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The Diem Myth

The Ngo Dinh Diem myth has exploded in South Vietnam and it is collapsing in America. It was a murderously expensive myth. For over nine years the American taxpayer shelled out more than a million dollars a day to keep it alive. For Vietnamese who did not get in on the graft it was nine years of misery; arrests in the night, concentration camps and liquidation if they protested. The final bill, over and above an unspecified number of American lives, will be expiated by the Vietnamese.

The American officials responsible for this fiasco are highly placed. They were able to play with the Vietnamese people, as undisciplined children play with lead soldiers, because the area of their meddling was half-way-around the world, and all levers which direct American policy, news management, and aid distribution were at their command.

Only the segment of America referred to by *Look* magazine as the “fanatical Right” is likely to now demand that these men be ferreted out and driven from office. The most conspicuous is our present Administration’s Chief of Protocol, Mr. Angier Biddle Duke, who for years directed an out and out personality cult operation known as “American Friends of South Vietnam,” dedicated to the glorification of Ngo dinh Diem. Before the smoke has cleared an irate America will have learned that what Cuba taught them about managed news barely scratched the surface.

While the lid is off and even *Associated Press* is refraining from prefacing “discrimination against Buddhists” with the word “alleged,” let us weigh all this indignation over secret police and uniformed police (American-trained) clubbing Buddhist monks, nuns, old women, and children under the eyes of Diem’s personal troops — standing by with their American automatic arms at the ready — to see whether or not it is a moral mirage. Let us compare the newest attacks with the complete indifference and cynical suppression of news by our Press, State Department, Information Service, and Foreign Aid Administration when Diem was doing the same thing to other religious groups and his countrymen in general. The conclusion: No one in America to the left of our “fanatical Right” cared a hoot about religious tolerance until “America’s man” took on the one group in his country too big to be destroyed piecemeal, even with our money

In April of 1955, two religious sects, the Hoa Hao and the Cao Dai, lined up with the private army of General Le van Vien in the only opposition possible against the Diem dictatorship we were supporting: armed resistance. We have many sects in California just as strange as the two Vietnamese groups our government sneered at when it was destroying them for Diem. The Hoa Hao believers, a couple of million strong, and the still stronger Cao Dai, led by their Pope Pham cong Tac, were daring to obstruct our brilliant “liberals” who had decided that the Vietnamese were going to have Ngo dinh Diem whether they wanted him or not.

Unfortunately, during that period South Vietnam was not the only country to equate opposition



with sedition. Any American who knew the score and was willing to buck the current faced charges of “working against America” if he wrote an honest report and found an editor brave enough to print it. *Time*, *Life*, *Colliers*, *The Reporter*, *Harper’s* [which carried Senator Mike Mansfield’s pro-Diem drivel as “written by Diem’s ‘godfather’”], *Saturday Evening Post*, *Reader’s Digest*, *American Legion Magazine*, *Modern Age*, *National Review*, *Christian Science Monitor*, *Look*, and others helped to black-out the truth and inflate the myth. Only *American Opinion* consistently dared to report the facts.

Newsweek helped lull its readers into believing our side was winning by printing a story about some ingenious North Vietnamese “choosing liberty” and dismantling a whole spinning mill, to be slipped south and reassembled in what was misleadingly called Free Vietnam. When a South Vietnamese heard of it and tried to trace down the spinning mill boys for an interview, Diem and his brothers threw him in jail for exposing the hoax. That hoax went unmentioned in the pro-Diem American Press.

Even our educational system must stand for indictment as truth now becomes readily available regarding South Vietnam. Michigan State University was a hot bed of pro Diem maneuvering. A Michigan State Political Science Professor, Wesley Fishel, was a top propagandist working under the label of “adviser to President Diem” [Read his articles in *New Leader*, of November 2, 1959, and December 7, 1959], and should come in for some scrutiny. Diem was no different then than he is now; but seven crops of Michigan State graduates who got diplomas by singing Diem’s praises in classes and on examination papers are now entrenched in Foreign Service, university professorships, and newspapers.

