

SAVANNAH, GA.
PRESS

e. 24,262

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Date: AUG 26 1964

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Viet Nam: Signs of the Times

In the wake of the largest anti-government outpouring since Viet Nam won its independence from France 10 years ago, Maj. Gen. Nguyen Khanh capitulated to angry demands of students and Buddhists for an end to dictatorial rule.

The 37-year-old general stepped down only nine days after elevating himself from premier to president of South Viet Nam. He also tore up a controversial new constitution giving him strongman power in a national emergency.

Back in the confused political picture is Maj. Gen. Duong Van Minh, the Buddhist who led the overthrow of President Ngo Dinh Diem last Nov. 1. Minh, known as Big Minh, was removed as figurehead chief of state in the Aug. 16 shakeup. Governments have been turned over three times since last Nov. 1.

Gen. Khanh's ascendancy to power has purportedly had the blessing of U.S. authorities. The CIA was blamed for the coup which toppled President Diem's government and eventually led to his death.

Even in Southeast Asia these coups just don't happen overnight. Signs of brewing trouble are always seen before the main event. Last week for instance, workmen quietly removed a granite monument to the late President John F. Kennedy before dawn in an apparent concession to South Viet Nam's restive Roman Catholics.

Catholics had objected to the one-ton monument because it signified renaming "Our Lady of Peace" square for the late American President. They have been concerned about their status ever since Diem, a Catholic, was overthrown and slain last November. Removal of the statue was discussed in advance with U.S. Ambassador Maxwell D. Taylor.

Last week, too, an official of the Central Intelligence Agency suggested the possibility of "some kind of negotiated settlement" of the hostilities in South Viet Nam.

The plan dated June 8 was apparently made public by the administration because a copy was said to have been obtained by The Chicago Tribune, which indicated it planned to print excerpts.

Willard Matthias, a member of CIA's Board of National Estimates and author of the 50-page working paper, said that there was "serious doubt that victory can be won." He indicated that, at best, "a prolonged stalemate" might be achieved.

In view of past accusations relative to the CIA's role in South Viet Nam one wonders if Gen. Khanh has been toppled by our own people to pave the way for implementation of the Matthias Plan.

Perhaps it is prophetic that this "chicken" should come home to the roost during the Democratic National Convention. We can't help but wonder if the Matthias Plan is what President Johnson was going to reveal to the American public sometime after Nov. 3. Like an inept poker player, Johnson has been bluffing and now he is caught without an ace in hand.