

An Introduction to Tran Van Dinh's "The Quirks and Whims of Heaven: A Meeting with President John F. Kennedy and the Buddhist Crisis"

Quan Manh Ha

Introduction

In the summer of 2011, I visited Tran Van Dinh (1923-2011) at his home in Washington, D.C., after he had read and responded personally to my published article on his semi-autobiographical novel *Blue Dragon, White Tiger: A Tet Story*. He was 88 and in fragile health, so I was unable to conduct a thorough interview with him on his perspectives and insights on the Vietnam War, his novels, and his political and diplomatic career. Dinh's wife and eldest son, Dr. Zung Vu Tran, retired Professor of Biostatistics and Pediatrics at the University of Colorado School of Medicine, were present during my visit. When Zung visited with me in Troy, Alabama, in the summer of 2012, after the demise of his father, he gave me a copy of a chapter of his father's unpublished memoir entitled "The Quirks and Whims of Heaven: A Meeting with President John F. Kennedy and the Buddhist Crisis," which he had found in his father's desk. Zung said that his father always had been an avid reader while he was alive, and because his father's papers and library held many important, valuable, and even very rare documents and books, Dinh wished to donate his library posthumously to a university for research purposes. I was able to assist Zung in finding a home for his father's library: the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University. During two research trips to the archive in 2016 and 2018, archivist Amy T. Mondt allowed me access to several boxes of important documents from Dinh's collection that had been classified and catalogued, including his correspondence with the White House, the US Congress, senators, ambassadors, and

politicians; invitation letters to speak at various US universities; immigration and naturalization documents of his family; his published articles; his correspondence with US publishers; reviews of his published novels; and cropped-out articles on Vietnam and the Vietnam War, and other matters.

Dinh was an important figure and spokesman during the Vietnam War. However, his political position has not been substantially recognized in either Vietnamese history or Vietnamese American history, although he is acknowledged in some history books, such as K. Bruce Galloway and Robert Bowie Johnson's *West Point: America's Power Fraternity*,¹ Gareth Porter's *Perils of Dominance*,² Ellen J. Hammer's *A Death in November: America in Vietnam 1963*,³ and Edward Miller's *Misalliance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and the Fate of South Vietnam*.⁴ Former United States Ambassador to the United Nations William J. vanden Heuvel called Dinh "a person of integrity, character, courage, and commitment," and Dinh's life was dedicated to the "preservation of democratic principles and values."⁵ Dinh was born and grew up in Hue, the ancient imperial capital of Vietnam. He was educated at Quoc Hoc College, and he

NOTES

Some of the sources below do not have complete information, such as the date and/or place of publication and the page numbers, because they were cropped-out articles that Dinh saved when he was alive. I was unable to find the missing information.

¹ Bruce Galloway and Robert Bowie Johnson, *West Point: America's Power Fraternity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1973), 7.

² Gareth Porter, *Perils of Dominance: Imbalance of Power and the Road to War in Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 123.

³ Ellen J. Hammer, *A Death in November: America in Vietnam, 1963* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 207, 257-58, 268-70, 281.

⁴ Edward Miller, *Misalliance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and the Fate of South Vietnam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 307-308.

⁵ William J. vanden Heuvel, "Affidavit" [to endorse Dinh's application for American citizenship], 1980.

considered himself a diplomat, a journalist, an artist, and a poet. His family upheld the intellectual and spiritual values of a traditional upper-class Vietnamese family—a family steeped in the tradition of Confucian scholars, Buddhist philosophers, and Taoist poets. During the French War in Vietnam, Dinh, like his father, actively joined in anti-colonial activities against the French and later against the Japanese. After the defeat of the Japanese in 1945, he became Deputy Chief of Staff for Special Operations, Vietnamese Liberation Army, in his hometown. In 1961, after ten years of working in the Vietnamese diplomatic service in Southeast Asia (Thailand and Burma), he joined the South Vietnamese Embassy in Washington, D.C., where he participated in the Civil Rights Movement, and in 1963 he was appointed Chargé d’Affaires. Prior to 1963, after having held various prestigious political positions, Dinh simultaneously served as non-resident ambassador to Argentina and head of the Vietnamese Embassy. He was ordered to return to Vietnam at the end of October 1963, and on November 1 of the same year, he met with South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem only a few minutes before the president was assassinated in a *coup d’état*. At the end of 1963, he resigned from his diplomatic position in Washington and pursued his passion for work toward peace and social justice. He taught Asian humanism at SUNY–Old Westbury (1964-71) and at the Dag Hammarskjold College in Columbia, Maryland. At Temple University (1971-85), he taught international politics and communications; he later was appointed chair of Temple’s Department of Pan-African Studies. Dinh had lived in the United States since 1961, and he and his wife became naturalized citizens in 1980. After his early retirement from Temple University in 1985, he devoted his efforts to the postwar reconstruction of Vietnam. Dinh died in Washington, D.C., in 2011, at the age of 88.

Dinh’s publications and scholarly activities are quite impressive: he published on Vietnamese history, international Buddhism, and the Third-World independence movement. His

articles appeared in the *New York Times*, the *Nation*, *National Geographic*, the *Christian Science Monitor*, and many other newspapers and journals. In 1967, Phil Semas, editor of *Collegiate Press Service*, invited Dinh to be a regular columnist for the newspaper, and Dinh contributed several articles that expressed his strong views on the Vietnam War.⁶ Besides his scholarly works, he wrote poetry and two novels set during the war, *No Passenger on the River* (1965) and *Blue Dragon, White Tiger: A Tet Story* (1983), both written in English and published in the United States. In 1996 and 1997, he contacted several presses about the publication of his memoir, but it was never published.

Dinh's caliber as a politician, diplomat, journalist, activist, and writer helped him to view and understand the Vietnam War critically and insightfully. He possessed first-hand knowledge of Vietnamese communism. According to Stefan T. Possony, former Director of International Research at Stanford University, Dinh is "a shrewd, able operator, extremely capable and intelligent. He has had considerable operational experience in intelligence and special operations in Southeast Asia, including direct experience with communist operations."⁷ In 1966, the television documentary programs on the Cold War invited Dinh to be a contributor to the programs because he was "one of the people best qualified to offer comment and analysis" of the 1963-1968 period of the Vietnam War.⁸ According to Edward Miller, Dinh was a "loyal Diem supporter [... who] rallied to the Bao Dai government and then rose rapidly through the South Vietnamese diplomatic hierarchy after 1954, thanks to his close ties to the Ngos." Dinh claimed that he, in 1958, had been consulted by a Democratic Republic of Vietnam diplomat about the reunification of the country.

⁶ Phil Semas, Letter to Tran Van Dinh, 18 Sept. 1967.

⁷ Stefan T. Possony, Letter to Steve, 21 Jan. 1964.

⁸ PP Lynda Regnier, Letter to Tran Van Dinh, 17 May 1966.

Moreover, Diem trusted Dinh with some communication assignments concerning South Vietnam's economic, political, and military relations, and with negotiations with North Vietnam and the United States.⁹ In Dinh's letter to Diem written from Bangkok, Thailand, and dated July 15, 1955, Dinh wrote that he had recently published an article about Diem in the *Bangkok Tribune* to praise the president for his "integrity and righteous commitment to national liberation and construction of a society governed by justice, a society in which the working class could live a decent life and in which human rights were promoted" (my translation).¹⁰ However, Dinh later became disappointed with the South Vietnamese government and disagreed with its policies. In his 1969 open letter to President Nixon, Dinh wrote,

I am persona non grata to South Vietnam, having committed three crimes against that state in the past five years: working for peace, being an active Buddhist (our Catholic president, General Nguyen Van Thieu, thinks that the Buddha was subversive and a communist), and writing magazine articles [...] which the Saigon government regards as "harmful to the security and morale of the Free World."¹¹

Several articles and personal letters that Dinh wrote and published in the 1960s and 1970s express his critical insights on the Vietnam War. In a 1965 letter to Roger N. Baldwin, Dinh wrote, "Nothing is going to prevent me from doing what I think is consistent with my faith." He added, "Of course I am careful enough and realistic enough not to shock but to guide, not to dictate but to educate, not to impose but to orient. My strategy in the midst of the confusing and heated debate going now [...] is to present the authentic Vietnamese views." More specifically, Dinh wanted to present the "basic interests of the Vietnamese peasants," even if their interests contradicted those of the

⁹ Edward Miller, *Misalliance*, 307-308.

¹⁰ Tran Van Dinh, Letter to Ngo Dinh Diem, 15 July 1955.

¹¹ Tran Van Dinh, "Another Open Letter to President Nixon," *The Christian Century*.

US government or the Vietnamese government or his own.¹² In his 1966 article "Vietnam: A Third Way," he highlights the peasant problem in wartime Vietnam, acknowledging the important role Vietnamese peasants have historically played in defending Vietnam against foreign aggressors. Dinh stated,

the Viet Cong tell the peasants that the land they till is theirs and that they will get more after victory, whereas the South Vietnamese governments have been trying to arrange for them to purchase the land from its owners on easy terms. As a result, the peasants tend to believe that a South Vietnamese government victory is not to their advantage and, until and unless they are convinced of the contrary, they will not welcome government troops into their areas because they feel that under their cover, the landlords will return and seize the land. [...] The Communists, who came to power with peasant support, usually betray the peasants as a result of applying their concept of economic development and their obsession with rapid industrialization and collectivization.¹³

Later in the article, Dinh points out that because about 80% of the Vietnamese were Buddhist and most of them were peasants, Buddhism would "help the Vietnamese people to identify themselves with the nation."¹⁴ In a 1971 interview, Dinh stated that Buddhist monks played a significant role in Vietnam because they served as "arbitrator, mediator or counselor" when a conflict occurred between civilians and law-enforcement officers.¹⁵ Dinh argued that Vietnamese peasants did not collaborate with the South Vietnamese government and the United States because both governments used "force and violence against the peasants and provoke[d] 'intense fear,'"¹⁶

¹² Tran Van Dinh, Letter to Roger N. Baldwin, 12 Jan, 1965.

¹³ Tran Van Dinh, "Vietnam: A Third Way," *New Politics: A Journal of Socialist Thoughts* 5, no. 4 (1966): 7-8

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹⁵ Dick Meyer, "Doubts Nixon's Plan Will Work," *The Republic* (Columbus, Indiana), 20 Apr. 1971, 1-2.

¹⁶ Tran Van Dinh, "Is Viet Cong 'Terrorism' the Reason for US Military Intervention in South Viet Nam?" *CPS (College Press Service)*, 18 Jan. 1968, 1-3.

whereas the peasants “loved and trusted” Buddhist monks for their sincerity.¹⁷ In many of Dinh’s articles, he emphasizes the role Buddhism plays in Vietnamese culture. Buddhism, as well as Confucianism and Taoism, has shaped the “Vietnamese national behavior” and character for over two thousand years. However, the West misperceives Buddhism “as a religion of renunciation, of passivism, even of fatalism,” whereas Buddhism examines the causes of sufferings, offers solutions to ending sufferings, and raises awareness about the universal law of cause and effect.¹⁸ Within the context of wartime Vietnam, Buddhism “proposes a third way, a non-Communist, non-American way to solve the present cruel conflict.” Vietnamese Buddhists always struggled for peace and freedom, and they relied on the leadership of the Buddhist Church in their attempts to preserve and reconstruct the country.¹⁹

Dinh notes that Buddhism and Marxism have one goal in common: a “deep concern for the masses.” This common characteristic makes socialism superior to capitalism “in its practical aspect.”²⁰ In his 1967 letter to Congressman John G. Dow, Dinh suggested, “The only effective deterrent to communism is nationalism and in Vietnam nationalism and Buddhism are interchangeable. President Diem in the past and General Ky committed a grave error in trying to fight communism and suppressing the Buddhists at the same time.”²¹ Dinh seemed to be an advocate of Marxism because, when it was introduced into Vietnam, it became “Vietnamized and

¹⁷ Tran Van Dinh, “Vietnam: A Third Way,” 13.

¹⁸ Tran Van Dinh, “Astounding Captured Document Reveals Mind of Enemy,” *Washingtonian*, Apr. 1968, 45.

¹⁹ Tran Van Dinh, “Vietnam: A Third Way,” 9.

²⁰ Tran Van Dinh, “Past National Struggles and Present Socialist Revolution in Vietnam”: Review of *Tradition and Revolution in Vietnam*, by Nguyen Khac Vien, *Monthly Review*, Oct. 1975, 50.

²¹ Tran Van Dinh, Letter to Congressman John G. Dow, 24 May 1967.

popularized with the Vietnamese struggle for independence and freedom.”²² Dinh was against the Thieu-Ky regime because neither of them could “represent the Vietnamese people,”²³ who, Dinh argued, traditionally upheld “the virtues of austerity, integrity and honesty,” whereas South Vietnamese officials relied so heavily on American aid that they became corrupt.²⁴

In several speeches Dinh delivered in the second half of the 1960s, he articulated his perspectives on the role of the United States in Vietnam. In March 1966, he said that the United States should stop sending more troops to Vietnam because more G.I.s “would create large inflation problems with the economic system there.” Dinh emphasized that traditionally the Vietnamese people always distrusted foreigners.²⁵ At Fresno State College, in April 1970, Dinh stated that “the U.S. should have withdrawn their troops” in 1963, after the assassination of Diem.²⁶ In his 1969 article entitled “What the US Forgets: Vietnam Is One Land and One People,” Dinh promoted Vietnam’s unification, arguing that

it would be an illusion for the U.S. to expect that South Vietnam will remain a separated state for a long time after the war under a kind of Korea settlement, or to hope for the return of the French colonial three Vietnams as proposed by Major General Edward G. Lansdale (a communist North, a neutralist Center and anti-communist South). For when the mountains and rivers of Vietnam cease to echo the thunder of the guns of war, the issue of reunification will occupy the minds of all Vietnamese.²⁷

²² Tran Van Dinh, ““Confucianism and Marxism in Viet Nam: The Doctrine of Chinh Nghia, or the Just Cause,” prepared for delivery at the 1978 Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association. New York, Aug. 31-Sept. 3, 1978.

²³ Tran Van Dinh, [Commentary on Truong Binh and his family’s letter to Ambassador Bunker],” *CPS (College Press Service)*, 1 Nov. 1967: 4-5.

²⁴ Tran Van Dinh, Letter to Congressman Lester Wolff, 16 Nov. 1967.

²⁵ “More GI’s in Vietnam to Create Inflation,” *The Cleveland Press*, 24 Mar. 1966.

²⁶ Jenny Bailey, “Dinh—US Commitment Should Have Ended in ‘63,” *Daily Collegian (Fresno State College)*, 2 Apr. 1970, 1 + 7.

²⁷ Tran Van Dinh, “What the U.S. Forgets: Vietnam Is One Land and One People,” *The National Catholic Reporter*, 6 Aug. 1969.

Oftentimes, Dinh blamed the United States for its ignorance of Vietnam, which caused the tragedy of the Vietnam War, by which he meant “the United States was forced to support various governments in South Vietnam which were and are hated by the Vietnamese people.”²⁸ He criticized the United States for misrepresenting “the problem of South Vietnam” to the American public “not as a revolutionary war with all its complexities, all if political, social, economic, psychological and cultural aspects,” but as a war between the virtues of capitalism and the evils of communism.²⁹ He opposed the United States’ bombing of North Vietnam and urged the United States not to interfere into Vietnamese politics and to recognize the National Liberation Front “at least as a political reality.”³⁰ Dinh disapproved of President Nixon’s Vietnamization of the war because it not only prolonged the war but also hurt the South Vietnamese people.³¹ Dinh suggested that if the United States wanted to win the war, it should withdraw “all of its troops and substitute teachers, doctors, and nurses.” He also warned that the United States could never win the war “by military might” and advised the United States to deal with the Vietnamese people “as human beings” because simply killing them did not work.³² In his speech delivered at Michigan State University in February 1965, Dinh explained, “Doctors would be more valuable than soldiers in winning the war in Viet Nam” because the Viet Cong would never kill a doctor—peasants normally considered doctors as their good friends, and they would rebel if doctors were mistreated or brutalized.³³ In his 1976 article entitled “Viet Nam and America: Some Reflections,”

²⁸ Tran Van Dinh, Letter to Senator George McGovern, 30 July 1965.

