

Dispatch From the Vietnam War-

A HARD CHOICE FOR THE U.S.: GET TOUGH —OR GET OUT

Robert P. Martin of the staff of "U. S. News & World Report" has followed the anti-Communist war in Southeast Asia from its beginning. As Vietnam took a turn for the worse, he flew into Saigon and managed to send out this uncensored dispatch.

SAIGON, South Vietnam

Another political crisis is boiling up here—this time with the prestige and power of the U. S. directly involved.

The Kennedy Administration has decided the time has come to break the grip of the ruling Ngo Dinh family in South Vietnam so this country can get on with its U. S.-financed war against the Communists.

Talk with Vietnamese and Americans here in Saigon, and you find the mood that has given new urgency to U. S. official efforts to bring about some key changes while there is still time.

A highly respected professor at Saigon University told an American:

"If you have to make a choice between supporting the Ngo family and withdrawing from South Vietnam you might as well pull out. You cannot win with the family."

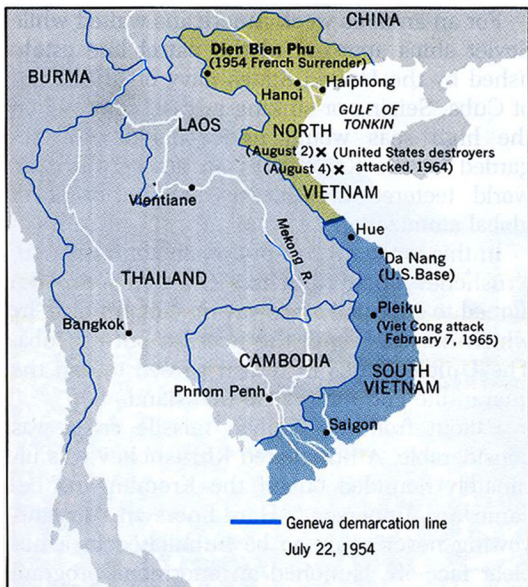
A Saigon businessman says: "What happens is up to you. What can we do? They have all the guns." The "they" refers to the forces the family controls.

An American officer fresh out of the muck and danger of fighting in the Mekong River delta said this:

"Of course we don't like what is happening here. Some of us are being killed or wounded every week. Anything that holds back the war effort keeps us Americans out here that much longer. Anyway, you don't win this kind of war with guns, you win it with people. And Diem no longer has the people with him."

The real targets. The United States wants Ngo Dinh Diem to stay on as President. It is, however, insisting that the President's brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu, and Madame Nhu be shorn of their power and influence and, preferably, that both be forced to leave the country.

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SCOREBOARD:

Laos, the strategic key to South Vietnam, largely handed over to Communists in a U.S. deal with Russia.

Cambodia, also flanking South Vietnam, reportedly used by Communist troops as needed.

South Vietnam, now torn by political strife, with war effort seriously affected.

BASIC TROUBLE — Americans pay for, supply, and help fight a jungle war, but have no authority to shape policy, command, or enforce a drive to win.

It also wants a sharp cutback in the power and influence of two of the President's other brothers. One is Ngo Dinh Thuc, Archbishop of Hué. The other is Ngo Dinh Can, a military and political dictator in Central Vietnam.

Washington's hope is that, once Diem is no longer completely dependent on the family, then the President will organize a more responsible and responsive Government. It is felt that such a Government might attract enough popular support in South Vietnam to make it possible for the war against the Communist guerrillas to be won at last.

For the past few days it has seemed more and more apparent that a decision is being forced on the U. S. in South Vietnam — either to get tough with Diem or get out of the country.

The U. S. has not said publicly what it will do if Diem clings to the family. But out here it seems almost certain that U. S. aid—both military and economic—will be cut back, step by step, in an effort to force Diem to act.

The most dramatic step that could be taken immediately would be the withdrawal of some of the 16,000 American servicemen involved in the war effort.

The background. It is now possible to piece together the events leading up to the crisis in U. S.-Vietnam relations.

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Washington has been increasingly concerned about the widening gap between the Diem family and the Vietnamese people, who are being asked to fight and die in a war against the Communists, but who have little say about the Government and the conduct of their own affairs.

Diem was elected President and his sister-in-law, Madame Nhu, was elected to the National Assembly. None of the other family members holds elective or official position. Yet, as a group they exercise all effective power.

Ngo Dinh Nhu supervises the National Revolutionary Civil Servants League, to which all Government workers must belong. He is head of a secret political-intelligence agency with a membership of about 75,000 and a youth corps that has been compared with Hitler's.

Madame Nhu is chairman of the Vietnamese Women's Solidarity Movement, which claims a million members. The association has been largely responsible for organized anti-American propaganda in Saigon.

These political organizations provide the power base for the activities of the other brothers, Thuc and Can.

The first incident. It was against this background of repressive family government that the Buddhist crisis broke last May. Troops and police broke up a demonstration in the city of Hué, where Buddhists were demanding the right to fly their flag in religious ceremonies. Eight Buddhists were killed and 14 wounded.

The Buddhists quickly developed into a political opposition, the first to confront Diem since 1955. They used passive resistance, hunger strikes, public prayers and suicides in their campaign against the Government—and, particularly, against the Nhus. The conflict dragged on for 15 weeks.

