for Visit, Relives His Exile at Maryknoll," *New York Times*, May 13, 1957.
[110] "Ike Welcomes Diem at Airport," *The Washington Post*, May 9, 1957.

them to hear Diem's speech. Diem had another banquet in his honor that evening with Michigan governor G. Mennen Williams present.[111]

Diem traveled back to Michigan State University, where he spent time during his exile four years ago with the help of Professor Wesley R. Fishel. For the official visit, the university recognized his position as a head of state and bestowed him with an honorary degree, Doctor of Laws. On May 15, 1957, Diem returned to Michigan State University. On his return, the university recognized his position as a head of state by bestowing him with an honorary degree, *Honoris Causa*, Doctor of Law. Upon receiving it, Diem made a speech to university President Hannah, members of the State Board of Agriculture.[112] When Diem was in political exile, he worked as a consultant to the governmental research bureau in the political science department. The university returned the favor to Diem in South Vietnam. In his speech, Diem thanked Fishel and the Vietnamese Advisory Group with newly formed nation's problems. The group consisted of Michigan students and faculty, coordinated various special training services for South Vietnamese governmental and police administration.[113]

Michigan State University was an important part of South Vietnam's climb to cultural and political relevance for Diem. He asserted that South Vietnam had rectified East and West tensions fraught by colonialism because of the university and United States.[114] The speech communicated, in another instance, the symbolic nature of Diem's visit. He demonstrated indebtedness to the United States, almost as if it took South Vietnam and Diem out of a hopeless situation. His stop in Michigan and the speech displayed his belief in loyalty and gratitude for Fishel and the Vietnam Advisory Group that supported him. The Michigan leg of the tour was

[111] "U.S. Industry Help Sought By Viet-Nam," *The Washington Post*, May 16, 1957.
[112] Diem, "Address at Michigan State University upon receiving the degree of Doctor of Law," *Free Vietnam*, 41.
[113] Jacobs, *Cold War Mandarin*, 25-30.
[114] Jacobs, *Cold War Mandarin*, 25-30.

one of many parts to convey that Diem was all-in with U.S. support and there was no turning back. Diem's exile in the United States reaped huge rewards and he displayed gratitude to those that propped him up. Not only public institutions, but academics ones too that had helped Diem showed excitement in what had happened in South Vietnam. One by one, many facets of U.S. society warmed up to Diem as the government and press promoted the trip. At least in the United States, Diem popularity skyrocketed as one of the most trustworthy and successful allies in the "free world."

On May 21, 1957, two days after Diem and his entourage left the United States, President Eisenhower spoke to Congress on the importance of U.S. aid to Vietnam. The Eisenhower Administration and press had just successfully sold Diem to the country's academic and industrial institutions and the general public. South Vietnam was a shining example of the United States' efforts to maintain global security against communism. Through U.S. economic and technical knowledge for foreign nations, these countries exemplified the benefits of their newfound political freedom much like Diem.[115]

If Congress did not buy in, he appealed to the U.S. public to understand the benefits of foreign aid and the new way the United States confronted global communism and instability. He cited Greece and Turkey as recipients of large foreign aid packages ten years ago during the beginnings of the United States fight against "International Communism." South Vietnam more recently, was a major recipient of US aid that responded to communism quickly "under steadfast leadership" that can be attributed to military and economic assistance. The United States could not survive alone "as an island of freedom in a surround sea of Communism."[116] Instead, the

[115] "Justification of the War, Public Statements" in *Pentagon Papers*, Part V-A.
[116] "Justification of the War, Public Statements" in *Pentagon Papers*, Part V-A.

United States deterred communist or enemy threats by building free countries to fight on their own, with their own people. Just like U.S. investment in Greece and Turkey, Diem's visit publicly displayed Eisenhower's and the United States commitment to a unified noncommunist Vietnam.

Conclusion – Becoming "My-Diem"

What U.S. Vietnam War historians often call the "Diem experiment," reached its apex in U.S.-South Vietnam relations with Diem's trip to the United States. President Eisenhower and many U.S. officials accepted the possibility of Diem as a challenger to Ho Chi Minh and showed the rest of the world through the visit. Diem's accomplishments up until the visit seemed to verify it. The U.S. public showed that it was more than ready to support leaders of developing nations if they embraced American ideas of freedom and anticommunism.

