

# Rumble in the Jungle

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*The J. Lawton Collins Mission to Vietnam and the Regime that Nearly Crumbled*

“Vietnam” in the minds of most Americans conjures up images of blazing machine guns, frantic jungle firefights, and countless movies, video games, and other pop culture icons, but this is the most famous part of American armed involvement in Vietnam. However, while American armed conflict gets the lion’s share of the fame, the much longer prologue was what laid the groundwork. American anticommunism efforts in Southeast Asia goes back to at least 1950, when President Harry Truman began authorizing aid to France to fund its war against the communist guerrillas. By 1952, France had gotten itself mired in a war with no foreseeable exit or any clear objectives other than “defeat the communists and restore French rule in Vietnam.” Vietnam quickly became the poster child of containing communism in Southeast Asia, beginning with the First Indochina War, lasting from 1949 to early 1954. This conflict started when the communist Viet Minh military attempted to drive the French from Vietnam, supported by the Soviet Union and China. Viet Minh guerrillas fought with French Expeditionary Units in a protracted conflict that ended in 1954. At the Battle of Dienbienphu, Viet Minh forces used heavy artillery against the French, taking them completely by surprise and eventually pounding the Dienbienphu fort into submission, leading to an armistice. Under this armistice the Soviet

Union, China, and Vietnam, as well as other countries, all headed to the U.N. summit in Geneva to finalize the treaty.

At the bargaining table in Geneva in 1954, world powers debated two major topics: the partitioning of postwar Korea and more importantly, settlement and peace in Vietnam. Fresh off of their victory at Dien Bien Phu, the Viet Minh had the upper hand and were prepared to exploit it. Accompanying the Viet Minh delegation was the Chinese delegate Zhou Enlai, who stressed the Viet Minh exercise restraint in their demands, as both Enlai and Khrushchev were far more interested in peace than war. The delegates convened and after much deliberation, decided to split Vietnam into two “regroupment zones.” The U.N. set up these regroupment zones as an easy way for the French and Vietnamese to collect their soldiers out in the wilderness as well as releasing prisoners to each side. The French were also to begin withdrawing troops, leaving only enough to qualify as a “security detail.” The other large decision was to hold general countrywide elections. These elections would determine if Vietnam was to be a partitioned or a unified state, and if unified, the leader to be head of state. The United States, well aware that if the voting went ahead the Viet Minh leader, Ho Chi Minh, would win, did not sign the accords. Similarly rejecting the accords was the newly created Republic of Vietnam, the southern regroupment zone. The leader of South Vietnam, Ngo Dinh Diem, ominously warned of a deadlier war in Vietnam’s future.<sup>1</sup> The Eisenhower administration began pouring even more resources into the survival of the fledgling Republic of Vietnam,<sup>2</sup> headed by the charismatic and virtuous Ngo Dinh Diem. Diem’s government was incredibly shaky, and in November 1954,

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<sup>1</sup> Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (New York: Penguin, 1991), 221.

<sup>2</sup> “United States Fiscal Year 1955,” Dwight D. Eisenhower Library (hereafter DDEL), J. Lawton Collins Special Mission to Vietnam Collection, Box 24, Folder “Briefing on Vietnam (1)”. Fiscal Year 1954 had \$24.9 million earmarked for the entire Southeast Asian region in support and economic aid. Fiscal Year 1955 had \$77.5 million earmarked for Vietnam alone. File notes there may be some “upwards readjustment” of this figure.

President Eisenhower appointed General J. Lawton Collins as special advisor with the personal rank of ambassador for South Vietnam, tasked with providing assistance for the Diem government as well as improving the economy to help promote South Vietnam's survival.<sup>3</sup> This mission nearly succeeded in toppling Diem's powerful autocratic regime, and only a last-minute power play saved Diem's position of power from someone presumably much more qualified.

The Collins Mission is an important watershed moment in Vietnam's history with the United States, yet remains largely unstudied. General Collins was not a diplomat by trade, and despite having ambassadorial privileges, the Senate did not need to confirm Collins because Collins was not going to be an official ambassador, rather just confer the "personal rank" of ambassador.<sup>4</sup> Collins was also unneeded in a military capacity, as the United States already had a separate United States military General in charge of the training and support of the Republic of Vietnam's army. Collins, a career soldier, received intensive briefing over the situation, including American aid records, miscellaneous files and reports of the area from the Army Intelligence Corps, and told that his mission should last no more than ninety days, though in reality Collins was in South Vietnam for over six months.<sup>5</sup> The Collins Mission would nearly see Diem ousted in a United States sponsored plot, and then, abruptly, the United States would latch on with Diem with a feverish zeal that would last until 1963.