²⁹ Tran Van Dinh, “A Middleground Solution,” *Ripon Forum* 4, no. 10 (Oct. 1968): 6.

³⁰ Tran Van Dinh, “The Immoral War in Vietnam,” *CPS (College Press Service)*, 2 Oct. 1968, 3.

³¹ Dick Meyer, “Doubts Nixon’s Plan Will Work,” *The Republic* (Columbus, Indiana), 20 Apr. 1971, 1-2.

³² “U.S. Troop Withdrawal, Replacement with Civilian Aid Urged in Viet Nam,” *The Blade* (Toledo, Ohio), 19 Feb. 1965.

³³ “Viet Nam Peasants Must Win War,” *State News* (Michigan State University), 4 Feb. 1965.

he concluded that, from the perspectives of the Americans, the Vietnam War was fought “without knowledge, consent, or support of the majority of the American people.” From the perspectives of the Vietnamese people, who fought for the integrity of Vietnam, it was a *chính nghĩa* war, or a war fought for a just cause, “for the very human principles in which all civilizations stand, for the conscience of humankind.”³⁴

In order to establish Dinh’s political insights into the historical period through which he served and about which he thought deeply, a brief summary of characters and events presented in his two novels will reveal much about his inner conflicts, which have bearing upon the memoir entrusted to me. Dinh’s debut novel, *No Passenger on the River*, published two years after the assassination of President Ngo Dinh Diem, captures his perspectives on the South Vietnamese government, its corruption and nepotism, and the diplomatic relationship between the United States and South Vietnam. A 1965 review of the novel stated, “The book is the story of the role that the United States has assumed abroad, and it is a tragedy of naivety and goodwill,” and the novel was a must-read for American “policy-makers and project creators in foreign affairs.”³⁵ Although Dinh states that the novel’s characters are fictional, its protagonist, Colonel Tran Minh, resembles the author in several ways, primarily in terms of his professional background and personal observations of military and political affairs in the early 1960s. Thus, it could be concluded that *No Passenger on the River* is at least quasi-autobiographical, if not semi-autobiographical.

The novel centers upon Minh’s romantic relationship with Ellen Kauffman, stepdaughter of General Raleigh, and Minh’s return to Vietnam upon the urgent order of President Diem. Minh,

³⁴ Tran Van Dinh, “Viet Nam and America: Some Reflections,” *US/Indochina Report*, 30 Apr. 1976, 5.

³⁵ Edward Hunter, “Book by a Viet Nameese: A Love Story, But Is It?” *Tactics 2*, no. 4 (20 Apr. 1965).

a forty-year-old bachelor and diplomat, has completed his formal education at the Command and General Staff College in Kansas, and the novel opens with Minh's visit to the residence of the Armed Forces Attaché of Vietnam, located in Washington, D.C. The Americans with whom Minh interacts commend President Diem on his great leadership in fighting against communism, but they are concerned about and disappointed with his inefficient and nepotistic administration, and with his undemocratic strategies in dealing with the communists and Buddhists. They also affirm the US support of Diem's political agenda, and Minh concurs with the American criticism of Diem's brother and sister-in-law, Ngo Dinh Nhu and Tran Le Xuan (Madame Nhu). Minh divulges that his father and Diem have been friends for forty years and that his father respects Diem for his "absolute integrity" and "abnegation and honesty."³⁶ Minh further adds that Diem is, in fact, "a living and successful product of Confucianist-Mandarinal education which was the only education his father received and which he thought was the best for humanity."³⁷ On the contrary, Ngo Dinh Nhu and his wife, Tran Le Xuan, whose names are never mentioned in the novel but who are referred to as the Adviser and his wife, respectively, represent the brutality and dictatorship that are detrimental both to the nation and to its people. Minh describes the Adviser as a man with "an air of Machiavellian mystery and cynical vanity, wicked intelligence and calculated malice,"³⁸ and his wife as a woman with "an aggressive face and gesticulating hands [who] rushed in like a hurricane."³⁹ Although Nhu proudly praises his wife for her dedication, patriotism, and directness, the common Vietnamese people with whom Minh interacts condemn her for manipulating the government, passing the ridiculous Morality Law, and oppressing the Buddhists. Minh exclaims

³⁶ Tran Van Dinh, *No Passenger on the River* (New York: Vantage, 1965), 72.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 72.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 75.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 76.

sardonically, “[T]he power in Vietnam right now is in the hands of a cruel, cynical, horrible woman!” and Minh cannot “suppress [the] intense hatred and disgust he [feels] for the Adviser’s wife.”⁴⁰ Minh learns from his countrymen that “the President is basically a good man, a patriot, naïve but honest.”⁴¹ However, his family and sycophants offer him bad advice that is severely detrimental to his leadership. Minh perceives that the South Vietnamese government has become corrupt and rotten, and that a *coup d’état* is the only way to change the political situation in South Vietnam.

Concerning the Buddhist crisis from a historical perspective, it is unnecessary to go into detail the Diem regime’s oppression of Buddhism in Vietnam and his attempt to Christianize the country, because several books have treated this topic thoroughly. For instance, in *Fire in the Lake*, Frances Fitzgerald devoted an entire chapter to “The Buddhist Crisis,” which contextualizes and chronicles the major events that led to the self-immolation of the Venerable Thich Quang Duc, a defining act of protest against the Diem regime that gained significant international attention.⁴² In *A Death in November: American in Vietnam, 1963*, Ellen J. Hammer mentions Dinh a few times, and the information pertaining to Dinh that Hammer provides reinforces the fact that Dinh was a very important politician entrusted by Diem to communicate with the US government. In his 1972 article “Catholics in Vietnam,” Dinh points out the paradoxes in Diem’s political viewpoints. Diem was a nationalist and a patriot who was both anti-French and anti-communist, and his regime was founded upon three principles: *Bãi Phong* (abolish feudalism), *Diệt Thực* (terminate colonialism), and *Chống Cộng* (oppose to communism). On the surface, these principles seemed congruous, but when placed within the context of Vietnamese history, their co-existence seemed almost

⁴⁰ Ibid., 189, 78.

⁴¹ Ibid., 142.

⁴² Frances Fitzgerald, *Fire in the Lake: The Vietnamese and the Americans in Vietnam* (New York: Vintage, 1972), 368-388.

impossible: "to be antifeudal and anticolonial and at the same time anti-Communist" became difficult in that "the Communists in Vietnam, by their deeds, have shown themselves to be successful fighters against feudalism and colonialism."⁴³

In Dinh's *No Passenger on the River*, Minh is an anti-war humanist who, very early in the novel, states that the Vietnam War "is an instrument of politics."⁴⁴ He, as a Vietnamese national, feels responsible for the fate of his country. Minh rejects his fleeting temptation to stay in the United States to avoid the war, primarily because of the parental and ancestral high expectations placed upon him: staying in the United States would debase his dignity, and "he had a war to fight, a country to serve."⁴⁵ The self-immolations of Buddhist monks and the suicidal act of the famous writer Nhat Linh to protest the government's oppression of Vietnamese Buddhists make Minh feel as if members of his family had died. Minh expresses his frustration at the way soldiers are made "butchers for the corrupted politicians."⁴⁶ What distresses Minh most is the fact that the Vietnam War forces the Vietnamese people to kill each other. He became frustrated with people's indifference to "the cruel war[,] and Minh was frightened at the thought that the Vietnamese accepted war as part of their daily life."⁴⁷ Psychologically and morally, Minh is torn by conflicting ideologies, values, and beliefs, and he is unable to reach a solution to his personal conflict between "the loyalty of the man in uniform [and] the duty of a civilized human being and patriot."⁴⁸ On the one hand, Minh maintains his belief in Diem's basic goodness and patriotism; on the other hand,

⁴³ Tran Van Dinh, "Catholics in Vietnam," *Worldview*, Nov. 1972, 38-39.

⁴⁴ Tran Van Dinh, *No Passenger on the River*, 42.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 62.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 95.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 129.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 125.

he determines to subvert Diem's regime in order to bring a quick, positive change in the governmental structure. Upon his return to Vietnam, Minh notices that the government is so detached from its people that it fails to listen to their voices and fulfill their wishes. The fact that Vietnam's traditional values of "intellectual qualities" have been replaced by "brutality and violence" pushes Minh "against his own will and his own inclinations."⁴⁹ Despite his formal education and life experience in the United States, Minh does not underappreciate his Vietnamese cultural values and traditions. In fact, he cherishes the "beauty of Vietnamese culture, its human aspects, [and] its sentimental expressions" even more.⁵⁰

As a diplomat, Minh is chary and economical in his use of words, but in the second half of the novel, he becomes more overtly critical and skeptical of the US intervention in Vietnamese politics. In a conversation with Captain Rosenberg, Minh corrects his interlocutor's prejudiced view of the Viet Cong, arguing that the Viet Cong "definitely are not unintelligent and lazy" and that in wartime, people universally tend to be "unkind."⁵¹ Minh states firmly that the South Vietnamese and the Americans cannot win the war that "has no purpose, no objective, no romantic attraction to the young and no policy for peace."⁵² The Vietnam War does not generate democracy and freedom among the Vietnamese people in the South; in fact, it is "unpleasant and inhuman."⁵³ Minh vehemently condemns the Americans for their use of napalm bombs on his country and people, sardonically pointing out that only lunatics "think that this war can be won by planes,

⁴⁹ Ibid., 129.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 138.

⁵¹ Ibid., 108.

⁵² Ibid., 109.

⁵³ Ibid., 109.

bombs and tanks.”⁵⁴ Minh does not approve of Diem’s financial and military reliance on the Americans because it makes the South Vietnamese government “not truly Vietnamese” by neither listening to nor fulfilling the “legitimate wishes of the people.”⁵⁵ In addition, Minh does not believe in a “genuine friendship” between the United States and South Vietnam because the so-called “friendship” between the two countries is “based on certain interests.”⁵⁶ Therefore, Minh repudiates the US claim of acting as a heroic savior of South Vietnam. This view was later elaborated in Dinh’s 1965 letter to Senator George McGovern: Dinh believed that the United States’ victory would become a reality if and only if the leader of Vietnam, an underdeveloped country, were “both a patriot for his people and at the same time a true friend and equal partner of the United States.”⁵⁷

The perspectives that Minh holds resemble those that the author himself held, as is evidenced in many of his non-fictional writings. In the article entitled “Tran Van Dinh Falls for It: Coalition Trap Is Laid,” published in *Tactics* of April 20, 1968, its author (also the editor of *Tactics*) states: “He [Dinh] has become the Viet Nameese symbol of how our [US] government edges a friend into a corner from where he has no alternative but to turn against our own and his true interests.” The author criticizes the US government for betraying Dinh, who had held strong faith and admiration for the United States in its war against communism; consequently, Dinh “now appears on the political stage in a dangerously contrary role.” The author points out that Dinh was “disgusted,” “shocked,” and “indignant” at the State Department for labeling Vietnamese

⁵⁴ Ibid., 124.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 141.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 155.

⁵⁷ Tran Van Dinh, Letter to Senator George McGovern, 30 July 1965.

commandos “cowards” and for its problematic reportage on the war.⁵⁸ This criticism is reinforced by Dinh’s 1966 letter written to Roger N. Baldwin, in which he expressed his sadness over President Johnson’s escalation of the war and his moral dilemma: “How long I could [sic] stay in this country [America] and see the US planes wreck my homeland? Although I sincerely love this country, my faith on your administration cannot be unlimited.”⁵⁹

In his second novel, *Blue Dragon, White Tiger: A Tet Story*, Dinh states in the Preface, “Most of the characters [...] are real people,”⁶⁰ and Dinh also names his protagonist Minh, who shares several common characteristics with Minh in *No Passenger on the River*. It could be inferred that they are the same person and that Minh in *Blue Dragon, White Tiger* is the author’s self-portrait. The protagonist, who has just returned to Vietnam from the United States, perceives the irony of the Vietnam War and the US involvement in Vietnamese politics. He becomes a communist sympathizer, working for the communists as an interpreter. Minh never claims to be a member of the Vietnamese Communist Party; he is merely a patriotic nationalist. In a conversation with Loc, a highly-educated communist cadre, Minh criticizes the Americans for their “total disregard and ignorance of other nations’ historical experiences[;] they believe that armed with guns, a copy of the Declaration of Independence, and a Constitution, they can propagate a ‘melting pot’ policy around the world” while, ironically, the US government cannot solve the racial tensions between its white and non-white citizens.⁶¹ In addition, Minh debunks the biased stereotype constructed by the Americans about the communists: the communists are not barbaric, bloodthirsty jungle-fighters. In fact, Dinh humanizes most of them as patriotic soldiers and moral leaders who sacrifice

⁵⁸ “Tran Van Dinh Falls for It: Coalition Trap Is Laid,” *Tactics*, 20 Apr. 1968, 8.

⁵⁹ Tran Van Dinh, Letter to Roger N. Baldwin, 1 July 1966.

⁶⁰ Tran Van Dinh, *Blue Dragon, White Tiger: A Tet Story* (Philadelphia: TriAm, 1983), Preface.

⁶¹ *Ibid.* 95.

their personal pursuit of happiness for the liberation and unification of Vietnam. The reason Minh leaves Vietnam after the war ends results from his disappointment with communist cadres who fail to balance their *Lý* (reason) and *Tình* (feeling) and thus become emotionless automatons. Dinh was a firm believer of the concepts of *Lý* and *Tình*, and his writings reflect how they directed his philosophy of life: "Ly and Tinh are the Yin-Yang of [the] Vietnamese process of judgment and resolution to a human situation."⁶²

After the assassination of President Diem, Dinh's antiwar position seemed to be consistent, as demonstrated in several articles he published. In his personal letter to H. Ross Perot, dated January 12, 1970, he wrote, "I am a Vietnamese who since 1964 opposed the US massive military intervention in my country. [...] The war in Vietnam has blurred the [civilized] image of the United States, damaged the social and moral fabric of our two peoples and therefore it must stop."⁶³ In "The Other Side of the Table," published in *The Washington Monthly* of January 1970, he quotes General Nguyen Cao Ky, who stated that American and Vietnamese negotiators could not reach a consensus because the Americans refused to understand the Vietnamese and the common goals and dreams that both Ky and the communists shared. Interestingly, Ky argued, "not all the evil is on the communist side."⁶⁴ While the Americans tended to generalize the communists as under-educated peasants, Dinh observes that all the communists were not, especially some of the ranking communist leaders. Vietnamese communist leaders were "Confucianist-Buddhist-Taoist scholars and administrators who have resorted to western theory and logic and methods chiefly in order to deal with [the] 'not so civilized' westerners."⁶⁵ It is crucial to note that communist

⁶² Tran Van Dinh, Letter to Donovan Webster, 22 Mar. 1996.

⁶³ Tran Van Dinh, Letter to H. Ross Perot, 12 Jan. 1970.

