

## **NEW LIGHT ON THE ANTI-DIEM COUP THE YEAR OF THE HARE**

AMERICA IN VIETNAM, JANUARY 25, 1963 – FEBRUARY 15, 1964  
Francis Xavier Winters, Athens and London, The University of Georgia Press, 1997, pp. 292.

LODGE IN VIETNAM, A PATRIOT ABROAD  
Anne Blair, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1995, pp.200

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In 1985, there were 1200 books on Vietnam.<sup>1</sup> Today their number is surely larger. But very few of them deal exclusively, fully or even extensively and especially, authoritatively, with the U.S.-instigated coup that overthrew the Ngo Dinh Diem government in November 1963. There are many gaps in the accounts available.

A major reason for the above situation is lack of information. Until very recently, the story of the coup was largely a series of constantly repeated clichés and myths based on fragmentary information lacking authenticity. Diem was usually depicted as a despot who indulged in religious repression, and obstructed the achievement of the two main U.S. aims in Vietnam: 1/ transforming Vietnam into an American-style democracy and 2/ defeating Communism. Succinctly put: Diem was a villain. This image stuck for over three decades.

However, there are a few books dealing exclusively, or almost exclusively, with the anti-Diem coup, which do not join the chorus of those repeating worn-out clichés, but examine the facts honestly, carefully, providing the basis for an objective, balanced and fair judgement. Among them, one should mention William J. Rust's *Kennedy in Vietnam, A Prelude to War, American Vietnam Policy 1960-1963*<sup>2</sup>; Ellen J. Hammer's *A Death in November, America in Vietnam, 1963*<sup>3</sup>; Marguerite Higgins' *Our Vietnam Nightmare*<sup>4</sup>; and, especially, the two books by Francis Xavier Winters and Anne Blair, which are the main object of this review.

The first three of the books mentioned are especially relevant to this review. Rust's is a very good introduction because it is perceptive; the narration is straight, unbiased and offers a fresh approach to the subject. Hammer's book provides the background to Vietnam's culture and

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1 Richard Nixon, *No More Vietnams*, New York, Harbour House, 1985, p.1.

2 New York, Charles Scribner & Sons, 1985.

3 New York and Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1987.

4 New York, Harper & Row, 1965.

society indispensable for understanding the realities that conditioned Vietnamese politics, an aspect largely ignored by many American officials and journalists. Higgins provides accurate first-hand information by a seasoned journalist based on extensive and deep investigations in the field.

These three books are an indispensable complement to the studies of Professor Winters and Miss Blair, because they shed new light on the coup.

The new light shed on 1963 contributes to a change of interpretation. Clearly, Diem should now be looked upon not as a villain, but as a victim. This change was made possible by the study of reliable and abundant material not available to researchers prior to 1992: the official documents including and secret reports, records of internal deliberations, messages exchanged daily, even hourly, between Kennedy and his administration in Washington and the U.S. embassy in Saigon, telling of what actually happened in the months preceding and following the coup in 1963-1964. These documents were declassified and published by the State Department in 5 volumes between 1988 and 1992, under the title of *Foreign Relations of the United States 1961-1964*. (FRUS, 1961-1964). In February 1994, the General Records of the U.S. State Department for 1963 became also available. All the above documents have been examined carefully by Winters.

Winters is Associate Professor of Ethics and International Affairs, School of Foreign Service, Georgetown University, Washington, D.C. His study is very thorough, very enlightening, and probably the most authoritative existing on America's policy and role in Vietnam in the period under consideration – January 25, 1963 to February 15, 1964 --, Chinese year of the Hare (of the Cat for Vietnamese). The study is highly authoritative because it is based not only on in-depth interviews with high-ranking members of the Kennedy administration, but also, and especially, on a very meticulous and exhaustive examination of the documents mentioned above.

As Winters explains in the Preface, his professional interest is in the relationship between ethics and foreign policy. It was the desire of “making ethical sense” of the American-NATO policy of “mutual assurance destruction” that led him to Vietnam. And it was the issue of the morality of the war in Vietnam that led him to trace “the dynamics and consequences of Kennedy’s decision to overthrow Diem”. The focus of Winters’ study is “the ethical assessment of U.S. responsibility for the inauguration and outcome of the war in Vietnam”. This inquiry led him to a reassessment of the Kennedy administration’s Vietnam policy. It is an ethical inquiry into “the moral acceptability of the U.S. involvement in such drastic intervention in the internal affairs of its ally”. In the process, he discovered “a pattern of decision that profoundly alters the profile of certain key figures in the drama”. It also revealed “the deliberate orchestration by President Kennedy of a coup against the government of his ally, Ngo Dinh Diem”.