The Eisenhower Administration, after determining that Collins' predecessor had not been performing up to standard in dealing with the South Vietnamese government, instead handpicked an old subordinate of Eisenhower's, General Joseph Lawton Collins. Collins, after being in

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<sup>3</sup> Robert Schulzinger, *A Time for War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 82.

<sup>4</sup> J. Lawton Collins, *Lightning Joe* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1994), 379.

<sup>5</sup> Collins, *Lightning Joe*, 410.

country for nearly 6 months, concluded that Diem was unsuitable for further U.S. government sponsored rule. With the Eisenhower administration and State Department ready to sponsor a coup, Diem came under attack by the organized crime syndicate Binh Xuyen, and the army appeared to rally under Diem, giving the U.S. government new hope and galvanizing their conception that Diem was the right man for the job. Through this rallying, Diem both kept his position and became convinced that he was indispensable to the United States.

But for what is this paper trying to account? Despite the mission's enormous long-term effects, an in-depth study does not exist and detailed information about the mission is spotty. Despite the unorthodox situation and the long-term ramifications for the United States military, foreign policy, and even civilian life and Americana culture, most works omit or at least slight the Collins Mission. Historian David Anderson wrote, "Although some historians have recognized the "enormous long-range significance" of Washington's decision to reject Collins' advice and to stick with Diem, an in-depth analysis of this watershed event has not been done."<sup>6</sup> Other masterful works of Vietnam and the road to it, such as *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War* by William Conrad Gibbons, hurries over the Collins mission, mentioning it, but with no real substance or ascribing it any significance. In *A Time for War*, for instance, Schulzinger argued that while Collins nearly succeeded in turning Washington against Diem, both Diem's success of controlling the military during a critical juncture and the dearth of suitable replacements meant that the U.S. government, instead of gambling on a new regime, instead wished to "to preserve what the United States had already invested in Vietnam."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> David L. Anderson, "J. Lawton Collins, John Foster Dulles, and the Eisenhower Administration's "Point of No Return" in Vietnam," *Diplomatic History* 12 (Spring 1988): 128.

<sup>7</sup> Schulzinger, *A Time For War*, 86.

This lack of attention hurts historians' understanding of how the United States deepened its commitment to South Vietnam over the years. This mission was a struggle for Collins on two fronts. Collins both fought against Diem's obtuse leadership and Secretary of State John Foster Dulles and Director of the CIA Allen Dulles, despite Eisenhower's assurances that Collins had both his and his administration's support. This internal struggle is surprising, given that a sizable majority of U.S. politicians focused on South Vietnam agreed that Diem was wholly unsuitable as a leader.<sup>8</sup> During those six months, the United States would solidify relations with South Vietnam that would become standard policy until the last Americans left Saigon amid anti-aircraft fire 20 years later in 1975.

### **The Mission Itself**

Collins travelled to Vietnam and while there vacillated between admiration and exasperation at the wildly inflexible Diem regime. To Collins's credit, he did put forth an honest effort to help Diem, though Diem was often unwilling even to compromise, much less take American advice outright even if it was to his benefit. While this inflexibility was a strength in Diem's mission to stomp out communism, it was also a glaring liability in terms of broadening his government to achieve wider support from the Vietnamese people. Collins was not alone in his difficulties in dealing with Diem. Colonel Edward Lansdale was the main CIA counterinsurgency operative active in Vietnam during the Collins Mission. Lansdale recounted the experience of successfully convincing the powerful Vietnamese mafia-style (ran gambling, prostitution, and the Saigon police station) gang Binh Xuyen to give up their arms, throw their

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<sup>8</sup> William Conrad Gibbons, *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 295.

lot in with the government, and perform services for the people.<sup>9</sup> The leader of the Binh Xuyen, Bay Vien, agreed, and Lansdale arranged a meeting between Vien and Diem. Lansdale waited outside, only to see Bay Vien storm out a few moments later, furious. Lansdale asked Diem what transpired, and Diem had more or less told Bay Vien that he was a liar and to get out. Lansdale was aghast, writing, “I was shocked by Diem's political obtuseness, and I told him so. He had failed to make use of a constructive solution to a vexing problem.”<sup>10</sup> However, Diem’s rigidity was only one of many problems for Collins to deal with. In particular, the aforementioned problems with John and Allen Dulles.