⁶⁴ Tran Van Dinh, "The Other Side of the Table," *The Washington Monthly*, Jan. 1970, 74-75.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 75.

leaders who complied with Confucianism upheld "law and order," promoted "justice," and emphasized "virtue and morality." Their life was characterized by "kindness, austerity, and simplicity."⁶⁶ Moreover, Dinh attempted to correct American false notions of the war: according to the perspectives of Hanoi and the Vietcong, the Vietnam War was by no means a "civil war," because it was "purely and simply an 'aggression' committed by the United States—a country that has no place in the Asian and Vietnamese cosmos."⁶⁷ *Administration*, rather than *government*, is the proper term to refer to the Thieu-Ky regime, which was "nothing but an 'odious' and temporary instrument of that 'aggression'—'a cliché of traitors,' no more no less."⁶⁸ In fact, the Thieu-Ky administration should not be recognized as the legitimate government of South Vietnam. Therefore, Dinh concludes, the Americans should cease its interference in Vietnamese politics and let the Vietnamese decide their own country's fate.⁶⁹

In "Viet Nam 1974: A Revolution Unfulfilled," Dinh criticizes the United States for its "ignorance of the Vietnamese revolution" when it attempted to re-intervene in Vietnamese politics after the Paris Accords. Not until the 1980s did American historians, and not until the 1990s did Vietnamese American critics, speaking postcolonially, point out that US discourse on the war always had been Americacentric, but Dinh, already in 1974, had noted that the communists "remain[ed] faceless black-pajamaed mysteries to be pictured only as corpses or the shadowy embodiments of diabolical qualities." While the "just cause" of the war, from the American perspective, was to save South Vietnam from communism, the "just cause" of the war, from the communists' perspective, was to achieve independence, reunification, and social justice; therefore,

⁶⁶ Ibid., 76.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 77.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 77.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 80.

the Vietnamese revolution must be viewed as fundamentally Vietnamese, and it must be represented as a “basic continuity” in Vietnam’s history.⁷⁰ This explains why, in postwar Vietnam, those who had allied themselves with the former South Vietnamese government or the Americans, politically and militarily, were classified as *nguy*, or betrayers of the national revolution against the American aggressors or imperialists. Dinh argues that the *nguy* generally were metropolitan educated bourgeoisie and wealthy Vietnamese who benefited from the presence of the Americans; and the *nguy*, to secure their privilege, “promoted the anti-communist, individualistic, materialistic ideology learned from the French and later from the Americans.”⁷¹ In the conclusion to his article, Dinh requested that, in order for the 1973 Paris Accords to be effective, it is crucial to prohibit “all kinds of aid by foreign powers to all parties in Viet Nam, except perhaps aid from international, non-governmental humanitarian organizations.”⁷² He realized that as long as the Thieu administration continued to receive military and economic support from the United States, the Vietnamese revolution would not fulfill the basic aspirations of the Vietnamese people for “peace, independence, and unity.”⁷³ Later, in his introduction to *This Nation and Socialism Are One*, published in English in 1976, by Secretary General Le Duan of the Vietnamese Communist Party, Dinh, the translator of the book, states that the Vietnamese revolution against the Americans was “one of the most important contributions to human liberation in the twentieth century in both theory and practice.”⁷⁴ Throughout the history of Vietnam, the Vietnamese people

⁷⁰ Tran Van Dinh, “Viet Nam 1974: A Revolution Unfulfilled,” *Pacific Community: An Asian Quarterly Review* 5, nos. 1-4 (Oct. 1973-July 1974): 436.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 438.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 444.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 444.

⁷⁴ Tran Van Dinh, Introduction, in *This Nation and Socialism Are One*, by Le Duan (Chicago: Vanguard Books, 1976), xviii.

always have demonstrated resistance to foreign aggressors because they are imbued with the tasks of *dựng nước* (building the country) and *giữ nước* (defending the country).⁷⁵

Dinh perceived the unification of Vietnam in 1975 to be a significant historical milestone in Vietnamese history because it fulfilled the collective will and aspirations of the Vietnamese people, because it did “*hợp tình, hợp lý* (conform to feeling, conform to reason)” (my italics).⁷⁶ However, he emphasized that if the United States wanted to establish a strong relationship with Vietnam and heal war wounds, the United States must consider and develop a profound understanding of Vietnamese history, and “the nature and the effects of the conflict,”⁷⁷ by which he meant “nationalism and communism in Vietnam were synonymous.”⁷⁸ In other words, within the context of Vietnamese history, especially its revolution against the French colonialists, communism stemmed from nationalism, a form of resistance to Western imperialism. In an unpublished article, “The Guns of March and the Spears of August,” Dinh explains that Vietnamese nationalism generally refers to the “absolute rejection of foreign direct intervention and conditional acceptance of assimilated external influences.”⁷⁹ This explains why the protagonist Minh in *Blue Dragon, White Tiger* identifies himself as a nationalist and collaborates with the communists during the war, despite the previous political and diplomatic positions assigned him by President Diem. In his 1976 article “Vietnam in the Year of the Dragon: Reunification, Reunion, and Socialist Reconstruction,” Dinh contextualizes the 1975 reunification within the long history

⁷⁵ Ibid., xiii

⁷⁶ Tran Van Dinh, Review of *Our Vietnam: The War 1954-1975*, by A. J. Langguth, *Christian Century*, 7-14 Feb. 2001, 57.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 56.

⁷⁸ Tran Van Dinh, “Techniques vs. Ideology” (Review of *War of Ideas: The US Propaganda Campaign in Vietnam*, by Robert W. Chandler), *Journal of Communication* 32, no. 3 (Summer 1982): 227.

⁷⁹ Tran Van Dinh, “The Guns of March and the Spears of August.”

of Vietnam's fighting foreign invaders, and early-on expanding its territory aggressively toward the South: "Vietnam was not a gift from nature but a conquest by the Vietnamese, who have shed so much blood in so many wars."⁸⁰ Dinh did not approve of the United States acknowledging the former South Vietnam as an independent nation, and he criticized the United States for "its imperialist policy," which attempted to make South Vietnam the center for American power in Southeast Asia: "The history of the two Indochina wars proved to all Vietnamese beyond any doubt that territorial division of Vietnam was part and parcel of foreign aggressors."⁸¹ Dinh accused the United States and its massive attacks of having "destroyed the social fabric of the country [Vietnam]" and of having "exposed to the masses the brutality and barbarity of capitalism and imperialism."⁸² The unification of Vietnam in 1975 liberated the Vietnamese from Western "exploitation and oppression," and it established a "more just and humane society."⁸³ He affirmed that Marxists generally were progressives who led the Third World's movements toward liberation.⁸⁴

Corroborating the meeting with President Kennedy reported in Dinh's memoir has proved difficult, using the records held by the John Kennedy Presidential Library, but a gap in the archival evidence does not discredit Dinh's account of the meeting, which he described as "informal." I believe, however, that Dinh must have met President Kennedy, due to Dinh's official position as Charge d'Affaires ad interim of South Vietnam. On September 23, 1963, Angier Biddle Duke, Chief

⁸⁰ Tran Van Dinh, "Vietnam in the Year of the Dragon: Reunification, Reunion, and Socialist Reconstruction," *Monthly Review*, May 1976, 22.

⁸¹ Ibid. 25.

⁸² Tran Van Dinh, "Vietnam in the Year of the Dragon," 29.

⁸³ Ibid., 32.

⁸⁴ Tran Van Dinh, "Steel Poems in Which People Sing," *Monthly Review*, Apr. 1977, 50.

of Protocol of the Department of State, invited Dinh and his wife to attend a concert that celebrated the eighteenth anniversary of the founding of the United Nations, and the event was “under the patronage of the President of the United States and Mrs. Kennedy.”⁸⁵ The memoir presents Dinh’s positions on such important historical events as the Buddhist crisis of 1963 and the assassinations of Presidents Diem and Kennedy of the same year. The memoir documents the sincere feelings of an important South Vietnamese diplomat who was an eye-witness of events during one of the most formative years in both US and Vietnamese history. Dinh’s writing style is self-effacing and sincere, which adds distinct credibility to the account, held in his desk until discovered posthumously by his son, and written by a diplomat respected for his integrity. Apart from the social and political events that he witnessed from the position of a respected Vietnamese official, Dinh’s account of his reasons for resigning from Vietnamese diplomatic responsibilities and remaining in the United States is insightful. Dinh’s memoir substantiates the balanced perspectives provided in his novels, which parallels and substantiates the perspectives provided in his memoir.

Vietnamese American literary critic and author Viet Thanh Nguyen, whose novel *The Sympathizer* won the 2016 Pulitzer Prize, states in his article “The Great Vietnam War Novel Was Not Written by an American,” published in the *New York Times*, that in the 1980s and 1990s, while he was trying to learn more about the Vietnam War and the Vietnamese refugees’ experience, he could not find many books about the topics available either in English or Vietnamese that were written by the Vietnamese. Nguyen calls Dinh’s two novels, mentioned and summarized above, as “a few exceptions” and states that “it was rare to find Vietnamese writers in the United States

⁸⁵ Angier Biddle Duke, Letter to Tran Van Dinh, 23 Sept. 1963.

speaking about this war, or to hear any Vietnamese voices at all in mainstream America.”⁸⁶

Contextualizing Dinh’s novels within the context of America-dominated literature about the war, Nguyen wonders “if he [Dinh] was lonely as the only Vietnamese novelist in America of his time.” *The Quirks and Whims of Heaven*, therefore, is an important document that deserves consideration by historians of the era of the Vietnam War, as it enriches the corpus of early Vietnamese American literature.

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⁸⁶ Viet Thanh Nguyen, “The Great Vietnam War Novel Was Not Written by an American,” *The New York Times*, 2 May 2017, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/02/opinion/vietnam-war-novel-was-not-written-by-an-american.html>

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Quan Manh Ha is Associate Professor of American Literature & Ethnic Studies at the University of Montana. His primary research interests include Asian American literature, Vietnam War literature, and literary translation. He thanks the Humanities Institute at the University of Montana for funding his trip to Texas Tech University to do research on this project, Dr. Zung Vu Tran for granting the permission to publish his father's memoir, and the archivists at the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University for their help and support.

The Quirks and Whims of Heaven: A Meeting with President John F. Kennedy and the Buddhist Crisis

Tran Van Dinh

When power leads man toward arrogance,
poetry reminds him of his limitations.
When power narrows the area of man's
concern, poetry reminds him of the richness
and diversity of existence. When power
corrupts, poetry cleanses.

—President John F. Kennedy, Speech at Amherst College, Massachusetts, October 26, 1963

I

A Meeting with President Kennedy

The unusually cool air made it feel more like a Washington fall on that eighth day of May, 1963, twenty-three months after my assignment to the Embassy of the Republic of South Vietnam as Minister-Counselor in charge of Press and Education. I was walking toward the White House to see President John F. Kennedy for the first time.

The President had made the request for an informal meeting in the Oval Office. Upon receiving his invitation, I had supposed that our discussion would concern the newly explosive political situation in Vietnam. The day before, in Hue, the former capital of Vietnam, a company of Civil Guards (Bao An), commanded by a Catholic officer, had opened fire on an unarmed Buddhist crowd, killing nine persons, some of them children. It was Buddha's 2,597th birthday, and the citizens of Hue, the majority of them Buddhist, were celebrating the holy day by defying

the government's ban on flying Buddhist flags. That edict had been issued by President Ngo Dinh Diem, a friend of my father's and for a long time my political mentor and boss. He had done so at the instigation of his older brother Ngo Dinh Thuc, the Archbishop of Hue who had, three weeks earlier, celebrated, in a sea of Vatican banners only, his 25th anniversary of being elevated to the position of Bishop.

Hue is my native city; it was also President Diem's hometown. I am a Buddhist. President Diem was a Catholic. Some of my friends at the Department of State and other US government agencies—the Department of Justice, USIA, and the CIA, many of whom I had known in my earlier assignment in Bangkok and Rangoon—were aware of my close association with President Diem, despite my different religious belief. Since I had been in Washington, D.C., they had often suggested that I should see President Kennedy, some even volunteered to arrange such a visit. I had consistently resisted their offers. I didn't want to create any misunderstanding with my Ambassador, and I didn't wish to seek any personal favors from the President of the United States of America. I had no political ambitions. I aspired only to literary achievements. This time, however, I could easily guess what President Kennedy wanted to know: the essence, the meaning, and the consequences of the emerging "Buddhist Crisis" that threatened to destroy the Diem's regime and endanger the future of the US commitment in Vietnam

There was a tea service set up in his office, but neither of us touched it. President Kennedy shook my hand and showed me to a sofa next to his rocking chair. No one else was in the Oval Office, which to me seemed smaller and less impressive than when I had first seen it a few years earlier during a conducted visit for tourists. He quickly put me at ease when he told me that I was "highly regarded by people at State" and others such as Assistant Attorney General Bill vanden Heuvel and Don Wilson, Deputy Director of USIA. In the early 1950s, Bill had been assistant to

General "Wild Bill" Donovan, former director of the Office of Strategic Services (the forerunner of the CIA), then US Ambassador to Thailand. I had been at that time with the Vietnamese Embassy in Bangkok, and we worked closely "on matters of mutual interest" (meaning intelligence). Donald Wilson had been with Life magazine.

President Kennedy looked grim. He must have been deeply concerned about the Buddhist Crisis, because he asked me at once about my thoughts on what was then happening in Hue. I told him that relations between Buddhists and Catholics in Vietnam in general and in Hue in particular had been cordial until 1961 when President Diem's older brother Ngo Dinh Thuc had been named Archbishop. He then blatantly began to use his younger brother's position to fulfill his ambition: the Christianization of Vietnam. His intention was to capitalize on the 1954 influx of nearly one million Catholics who had moved from the North to the South following the Geneva Agreements that temporarily divided the country at the 17th parallel. The agreements were signed after the French defeat at the battle of Dien Bien Phu by the Vietnam People's Army, thus ending the first Indochina War and the French colonization of Vietnam.

While talking to President Kennedy, who looked older and tougher than he did on TV, I was constantly reminding myself that I was facing the most powerful man in the world, a Catholic with a closely-knit, politicized family not unlike that of President Diem. I made it clear to him that although Catholicism was generally identified with French colonialism, Vietnamese intellectuals recognized the good work of some missionaries such as Alexander de Rhodes who had helped the successful Romanization of the Vietnamese written language.

President Kennedy listened attentively. Suddenly, he interrupted me. "I know you come from a Buddhist family," he said. "Can you tell me about the doctrine and teachings of Buddhism and its practice in Vietnam?" I was happy that he had changed the subject of conversation, thus

relieving me of the strained, self-imposed caution that I felt when talking about Catholicism with a Catholic President. I told him that Buddhism had originally come to Vietnam from both China and India over two thousand years ago. It gradually blended with the native traditional beliefs and customs at the popular level, and with Confucianism and Taoism among intellectual classes. Topics for imperial examinations to recruit officials were based on Buddhist, Confucianist, and Taoist texts. However, Buddhism was credited with the building of national culture and the defense of national independence and unity. The emperors of early dynasties from the 10th to the 17th centuries were Buddhist scholars, statesmen, and poets. I realized that I should not take too much time talking about Buddhism, although Mr. Kennedy seemed quite interested in the subject. I concluded this part of the conversation with a metaphor I had heard from a Buddhist monk years earlier in Hue: "Buddhism is like a drop of mercury; when you strike at it, it disintegrates into many parts, but as soon as you remove your fist, they all run together again."

The President's face brightened. He seemed impressed and intrigued by the poetic figure of speech. "Then," he asked, "do you think that the Buddhists will rally against the government again even if it makes concessions to their demands?"

I took a few seconds to find an appropriate and objective answer to that difficult question. "I'm afraid that's going to be the case," I said. I told him how the South Vietnamese government, especially since the abortive coup d'état of 1960, had shown no sign or intention of making sincere concessions to popular demands. On the contrary, an increased and manifested arrogance of power—not from President Diem himself, but from his close advisers, his older brother the Archbishop, his younger brother and political adviser Mr. Ngo Dinh Nhu; also his sister-in-law, Madame Nhu, and his other younger brother Mr. Ngo Dinh Can, the de-facto overlord of Central

Vietnam and Hue—all these family members would rule out any effort at reconciliation. "To the Vietnamese at large," I concluded, "their President has lost control of his government."

President Kennedy was visibly disturbed. He shook his head, then said briskly, "What is the name of that over-lord in Hue?" He then gave me a piece of paper and I wrote down the name of Ngo Dinh Can.

I added that Mr. Can, who had little education and no political experience, preferred to be addressed as Cau Can (Uncle Can). I detected a faintly sarcastic smile on his face. I wondered if he was thinking about Uncle Sam. I had the impression that he had little prior knowledge of Mr. Can's activities. He looked up reflectively. "Do you think then that there should be a change of personnel, of leadership?"

I didn't answer, although since 1960 I had thought that President Diem had become the prisoner of his family, and that his government had alienated most segments of the population: the students, intellectuals, peasants, Buddhists, and even some open-minded Catholics. The war for the "hearts and minds" of the Vietnamese people had been lost even before the Buddhist "incident" of the day before. The military war against the Viet Cong was a failure, as had been demonstrated by the battle of Ap Bac.

I wondered how much the President really knew about this debacle that had occurred just a few months earlier. On January 2, 1963, a date which happened to be the eve of the birthday of President Ngo Dinh Diem, two thousand South Vietnamese soldiers and American advisers, supported by helicopters and amphibious personnel carriers, had failed to dislodge a Viet Cong unit one-tenth its size from a fortified village named Ap Bac, at the Plain of Reeds in the Mekong Delta. Three Americans were killed, nearly one hundred Vietnamese lost their lives, and over one

hundred were wounded. The battle revealed one fundamental weakness: distrust between Vietnamese officers and American advisers.