Winters says he knows that this kind of inquiry is not fashionable, especially in American academic circles, who have an aversion for the ethical analysis of diplomacy. Incidentally, this explains the dearth of fair and balanced studies on Vietnam. Winters’ book will help correct this imbalance.

The book is composed of 15 chapters, divided into three parts. Part I, the longest, (9 chapters) is a narrative of the planning and execution of the coup. Part II (5 chapters) is a study of the personal and ethical profiles, and the patterns of the political conduct of the five principal protagonists in the coup drama: Dean Rusk, Henry Cabot Lodge, the correspondents and editors of the *New York Times*, President Kennedy on the American side, and Ngo Dinh Diem, on the Vietnamese side. Part III (just one chapter) is an assessment of the lessons, from the ethical angle, which are evident from such a study. There is also a Prologue and an Epilogue, which can stand by themselves, and constitute a very significant part of the book.

Two observations are in order here. First, the major evident feature of the narration given by Winters in Part I is that it is special, not to say unique currently: It is a meticulous, straightforward, comprehensive record of the deliberations and actions leading to and following the coup, and the most detailed, illuminating and enlightening account on the conduct of Kennedy and his officials in the planning and execution of the overthrow of Diem. This part contains a wealth of significant details unknown before.

Second, the book is very dense: it deals with many topics and is packed with information much of which is new or presented under a new angle. It would therefore not be possible to examine every part in full in this review. Only what distinguishes it most from other studies on the 1963 coup will be attempted.

The most remarkable revelations are about the role of Kennedy in the coup that overthrew Diem. Winters writes:

“The decision of President Kennedy to encourage on August 29 and personally to direct for two months, the overthrow of Ngo Dinh Diem – when he was aware that there was little likelihood of his replacement by a more competent Chief of State – has long puzzled commentators. This enigma was partially resolved with the revelation that Kennedy had privately communicated to a few friends his intention to remove American troops from Vietnam after his reelection in 1964. For Kennedy, the prospect of instability and/or chaos following a coup in Vietnam was less daunting because the United States would, he hoped, no longer be engaged there after 1965. The coup-installed government of South Vietnam would then be on its own”. (Winters, p.3)<sup>5</sup>

Winters adds that the decision to overthrow Mr Diem was taken consciously for moral reasons by the Kennedy officials, and for “*political opportunism* by President Kennedy himself, who finally decided to allow Diem to be sacrificed on the altar of American public opinion despite his own lingering sympathy for Diem”. (Emphasis added)

Political opportunism, sacrificing Diem to American public opinion, intent to disengage from Vietnam in 1965, are related. They are very important for a full understanding of the 1963 coup, and we shall dwell on them here.

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<sup>5</sup> All references to Professor Winters’ book from now on will bear only the page number, unless otherwise indicated.

To Winters, and indeed to many others, the big puzzle, the enigma, about Kennedy's decision to overthrow Diem is: why did he do it since he wanted to pull out of Vietnam in 1965, and Diem, and especially his brother Ngo Dinh Nhu, were reported to want to reduce American presence, and even to negotiate peace with Hanoi, thus permitting an early end of U.S. involvement?

The answer is that Kennedy wanted to be reelected in November 1964, and for this he needed to win the support of both the Left and the Right in America. He had won the 1960 election by only a slim margin of 118,574 votes, and the polls in June 1963 showed that his popularity rating had slipped from 60% to 47%. He needed to improve his image with the Left by showing, especially at a time of civil rights effervescence (the Selma March) that, contrary to what people thought, he was not a lukewarm but an ardent defender of civil rights, as evidenced by his public denunciations of Diem's anti-democratic rule, and especially Diem's religious persecution – intolerable to Americans. But he also had to defend himself against the charges of the Right, led by Barry Goldwater, that he was soft on communism, by making it clear that he was dissatisfied with the Diem government for its inefficiency in the fight against communism and wanted to have him replaced by leaders who could, and would prosecute the war more vigorously and more successfully.