Shortly after entering office, Vietnamese and foreign critics had nicknamed Diem, "My-Diem," which translated to "American Diem."[117] The nickname associated Diem to the United States and its heavy involvement in financially supporting his regime. A March 1957 State Department memo from Samuel T. Williams to Felix B. Stump showed how Diem's public title and name did have political significance. In Vietnamese culture, people are formally addressed by their family name first (Ngo), not their given name (Diem). North Vietnamese communists laughed at Diem because U.S. citizens addressed him with the title, "President Diem," which would be akin to calling Eisenhower, "President Dwight." Americans tended to call Ho Chi Minh by his family name, Ho.[118] It seemed to suggest that Uncle Sam did not seen Diem as an

[117] Jacobs, Cold War Mandarin, 11.
[118] Memo, Walter Robinson to John Foster Dulles, 11 February 1957, *FRUS*, Document 362.

equal partner in the relationship. Since U.S. officials addressed Diem with his given name, it suggested to the Vietnamese that the United States saw Diem not as equals, but a figurehead in place to carry out American interests. Issues that seemed insignificant gave Diem a more difficult time to attain national respect among all Vietnamese and hampered his ability to the promising symbol of Vietnam the United States and himself had wanted.

The *New York Times* reported that the visit also fostered interest in the United States among ordinary Vietnamese, at least in Saigon, as a pro-American mood swept through the city. Although most Vietnamese in Saigon spoke French, a demand for French-English dictionaries grew quickly among all sorts of Vietnamese – clerks, businessmen, and bartenders – excited to learn English. The ordinary Vietnamese cab driver proudly noted that he knew Eisenhower greeted Diem at the airport. Many more in the capital thought Americans were good people and became friendlier to U.S. diplomatic and military advisors after the trip.[119] Vietnamese in Saigon grew more accepting of U.S. presence and confident that it did not represent another form of foreign occupation. After Diem's trip, interactions between U.S. personnel and Vietnamese in Saigon improved not only among officials and government, but among the people too. Both governments seemed to have their citizens' support for South Vietnam and the highly publicized visit.

The positive mood stayed for the most part in the capital however, as an insurgency grew in the neglected South Vietnamese countryside. The honeymoon ended towards the end of the 1950s and early 1960s as Diem's repressive policies unraveled and the Viet Cong received the blessing of Ho Chi Minh and North Vietnam to increase communist action in South Vietnam. By 1963, televised and photographed Buddhist protests against Diem for religious and political

[119] "Saigon in Pro-U.S. Mood," *The New York Times*, May 16, 1957.

freedom shocked viewers around the world. When United States support for Diem waded, so did his control.

Diem's success was a victory for the United States that very much shapes his legacy in a united Vietnam today. On November 2, 2013, the Socialist Vietnamese government finally permitted for the first time a public remembrance ceremony for the 50th anniversary of Diem's assassination. Only about fifty to six people were present, almost all of them Catholic. The limited and centralized support for Diem in Saigon after the 1957 visit relates closely to public memorial ceremony. Nguyễn Hoàng Vi, who attended the event, said that many Vietnamese born after 1975 learn of Diem as a tyrant and enemy of the state.[120] For the most part, Diem role in Vietnamese history is extremely downplayed. Diem's reputation in Vietnam, then and now, does not extend very far.

Did Diem truly become "My-Diem" because of the visit? Was he really more popular in the United States than Vietnam? Perhaps, his critics had no second thoughts that Diem had become "My-Diem" after the United States paraded him around its major cities. Diem's vision for Vietnam was his own, even though he claimed it was for the Vietnamese. While the United States did solidify its commitment to Diem publicly, Diem did the same with this trip. Diem may have overestimated his achievements for South Vietnam in his own reality. The United States and Diem relationship goes both ways with both equally responsible to the outcome of the Vietnam's future and the build up to the war. U.S. Vietnam War historians often highlight Diem's insecurities and stubbornness in Vietnam War history. The United States however, placed itself in the corner too when it chose to back a leader in Southeast Asia that actually did

[120] Nguyễn Hoàng Vi, "Giáo dân ở VN viếng ông Ngô Đình Diệm," *BBC Vietnam*, November 2, 2013 http://www.bbc.co.uk/vietnamese/vietnam/2013/11/131102_remembering_president_diem_vietnam.shtml.,

accommodated its main goal to establish a stable non-Western government against communist ones in the 1950s. The Eisenhower Administration should have presented the Diem visit more as a “first date” scenario rather than full commitment to his regime only after three years.

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