From the outset of the unconventional mission, Collins knew it would be no simple task. Many historians’ works note that Collins knew it would be an exceptionally difficult mission. Dulles had estimated that this mission had as low as a 10% chance of succeeding. However, the Eisenhower administration had deemed that the mission “was worth the risk.”<sup>11</sup> Collins, arriving in Vietnam in November armed with plenary powers, met the prime minister of the Republic of Vietnam, Ngo Dinh Diem. Collins remembered their first meeting, writing, “My first impression was of a pleasant pudgy little man, self-conscious and not quite sure of himself. The tenacity and stubbornness that I later learned to know did not show in his round placid face, topped by a head of thick black hair.”<sup>12</sup> Collins found, with some dismay, the biggest obstacle to helping Diem was Diem himself. The United States’ exhortation of the necessity of Diem reinforced his own

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<sup>9</sup> Edward Lansdale, *In the Midst of Wars* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), 177.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Collins, *Lightning Joe*, 379.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 383.

sense of importance. Diem happily defied American advice on a host of topics, convinced of his complete political invulnerability in United States relations.<sup>13</sup>

### **Collins and Diem, the Two Titans of the Mission**

Collins was, as noted before, a career soldier and one of Eisenhower's most trusted generals in World War II. He was chosen for his vast wealth of experience travelling abroad in the world. Graduating from West Point in 1917, Collins, a major by 1920, became assistant Chief of Staff of the American Forces in Germany from 1920 to 1921.<sup>14</sup> Recalled to the United States in 1921, Collins spent the interwar years rising steadily through the ranks and improving himself as both a soldier and a leader. At the outbreak of World War II and the subsequent entrance by the United States, Collins led successful operations in both the Pacific and Europe, and had a hand in designing Operation Cobra, which led to the miraculous Normandy breakout in June and July of 1944. Collins was also a part of the Battle of the Bulge, organizing the desperate defense of a few ragged teams of tenacious airborne soldiers, allowing them to survive the onslaught of a determined Axis push. After the war, Collins served on the Joint Chiefs of Staff alongside Eisenhower, and with Eisenhower's election to presidency, became Army Chief of Staff, leading the Army through the Korean War, and seeing the first "true" Special Forces team come to fruition. Collins resigned in 1953 (succeeded by General Matthew Ridgway) and accepted generalship in NATO military command. Collins resigned his NATO commission to perform this mission to Vietnam, where he faced the obstinate Ngo Dinh Diem.

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<sup>13</sup> Karnow, *Vietnam*, 230.

<sup>14</sup> Collins, *Lightning Joe*, 36, 42.

A Catholic in an extremely Buddhist country with nearly zero governmental experience,<sup>15</sup>

Ngo Dinh Diem had many flaws that made him an unfavorable leader. Lansdale's altercation with Diem was but one mistake in a sea of missteps of the Diem regime. Diem from the very outset was a very insular ruler who set himself and his family up as a totalitarian plutocracy. His brother Nhu eventually became head of the South Vietnamese Special Forces as well as the paramilitary forces and special police. Nhu's wife, commonly referred to as simply "Madame Nhu," was an inflammatory figure who was apparently hell-bent on giving the Diem regime even more bad press than Diem himself. During the "Buddhist Crisis of 1963" in South Vietnam, when Buddhist monks began immolating themselves in protest of the brutality of the Diem regime towards Buddhists, she publicly offered to bring the monks more gasoline and matches, which was a large factor in dwindling American support for the Diem regime.<sup>16</sup> Madame Nhu was fiercely anti-Buddhist. An anecdotal story places Madame Nhu present at a meeting between her husband and Diem; Nhu suggested to his brother to ease restrictions and persecution of the Buddhists. Nhu then had to think quickly and dodge the bowl of soup thrown at his head by his wife.

This creation of a single immensely powerful family, complete with brutal oppression of non-Catholics, undermined popular support for the Diem regime, along with Diem's almost Stalin- or Hitler-esque methods of imprisonment, punishment, and execution of perceived political enemies, especially of presumed communists. The aforementioned David Anderson in his article argues this position as well, noting that after Collins had left and the United States sent

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<sup>15</sup> Anderson, "J. Lawton Collins," 129 – 130

<sup>16</sup> Nick Serpell, "Been and Gone: Marathon mystery man and Mugabe's foe," *BBC Magazine*, May 3, 2011 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-13257966>, (Accessed 11/11/12).



a more traditional ambassador, Diem became yet even more insular and reliant on his own family helping his governmental rule. An excellent example of Diem's reliance on his family was during the prelude and initial stages of the Republic of Vietnam's Army's push against the Binh Xuyen. Diem circumvented his ministers and consulted almost solely with his brother in the organization and execution of first depriving them of gambling licenses, then eventually taking up arms against them, sending the army in to clean the Binh Xuyen out. This circumvention even led to one of Diem's cabinet members to resign in protest.<sup>17</sup> This was the sort of obstinate insular ruler that Collins was under orders to aid and support.

