

PORTLAND, MAINE
PRESS HERALD
SUNDAY TELEGRAM
M- 56,002
S-107,251

JUN 8 1967

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FOCUS ON VIETNAM PART 2 A \$3 BILLION GAMBLE FAILS

©PYRGHT *The Making And The Murder Of President Diem*

Editor's note: Last Sunday, the Telegram's special series "Background to Vietnam" told the story of Ho Chi Minh, leader of North Vietnam and Asia's senior Communist. Today we present the story of Diem, first leader of South Vietnam. The U. S. hand-picked Diem in 1954 and backed him with \$3 billion of aid over eight vital years, in the hope Diem could unify South Vietnam and stamp out the threat of Communist takeover by Ho Chi Minh. Diem failed. Diem's eight-year rule ended with his murder in the streets of Saigon, just three weeks before President Kennedy's assassination.

Telegram editorial page editor and columnist Bill Caldwell, who is writing this series, worked in Vietnam for the State Department on three different missions during the Diem regime which this installment covers.

In the early Washington summer of 1954 CIA expert Edward Lanham finished his briefing to a high level conference of U.S. specialists on S.E. Asia, presided over by Secretary of State John Foster Dulles. He left the room with new orders.

Lanham's orders were for Saigon. His mission was to select a popular leader in South Vietnam, a man who could defeat Ho Chi Minh's threatened takeover by the communists; and then to throw the full support of the CIA behind him.

Lanham chose a pudgy five-foot five Roman Catholic aristocrat, age 54 named Ngo Dinh Diem, who became the first President of South Vietnam.

Lanham chose with expert knowledge. Before his mission to Saigon, Lanham

(who was also a colonel in the U.S. Air Force) had been confidential advisor to President Magsaysay in the Philippines. There he had helped Magsaysay to win his battle to drive out communist Huk guerillas. The same tactics, hoped Eisenhower and Dulles, might defeat the communist led Vietminh and Vietcong guerillas who threatened to take over all Vietnam and put the entire country under the rule of Ho Chi Minh.

DIEM BECAME premier July 7, 1954. His avowed enemy was Ho Chi Minh. Few Americans know that Ho Chi Minh had been the first to offer to make Diem premier, eight years before, in 1946. Mainly because Diem believed the Vietminh were responsible for his brother's death, Diem turned down the offer.

Unsuccessfully then Diem tried to develop a Vietnamese, anti-French force himself to rival Ho Chi Minh. By 1950 he chose exile and spent most of the years 1950-54 at the Maryknoll Seminary in Lakewood, New Jersey. Diem, who had once studied to become a Roman Catholic priest, used this churchly abode to lobby against U.S. aid to the French who were fighting hard to subjugate Vietnam once again to their colonial rule. Simultaneously Diem tried to rally the U.S. against communist Ho Chi Minh in North Vietnam who was leading the fight against the French and who finally defeated them at Dienbienphu in the spring of 1954.

During these four years in exile in the U.S. Diem, through Cardinal Spellman and the religious, political and academic leaders who formed the American Friends of Vietnam, established support for Diem within the United States, which helped him to become President.

Thus, after the defeat of France and the signing of the Geneva Agreements, which granted independence to Vietnam but also promised to Ho Chi Minh that he could hold free nation-wide elections, Washington chose Diem to stem the spreading tide of communist influence in Vietnam.

AS ANOTHER DEFENSE, Dulles hurried to build SEATO (the South East Asia Treaty Organization), signed at Manila in September 1954, just a few months after Diem became President.

purpose was to build a political, economic and military bastion against the further spread of communist influence in S.E. Asia, especially to prevent the Vietminh from gaining control over all Vietnam and to insure protection of Laos and Cambodia.

The SEATO treaty was a disappointment. Burma, India and Indonesia, the major neutralist states in South East Asia, refused to join. Only Thailand, the Philippines and Pakistan (which saw the

pact as strengthening its position against India) joined. The other signers were all Western nations — The United States, Great Britain, France, Australia, New Zealand. But few have given any important assistance in Vietnam.

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In Vietnam, under the terms of the Geneva Armistice agreement, Ho Chi Minh now withdrew 100,000 of his military forces from the South. The Saigon government of Premier Diem, on paper at least, spread its administrative control north to the 17th parallel into areas previously wholly controlled by the Vietminh.

To Diem in Saigon, the United States now began to pour aid directly — at the rate of a million dollars a day to help him gain control and popularity.

Diem's first major domestic opposition was from the powerful gangster-type sects headquartered in Saigon. These were the Cao Dai, the Hoa Hoa and the Binh Xuyen. Bribes were the temporary answer. During March and April 1955 some \$12 million U.S. were used by Diem to bribe these Cao Dai and Hoa Hoa from outright opposition.

Later, when Diem's military strength was built up, he was able to use force instead of money alone.

Strongly supported now by Washington, Diem, who technically held office under the auspices of Emperor Bao Dai, the Vietnamese Chief of State living on the French Riviera, decided to hold elections in South Vietnam only, so he might legally oust the French puppet Emperor. Acting against American advice, Diem rigged the elections. The returns showed Diem the victor over Bao Dai at the polls, gaining a ridiculous 98.2 per cent of the vote. Thereupon he proclaimed himself President of the Republic of Vietnam, effective Oct. 26 1955.

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