Diem repeatedly told the United States he would not use force to crush the Buddhists. But at the same time Nhu was quietly laying plans to do so, with or without the President's knowledge.

At least three companies of the toughest, most-disciplined troops were quietly brought into Saigon. Army units that might not be loyal in a showdown were shifted away from the capital.

On August 21, Nhu's forces struck at every pagoda in Saigon and in other South Vietnamese cities. Hundreds of Buddhists were rounded up.

The reluctant manifesto. Four key generals in the Army were summoned to meet with Nhu. They were given a doc-



RULING GROUP. Key members of South Vietnam's ruling family, from left: Madame Ngo Dinh Nhu, Archbishop Ngo Dinh Thuc, Ngo Dinh Nhu and President Ngo Dinh Diem. U. S. wants to cut sharply the power of President's brothers and sister-in-law.

ument saying, in effect, that military commanders were "disturbed" by the unrest in the country. The document accused the Buddhists of undermining the will to resist Communism—and said the generals had taken action to "save the country."

Although none of the generals was involved in the preparations for the crackdown on the Buddhists, all were forced to sign the statement. It was to be presented to the U. S. Embassy as proof that the Army had initiated the move.

Martial law was declared throughout the country: In theory, the Army was in control. But in Saigon it was quickly evident that all the power rested in the hands of Ngo Dinh Nhu. His chief agent was Col. Le Quang Tung, commander of Vietnam's Special Forces. The Colonel has never held a combat command. He has always been associated with internal security and counterespionage.

Enter the students. On August 25, Nhu's forces once again showed who was in command. Students of Saigon University, which has an enrollment of 10,000, are normally apathetic. They have never demonstrated in the manner of students in China, Korea and Japan. But the Buddhist-Government conflict—plus perhaps subtle prodding by Red agents—finally aroused them.

The demonstration started only a block from the U. S. military headquarters here in Saigon. Vietnamese troops—trained and equipped by Americans—trapped more than a thousand students in the street. Special Forces, with bayonets fixed to their rifles, herded the students into trucks that bore the symbol of the American aid mission.

The demonstration was over in a few minutes. But it took the police two days to collect all the bicycles and motor bikes that had been abandoned by students as they attempted to escape the net.

All schools were closed. So were

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theaters, to prevent crowds from assembling. Troops were under orders to fire on any unauthorized assembly or crowd. The Government's critics started calling the situation the "family's war against the people."

President Diem's role in the crackdown is still unclear. What is clear, however, is that he certainly went along with Nhu's plan once it was set in motion. Some Vietnamese think that the President had no real choice—that his brother Nhu would have ousted him if he opposed the plan.

By the time the crackdown was over, U. S. officials found themselves in an intolerable position.

Diem's pledge not to use force against the Buddhists had been violated. It was obvious that Nhu was not only cracking down on the Buddhists, but was using that crackdown to show the Americans who really was running South Vietnam.

What worries U. S. officials is a conviction that a Government controlled by Nhu would be more repressive and almost certainly less effective in waging the war than one headed by President Diem.

The President is still respected in South Vietnam. But Nhu is feared. Many Americans working in this country believe that some Vietnamese would turn to the Communists as an alternative to Nhu—and that many others would sit on their hands, refusing to help either side.

In either case, only the Communists would benefit.

The U. S. position. The United States made its position clear in a message broadcast in the Vietnamese language by the Voice of America. Officials here say the message was cleared by the "highest authorities" in Washington. The broadcast clearly made these points:

- The raids on Buddhist pagodas and the mass arrest of thousands of monks and students were carried out by the secret police and Special Forces that are headed by Nhu.

- Vietnamese Army leaders were not responsible for the attacks, and were not advised of the planned raids.

- Top Vietnamese Army commanders agreed to the declaration of martial law only in the hope it would stabilize the situation in the country.

- There may be a "sharp reduction" in the U. S. aid program unless President Diem "gets rid of secret-police officials responsible" for the attack against the Buddhists.

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Business—or bluff? The broadcast added that U. S. Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge—newly arrived in Saigon—“is understood to be under instructions to make it clear to President Diem that the United States knows who is responsible for the attacks.”

U. S. officials in Saigon were certain, in their own minds, that the United States meant business this time and would not retreat from its insistence on a change in the Government.

Yet, observers recalled that the U. S. has tried bluffing Diem before with a conspicuous lack of success. Nhu will not quit without a struggle. And the President knows that the supply lines from the U. S. are full for the next six to nine months. He may try to outwait the U. S.

If the Vietnamese, themselves, refused to force the changes the U. S. insists on, the United States has relatively little bargaining power. It could withdraw from South Vietnam, but such a withdrawal might, in turn, lead to the loss of Asia.

Here in Saigon, the U. S. dilemma is sharply etched:

Can a war against the Communists be won when the Diem Government is preoccupied with a political struggle for survival against a non-Communist opposition that is increasing, rather than decreasing, in strength?

If the war cannot be won under these circumstances, would it be better to cut losses and get out, or hang on and hope for a change for the better?

It's a choice that may have to be faced sooner than many think. [END]