Because his reelection must come first, Kennedy had to defer U.S. withdrawal until 1965. Kenneth O'Donnell, his personal secretary, revealed in his memoirs that in the spring of 1963, Kennedy told Senator Mike Mansfield he agreed with him on the need “for a complete military withdrawal from Vietnam”, but he could not do it until after 1965, after he was reelected. If he announced his intention before the 1964 election, “there would be a wild conservative outcry against returning him to the Presidency for a second term”.

After Senator Mansfield left, Kennedy said to O'Donnell: “In 1965, I'll become one of the most unpopular Presidents in history. I'll be damned everywhere as a Communist appeaser. But I don't care. If I tried to pull out completely now from Vietnam, we would have another Joe McCarthy red scare on our hands, but I can do it after I'm reelected. So we have to make damned sure that I *am* reelected”.<sup>6</sup>

Kennedy's intent of withdrawing from Vietnam in 1965 was confirmed by a close friend of his, the journalist Charles Bartlett, to Professor Winters in June 1988. Kennedy said: “We have no future in Vietnam. They're going to kick our asses out of there. I can't give up on Vietnam before 1964. I couldn't go out there and ask for reelection after giving up two pieces of territory [Laos and Vietnam] to Communism.” But after the election was won, he would be free to disengage. (p 192)

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<sup>6</sup> Kenneth P.O'Donnell and David F. Powers with Joe McCarthy: *Johnny, We Hardly Knew Yee*, Boston, Toronto, Little Brown and Company, 1972, p.16

Kennedy therefore decided to overthrow Diem in 1963 because of his personal need to improve his image with both Left and Right in America to ensure his reelection in 1964, and Diem was seen as “a threat” to his reelection. (p 193)

To enhance his image on both the Right and the Left, Kennedy had to play along with the American press, which was working up the public against the Diem regime by printing inaccurate and distorted information. The press was taking an open position in favour of the Buddhists, although it was clear by July, and reported by the Saigon embassy itself, that there was no religious repression but only a political agitation led by a small group of fanatical Buddhists bent on toppling the Diem government. He also accepted as true the skewed reports of the anti-Diem activists that the Diem government was losing the war, that Diem and Nhu were anti-American and were plotting with Hanoi to “kick the U.S. out”. A twin aspect of the coup as a conscious decision is the planning of this coup. The facts uncovered by Professor Winters reveal a Machiavellic scheme worked out by the anti-Diem activists and approved by Kennedy himself. It was a vicious two-pronged operation from which there was no possible escape for Diem.

One prong consisted in adopting a “policy of dissociation” and making it known to the Vietnamese opposition elements through press leaks and direct secret contacts with these elements to incite them to rebel against Diem, forcing him to take strong, forcible measures in self-defense, and thus to appear in the eyes of the public as a repressive government.

The other prong was a “quiet plan” under which American officials in Vietnam would disburse funds directly to the district and village levels without obtaining the prior authorisation of the Vietnamese government, or even without informing it, indeed treating Vietnam like an American protectorate. Inevitably, this was opposed fiercely by Diem, and led him, and especially his brother Nhu, to call for a reduction of U.S. presence. This was used to work up American opinion, especially Congress, leading it into believing that the Diem government was hostile to the U.S. and wanted “to kick the U.S. out”.

The two prongs converged towards the conclusion that “Diem must go” is a necessary decision, and the staging of a coup to that end is thus legitimate.

How the coup was organised and executed is well-known, and there is no need to dwell on that here. What is less well known is what Winters calls “The Aftershocks”, the reactions of the coup advocates, as well as of the Communist leaders in Hanoi.

Among the fiercest anti-Diem activists was Michael Forrestal, who had argued hard that to improve the situation in Vietnam Diem must be removed, and who had proposed General Duong Van Minh as a “logical” replacement for President Diem. On December 11, five weeks after the coup, Forrestal reported from Saigon that the government was in a state of inertia, General Minh was indecisive, and government officials seemed too distant from the needs of the villages.

Roger Hilsman, who had played a key role in the drafting and dispatching of the famous August 24 telegram which gave the green light to Ambassador Lodge for the coup, dropped out of the presidential councils. Hilsman told Miss Hammer that he had resigned over disagreement on policies, but President Johnson said: “When I became president, the first man I instructed to be fired was Hilsman.....it was one of the first things I did”. When asked by Higgins in 1963 how he felt having blood on his hand, Hilsman answered offhandedly that “Revolutions are rough, People get hurt”. Then, blood meant the blood of only the two Ngo brothers, but in 1975, blood would mean the blood of 58,000 Americans!