Perhaps because of my silence and perhaps realizing the delicate nature of his question, President Kennedy changed the subject by inquiring about my family and my work, then asked when the last time was that I had seen President Diem. I told him it was about two years ago. He asked if I knew anything about the Vietnamese government's "plan to negotiate with the North." I said I had heard rumors about it. Visibly angry, he raised his voice. "We shall not tolerate any such negotiations until we defeat the communist insurgents."

I refrained from disclosing to him that, at my meeting with President Diem in early 1961 to receive instructions before coming to Washington, he had told me that I should stand ready to work with Professor Dr. Buu Hoi, an internationally-known biochemist and President Diem's ambassador at large for African countries even though he was based in Paris, for some possible preliminary talks with Hanoi. Dr. Buu Hoi, a skilled diplomat, was also a close friend of mine. I had not taken President Diem's instructions seriously, for I felt it was just a blackmail concocted by his brother Nhu and directed at the USA.

President Kennedy continued: "We want to support your President, but he must, even at this late hour, act decisively to regain the control of the situation and of his government." I thanked him and knew it was about time to leave.

The meeting lasted about thirty-five minutes. I had learned nothing new from President Kennedy, and he was perhaps disappointed that I had no concrete suggestions to give him, no plan to change the course of events in Vietnam. I was impressed by his intellectual vigor and was grateful yet curious about his indirect but clear interest in my personal position on the change of personnel and policy in Vietnam. Only much later, in 1988, did I discover the possible source of

his interest. That year, the US Department of State had prepared a Top Secret memorandum entitled "Suggested Contingency Plan," in which was a list of names of people who might replace President Diem when he "lost effective control." Among the candidates were military and civilian leaders in the Saigon Government, and two men who were living abroad: Professor Buu Hoi and myself. It was likely that President Kennedy was aware of this "Suggested Contingency Plan," and he was disappointed at my apparent indifference when he had asked what I thought about a leadership change.

I left the White House with a sense of sadness and dismay.

This meeting had confirmed my worst fear that South Vietnam and the USA were more and more like two trains running in opposite directions toward each other and were bound on a head-on collision course. On one side, President Kennedy, because of personal convictions and political necessities (the coming re-elections, the imperatives of the Cold War) was undeniably determined to win the war against the Viet Cong, with President Diem or, if necessary, without him. Even if there were to be new people in power in Vietnam, he seemed intent upon following the same US policy. Regardless, I knew that President Diem, whom I had always respected for his moral integrity and incorruptibility in public life, was almost totally relying on his brothers for major decisions. Several times during his long monologues, I had been surprised and disappointed to hear him blast the US Embassy in Vietnam, the American press, and the State Department, calling them "dupes" of the Communists who were conspiring to destroy him and his family. Politically married to the USA, President Diem now suspected that his partner had committed adultery and had been caught red-handed in the abortive 1960 coup d'état. Diem did not know, however, that the leader of that coup, Colonel Nguyen Chanh Thi, also a friend of mine, was an honest, dedicated officer and had had no contact whatsoever with the US Embassy in Saigon.

Once, President Diem even asked me to report to him anyone I knew in the government who had close relations with the Americans. Another friend, Colonel Dinh Son Thung, had a similar experience: he was ordered by President Diem not to promote any officer who was in contact with the Americans.

Facing a dilemma, I walked back to my office at the Embassy of South Vietnam on Embassy Row at the corner of R Street and Massachusetts Avenue, NW, the most elegant part of Washington, D.C. The sky was immaculately blue, the air was crisp and almost cold as in autumn, my favorite season, but without the typically beautiful colors. Lin Yutang, the great Chinese philosopher, academic, and writer, has in *The Importance of Living* described Spring as "the natural frame of the mind of Heaven" and Autumn "as one of its changing moods." What might, I wondered, really be the natural frame of mind of Heaven—which, according to ancient Chinese and Vietnamese concepts, gives the Mandate of Government to rulers, then withdraws it when they betray the will of the people—on this spring day in Washington? We would soon know. In the autumn of 1963, Heaven, indeed, changed its mood, and violently withdrew the Mandate from both presidents.

My Embassy was deserted when I returned a little after 5:00 p.m. The staff had left for home. I opened the window of my office to further enjoy the cool air but had to close it a few minutes later: the noisy traffic down the street was unbearable. On my desk, there were two notes from my secretary. One read: "Mr. Joseph Kraft called and asked you to call him back as soon as possible"; the other said that my Ambassador wanted to see me tomorrow at my convenience. With the Oval Office meeting still on my mind, I was intrigued by both notes, but quickly dismissed the possibility that either man could know of my visit with President Kennedy, especially Kraft, a columnist for the *Washington Post* and a close friend of President Kennedy when he had been

the senator from Massachusetts. I called Joseph Kraft at his home. He invited me to have lunch sometime in the next few days at the prestigious Cosmos Club, only two blocks from my Embassy. He needed some background information for a column on the Buddhist crisis. Then I called my good friend Major General Edward G. Lansdale, Deputy Assistant to the Secretary of Defense for Special Operations. He was out of town.

I then sat down to write a letter to my friend Mr. Vo Van Hai, Chief of the Special Staff of President Diem. Like myself, Hai had been close to Diem since the 1940s. In 1945, after the August Vietminh revolution, he had escorted Diem, then in Saigon hiding from the French Sureté as well as from the Japanese, back to Hue. They were both arrested in mid-trip and sent to Hanoi, where Diem refused President Ho Chi Minh's offer to join his government because he believed that the Vietminh had killed his elder brother Ngo Dinh Khoi, a former provincial governor. To me and his many other friends, Hai was a "saint in a sea of sinners" in the Saigon Government. He was incorruptible and dedicated, and, despite his knowledge of all the wrongdoings of Mr. Diem's family, he had served President Diem faithfully. Some people said that "being a friend of Mr. Hai was rather a disadvantage," and it certainly was. I knew of many examples: a friend or relative, for instance, might ask him for a favor, but instead of helping them, Mr. Hai would tell them straight to their faces that precisely because of their close relationship with him their cases should be judged more severely than others to avoid any appearance of favoritism.

Knowing the political climate at home, especially President Diem's mistrust of the Kennedy administration, I informed Hai without mentioning my meeting with President Kennedy that I had learned from a close friend of the Kennedy family that President Kennedy has apparently lost all confidence in the ability of our President to regain control of the government. The US government could take drastic measures unless radical reforms take place soon." I wrote the letter as an act of

desperation, hoping that I might be able to help abort a tragedy that I saw about to happen, the inevitable head-on collision of those two trains. I felt that it was my duty, my responsibility to urgently communicate the message to Hai to save the President. I prayed with all my heart that Hai would take the information seriously and act accordingly. Somehow, I doubted that it would have any effect on the proud and stubborn President Diem, but I had to try. To avoid having the letter seen by someone else in my government, I sent the letter by regular airmail, not by diplomatic pouch. I was about to leave when I heard a woman shrieking from the Ambassador's residence on the floor above. It was Madam Chuong, the Ambassador's wife. As happened quite often, Madam Chuong was shouting at her husband. Her high-pitched voice was on exactly the same level of stridence as that of her daughter, the notorious Madame Nhu, the wife of President Diem's brother.

I slipped out of the Embassy and drove home to the quiet suburb of Chevy Chase. After a good Vietnamese meal with my wife and children, I read Vietnamese poetry. Ever since elementary school, poetry has been a source of inspiration to me, a means of relaxation and an effective way of cleansing my heart and mind of *bui tran* (the dust of the world). *Kim Van Kieu*, the 19th century Vietnamese national poem, was and remains my literary Bible, my companion and my unflinching therapist. I read the concluding lines of this 3,254-verse masterpiece of Vietnamese literature: "Let's stop decrying Heaven's quirks and whims / Within us each there lies the root of good / the heart means more than all talents on earth." It was apparent to me that from all sides in the unfolding tragedy in Vietnam, the major actors were relying on their opponents, forgetting that the heart, the unfulfilled hope of the Vietnamese for Independence, Unity, Peace, and Justice, "means more than all talents on earth." And all of a sudden I realized that President Diem was probably the only Vietnamese I knew who was not interested in poetry. He had once told me

without any embarrassment at all that he had never read *The Tale of Kieu*. It had been in 1960, and he was responding to my suggestion that there be a national celebration to be held in 1965 for the 200th birthday of Nguyen Du, *Kim Van Kieu's* author. I was then briefly Diem's Director General of Information. This would be a good occasion, I told him, to launch a needed cultural offensive. Diem had not supported my idea, saying only, "It's not necessary."

As the day of my first meeting with President Kennedy ended, I wondered if giving a copy of Nguyen Du's epic poem to both presidents might help. Probably not, I thought. Even though I still wonder now, I believe that given all the circumstances, nothing could have stopped those trains.

II Return to Vietnam

The meeting with my Ambassador the next day in the late afternoon was cordial. My relations with him had always been correct and professional, but guarded. He, like other senior diplomats in my Embassy, knew that I was close to President Diem, so he would always refrain from making any critical observation of the government in my presence. He needed advice, he said, on the case of a Vietnamese student who had refused to return home after finishing his studies at Cornell University on a government scholarship. The student had claimed that as a Buddhist he would be persecuted in his native city of Hue. I did not know the student personally. A congressman, a ranking member of the Appropriations Committee, had called my Ambassador to intervene on the student's behalf. I assured him that I would take care of the problem by calling Cornell, suggesting that they send me a note requesting an extension of the student's stay for additional research.

The Ambassador was pleased with my quick resolution of the problem. Then he asked me about the Buddhist crisis in Hue. I gave him my opinion not only on the crisis but also of the government. He was visibly surprised. I knew how much he suffered from the tyranny of his wife, Madam Nhu's mother. She was the salaried "Official" Observer of Vietnam at the United Nations. She had no qualifications for the job and rarely visited the UN Headquarters in New York City. (One didn't have to go all the way to Independence Palace in Saigon to find abuse of power, nepotism, corruption and favoritism. They existed in a smaller scale at our Embassy itself.)

The next day, Friday, May 10, when Buddhist monks and lay people demonstrated at the Tu Dam Pagoda in Hue, arrests were made and a curfew was imposed. Buddhist leaders issued a manifesto demanding that the government rescind the order against the flying of Buddhist flags, give Buddhists legal equality with Catholics, stop the arbitrary arrests and the intimidation of Buddhists, indemnify the families of victims of the May 8th killings, and punish the officials responsible. A delegation of six monks and two laymen submitted these five just demands to President Diem on May 15, in Saigon. The Tu Dam Pagoda demonstration affected me personally and deeply. It was at that beautiful pagoda that my father had confided me to the care of Buddha when I was five years old. The ceremony was called *Quy y*, after which I was given by the Patriarch the Buddhist name Tam Linh (Sacred Heart). When I die, my Buddhist name Tam Linh will be written on a banner in the funeral procession so Buddha can recognize and welcome me.

In Saigon, the Buddhist' demands were first ignored, but finally accepted reluctantly by the government after strong pressures from the US Embassy.

That same day Mr. Nhu, President Diem's brother-advisor, gave an interview to Warren Unna of the Washington Post. Nhu told Unna that half of the American military personnel stationed in Vietnam could be withdrawn. Their presence, he said, made the struggle look like an

American war. Later in Washington, President Kennedy, asked at a press conference about the Nhu interview, said, "We would withdraw troops, any number of troops, any time the government of South Vietnam would suggest it. The day after it were to be suggested we would have some troops on their way home. That is number one. Number two is that we are hopeful that the situation in South Vietnam would permit some withdrawal in any case by the end of this year." President Kennedy had called Nhu's bluff, while at the same time preparing for a change of personnel and policy in Vietnam.

For the next month, Buddhist demonstrations continued, and the Buddhist crisis exploded again on June 11. A little after mid-day, at the busy intersection of Phan Dinh Phung and Le Van Duyet streets in Saigon, The Venerable Thich Quang Duc, a seventy-three-year-old Buddhist monk from Hue, seated himself in the lotus position while his companions poured a can of gasoline over him. He lit the match himself and sat motionless as the flame engulfed him. In three minutes it was all over, and the blackened lifeless figure toppled over on the pavement. Malcolm Browne of Associated Press took the famous picture. It appeared in all the newspapers of the world the next day. Madame Ngo Dinh Nhu called Quang Duc's self-immolation a "monk barbecue show."

I was shocked, morally debilitated, mentally crippled, and physically pained when I saw the photograph in the morning newspapers. That day, I decided not to go to my office but to stay home, to have time for myself and find some peace and serenity, to meditate and reflect on the events which since May 8th had so disturbed my life. As a Buddhist, I tried to find out the truth. I read carefully the selection from that Mahaparinibbana Suttanta, generally translated as "Buddha's Farewell Address," where Buddha, the Enlightened One, addressed his closest disciple: "Ananda, be ye lamps unto yourself. Rely on yourself, and do not rely on external help. Hold fast to the truth as a lamp. Seek salvation alone in the truth. Look not for assistance to any one besides yourself."

The truth can be found by recognizing the dangerous effects of "self-craving," especially craving for power that leads to arrogance, domination, and self-destruction. I looked at my wife's painting of a Lotus Flower that graced our living room. A flash of enlightenment followed: the Lotus is a Buddhist flower, a flower that grows from the mud but not tainted by it, and the Lotus of Vietnam is now in a sea of fire.

This and subsequent acts of fiery self-immolation by Vietnamese monks were called suicides by Western and American press, but as the Venerable Thich Nhat Hanh, a Vietnamese Buddhist monk and Director of the Vietnamese Buddhist Association, later explained in a letter to the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.: "This is not a suicide. Suicide is an act of self-destruction, having as causes the following: (1) Lack of courage to live and to cope with difficulties; (2) Defeat by life and loss of all hope; (3) Desire for non-existence."

To burn oneself by fire, however, is to prove that what one is saying is of utmost importance. There is nothing more painful than self-immolation. To say something while experiencing this kind of pain is to say it with utmost courage, frankness, determination, and sincerity. During the ceremony of ordination, as practiced by the Mahayana tradition, the monk-candidate is required to burn one or more spots on his body while taking their vow to observe the 250 rules of bhikshu, to love the life of a monk, to attain enlightenment, and to devote his life to the salvation of all beings. Suicide is considered by Buddhism as one of the most serious crimes; not so is self-immolation. The monk who burns himself has lost neither courage nor hope, nor does he desire non-existence.

Could I be a Lotus, free of the arrogance, the cravings, the intrigues, the conflicts, and the cruelties around me? Should I continue to work with the government and try to influence it or get

out of it to be true to my faith and loyal to my Buddhist name Tam Linh? Day after day, I kept looking into myself.

At the end of June, General Lansdale called me up and suggested that we meet at my house. I was delighted and didn't ask where he had been in May when I had tried to contact him after I met with President Kennedy.

I had first met then Colonel Landsdale at the end of August, 1954. He had just come from Saigon to Bangkok to meet with a group of doctors and nurses from the Philippines who had been sent to Vietnam to help Vietnamese refugees from North Vietnam. Sponsored by the Junior Chamber of Commerce, "Operation Brotherhood" had been organized by Landsdale. I was then Press Attaché at the Vietnamese Embassy in Bangkok, and I arranged a press conference at Bangkok's Donmuang Airport. Lansdale and I had a conversation about the situation in Vietnam, and I was impressed by his sincere desire to help the Vietnamese and by the kind of camaraderie he enjoyed with the Filipinos. At that time, however, I did not know the extent of Lansdale's position with the SMM (Saigon Military Mission) in Vietnam; nor had I been made aware of his employment by the CIA.

I suggested dinner—Lansdale and his wife had been at our home several times before—but he preferred to meet over tea. When he arrived a short time later in short sleeves and khaki pants (we were having quite a heat wave that June), he looked relaxed and cool and told me that he had just returned from a quick informal visit to Vietnam and Laos. From what he saw, the situation in Vietnam was near the breaking point, not only because of the Buddhist crisis and the increasing military strength of the Viet Cong but also because the breakdown in relations between American and Vietnamese had produced a defeatist attitude in both camps. He still

strongly supported President Diem with whom, he said, "we could gradually build the foundations of a true opposition, a democratic structure, and win the war."