Collins arrived in Vietnam, faced with a myriad of problems. The partitioning of the country at the Geneva Convention of 1954 left the country with a massive refugee problem, as Northern Vietnamese streamed south across the border to escape communism. It was enough of a problem to warrant an addition as an individual item for Fiscal Year 1955 – refugee resettlement funds in excess of 45 million dollars.<sup>18</sup> The refugee situation paints a stark picture of the realities faced by General Collins. Balancing the different sects of Vietnam, as well as building the economy, strengthening the military, and keeping a watchful eye on the actions of the communist North Vietnam would be a monumental task for even a highly accomplished statesman. For Diem, this task proved impossible, leading to the delegation of tasks and increasing autocracy of Diem's other family members. From November 1954 to January 1955, Collins' gave Diem every benefit of the doubt, keeping in mind the difficulty of the tasks that were in Diem's path.

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<sup>17</sup> Anderson, "J. Lawton Collins," 133.

<sup>18</sup> "United States Fiscal Year 1955," DDEL, J. Lawton Collins Special Mission to Vietnam Collection, Box 24, Folder "Briefing on Vietnam (1)".

On February 2, 1955, while back in the United States to meet with Eisenhower, General Collins appeared on NBC's *Meet the Press* to discuss the situation in Southeast Asia, Vietnam specifically. During questioning, NBC's Lawrence Spivak brought up a genuine concern that South Vietnam was in immediate danger of falling to communism.

**General Collins:** "I don't want to be overly optimistic Mr. Spivak, but I think that in the past four weeks, President Zee-em, as he pronounces it, has made genuine progress toward establishing a progressive program in his country. And if this program is fully implemented then I think there is at least a 50-50 chance that South Vietnam can remain free."

**Spivak:** "General, just how important is that area to our security and our safety?"

**General Collins:** [pause] "Well it's not of immediate importance to the security of the United States. It is of tremendous importance to the security of all of Southeast Asia. And therefore, since we are interested in maintaining peace throughout the Pacific area, then South Vietnam is of great importance to us."<sup>19</sup>

Collins went on to reassure the reporters that he assumed that the United States did not intend to fight a ground war in Southeast Asia, a sentiment, which, during the Battle of Dienbienphu, was echoed by both Eisenhower and Army Chief of Staff (and Collins' successor) General Matthew Ridgway.<sup>20</sup> The interview continued, outlining plans of strengthening the South Vietnamese Army, working with the French liaison General Paul Ely, general questions about Ngo Dinh Diem, and French-North Vietnamese peace deals. Of notable importance is the question of the national Vietnamese elections set for 1956. Associated Press reporter Yates McDaniel then questions Collins over the general elections scheduled for 1956.

**Yates McDaniel:** "General, I think the truce agreement provided for some sort of elections very soon or what was it, 1956?"

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<sup>19</sup> MP3 of *Meet the Press* Interview retrieved from <http://newstalgia.crooksandliars.com/gordonskene/newstalgia-reference-room-gen-j-lawton> (Accessed 11/11/12) (Quotation begins at 4:04, ends at 4:54)

<sup>20</sup> Karnow, *Vietnam*, 213.

**General Collins:** Yes.

**McDaniel:** Which would more or less decide the fate of that country... Premier Diem apparently has just started. The communist regime in the north has moved rapidly according to all reports; consolidate its gains based on the prestige of its military victories. Do you really think there is now chance or a hope for the South to get on its feet sufficiently before those elections to keep the communists from taking over the whole country?

**General Collins:** Well it's at least a year and a half until the time scheduled for these elections. I think a lot can happen in a year and a half, and a lot can happen in North Vietnam in that same period. Things aren't going too well up there economically for example right now.

**McDaniel:** In the meantime we're going to put in a certain amount of military and economic aid, and a good deal of prestige in the South... Don't we run a very real risk of just putting the South on its feet for the communists to take over [unintelligible]?

**General Collins:** It's a gamble. I happen to think it's a gamble worth taking.

Continuing along that tack, author August Heckscher then asks of the elections again, and thrusts the possibility that Diem would not win said election, if it happened, into the public's mind.

**August Heckscher:** General Collins, about these elections, they are guaranteed I understand under the Geneva Convention, but now neither the United States nor President Diem signed the Geneva agreement. It's sometimes said that those elections never will come off, that we may not favor them when the time comes near and that President Diem may not. Would you comment on that?