But the most noteworthy reactions should be those of Harriman, the principal plotter, and Cabot Lodge, the principal executioner. The reaction of Harriman, the leader of “the trio” who were determined to “get Diem”, arguing that this was necessary “in order to get on with the war”, was one of “total surprise”. On January 30, when General Minh was overthrown by General Khanh, he was “at a loss over the collapse of the government he had installed”. In April, he told A. Schlesinger that “Diem was better than the chaotic condition we have now”, and admitted that “temperuosity” had deprived him of control of Vietnam policy. (120, 123) Indeed, his intense dislike for Mr Diem had led him to “translate this dislike into policy”, a dangerous posture for an adviser. Indeed, Robert Kennedy remarked about Harriman in an interview in 1964 that “his advice was wrong. In fact, it started us down a road which was quite dangerous”. (Hammer, pp.31-32)<sup>7</sup>

As regards Lodge, who was determined to remove the Diem government because it did not conform to American democratic standards, and who had asserted that it was “an even bet that the next government would not bungle and stumble as much as the present one has”, he unashamedly reversed himself completely at a meeting in Honolulu on November 20, less than three weeks after the coup. He told his colleagues that he “doubted the wisdom of the U.S. making sweeping demands for democratization or for early elections at this time....He emphasized that if we can get through the next six months without a serious falling out of the generals we will be lucky...Americans – whether in the government or in the press – should not seek to guide them at every turn nor try to get them to act as though they were made to our image”.

Lodge had also some “chilling news” for his colleagues: the reception outside Saigon to the generals was “apathetic”; the peasants were “not enthusiastic” about the military government; they seemed to “regret the overthrow and assassination of their president”; all programmes had come to a virtual standstill.

Lastly, Senator Mansfield, whose report in December 1962, condemning Mr Diem for his autocratic rule, stressing that Diem had lost touch with the people, and recommending U.S. dissociation from his government, had decisively influenced Kennedy; this in fact started the

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<sup>7</sup> Robert Kennedy’s interview by John Bartlow Martin, April 30, 1964, cited by Hammer. See also Frederick Nolting, *From Trust to Tragedy*, New York, London, Prager, 1988, chapter 6 and p. 105.

whole anti Diem campaign, but which subsequently joined the chorus of those proclaiming the overthrow of Diem to have been “a great tragedy.”

In 1963 the U.S. dealt its ally South Vietnam a fatal blow. In this, Kennedy’s policies played a decisive role. This bitter truth has been underscored by the leaders of North Vietnam.

On hearing the news of Diem’s overthrow, Ho Chi Minh said: “I could hardly believe that the Americans would be so stupid.”

When General Vo Nguyen Giap and his surviving colleagues met with Robert McNamara in Hanoi in November 1995, they argued that “Kennedy’s policies in Vietnam were terminally mistaken. Ngo Dinh Diem was a nationalist who would never have allowed the Americans to take over Saigon’s war effort, leading the American and their hapless allies to costly defeat. *Therefore the coup that overthrew Diem in 1963 was the surprisingly early end for the United States in Vietnam.*” (reviewer’s emphasis).

Hanoi radio said: “By throwing off Ngo Dinh Diem and his brother Ngo Dinh Nhu, the U.S. imperialists have themselves destroyed the political bases they had built up for years.”

The leaders of the South Vietnam Liberation Front also could hardly believe their luck. “The fall of Ngo was a gift from heaven for us”, Nguyen Huu Tho, the president of the Liberation Front told *Nhan Dan*. And his vice-president Tran Nam Trung: “The Americans decided to change horses in mid-stream. They’ll never find anyone more effective than Diem.”

In Part II of the book, Winters paints the portraits of the five main players in the coup drama. Lack of space does not permit us to go deeply into this aspect here. Only a few relevant points will be noted.

On Dean Rusk, the Secretary of State, Winters observes that his decision to depose the constitutional head of an ally was made “out of repugnance at autocracy” but it was “misguided” because based on a “narrow view of political legitimacy”, and “the fruits of this high-minded meddling in Vietnam were...predictably bitter”.

For Ngo Dinh Diem, Winters showed great understanding. To him, “Diem was no enigma but an embattled autocrat struggling for survival”.

“The odds against Diem were indeed daunting....Diem had been besieged for almost a decade by both foreign and internal forces. Under such circumstances, South Vietnam’s slow progress toward a modern political structure was comparatively impressive.”