I had always valued his opinions, but I made no effort to reveal to him the profound changes in my view of the South Vietnamese government. I had no doubt that General Lansdale was a sincere believer in American Jeffersonian democracy which could, in his view, grow everywhere, either in the Philippines where he had succeeded, or even in Vietnam. He was convinced that a coup d'état against President Diem would be a disaster both for Vietnam and the United States. He told me that he had had a long conversation with our mutual friend, Mr. Vo Van Hai, Chief of President Diem's Special Staff. Hai had asked him to invite me to return home for an "informal" visit.

Without waiting for my answer, Lansdale handed me an envelope with a voucher for a round-trip airline ticket to Saigon. "Are you sure it's not one way?" I remarked. He laughed. "Oh not at all. We need you here."

Once again, I deliberately did not mention my May meeting with President Kennedy. When I had first come to Washington in 1961, I had believed that General Lansdale had the confidence of President Kennedy, but since the coup attempt of 1960 and Lansdale's failure to personally influence President Diem to reform the government and to ignore advice from his brother Nhu, Lansdale had been increasingly criticized by friends of mine at State as naïve and idealistic. Lansdale himself was aware of these criticisms. He had told me so in a dinner at my house in late 1962.

So I decided to accept Hai's invitation and left for Saigon on July 3. I told my Ambassador only that I wanted to take a week's vacation to go home and see my father. I arrived in Saigon late in the afternoon of July 5, the day a special military court was trying nineteen military officers

and thirty-four politicians and intellectuals, all accused of having led or participated in the abortive coup d'état of November 11, 1960. Because I had left Washington so hastily, I had forgotten to send a cable to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Office of the President. As a result, I could not go through the VIP gate but had to go by the regular immigration desk. The desk officer noted something irregular on my diplomatic passport: I didn't have the re-entry visa which had to be obtained from my own Embassy. To avoid any diplomatic dispute, I asked him to call the President's Special Staff. The officer consulted with his boss for a moment and decided that it was all right. Interestingly, he said "OK" instead of moi ong ("Please, Sir," in Vietnamese).

I went outside and was waiting for a cab when I saw a relative of mine who worked in the Ministry of Education. He offered me a lift to the city. His car with no air-conditioner was so hot and stuffy that I almost fainted. Fortunately, half way to town, the rain started to pour down, the typical Saigon afternoon rain that made a Saigon summer bearable. My relative Hau, whom I hadn't seen for many years, had just sent his daughter off to Australia to study. He asked me how long I had been away. "Two years," I said. "You will find a lot of changes. More police on the streets, more beggars, and also more Americans," he said with a soft, resigned voice. He continued: "I shall retire in a few months and will return to my native province Quang Tri only if the security situation there has improved." He then paused a moment, and as if anticipating my next question, he added, "I sent my daughter to Australia to study because after a year, even as a student, she could guarantee that my family and I can join her, just in case our country is taken over by the communists." He was surprised, almost fearful, when I asked him to drop me at Gia Long Palace. "I've just come from the United States." Hau did not wave as he drove off into traffic.

I went directly to Hai's office. He was surprised that I hadn't let him know I was coming. Although he usually worked late, that day he decided that we should go out for dinner. I asked

him if he had received the letter I sent him in May. He said yes, but he had decided not to show it to the President. I understood. On our way to Cho Lon, Saigon's Chinatown, he changed his mind and suggested that we go to his house instead. Because his wife was not at home that evening, we stopped at a restaurant to buy a few dishes. Quite a gourmet and selective in his ordering of food, Hai preferred *cha gio* (crisp fried egg rolls) which had become very popular with foreigners, he said. He complained to me that lately some merchants were taking advantage of the ignorance of foreigners about Vietnamese food and would substitute the traditional paper-thin rice wrapping of *cha gio* with a covering made from wheat flour that was thicker, softer, and easier to roll, thus saving preparation time. But the rolls just didn't taste right. Vietnamese could detect the substitution immediately just by looking and tasting (with real rice wrapping *cha gio* tastes light, crispy, and delicious, but made with wheat flour it becomes heavier and soaked with fat).

Hai recommended that we stop by the restaurant My Huong (Beautiful Perfume) because, besides the regular ingredients used for *cha gio* such as two kinds of mushrooms, chopped pork, chopped onion, egg, and bean sprouts, they also added a lot of crab meat. For the first time in what seemed like ages, I felt at home, and I thoroughly enjoyed watching Hai perform at the restaurant. After shouting at the owner not to forget to add some fresh rice noodles to go with *cha gio*, and to put in a separate jar the special mildly spicy sweet and sour fish sauce, he turned to me and asked if I wanted something else besides what he had ordered. I told him that I needed to eat a lot of fresh raw vegetables to cool down my insides. Then I asked him to order my favorite pork skin roll (*bi cuon*) whose ingredients include finely chopped cooked pork skin and finely sliced grilled lean pork flavored with roasted rice in powder, all rolled tightly together with whole fresh raw green lettuce, mint leaves and cilantro inside the rice wrapping. I hadn't eaten this for

some time, and just mentioning it made my mouth water—as it does now, while describing the scene.

In addition, Hai didn't forget to order two glasses of *hot luu* juice (pomegranate seed), the ice-cold soda drink made of clear bits of tapioca made to look like pomegranate seeds. As children we all loved that beautiful red color and the odd but lovely shape of pomegranate seeds.

During our delectable dinner, Hai seemed extremely concerned about the military situation in the Mekong Delta, and he told me that he was afraid the Viet Cong might soon conduct a general offensive because the Vietnamese army was so busy with internal politics. He was upset by the many arrests of students and Buddhists by agents of Dr. Tuyen's office (officially called the Office of Political and Social Studies, but actually a Secret Service directed by Nhu and Tuyen). Then he said something that surprised me: "I caution you not to go out alone at night in Saigon." He offered to let me stay with him for security. He also told me that he thought the trial of the suspects in the abortive coup attempt was entirely unnecessary and primarily a move to intimidate those who were protesting against the government's Buddhist policy. I had never seen him so disturbed and so pessimistic, but I declined his kind invitation of a place to stay. Hai insisted upon driving me to my hotel, even though I had told him that I could walk to the street and hail a taxi. I really wanted to have a few moments to myself to try to understand the seriousness of Hai's thoughts about the regime he had served all his adult life. His morality and his dedication to his work were well known. Everyone knew that he had taken only a one-day leave for his wedding and honeymoon, yet he had told me that President Diem had grumbled, "Why do you need 24 hours off for your marriage?" He had not taken a day off before his wedding.

Deep into my own thoughts, I didn't hear the screeching of the car's breaks when Hai stopped in front of my hotel. He tapped me lightly on the shoulder and said, "Here we are." I had

no doubt now that the priority was no longer the need to change policy and personnel but how to save a President, a man I still held in great respect. When I said goodbye and goodnight to Hai in front of my hotel, I had to summon all my inner strength just to whisper, "Hai, please take good care of yourself. Sleep well, I'll see you again soon."

The next day, after a sound night's sleep at the Caravelle Hotel, I went to Hai's office and asked to meet with President Diem, but Hai told me to return the next day, July 7, in the late afternoon when the President would be free. Having some time to myself, and with the day still young, I visited the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, across from the Office of the President. At the gate I saw a car coming and with Mr. Vu Van Mau, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, inside. He waved at me, then stopped the car and walked with me to his office. My relationship with him had always been courteous, but in the past, like so many others, he had been careful with his words whenever he talked with me. He knew that I was the President's man. Even though I had always asked Mr. Diem, when he ordered me to do something, to please brief the foreign Minister, my requests often had been ignored.

This time, though, I was taken aback by Mau's obvious over-friendly attitude toward me. As soon as we sat down on the sofa in his office anteroom, he started in with a long attack against the anti-Buddhist policy of the government. Usually a cautious man, this former professor of law bluntly told me that the President had lost control of the government and that the country was in a serious crisis. He revealed that one of his friends, a Buddhist monk, had been arrested and that no one had heard from him for a month. It was a great pain to hear his angry condemnation of his own government, and I felt a great deal of sympathy for him. A few weeks later, I was not surprised when, on August 21, he shaved his head to protest against the government's suppression of Buddhism, and then resigned his post.

That afternoon, I returned to the Ministry to see Mr. Pham Dang Lam, the secretary General of the Ministry, a career administrator well liked by his colleagues. I cleared with him a few matters relating to my work at the Embassy and then took the opportunity to mention my meeting with the Foreign Minister in the morning. He just looked silently at the ceiling. Finally, he too said sadly that he believed that the President was out of touch with the people, and that our country's situation, both military and political, was extremely critical. He too cautioned me not to go out at night.

I left the Ministry at about 4:00 p.m. and walked back to the Caravelle, planning to look up a friend, James Robinson, a correspondent for NBC whom I had discovered was also staying there. He was standing in front of the entrance with a group of journalists about to leave, he said, for a press conference at the Directorate of Information, and he asked if I'd like to join him. I declined, and he shouted as he was getting into his car, "Let's have dinner tonight." I shouted back, "Sorry, not tonight." Even though Jim had been a dear friend since our days in 1950s Bangkok, I sensed that to go out with an American journalist at night in Saigon would be a risk I couldn't afford. All the bad news that I had heard second-hand in Washington seemed to be coming altogether as too true.

Hai called me early in the morning and said that he had arranged a meeting for me with the President for sometime after siesta, around 2:00 p.m.

Even in the midst of the Buddhist crisis, Saigon and the President still observed siesta as usual. Having some free time, I tried to contact my younger brother, Tran Van Due, a captain in a "special unit" of Army Military Intelligence. He was a graduate of the first South Vietnamese Military Academy in Da Lat and had spent a year in Okinawa undergoing US Army Intelligence training. I was lucky to be able to reach him. He was obviously busy but had time to come to my

hotel and talk. Due appeared nervous, which was unusual. Ever since he had been quite young, he had always been smiling, self-confident and outgoing. He asked if I noticed anything different in Saigon now compared to the city I had left in 1961. I hesitated for a moment, then answered, "Somehow I have the impression that Saigon is less noisy, less lively and has more uniformed policemen in the streets." Due nodded, then said, "There are even more plain-clothed security men from the Special Branch of the Special Forces." Like Hai and Lam, he warned me not to go out at night because, he said, the Special Forces were in charge of the security of the city and they were very brutal. Funded directly by the United States, the Special Forces were commanded by Colonel Le Quang Tung, who received his orders not from the regular chain of command but directly from Mr. Nhu.

I asked Due about our father in Hue, and he assured me that he was fine and not really affected by the turbulent situation. Did he believe, I inquired, that the Communists had infiltrated the Buddhist movement as the government claimed? He shook his head. He wanted to know if I thought the US government was planning to change its policy in Vietnam. I said I didn't think so, not if our government could restore law and order and work out an agreement with the Buddhists. He started to tell me how Cau Can ("Uncle Can" of Hue) was opposing the government policy on the Buddhists, but he was not being listened to by Archbishop Ngo Dinh Thuc.

Suddenly, he interjected, "Did you know of the death of Mr. Nhat Linh? He committed suicide, rather than be tried by the Special Military Court."

I was stunned. Our whole generation had been influenced by his writing and that of his group—the Self-Reliance Literary Group (Tu Luc Van Doan). They had done a marvelous job during all those years under French Colonialism of helping all young Vietnamese aspire, as Nhat Linh once said, "to see Vietnam independent again one day." I can still remember vividly my excitement

and that of all my friends as we waited for the weekly publications *Customs (Phong Hoa)* and *Today (Ngay Nay)* to reach the only bookstore in Hue. We would stand in long lines for many hours until the postman delivered those precious but so scarce magazines. Everyone devoured each issue from cover to cover. They were instructive, informative, and greatly entertaining at the same time.

I replied that I did not know that Nhat Linh had been in Saigon. My brother said that he had taken an overdose of sleeping pills. He had been accused of being the mastermind behind the failed coup attempt of 1960. I was shocked and pained at the news and angry at the action of the government. After saying goodbye to my brother, I did not sleep very well that night.

The next day, for the first time in two years I met with President Diem, at about 2:30 p.m. He had certainly changed, at least physically. He looked tired, and I detected a few spots of grey in his normally thick jet-black hair. He asked me to sit near him and, smoking a cigarette, he started right off by berating Tran Van Chuong, his Ambassador in Washington. He accused him of lack of conviction, of laziness and of inability to convey to the US government and the American press the great progress made by his government, such as the Strategic Hamlet Program and the Republican Youth that had been organized by Mr. Nhu and his wife as paramilitary forces. He called the Vietnam Embassy in Washington a nest of parasites. I had the impression that he had forgotten the fact that I was still a member of that "nest." He hinted that the Ambassador would be recalled when he said obliquely that "Chuong cannot continue to receive his salary while he conducts himself as a silent partner with those who oppose my government."

After he finished his attack on the Embassy, he turned to the American press which, he said, "refuses to listen to my government but pays attention to even the smallest demonstration of Buddhists." I asked him about the Buddhist "question," and he answered, "All the

misunderstandings were cleared up when the Buddhist monks realized that there have been more pagodas built under my regime than at any time in the past history."

I took the opportunity to bring up the suicide of Nhat Linh, and he told me without the slightest emotion that he did not know anything about it. I told him that I had seen General Lansdale just before leaving Washington. He looked concerned. "How's the General?" he asked. "Why has he lost all his influence with the White House and the State Department?" I noticed that it was the first time he had called General Lansdale formally by his title "General" instead of *ong ban* (our friend), a more intimate term that he had always used before. I replied that I didn't know and, just to please him, that I didn't believe that rumor to be true. He did not pursue the matter further. I wondered if Lansdale had met with him on his recent trip to Saigon, but I didn't ask. When I stood up to leave, for the very first time in the eight years that I had been seeing him on official business, he did not ask me to return.

On the way back, I stopped by Hai's office, but seeing that he had a visitor, I left and went to my hotel. I felt sympathy for the President whom I still respected, but I had the frightening feeling that he would not be able to survive in office much longer. My younger brother came to the hotel to have dinner with me. We tried to reach some friends, but without success. The next day Due picked me up and drove me to the airport. He insisted on staying with me until the plane took off; he reassured me again that he would take good care of our father and that I should not worry about his safety and well-being. I told him I would try my best not to do so.

III The Long Hot Summer of 1963

As I left Saigon, I felt confused and concerned. No one seemed to feel secure, without any precise idea of what might happen, and everyone seemed to expect some disastrous change in the fate of the Nation. Saigon had indeed lost hope and direction. Once secure in my seat in the Pan-American Clipper, I began to wonder why Hai, after inviting me to return, had been so unusually reserved and hadn't shared anything important with me. Could he, like the President, feel lonely and abandoned by his people and by the United States? I really didn't know the answers. I slept until the plane landed in Bangkok to pick up passengers. Ever since those long years when my family and I had lived in Thailand, I had envied the self-confidence I always noticed among the Thai people. If they ever lost faith in their government, the Thai could always rely on the protection of their Emerald Buddha and their compassionate monarch, neither of whom was available to the Vietnamese.

After takeoff, I began thinking about the suicide of Nguyen Tuong Tam. The very first novel his group had published in the late 1930s, *Butterfly Soul, Fairy Dreams*, by Khai Hung (the pen-name of Tran Khanh Du) came to mind. It is a simple story: a young woman disguises herself as a man in order to be accepted as a monk (there were then no women allowed to live in any Buddhist pagoda). A young, faithful Buddhist woman who has regularly paid respects to Buddha at the temple is attracted to the disguised handsome monk; but soon the disguised monk tells her that "he" is really a woman. In spite of that confession, the two continue to "love" each other in "mind and spirit," under the compassionate understanding and protection of the Buddha. The beauty of the story helped me sleep through to Hawaii. In my sleep I dreamed that I was transformed into a butterfly, and when I woke up I could not remember whether I was myself who had dreamed of

being a butterfly who was dreaming of being me. Such was the famous story by Chuang Tzu, a master of Taoism, who used it to explain the futility of life.