II

Let us turn back to the Spring of 1955 and see what really happened during those years when Angier Biddle Duke was seated at the head table through endless Diem banquets. The true story explains why America has Rightists and Diem has Buddhists driven to the point of public suicide. General Le van Vien was being pilloried by our government in April of 1955, ostensibly because he controlled the gambling city of Cholon, just outside Saigon. Le van Vien had driven the Communist Vietminh out of his invulnerable Binh Xuyen swamps. The gaming tables of Cholon supported him and his army, which the Communists were powerless to destroy, and this should have been a relief to the American taxpayer. But no, American “liberal” forces decided to break Le van Vien and his forces because they were blocking the road to absolute power for Diem. Today his swamps are Communist held and it will take more than the fifteen thousand Americans in South Vietnam to uproot them from even that small area.

Pope Pham cong Tac, who had prevented the Reds from getting a foothold in the area defended by his sect, was marked for elimination for the same reason. *Time* magazine did not care enough about religious tolerance in 1956 to treat him even politely when, stripped of power and robbed of his treasury, he fled to Pnom Penh. The act provoked a crisis. About 25 thousand Cao Dai troops under General Nguyen thanh Phuong and a smaller number of Hoa Hao forces under General Tran van Saoai lined up alongside of Le van Vien’s army in this showdown. They were all that stood



between the people of South Vietnam and the sort of treatment the Buddhists are receiving now. They represented force, the only thing Diem and his family would respect.

What happened was horrendous. Even Mr. John Osborne admitted in *Life*, May 13, 1957, that General Nguyen thanh Phuong was paid 3.6 million dollars [from American aid, understand] to defect. There was to be more money for his troops and a soft job in Diem's army. When the danger had passed, Diem broke all of them; and back to Diem's family went the money for which Phuong betrayed his country, his religious leader, and his friends.

An *AP* dispatch out of Saigon, dated July 9, 1963, tells us that the Cao Dai general, Nguyen thanh Phuong, is among the thirty-four being tried for complicity in the attempted coup d'état of November 11, 1960. His thoughts as he sits in prison awaiting probable execution must be bitter. While it is certain that what he is facing is just retribution, there is also a lesson for America: Phuong was only another man who trusted "Honest Diem."

Raymond Cartier, one of the best political writers in France and a former intelligence officer, reported in *Paris-Match* that three million dollars (again provided by the American taxpayer) was paid to the Hoa Hao general, Tran van Saoai, to betray his religious leader. Le van Vien, who had been Ho chi Minh's implacable enemy ever since the Reds led him into a trap in 1948, rose to nobility in the ensuing massacre. He had sworn loyalty to his Emperor, and he went down fighting. Diem captured his son, Colonel Le Paul, and had him murdered by police a couple of years later.

No force remained to protect the people from the secret police that Michigan State University and some tough cops from Detroit and Los Angeles were training for Diem. What happened thereafter to Cao Dais, Hoa Haos, Binh Xuyen followers, and anyone else uncooperative with the clique we were fastening on the unhappy Vietnamese people when we should have been strengthening the country against the Communist North, would make the present atrocities against Buddhists pale into insignificance. In the case of the Cao Dais and Hoa Haos the government's activities amounted to more *than religious persecutions*; such as we are now prattling about with pious indignation. The cynical truth is that the religious minorities concerned seemed too small to be worth considering.

The great "liberal" and sympathizer with minorities, Mr. Angier Biddle Duke (as we mentioned, now President Kennedy's Chief of Protocol), spent a fortune in American aid through his Diem propaganda front to maintain for that creature a benign image while the beatings, killings, and kidnappings were going on. The American taxpayers making this money available never knew that the persecutions were taking place. Mr. Duke, when informed of them, spent more money — to undermine the informant.