On the press, and in particular, the New York Times, Winters notes their readiness to “reiterate misrepresentations of easily verifiable facts”, the “tendentious character of reporting during the Buddhist crisis of 1963”, and “contributing to US government confusion by their ill-informed and inbred diatribes against Diem.”

The chapter on Kennedy epitomises what has been said throughout the book. Winters notes the “ruthless side” of the man, his “lack of concern for the destiny of Vietnam”, his “opportunism”, the indifference to the sort of government that might follow Diem, his “ruthless ambition”, his “identifying his reelection with the national interest”.

On Lodge, Professor Winters notes his “singular diplomacy in Saigon”, his ambassadorial independence “that would later turn out to be the undoing of Kennedy’s troubled relations with Diem”, his “attitude of proconsulat aloofness from Diem”, his preference for the symbols of another century in his “symbolic approach to diplomacy”, and his “intellectual vacuity”.

Lodge has been studied in great detail by Anne Blair, and to her biography of him, *Lodge in Vietnam, A Patriot Abroad*, we now turn.

In contrast to Winters’, Anne Blair’s study is limited in scope: it is focused on only one actor; it contains only 6 chapters (instead of 15) and covers only 200 pages (instead of 292). As she explained in the Introduction, it seeks to answer the question: why the US, and Australia, her country,<sup>8</sup> had ignored the opportunities to disengage that must have arisen from time to time in “the rather messy period after the Diem coup”. Since this “mystery period” is framed by Lodge’s first ambassadorship, a study of Lodge is in order. This means paying attention to the circumstances surrounding his appointment, his personality and modus operandi, and an assessment of his performance.

Blair stresses that her book “is not a full-scale biography of Henry Cabot Lodge, and certainly not a Freudian psychological profile”, that what she increasingly found was that “coincidence, personal style, individual ambitions, and the clash of strong wills shaped events more than explicit policy goals or the functioning of a system.”

It is precisely the above findings, which make Blair’s study highly interesting. They complement the findings of Winters’ study, whose focus is on morality, psychology, goals and system. Together, the two books shed a flood of light on the coup, on the actors involved, and on the reasons of America’s spectacular failure in Vietnam.

Blair found that Lodge was “a man of immense authority and charm, motivated by loyalties and his conception of duty, impatient of detail, and inclined to move on once a solution to a problem appeared to have been found....in some ways a nineteenth-century figure functioning in modern professional structures.....”; he was aristocratic, and used to wealth and privilege. Lodge was chosen for a post which Rusk, his sponsor, described as “the toughest post in our service”. To Blair, Lodge was “a poor choice” for the post. The reasons: he had no knowledge of the area; he had only a sketchy knowledge of Buddhism, and little information on South Vietnam’s culture; he believed that physical health and good appearance were more important in politics and

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<sup>8</sup> Miss Blair is a research fellow at the National Center for Australian Studies, and teaches Southeast Asian and American history in Melbourne.



diplomacy than intellectual agility; he drew speedy conclusions on the basis of preconceived notions”; he was more fit for Paris and Europe; he was “out of place in the professional world of the later twentieth century”; and, Blair stresses this point: having no experience as an administrator, “he lacked the complex managerial skills needed to organise the resources and personnel of a modern American mission.”

So, the fault for the poor choice was Rusk’s and Kennedy’s. But they had their own reason: Lodge, a prominent Republican, would “deflect the appeal of Barry Goldwater, representing the Republican right, who was demanding a more bellicose American posture in Vietnam” (p 13).

Blair notes: “As history was to show, the Lodge appointment did achieve the goal of deflecting criticism from Kennedy’s involvement in Vietnam, although ultimately with great cost to American reputation in the foreign policy field.”

Within two days of his arrival in Saigon, Lodge had made judgements with far-reaching implications on the basis of testimony from informants with vested interests of which he could know little. He decided that the Diem government must be overthrown, and this was “a course from which there is no respectable turning back”. At the end of six days, he had taken a major role in activating a coup. From now on, he will not permit anything or anyone, including the Secretary of State or the President, to deflect him from this aim.

How Lodge achieved his aim is well known. But Blair brings to the story many interesting new details concerning the aftermaths of the coup, especially Lodge’s grappling with the generals whom he had incited to overthrow Mr Diem so that the war could be prosecuted with more vigour and success. In the process, Lodge discovered the realities of Vietnam, and learned something about Vietnamese culture, something he should have done before setting foot in Vietnam and facing Mr Diem!