Back in Washington's hot and humid weather, I kept trying to detach myself from the daily developments in Vietnam, even though the news from home continued to get worse. The only question, I thought, was how and when a major change would take place. At the end of July, General Le Van Ty, the oldest officer in and Chief of Staff of the South Vietnamese Armed Forces came to Washington. He was seeking treatment at the Walter Reed US Army Hospital for what I found out was terminal cancer. He was respected by all officers for being a father figure to them. We invited him for dinner at our home with the Vietnamese Armed Forces Attaché, Colonel Nguyen Van Chau, a former Chief of Psychological Warfare of the ARVN and a devout Catholic who had been at one time very close to Mr. Nhu. The colonel and I were surprised to hear from the general that although he still respected and supported President Diem, he was afraid that the President had lost control of his government and was listening to the wrong people. He was fearful that a "US supported coup d'état would soon take place, and that the President could be harmed." Hearing him talk so directly, I was quite concerned for the dying general's future because Colonel Chau, a Catholic, was completely loyal to Nhu and might report our conversation back to him.

I did not contact General Lansdale after my return from Vietnam, but Rufus Phillips, one of his former associates in Vietnam in the 1950s, looked me up in the Embassy. Phillips had later become the CIA representative in Laos, then had returned to Vietnam in 1962 to direct the US economic support of the Strategic Hamlets Program. He was back in Washington for consultation. Unlike his mentor Lansdale, Rufus Phillips had lost all confidence in President Diem's ability to reform. He was suspicious that Ngo Dinh Nhu was conspiring behind the President's back to overthrow his brother's government and to bring down the Republic. Indirectly but clearly he let

me know that the US was about to help some Vietnamese generals in a coup d'état attempt aimed at sending Nhu and his wife into exile. Rufus was an able man, pleasant to talk to, with a good grasp of international situations (his wife was a daughter of a Chilean diplomat). Any information coming from him, I had no doubt, was true, not rumor or guesswork. I asked if he had told Lansdale what he had just told me and he said nothing. We both knew that Lansdale would never have any involvement in the overthrow of his friend, President Diem, a man he sincerely admired, respected, and liked.

August proved to be the cruel and fatal month, the prelude to the end of President Diem's regime. It began with vicious verbal attacks by Madam Nhu on the Buddhists, followed by a pathetic duel over the airwaves of the VOA (Voice of America) between her and her father, Ambassador Tran Van Chuong. She also declared war against the New York Times and the American press in general. She ridiculed monks and nuns who self-immolated themselves, one in Phan Thiet in south Central Vietnam, one in Hue, and another one, a young nun, in Khanh Hoa, a neighboring province of Phan Thiet, all of whom died to protest against the Diem regime. On the night of August 23, Special Forces units on orders from Ngo Dinh Nhu carried out a national assault on major Buddhist pagodas in Vietnam, starting with the Xa Loi Pagoda in Saigon. In all, about 1,500 persons, mostly monks, were dragged to jail; some were then beaten and starved. "The Night of Pagodas" marked the first general offensive in the war by the government against the Buddhists. Fearing for their lives that August night in Saigon, even American journalists went into hiding.

The next day, August 22, Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge arrived in Saigon to replace Frederick Nolting, who had been a supporter of President Diem. In Washington, my Embassy was to all intents and purposes closed because the Ambassador and his staff were angry, surprised,

and ashamed of the action taken by the government they represented. That same day, the Vietnamese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, acting on orders of President Diem, sent us a cable "ending the mission" of Ambassador Tran Van Chuong and naming me Chargé d'Affaires. After I received the cable, I immediately showed it to the Ambassador. I told him that he was welcome, if he wished, to continue at the Embassy residence. I also left the Embassy's car and driver at his disposal for the time he needed to get resettled. He said he had actually resigned before being fired, and I believed him. He thanked me and promised that he would vacate his quarters as soon as possible. A few days later, he moved to Chevy Chase, only a few blocks from my house. My appointment as Chargé d'Affaires (the full title: Chargé d'Affaires ad. Interim) was somewhat a surprise to most of the members of the Embassy staff. They had expected that I would be named Ambassador to replace Mr. Chuong. One even expressed his surprise to me as a way to tell me that he was wrong in thinking that I was the President's man. Jokingly I told him, "Although my family name is also "Tran Van" like the Ambassador, I do not have a daughter married into the President's family." Most of the other Embassy staff members were uncommitted bureaucrats, former officials in various government agencies during the French colonial period.

On August 23, I went to the State Department to meet with Joseph Mendenhall to formally inform him of my new position as Chargé d'Affaires. We had had a good relationship ever since his time as Political Counselor at the US Embassy in Saigon. He now headed the Vietnam Coordinating Committee. We talked about the "Night of the Pagodas," and he was certain that the whole affair had been mounted by Ngo Dinh Nhu in order to involve the Army Generals in the Buddhist Crisis and to prevent them from plotting against the government. He asked my opinion about the rumor circulating in Saigon that Ngo Dinh Nhu was mobilizing his youth Republican Organization for a mass demonstration that would lead to the overthrow of his

brother's government. Madame Nhu was apparently doing the same thing with her Women's Movement. Pictures of President Diem at the Saigon City Hall were being replaced by those of his brother Nhu. I told him that those organizations were not only "paper tigers but dead fish." We both laughed out loud at my answer to his question. He told me that he might go to Vietnam soon and asked if I had any message to our mutual friend Vo Van Hai. I said, "No—just tell him to take good care of himself."

On August 28, I witnessed the huge historic demonstration led by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., in Washington, D.C. It was the biggest demonstration I had ever seen. I was deeply moved by his speech, especially when he talked about not being "satisfied until justice rolls down like water and righteousness like a mighty stream." For a few hours, I forgot all my concerns about Vietnam. Back in my office, I hand-wrote a report to President Diem and concluded that "we should not rely too much and for too long on the USA to solve our problems as their country will have to concentrate on this growing domestic racial crisis." I sent it the next day by diplomatic pouch to Mr. Hai. I also informed Hai about the coming visit of our "friend" Mendenhall. Dr. King's speech had made a profound impression on me and had given me a new outlook on an American national problem that I had not yet even noticed. That same afternoon General Lansdale called me and told me that he had had dinner with Ambassador and Mrs. Tran Van Chuong. Madame Chuong had tried to convince him that it was too late for President Diem to do anything that could solve the Buddhist Crisis in Vietnam. She had heard that President Kennedy intended to invite Dr. Buu Hoi to lead the new government in Saigon. She believed that this appointment would be dangerous because Dr. Buu Hoi had once been associated with Ho Chi Minh in the 1946 negotiations with France. She thought he could probably declare Vietnam a neutralist country and ask the Americans to leave. Her solution, she had told Lansdale, was that the US should invite her

to form a government and be Prime Minister. Vietnam "would then return to normal, and would defeat the Viet Cong." Over the telephone, we laughed loudly. Now I was certain where Madame Nhu had received her training! Like mother, like daughter. In any tragedy there is always lurking an element of comedy and a flash of madness.

That evening, while I was working late at the Embassy, a coded telegram ordering me to come home for consultation came from President Diem's office. The next day I flew back, via Paris. Because the connecting Air France flight would not leave until four hours later, I took a taxi to the Vietnamese Embassy in France. There the Ambassador handed me a cable from the Minister of Foreign Affairs, informing me that I had been named Consul-General in India with the rank of Minister Plenipotentiary, replacing Mr. Do Vang Ly, who had been "called for another function." My immediate reaction to that quick change was probably that the government had started the negotiation process with Hanoi as President Diem had warned me previously before I joined the Vietnamese Embassy in Washington, D.C.

After arriving in Saigon in the late afternoon of August 30, I immediately went to Mr. Hai's office. He told me that President Diem was waiting for me. I saw him right away. Because he looked physically better and less tense than he had the last time, I felt at ease. He asked me to move my chair close to him and in an unusually low voice told me that he had appointed Mr. Vang Ly as Ambassador to the United States and that I was to replace him in New Delhi. I told him that the Embassy in Paris had already informed me about this. He asked if I knew Mr. Ly. "Not very well," I answered.

All of a sudden, Ngo Dinh Nhu strode into the President's office, dressed casually in short sleeves and tan-colored pants. My initial reaction was a feeling of chilling fear. Except for a visit in 1960 when I had been Consul General in Rangoon, I had rarely seen him in person. He looked

now like an opium addict, with a leaden face, bluish lips, and dreamy eyes. It had occurred to me once that my new assignment must have been planned by Nhu. (I learned later, however, that the idea had come from Dr. Ton Nhat Thien, a friend of mine and the President's Press Secretary.)

I felt a cold sweat on the back of my neck. I wondered if Colonel Chau had reported to him about our dinner conversation with General Ty. Then I suddenly remembered a handwritten, undated note Nhu had sent me in 1962 via the diplomatic pouch. In that note he had ordered me to report immediately about my relations with Pham Xuan Giai, an associate of Tran Dinh Lan whom Nhu had tried to implicate in the 1960 attempted coup d'état. I also remembered that Nhu's Secret Service, led by Dr. Tuyen, had also tried to implicate me in that coup, but President Diem had not believed it. When I saw Nhu appear so suddenly at the end of the room, I froze. My heart was pounding and I felt trapped with no way out. I thought that perhaps Mr. Nhu would attempt to "convict" me in front of his brother, then shoot me or send me to prison right that minute. I prayed to Lord Buddha not to let that happen. Then I felt relieved when Nhu offered only a cold greeting: "You are already here!" He immediately began to brief me on my new assignment in India. I was to wait until informal contacts had been arranged between me and the Consul-General of North Vietnam. If these initial meetings proved successful, a full negotiating team led by Dr. Buu Hoi would start formal talks with representatives from Hanoi. In the meantime, I should do everything possible "to speed up the accreditation process for Mr. Ly to be our Ambassador in Washington."

After Mr. Nhu left as quickly as he had come in, President Diem told me that early next month "Mrs. Adviser," by whom he meant Madame Nhu, would lead a delegation to the International Parliament Conference in Belgrade. She might also visit a number of other countries, including the United States, but only in a "personal capacity." Then he asked if Mr. Chuong had

already vacated the Embassy. I told him that he had done so, and Diem instructed me to go back right away to take care of the new Ambassador's accreditation problem. It was the shortest visit I had ever made to Vietnam. I left Saigon the next morning.

I arrived in Washington in time to watch Walter Cronkite's September 2nd interview with President Kennedy on CBS. Kennedy spoke from his back yard at Hyannis Port, mostly about Vietnam. "We are prepared to continue to assist them," he said, "but I don't think the war can be won unless the people support the effort, and in my opinion, in the last two months [the Saigon government] has gotten out of touch with the people." Cronkite then asked him, "Do you think this government has time to regain the support of the people?" "I do," the President replied. "With changes of policy and perhaps of personnel, I think it can." I found out later that this statement was interpreted by the generals who were plotting with the knowledge of the US Embassy as the green light of approval. This signal was strengthened by another statement by the President in the same interview: "I don't agree with those who say we should withdraw. That would be a great mistake."

On September 10, 1963, "the 5-foot 80-pound spitfire," as Madame Nhu was being described, departed with her delegation to attend the International Parliamentary Conference in Yugoslavia. Her plan was to tour Europe, then visit the USA for what she arrogantly described as a "campaign of disintoxication" designed to clear the American public opinion "of the falsehoods about her husband and her country propagated by the American press." That same day, at the White House, President Kennedy met with Joseph Mendenhall of the State Department and General Krulak, the US Marine Corps Commander. A few days earlier, they had been dispatched by the President at the suggestion of Secretary of Defense McNamara to Vietnam for a quick fact-finding tour. When they returned, they could not have disagreed more about the situation in

Vietnam. After the President listened to their contradictory reports, he made one of his most famous statements about the war: "You two did visit the same country, didn't you?" "I can explain it, Mr. President," General Krulak answered. "Mr. Mendenhall visited the cities and I visited the countryside and the war is in the countryside."

More and more confused about contradictory reports about Vietnam from the Department of Defense, the Department of State, and the CIA, President Kennedy tried once more. He sent McNamara and General Taylor to Vietnam two weeks later, for more "facts." I began to see the American view of the war in Vietnam as becoming much like the story of "The Elephant and the Blind." In other words, the US government knew every tree in Vietnam but could not see the forest.

By mid-September, Ambassador Do Vang Ly arrived in Washington and settled into the Embassy residence. Following President Diem's instructions, I had contacted the State Department and the White House, but it was clear to me that the US government, as an expression of "extreme displeasure" with President Diem, was refusing to accept the credentials of a new envoy from an allied country, something that happened only when two countries were at or on the verge of war. Yes, South Vietnam and the United States were allies against the communists, but since 1960, they had actually been engaged in a secret war characterized by mistrust, arrogance of power, and lack of concern for the common people. Mr. Do Vang Ly became a ghost Ambassador, and I had to carry on my "acting" duties while the Ambassador was living on the third floor of the Embassy. For the next few weeks, the only sane instructions I received from Saigon were about Madame Nhu's impending visit to the USA. I was instructed to consider her appearance "as private and not official" and that "the Embassy has no obligation to treat her differently from other visiting

Vietnamese citizens." The instruction was sent uncoded in the clear and began with "D'ordre du President." In the still hot September in Washington, that was indeed some cool, fresh air.

IV Swept Along by the Flood

On September 16, I was pleasantly surprised to receive a telephone call from Buu Hoi. He invited me to come to New York City to work with him on what he called a "new mission," the possibility that the United Nations could bring the Buddhist question to the General Assembly. Doing so would, he thought, in the context of the situation in Vietnam, "pour gasoline on the fire." He knew that I knew U Thant, the Burmese statesman then Secretary General of the United Nations. Dr. Buu Hoi had assembled a few Vietnamese career diplomats from Europe to help support this idea. His strategy was to avoid a full debate of the Vietnam "Buddhist problem" at the General Assembly but instead to propose a UN fact-finding mission to Saigon made up of Ambassadors from Asia and Buddhist countries. He even hinted that the mission would be led by the Buddhist Ambassador from Sri-Lanka. He told me that he had recently been in Saigon and had met with both President Diem and Mr. Nhu, whom he had known since their student days in Paris. They had both agreed with his plan. He believed that the same situation in Vietnam was nearly hopeless, that a coup d'état was imminent. His hope was that a favorable report on the Buddhist question by a fact-finding UN team would create a better international climate for Vietnam and influence the US to reverse its course.

Generally, I agreed with him. Our only difference was that he thought Ngo Dinh Nhu was not as bad as most people thought. For Buu Hoi, the major problem was, he said, how to shut "Madame Nhu's big mouth." Buu Hoi had important friends in the US government and needed to

see them. I arranged for him and myself to meet with Under-Secretary of State Avril W. Harriman and Assistant Secretary of State Roger Hilsman on October 1. Harriman refused to listen to Buu Hoi's explanations of the difficulties facing the Vietnamese government. At one point during the meeting, violating all rules of normal courtesy, he even removed his hearing aid. Hilsman, although more polite, was firm in his belief that unless there was a change of personnel and policy, the Diem government would lose the war. During that visit, the only pleasant and courteous occasion occurred when Ambassador Buu Hoi, on behalf of the government of the Republic of Vietnam, signed the nuclear test-ban treaty. Assistant Secretary of State Hilsman and I were witnesses to the event.

On October 9, Madame Nhu arrived in the United States, and the only thing I did for her was to ask a young diplomat, Mr. To Ngoc Thach, a second secretary to Madame Nhu's mother, to help her during her stay in the US. Madame Chuong was still, in principle, the "Observer," even though her husband had been dismissed. Because she so rarely showed up at the New York office, Mr. Thach was in charge of business there. Besides criticizing the US policy, Madame Nhu engaged in verbal attacks against her parents who refused to see her at their home. On October 14, 1963, Madame Nhu was the luncheon guest of Arthur Ochs Sulzberger, president and publisher of the New York Times. She was accompanied by her eighteen-year-old daughter Ngo Dinh Le Thuy. The off-the-record luncheon was also attended by news and business executives of the Times. The day after, and without giving any details, Madame Nhu claimed in a cable she sent to the Vietnam Foreign Ministry that the "luncheon was a big success and that she has convinced the New York Times to believe her just cause."

In an interview on the NBC television program "Meet the Press" on Sunday October 13, she declared, "We cannot get along just as well, because the world is under a spell, the communist-

inspired spell which is called liberalism." She said that many leaders in America had started to "change the line and are not as strongly anti-communist as well" (The New York Times, October 14, 1963). While she was accusing the US as being "soft on communism," her father, former Ambassador Tran Van Chuong, told the Columbia Broadcasting System's (CBS's) "Face the Nation" program that "liberalization in Saigon would produce great popularity for critics of the regime and that dictators cannot permit opponents to become heroes" (the New York Times, October 14, 1963).