In mid-1956 a rebel Hoa Hao leader named Bacut found Communist pressure at his back was too strong, so Diem's Vice President [arrested as a Communist by Police Chief Nguyen van Tam in 1946] lured Bacut away with a promise of amnesty. Diem gave him a rigged trial and promptly lopped his head off with an old guillotine, which drove a million Hoa Haos into active revolt. Our Press told its readers they were nothing but Communists.

When a moviecrew went out to Tai Ninh, South Vietnam, to film Graham Grene's *The Quiet*



American — then being twisted into a Diem propaganda feature despite Mr. Grene's statement that he had never intended that his book should help the most corrupt government in Southeast Asia — another incident took place. Cao Dai followers being hired as extras staged a demonstration to try to bring their grievances to America's attention. No one ever reported what happened to them. The producers simply moved the cast to Italy, where no unpleasant truths would have to be faced; and there they completed their film "on South Vietnam." Who picked up the tab for that dishonest production, which faded away after the two premiers Mr. Duke graced in New York and Washington, will probably come out when the Diem government falls.

Le van Vien, living quietly in a little suburb outside of Paris, was still occasionally insulted as a "puppet of embittered French colonialists" by General "Iron-Mike" O'Daniel and our omniscient Left; the grounds being that he had taken refuge from Diem's American-encouraged vindictiveness in the only country that would have him. In mid-1957 Le van Vien received a message from some of his former followers who apologized for having accepted shelter in North Vietnam. They expressed continued loyalty to their former chief and added that they were awaiting his return. If he would come back and lead them, they promised, every Binh Xuyen would rally to his side; each bringing ten Communist deserters with him.

Diem's public relations agent in New York, who pocketed a fortune out of our aid money for hawking the "devout Catholic" aspect of Diem, added another angle to the irony that pervaded everything we did and said in our "South Vietnam experiment." Indignant to the point of abuse in charging *religious intolerance* if his own religion were ever mentioned, this huckster exercised no restraint in heaping attacks on the sects opposing Diem.

III

Those who knew South Vietnam and the true situation continued to warn that the lid could not be held on forever: that by blind support of a man who had no following when we imposed him, who never could claim having attained power except through us, we were leaving the people of that country no alternative but to turn to Ho chi Minh. Trying to reason with State Department officials, foreign aid distributors, and U.S. Information Service busy-bodies during those years was like trying to nail Jell-O to a wall. In conversation they ignored every pertinent fact; in private they stuffed State Department files with derogatory reports (to which victims have no access) against anyone who embarrassed them.

Few authorities on South Vietnam counted on the Buddhists to lead the resistance. They were regarded as having become *precious*. They had gone soft. *Contemplative*, they called it. But the nine years of Diem family tyranny and abuse seems to have toughened some of them. Enough Americans are on the scene, witnesses whether they wish to be or not, to make further suppression of the facts impossible.

Veteran Southeast Asia reporter George Chaffard wrote in the Paris diplomatic daily *Le Monde* of July 11, 1963, from Saigon: "A western military observer spoke to us a few days ago of several hundred Americans killed in the expeditionary corps in South Vietnam during the past three years;



yet the official figure barely passes eighty.” No matter what the true figure, they died trying to bail out a boat that was doomed when we made Ngo dinh Diem its captain. Honest Americans were threatened with reprisals when they tried to sound a warning while there was yet time. Diem has not changed. The man we see for what he is today is the same Diem our “liberal” Chief of Protocol and his ilk crammed down our throats — and the throats of South Vietnam’s citizenry for nine long years.

A last sad reflection: It would be interesting to know what “The International Rescue Committee,” — which Angier Biddle Duke ran with his right hand while his left built up Diem and directed “American Friends of Vietnam” — is doing, if anything, for those monks, nuns, old women, and children clubbed into insensibility within the confines of Diem’s barbed wire. (And, not incidentally, within shouting distance of fifteen thousand American troops.)