Lodge’s decision and determination to bring down the Diem government will lead to “a massive political failure” in 1963 and 1964, which left President Johnson only one option: American direct military intervention in Vietnam in conditions which made an American victory impossible. It provides the answer to Blair’s question in undertaking her study.

Blair writes: “Lodge’s first embassy in Saigon occurred at a time in the development of US policies in Vietnam when several alternatives to American takeover of the war remained open. During the eight months of his presence as U.S. chief of mission, these options were gradually closed off. Lodge played a central role in this process because of his approach to his diplomatic assignment, the choices he made, and the openings he failed to see at the time.....At the beginning of the first of Lodge ambassadorship, civilians and the Department of State were in charge of US Vietnam policy, at the end, the armed forces and the Pentagon were firmly in control.”

The following concluding comment of Blair is appropriate: “Lodge was out of his depth in Vietnam....Drawing swift rather than well-substantiated conclusions, he oversimplified the

political picture in South Vietnam and came to throw up his hands at the difficulty of getting anything done in “the orient”. His cables by early 1964 take on the color of the colonizer’s attitude to “the natives”.....

“For the American enterprise in Vietnam was indeed colonialist...Diem was overthrown because he would not be a puppet, Minh toppled when he advised against the bombing of North Vietnam. Khanh, with U.S. approval, dismissed the post-Diem representative Council of Notables; the 1966 constitution forbade the neutralist and anti-war ideas. How could an “advisory phase” play itself out and the United States be compelled to “move into a position of actual control” if American assistance was only just that?”

As Blair sees perceptively, the independence of the Vietnamese was the problem. Lodge’s attitude only reflected the way in which American officials and journalists, as well as academics, approached the problem in the 1960s.

Like Blair and Winters, Higgins and Hammer also have recognised the colonialist facet of American policy in Vietnam.

Winters writes: “Not only were Washington’s values wholly alien to Vietnam, but the relentless urging of these values on Diem by American officials and editors smacked of a new colonialism...”; he points out “the forthrightly colonialist approach of Cabot Lodge to South Vietnam”, and Lodge’s “remarkable demonstration of neo-colonialism” during the visit of McNamara and Taylor in September 1963. Lodge’s “unconscious imperialism” and Kennedy’s “unconscious colonialism” mirror the colonialist ethos of the correspondents and editors of the time (p 189).

Higgins reproves Washington for going into “the business of hiring and firing governments...”, for having “the arrogance of playing God in Vietnam”; and Hammer is outraged by the “unabashed colonialism” of Lodge.

What lesson to draw from it all? As Winters sees it: “The lesson of Vietnam is now increasingly inescapable: the fate that befell the American intervention in Vietnam was the ever-bitter fruit of colonialism. For the self-complacent American rush to remake Vietnam’s government in a Western democratic image was a blind violation of the prerogative of sovereignty, the right to self-determination. Less abstractly, Kennedy’s coup vainly sought to extinguish in Vietnam the flame of freedom in the name of an alien political ideal, democracy.” Viewed from an Asian angle, “the tragedy of Vietnam” would look as follows. Ngo Dinh Diem had accomplished the extraordinary feat of achieving the status dreamed of by every Vietnamese aspiring to national leadership: recognition as an equal of Ho Chi Minh. This was evident when Ho told the famous Australian-born Communist journalist Wilfred Burchett that “Mr Diem is a patriot in his own way” and to “shake hands with him for me.”

For New Year’s Day, through the International Control Commission (ICC) Ho had sent Mr Diem a blossoming cherry branch, which Mr Diem displayed in the hall of Gia Long Palace for the

diplomatic corps to see. The diplomats were puzzled because they missed the profound symbolic meaning of the gesture: it was a public tribute of Ho to Mr Diem. Furthermore, through M. Maneli, the Polish representative on the ICC, Ho sent a message to Diem that he would not be challenged as head of a southern government in a federated Vietnam.

The Americans should have felt lucky to have for an ally a man of Mr Diem's stature, who could bring peace to Vietnam while preserving the existence of a separate and non-communist South Vietnam. This would have permitted the US to claim proudly of having accomplished the mission, and of having disengaged honourably. They should have proclaimed Mr. Diem as their hero and saviour. But, instead, they had him overthrown and killed. Therein lies "the tragedy of Vietnam".