In Saigon on October 17, her husband, Mr. Nhu, in an interview with seven visiting newsmen, declared that "the US has initiated a process of disintegration of Vietnam" and that "the trust which existed between South Vietnam and America has ceased to exist" (The New York Herald Tribune, October 18, 1963). This was the line his wife was taking in almost all her public statements. I never quite understood what they both wished to accomplish in the battle over the hearts and minds of the American people by accusing the US government of being "soft on communism" and of conspiracy. Yet she believed and told the official Vietnam Press Agency that she impressed "practically everybody in Washington, D.C., on October 18, 1968." On that day she tried to see her parents, my neighbors then, and failed. They closed their door on her and their granddaughter Le Thuy. Most Vietnamese I knew felt the sense of shame in watching, hearing, and reading about her public war with her parents on radio, TV, and in the press. And even when the coup did finally occur, Madame Nhu thought and still clung to her belief for some time later that this coup had been the one that her husband and herself had plotted to destroy the rebellious Vietnamese Army in order to take over the Presidency of Vietnam.

On October 6, 1963, I received a cable from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs asking me to proceed to Buenos Aires to "represent the President of the Republic of Vietnam, as his Special

Ambassador to the Inauguration of President Jose Maria Guido of Argentina." The cable specified that "The Office of the President has cabled your credentials directly to the Office of the President of Argentina." I had only a few hours to prepare myself for the trip because the Inauguration ceremonial and festivities started on October 10. I had been to Brazil but had no real knowledge of Argentina. I called the Argentine Ambassador to Washington for a few more details. He answered me in French and explained that I "would feel more at home as the cultural influence of France prevails among the elite." He suggested that I should be there on the 8th. This would allow me to "rest a while before a four-day heavy schedule." I asked my secretary to arrange my travel and immediately informed the Embassy of Argentina to communicate to Buenos Aires my imminent arrival.

It took fourteen to fifteen hours by Pan-American clipper to reach Buenos Aires on the bright cool morning of October 9. I was met at the airport in full honors by the Chief of Protocol of the President. He introduced to me a Navy Captain—who spoke fluent French—who would serve as my Aide-de-Camp during my visit. Escorted from the airport by an impressive motorcade, we passed through beautiful and elegant large boulevards sparkled with well-groomed emerald-green lawns and vast parks full of flowers. My first impression was that the capital of Argentina definitely did have an attractive French flavor. Rows of busy sidewalk cafés full of well-dressed and relaxed shoppers showed off the wealth and prosperity of the country.

Exhausted, I arrived at a majestic, huge hotel, the Alvear Palace. Immediately, the journalists who were waiting in the lobby began flashing their cameras at me, and I soon realized that even in South America, the crisis in Vietnam was not very far away at all. One newsman from the United Press shouted a question: "How long you think President Diem is going to last?" I replied immediately, "Forever." That was my only answer. Everyone in the crowd laughed,

including my severe-looking ADC, no doubt having fun with my reply. Upon entering my room, I immediately lay down on my bed for a six-hour sleep. My ADC gave me a tour of the city before taking me to an informal dinner. His French was so elegant that it reminded me of the way some of my professors talked in my school days at the Quoc Hoc College in Hue.

On October 10, the Inaugural Ceremonial started with the formal introduction to the new President of Argentina of the Heads of Foreign Diplomatic Missions, in alphabetical order. Each one of us was allowed seven to ten minutes to talk with the Head of State. Because Vietnam's name was so near the end of the list, my turn did not come until early October 11. President Maria Guido had a translator and was obviously interested in seeing me. After a few minutes of courtesy conversation (inquiring about my President and myself, our families, etc.) he asked me about the political and military situation in Vietnam. He was very well informed and asked the most important question: "Do the people of Vietnam support the American intervention [his word] in Vietnam?" I answered diplomatically: "The people of Vietnam have little knowledge about the USA and its policy, but as a whole, at the government level, relations could be improved." He smiled at my answer, and in a very serious mood he looked into my eyes and he said, before I left after more than ten minutes of conversation, "We have more experiences than your country in dealing with the complexities and difficulties with North America, and I hope your President will send you back here as Ambassador so we can help your people." At first I thought it was just a diplomatic gesture toward my President and myself; but I was surprised when on the 14th, my ADC handed me a copy of a letter in French from the Argentine President to President Ngo Dinh Diem, thanking him for having sent an "erudite and skillful diplomat" to his inauguration and suggesting that President Diem send me back as Ambassador to Argentina. After I finished reading, my ADC then handed me a sealed letter for President Diem and said his President had instructed him to show

me the duplicate as a courtesy. I was, of course, very pleased and immediately sent the letter to President Diem as soon as I reached Washington.

The four-day ceremonial program left one afternoon free so each head of delegation could use that time to see any part of the city or meet with non-governmental "personalities." I expressed a wish to meet four other writers and poets. They all spoke excellent French and were politically far to the left. They clearly expressed their anti-United States positions. One young poet indirectly "accused" me of cooperating with the "capitalists." To save the party that was quickly turning sour, I instinctively changed to talk about the arts, the meanings of Joy and Creation, a famous topic of the French philosopher Henry Bergson (1859-1941), winner of the Nobel Prize in literature in 1927. Because I had a late dinner appointment with the Argentine Foreign Minister that day before my departure, I took leave of the poets and writers sooner than they had expected. I promised to continue the dialogue in writing later.

While in Argentina I had planned to spend a few days sightseeing and also to see an old friend whom I had known before in Bangkok, then Burma, Frederick Larkin, the CIA Station Chief in Buenos Aires. He had called one evening and invited me for dinner. However, when I returned to my hotel at midnight after the poets and writers meeting, I received a formal letter from the US Embassy in Buenos Aires conveying to me a message from the Vietnamese Mission to the United Nations. Because Buu Hoi needed me immediately for the preparation of the UN fact-finding mission to Saigon on the Buddhist Crisis, I had to decline Fred's invitation and return to Washington.

On October 22, a week after my return, I received a letter from Madame Ocampo reminding me of my promise to continue the "unfinished" debate in writing. It was a polite, meaningful letter, but by then I had no time and no desire to continue the discussion. Although I

disagreed with certain aspects of the US policy in Vietnam, I had little respect for the automatic anti-USA attitude of the left wing of any country.

Ambassador Buu Hoi's proposal was accepted by the United Nations, and the fact-finding mission arrived in Saigon on October 23. President Diem met with the members of the mission on October 25 and Mr. Nhu joined them on October 26. They were obviously impressed by President Diem's views. The report they made later was generally favorable toward the arguments presented by the Vietnamese government. At least for a few days, the Buddhist Crisis seemed to have cooled down and no further debates took place at the international body in New York.

October 26 was the National Day of the Republic of South Vietnam, the anniversary of the promulgation of the Constitution of the Republic. As head of the diplomatic mission and Chargé d'Affaires, I was required, with my wife's help, of course, to host a reception. All through October, both in Washington and in Saigon, the rumors of a Washington-supported coup were becoming accepted as a probability. The only question being asked was when. Early in October, Bernard Yoh, a close associate of President Diem and General Lansdale in the mid-1950s in Saigon, had contacted me at my office. So sure was he that a coup against President Diem would soon take place, sometime in November, that to prevent it from happening, he had arranged for a few Senators to go to Saigon and literally stay there, physically, in the office of the President. To reach Diem, the coup plotters would have to cross the bodies of US Senators. The day after informing me, he had invited me to meet for the first time Senators Thomas Dodd (D-Connecticut), Barry Goldwater (R-Arizona), and Strom Thurmond (R-South Carolina). The Senators had expressed displeasure at the "way the White House and the State Department were treating President Diem" and would try to help. As Yoh and I had agreed, I didn't say anything at that meeting; my physical presence there was designed to show that I was for it. I checked with General Lansdale, and he

thought it was a good idea that might work, but he said he did not want to be involved. Bernard Yoh promised to contact me by the end of October or the first day of November.

I thought Bernard Yoh's idea could succeed if he knew the precise date of the impending coup, so I went to the British Embassy to look up an old friend, someone who could know but might not tell. He was Maurice Oldfield, believed to be the inspiration for George Smiley in John Le Carré's spy novels and "M" in Ian Fleming's James Bond books. I had known him in the 1950s in Bangkok. He was then the Singapore-based M.1.6 British Intelligence representative in Southeast Asia. When I had first arrived in Washington in 1961, I had looked up the "Blue Book" list of diplomats at all embassies, and to my happy surprise saw his name listed as Minister-Counselor. We renewed contacts and worked on "matters of mutual [intelligence] interest." In all our conversations, he had rarely mentioned the Vietnamese problem. He had indirectly hinted to me that because the US-Britain relationship was so special, we should talk only at a very general level about questions outside of Europe. We saw each other often in social gatherings. He was well-read, well-educated, cheerful, had a childish-looking face, and had a good sense of humor. This time, however, I asked him directly if he had any thoughts about the on-going crisis in Vietnam and the rumor of a pending coup d'état. All he said was that he had "heard the rumors" and was "sad about the whole thing." He was not committed either way.

The Vietnamese National Day Reception at my Embassy on Saturday evening, October 26, was considered a success by everyone who attended, because of the great number of guests and the quality of food and drinks served. The US government was formally represented by Angier Biddle Duke, Chief of Protocol, other high-ranking officials from the Department of State, the United States Information Agency, the Department of Justice, and some Members of Congress. Also present were heads of diplomatic missions from countries having diplomatic relations with

the Republic of South Vietnam, members of the national and international press, and businessmen. About 350 guests attended the party. As customary at such an occasion, at about 7:00 p.m. when all important personalities invited were already present, the US Chief of Protocol and his wife approached me and my wife and asked that we and all the invitees raise our glasses to "drink to the health of the President of the United States. Standing not far from me, General Lansdale and Bernard Yoh smiled sarcastically when the Chief of Protocol drank to the health of the Republic of Vietnam. To them, the US government, in particular the State Department, had already put President Diem on the "death list." At about 9:00 p.m. when most of the official guests had left, I went to the Ambassador's residence on the third floor of the Embassy to invite Ambassador-designate Do Vang Ly to join me and some of my close friends for a drink and some food. He was still forced to be "invisible" because his credentials had still not yet been formally accepted by President Kennedy. After the last guests had left, Mr. Ly pulled from his pocket a cable from the office of the President of Vietnam ordering me to return immediately to Saigon for consultation.

I left the next morning, October 27. During the flight, I read the transcript of the speech President Kennedy had delivered at Amherst College just the day before. It was, I thought, his best yet, an address on poetry and the arrogance of power. I did not know if he had been influenced by the situation in Vietnam while writing that speech, or if it was just a coincidence that what he said applied so well to what was happening there.

I saw President Diem in the early afternoon of October 29. He looked more relaxed, even cheerful when he received me, as he had been in the good old days. There was only one difference. For the first time since our meeting had begun in the 1940s, he handed me a blank sheet of paper and a pencil and told me to take notes. He opened the conversation by asking me with a grave

but not angry voice why there had been so much delay in the presentation of the credentials for Ambassador-Designate Do Vang Ly. I told him that the State Department high-ranking officials, Undersecretary Harriman and Assistant Secretary Hilsman, seemed to be blocking the ceremony. "Why does Washington," he inquired, "insist on having more military and civilian control here, yet refuses to satisfy our request for more aid for building strategic hamlets and arming the self-defense units and the National Guards?" Without waiting for my answer, he said he believed that the Americans "want to send in their regular troops even though that would play into the hands of the communists."

Then, quite unexpectedly, he switched to his own domestic situation and asked if I knew Nguyen Dinh Thuan, the Secretary for the President and Assistant Secretary of Defense (as President, Diem also held the title of Secretary of Defense). I said, "Not very well." Diem continued: "Mr. Thuan will be the Prime Minister in my next, new government," then insisted that the "creation of this important post was my idea, not the Americans'." Then he asked me to pay attention to the following instruction: I was to return to Washington as soon as possible, and immediately after my return, I should call a press conference to announce that "agreements had been reached between the Vietnamese government and Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge regarding the best methods to combat the Viet Cong insurgency. These methods concern more efficient use of military and economic aid, a better administrative structure at the national level. In short, there will be major changes in both personnel and policies." I was directed not to go into any detail but to say only that "the next few days will see the materialization of these agreements." He added, "If possible, you should try to convey the same message directly to President Kennedy." He asked how soon I could return. I replied November 1, late afternoon." He then asked me to come back about noon that day to see him once more before I went back to Washington. When I was about

to leave he said to me, "After your press conference, you should proceed to New Delhi, because of new developments." I would be needed in India to deal with the "highest person" the Hanoi government might choose to send for talks. President Diem seemed convinced that North Vietnam was willing to discuss constructive matters such as trade and postal relations with the South. Caught in the conflict between Peking and Moscow, he reasoned, "Hanoi may wish for a period of non-alignment and we can profit from it."

When I left President Diem this time, I felt more optimistic and encouraged than I had been for some time because of his willingness to negotiate with Hanoi, something I had originally thought was just a device designed by Mr. Nhu to blackmail the United States. It was probably just intellectual curiosity, but I secretly hoped that I would have an opportunity to sit down with a Hanoi diplomat for serious business.

I spent the next two days visiting friends and relatives, and I got the impression that the stormy days and the tensions between the government and Buddhists were apparently over. President Kennedy's "fact-finding mission" was still in town. Apparently, though, there were no US Senators to act as a "protective shield." My friend Ambassador Buu Hoi was also in Saigon with the UN mission. On the morning of October 31, as he later told me at dinner at the Majestic Hotel where we were both staying, he had brought two Buddhist monks to see Ngo Dinh Nhu. He was pleased with the results of the meeting, and he told me that Nhu was relaxed and was polite with the monks. After dinner, my younger brother Due, whom I had tried unsuccessfully to contact since my arrival, came to see me at my hotel. He was in uniform, and seemed worried and tired. It was also the first time that I had seen him with a revolver, which he carried in a satchel hanging from his belt. He pulled out the gun and showed it to me. I remarked to him that the city now seemed quieter than the last time we had been each other. He said it was only appearance, merely

the "calm before the storm." In just a few hours, at midnight, he said, his Military Intelligence Unit had been ordered to go on alert, and he suspected that something very big might happen. He cautioned me not to go outside at all. He gave me a special telephone number to reach him in an emergency.

I told Due that I was going to see the President the next day, November 1, the day before I was due to leave for Washington. He seemed unusually concerned. "Do you really have to see him?" he asked. "I promised," I answered firmly. I sensed that he was aware of something serious but didn't want to share it with me. He looked straight at me. "A friend of mine who works at the General Staff Secretariat told me just a few hours ago that a number of army units had been ordered to move near Saigon, perhaps for a coup d'état. He asked me not to tell anyone, "even my wife." I took his words seriously but kept my cool. I thought I might be able to verify his warning when I saw the President. I told him that I would call him wherever he might be as soon as I left the President's office.

The next day, November 1, I had breakfast with Buu Hoi at the hotel. He had seen President Diem in Da Lat, the resort town in the Central Highlands. The President had been there with US Ambassador Lodge. They seemed to be on good terms, he believed. It was in Da Lat that the "Center for Nuclear Power" was located. For prestige purposes, Buu Hoi was the Honorary Director of the new Research Institution, even though he was based in Paris. He had suggested that President Diem sign the France-Vietnam agreement that Buu Hoi had negotiated on the "use of nuclear power for peaceful purposes." President Diem indeed had signed the agreement, and according to Doan Them, the most reliable chronicler of the regime, it was the last official document he ever signed. Buu Hoi concurred with me that the President was in a very good mood.

Then, about 11:00 a.m., I went to Vo Van Hai's office and was told that the President had two important guests, Admiral Harry D. Felt, CINCPAC, and Ambassador Lodge. About noon, I saw a small, wiry American officer in a Navy uniform leave the President's office. It was Admiral Felt. About an hour later Ambassador Lodge left. The President received me, holding in his hand a piece of paper: it was my report on the August civil rights demonstration led by Martin Luther King. He was wearing his usual formal sharkskin suit with a black-blue tie. Against the bright ceiling light, more grey hair showed on the back of his head. His usually sharp eyes looked dreamy, perhaps because of lack of sleep, and although he was apparently in a good mood, he didn't smile. He then said, "This is very interesting," and he asked me to keep reporting to him about the movement. Still standing, he added that he had had a good meeting with Admiral Felt and Ambassador Lodge, and he believed "that everything is all right." For the first time in years he wished me a good trip and reminded me to tell him immediately about the American reaction to the press conference he had ordered me to hold in Washington. I wished him good health and told him that I would cable him as soon as there was a public response.

I immediately went to Vo Van Hai's office where he was waiting for me. I tried to use Hai's phone to contact my brother Due, but the line was busy. I tried to call twice more but finally had to give up. We then drove to Hai's home. We were silent most of the time, but when we sat down for a quick lunch he told me that a coup d'état was unavoidable and was coming very soon. I did not really know what to think. All the indications I had received on this trip were that the situation was improving, but according to Hai, the Vietnamese generals still believed that Mr. Nhu was trying to trap them into a situation in which they, not Nhu, would be seen as the enemies of the Buddhists and the people. It was Nhu, however, and his Special Forces who had raided the pagodas, had arrested the monks and students. Hai tried to suppress his anger and asked me

what I knew about the American position. I told him that despite the contradictory versions he must have read in the press, the US government had lost its patience and still thought that our President had lost control of the government. He said matter-of-factly that he had "recently, for the first time told an American official about the true situation and the need to get rid of Mr. Nhu and his wife." He asked if I knew that Dr. Tran Kim Tuyen, Director of the Office of Political and Social Studies (the cover name for Nhu's Secret Police) had been sent in September to Cairo to be Consul-General, a newly created post. Who had replaced him? None other than Madame Nhu's brother, Tran Van Khiem. I had not heard of this change. So another "family" member had just been added to Nhu's political establishment. Hai added, "Tuyen was suspected of plotting against Nhu." He suggested that I go back to my hotel for a rest and that we should meet again in the evening with other friends. I proposed dinner at my place. He agreed and drove me to the Majestic.

I had a good siesta, and I am almost ashamed to say that I slept through the most significant political event of my career as a Vietnamese diplomat. At about 3:30 p.m., Buu Hoi knocked at my door. He looked shaken. I asked him what the matter was, and he told me that the coup d'état had finally taken place. Dr. Buu Hoi revealed that the French Ambassador had been informed about one hour before the coup d'état although he had the impression--he didn't give me the reason and I didn't think it was proper for me to ask—what the French Embassy all along was being briefed by a leading member of the leadership of the coup. I asked Buu Hoi if he knew whether or not the President had asked for asylum at the French Embassy or that of the Vatican representative. He replied, "I asked the French Ambassador the same question." He paused, then added, "And the answer was that they were wondering why the President didn't take that road. The French Ambassador had called the Italian Embassy and the Vatican Office to check. They all

concluded that President Diem would never call either the US Embassy or any other Embassy for help. His well-known pride and stubbornness would not allow him to do so."

Lacking any more fresh news, we speculated about the fate of the President, and Buu Hoi concluded that Diem would probably be safe. I was not so sure, because I knew the negative feeling of General Duong Van Minh, the leader of the coup, against not only Ngo Dinh Nhu and his wife, but also the President himself. I had met General Minh once at the office of Vice President Nguyen Ngoc Tho (a close friend of Minh) in 1960; in our discussion about general government policy, I asked him if the President still enjoyed the popularity in the Army. He had quickly responded, "It depends on how he will be able to control his family. He is not the same man he was in the 1950s."

My next question to Buu Hoi was, "What's going to happen to the President?" Buu Hoi said that he had just finished lunch with the French Ambassador and had been told that the coup leaders would be lenient with the President but not with Mr. and Mrs. Nhu or Mr. Can. Unlike myself who had never had contact with the French Embassy, Dr. Buu Hoi still held a French dual citizenship and was close to the people with whom he had lived in Paris since his student days. Moreover, despite President Diem and Mr. Nhu's anti-French attitude, there existed a kind of French intellectual "mafia" among those who had studied there. Both Diem and especially Nhu were fluent in the language. I suggested that Buu Hoi call his friend General Le Van Kin, Tran Van Don's brother-in-law and one of the coup leaders, to get more information. Both of us were extremely nervous, anxious to know more, and greatly concerned about the President's fate. General Kin's telephone rang and rang but no one answered. Desperate, we turned on the radio, but the stations were off the air. Frustrated, we tried to go outside and have a look on the street, but the hotel staff advised us against it.

At 4:00 p.m. my younger brother and another captain, both in army uniforms, arrived at my hotel and confirmed that a coup d'état had indeed taken place early that afternoon. He advised me to stay put. We both, Buu Hoi and I, felt so relieved to see my brother. Due added, "You do not have to worry about anything. Your friend, General Do Mau, Director of the Military Intelligence Department, is an important member of the Revolutionary Military Committee." Of course I knew Do Mau well. I had recruited him in the 1940s for Ngo Dinh Diem's underground organization. Due said he had just come to bring the news. The coup was still underway and he couldn't stay long.

At 4:30 p.m., Radio Saigon returned to the air and at the same time I could hear for the first time sounds of what I learned later was the heavy bombardment of the President's Guard's barracks. I tried to reach Hai at his office (the line was cut), then at his house (no answer). Having nothing to do but worry, Buu Hoi and I thought about checking with the travel agencies to take care of our reservations. The airport was closed. No office was open for business. We couldn't help but talk a little bit about our futures, and Buu Hoi was concerned about me. "For me," he said, "I shall return to Paris as soon as I can and back to my scientific work, to my labs that I have neglected for years, but perhaps it will be more difficult for you." He repeated many times that he would help if I needed him. We spent the day trying to reach friends and listening to the radio that played nothing but martial music and the Revolutionary Communiqués that told us very little that we wanted to know.

We both felt cut off, and I again turned to *Kim Van Kieu* to find a clue to my future and to my inner feelings. Holding the small book between my hands, with closed eyes I silently recited a prayer and opened it, my index finger pointing by chance at line 2465 that read:

If I turn up at court, bound hand and foot,
what will become of me, surrendered man?
Why let them swaddle me in robes and skirts?
Why play a duke so as to cringe and crawl?
Had I not better rule my march domain?
For what can they all do against my might?
At pleasure I stir heaven and shake earth
I come and go. I bow my head to none.

These are the thoughts of Tu Hai, the rebel with a cause, who was thinking to himself before he accepted the terms of surrender of the imperial government at the suggestion of Kieu, the woman he had fallen in love with. He finally surrendered, but betrayed by the government, was ambushed and killed.

I showed the lines to Dr. Buu Hoi. He had a cynical smile, thinking I had deliberately selected the lines. I preferred not to argue and enjoyed a temporarily restored peace. I told myself, "I shall not bow my head to anyone. In America, no decent human being has to do that."

Buu Hoi went to his room. Left alone, I wandered on the street in front of the hotel. The sidewalk was almost deserted, the sky became cloudy. Even darker, it seemed, was the air space above the President's Office. Then, suddenly, I felt like a caged lion. I felt the need to roar, to shout, to scream, but no sound came out of my throat.

During the night, the Gia Long Palace was attacked, and at 7:00 o'clock in the morning of November 2, Radio Saigon broadcast Communiqué No.1 announcing that victorious coup d'état by the Military Revolutionary Committee (Hoi Dong Nhan Cach Mang) and naming all the participating leaders, including General Do Mau as Political Commissar. I tried to call Hai again,

but his phone line remained dead. I contacted the Pan-American airlines office about my ticket reservations but was told that the airport remained closed "until further notice." Buu Hoi stayed with me for a while and said he needed to see his friends at the French Embassy. I told him to be cautious. The hotel management advised guests to close all windows for fear of stray bullets and warned us not to leave the hotel premises. We heard bombardment noises close by.

By November 3, Saigon was practically back to normal. In the morning I walked around the city. The Gia Long Palace had suffered serious damage, and police and some army soldiers blocked all streets leading to it and to the nearby headquarters of the Special Forces and the Presidential Guard. Crowds of men and children tried to approach for a close look at the Palace but were pushed away by army soldiers. A lot of military vehicles were circulating around, but not many soldiers were seen on the main streets. I felt frustrated at not being able to get in touch with friends but soon realized that it would be unwise to try to do so. In an abnormal situation like this, and because of my known close relations with President Diem, to lie low was the best policy. An announcement on the radio referred to President Diem's suicide. I was devastated, mentally exhausted, and politically disinterested. With the unwarranted death of President Diem, I knew that my public life had ended and all I could think of was to leave the scene of the crime and go home to my family and my America. For a moment, Vietnam had become a strange land to me, sinking to another level of shame, the shame of Vietnamese killing Vietnamese, the tragedy of a dead President who had for years washed off for us the shame of French colonialism.

People generally seemed to welcome the coup, though. Their hatred was mainly directed against Madame Nhu and her husband. Downtown, I watched a noisy group of youth armed with sticks trying to demolish the Trung Sisters Statue to express their anger. The work had been commissioned by Madame Nhu to honor the two women who, in the year 40 AD, had revolted

against the Chinese occupation. Despite their respect for the heroines, the first true liberators of Vietnam, the people nevertheless destroyed the statue because they told me that Madame Nhu had intentionally ordered the women's faces on the statue made to look like her.

At 6:00 p.m. I returned to my hotel and went to knock at Dr. Buu Hoi's room. Lying in his bed, he looked distraught, and my first reaction was to ask if he was all right. He broke into tears and told me that he had just come back from the St. Paul Hospital with a friend from the French Embassy. There he had seen the bodies of President Diem and Mr. Nhu. They had been brought there for identification. Having obviously been shot and stabbed to death, the brothers had not committed suicide as the official announcements had been claiming since morning. We both wept, and we realized that we both needed to be alone until evening when we would have dinner together.

Not knowing what to do, whom to call, whom to talk to, feeling suffocated, I went out to the street in front of the Hotel. November was usually a cool month in Saigon, but I had the impression that it was hot and humid with short periods of intermittent rain. I thought the weather was quite appropriate when applied to the circumstances. Then I felt sick to my stomach. A verse from *Kim Van Kieu* came to my mind: "Nguoi buon canh co vui dau bao gio" ("The outside world can't brighten up when you feel sickly sad inside").

Feeling very much alone, I lay down in my hotel bed and stared blankly at the ceiling. I couldn't remember what had happened to me; my head seemed suddenly to be empty of any thoughts. My brain simply refused to accept as reality the news of the President's death. I was, I suppose, in a denial state. For a moment I was distracted by the reflection of light through the glass window on the ceiling. Looking at the ceiling, I thought to myself, "That's a strange pattern." The different shapes of figures formed by light and shadow were rather blurred, not crisp like

those I had previously seen after walking up from my siesta. And the figures kept moving and changing patterns. Then I realized that outside the glass window were many long branches of a tamarind tree that were moving back and forth in the breezes, thus activating the odd patterns of light and shadow on the ceiling. I was surprised at my own discovery, at my own explanation, and surprised that I could think about such silly things with a clear head in the middle of an event that had shaken Heaven and Earth, an event that had changed my whole life. As the shock and the pain finally seemed to subside, I began to review in my mind the happy and the frustrating moments I had spent with President Diem since that historic day of July 2, 1940, when my father escorted me and "confided" me, such as he had done with Buddha when I was five, to the service of Ngo Dinh Diem, then the symbol of Vietnamese patriotism and integrity. Had it really been only two days since I had seen him for the last time? I still believed that he had been a great, uncorrupted patriot and a moral man, but he had also been a lonely victim of family members who had used him for power and profit. His murder had resulted directly from the logical development of an internal, violent rebellion (not a revolution) that had been initiated by his own brothers and sister-in-law.

I thought then—and I still believe now—that for the Vietnamese to blame a conspiracy by the United States for the bloody end of the Ngo Dinh Diem regime is to avoid their own national responsibility and to misunderstand the realities of their history during the decolonization period.

By the time Dr. Buu Hoi knocked at my door for dinner, I had finished reading and meditating over the English translation of the second-century Satapancasatka of Matrceta entitled *Hymn to the Buddha of Infinite Compassion and Wisdom*. (On my last two visits to Vietnam I had also brought along *The Teachings of the Compassionate Buddha* by E.A. Burtt [1955] as well as

the *Kim Van Kieu*.) Two lines of the Hymn beautifully describe not only my state of mind but also that, I hoped, of many other Vietnamese:

An island you are to those swept along by the flood, a
shelter to the stricken,
A refuge to those terrified by becoming, the resource
of those who desire release.

I indeed desired release, but above all I wanted to go home to my family in the United States of America.

We chose a table in a dark corner of the almost deserted hotel dining room and sat down. Neither of us had any appetite for any kind of food. Although our eyes were fixed on the menu, we couldn't see or read or comprehend. We both were still numbed by the events of the day. Buu Hoi's eyes were red and swollen behind his thick glasses. A waiter, waiting patiently for us to order our meals, kept coming back and forth several times to our table, no doubt not daring to address us directly out of respect for our obvious grief. I decided to help him out. With much effort, I finally succeeded in uttering a few words to Buu Hoi: "I suggest that we share a vegetarian dish made of stir-fried tofu (bean curd) with different kinds of fresh vegetables, sliced carrots, green beans, baby corn, bamboo shoots and straw mushrooms, to be served with steamed rice and a clear chicken broth containing slices of fresh tofu, green onion, flavored with lemon grass and a touch of ginger. Hoi merely nodded.

After our reserved, almost silent dinner, Buu Hoi gave me a few very red and blue capsules of Tuinal, a sleeping medication that worked very well and kept me from repeatedly reliving all the events of the past two days. I began to wonder just what I had or had not done that had caused me to be a participant in the collision of these two trains.

For the next few days we all waited—Buu Hoi, several senior diplomats in his team who had come to Saigon in October with the United Nations fact-finding mission, and myself—for instructions from the new government. The new Minister of Foreign Affairs happened to be a civilian, the old, experienced bureaucrat Pham Dang Lam, for many years a Director General in the Ministry. Buu Hoi departed first for New York City and the UN, where he formally terminated his special mission to find a solution to the Vietnamese Buddhist Crisis, which had of course just resolved itself with the bloody end of the Diem regime. His work finished, Buu Hoi joined his friends, his family and his laboratories in Paris. The other diplomats were instructed by the new government to rejoin their respective posts and wait for new orders. I was granted a meeting with Mr. Pham Dang Lam, the new Foreign Minister. He was the same man, with the same low voice and unimpressive face and manner, that I had seen before the coup. He told me that I could return to Washington, that my new assignment initiated by the Diem government would be reconfirmed, and I was expected to accept my new post as Chief of Mission in New Delhi, India. It was a great relief when I left his office. In my own mind, I was happy to be physically released from a chapter of Vietnamese history of which no Vietnamese citizen of any conviction could be especially proud.

Among the generals of the Military Revolutionary Committee, one name was missing from the list of new appointees: General Nguyen Khanh, Commander of Military Zone 2 in the Highlands. His absence among the leaders of the 1963 coup led me to believe that the victory of the November 1st coup might be short-lived. I thought about contacting him, but on advice of my younger brother, I decided that doing so might be dangerous for me. Later, I was to find out how correct my intuition had been.

So I boarded a plane for Washington, to return to my family and to my friends, determined to rebuild my life and to work for an eventual solution, an outcome that had already begun to

emerge as a common prayer for the people of both the United States and Vietnam. With renewed self-confidence, I found new strength in the treasure of Vietnamese poetry, in the wisdom of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism, which thousands of years ago blended with native beliefs and customs to form the foundations of our national culture, and had nurtured the long tradition of successful Vietnamese resistance against powerful foreign invasions and domestic tyranny.

As I flew back over the Pacific Ocean, I began to reflect on all the events that had made me a participating witness to this incredible, devastating collision, and I began to look ahead as well as back. In the United States, I thought, I would have a new, effective weapon in my favor: an absence of fear. Despite some obvious political shortcomings and serious national-social problems, the United States was, I thought, the country where the "only thing to fear is fear itself." Without fear, all human beings can struggle for a decent existence in a decent society, and I was determined to devote myself to the cause of peace.