**General Collins:** Well of course that's some time off in the future and I've been concerned with the present. Very actively concerned with the present, so I can't make any predictions about the elections.

**Heckscher:** [They are] planning to hold, as I understand, a National Assembly. Is that going forward as the basis of [cut off]?

**General Collins:** Yes, that is one of the programs which Diem is working on and I expect that in a matter of a few weeks, that the plans for a provisional national assembly will be announced by the president.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> *Meet the Press* MP3, 16:50 to 18:45.

Asking if in light of the current situation of acceptance of surrender in Korea as well as asking if he wanted to offer his opinion on potential cuts to the U.S. Army, Collins sternly replied, “That’s the last thing I want to do, Mr. Spivak,” and instead told him to direct the question to Ridgway. The interview ends soon after. However, this interview helped bolster the support of South Vietnam by the American public. One Peter White from New York wrote to the United States Army asking for a transcript of Collins’ performance, stating, “It gave more reason for confidence in the South Viet Nam situation than anything that has appeared.”<sup>22</sup> The Army was unable to comply with Mr. White’s request, but thanked him and suggested he send a letter to NBC and forwarded a copy of the letter to General Collins.

While his *Meet the Press* interview gave everyday Americans hope and a vision for a communism-free South Vietnam, Collins was battling his own private doubts about Diem, expressed to President Eisenhower over the following few days before being sent back to Vietnam in February 1955. Collins was quickly losing faith in Diem, by March falling into the opinion that Diem could never effectively lead the country of Vietnam, a position advocated by the French government, and in particular the French Ambassador and head of the French security contingent still in Saigon, General Paul Ely. In April, a *New York Times* article thrust Collins’ true feelings into the public eye. Reporter L.C. Sulzberger accused Collins of giving into French influence in advocating the replacement of Diem. In fact, Collins took great pains in not allowing his conclusions to reach Ely’s ears to avoid the very same accusations being waged against him by the *Times*.<sup>23</sup> However, it was apparent that General Ely and General Collins had

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<sup>22</sup> Peter White, “Letter to United States Army” DDEL, J. Lawton Collins Special Mission to Vietnam Collection, Box 29, Folder “Press”.

<sup>23</sup> Anderson, “J. Lawton Collins,” 136.

independently reached the same conclusion: ousting Diem and installing a replacement was paramount if South Vietnam was to survive.

Collins faced obstacles at home as well. Eisenhower had domestic issues to juggle, and trusted Collins to deliver the straight truth to him. However, another man who had Eisenhower's ear was his secretary of State, John Foster Dulles. Dulles launched attempt after attempt to undermine Collins' credibility and attempt to turn his mission into a disaster following the revelation that he believed Diem needed replacement. The replacement frontrunner was Dr. Phan Huy Quat, a man with wider appeal to the Buddhist population as well as prior government experience, serving as interim President directly before Diem's appointment. Dulles began a regimen of routinely ignoring Collins' telegrams if they did not fit what Dulles wanted to hear. Historian John Prados argues that Dulles dallied for four days on purpose before replying to a very urgent telegram and finally sent instructions for how to deal with the emerging war between the Binh Xuyen and Republic of Vietnam Army.<sup>24</sup>

### **The U.S. Prepares to Oust Diem**

This battle between Diem's forces and those of the Binh Xuyen have been a focus point of this paper so far, but only because it was indeed a watershed moment in American relations with Vietnam. At the time of the conflict, Eisenhower was torn between Collins' (and through Collins, the French's) recommendation of removing Diem from power and supporting a different candidate, in this case, Quat. The official view of the United States government was that Diem exhibited "narrowness of view and of egotism which will make him a difficult man to work with. His only formulated policy is to ask for immediate American assistance in every form, including

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<sup>24</sup> John Prados, *Vietnam: The History of an Unwinnable War, 1945 – 1975* (University Press of Kansas, 2009), 46.

refugee relief, training of troops, and armed military intervention.”<sup>25</sup> This aid became a sticking point for many even after the main Vietnam War. Collins himself maintained that since the very first delivery of aid in 1950, there had been nearly zero control over where the money went.<sup>26</sup> Aid first loaned to the French, then directly to Diem, numbered in the billions of dollars. When Eisenhower received yet another recommendation to replace Diem with a suitable replacement, Dulles was not pleased. Sending a terse letter to Collins, Dulles protested against ousting Diem, telling Collins, “I thought we felt when I was in Saigon, that the decision to back Diem had gone to the point of no return and that either he had to succeed or else the whole business would be a failure.”<sup>27</sup> Indeed, the billions spent gave American policymakers far too much incentive to just back out of South Vietnam, a sentiment that echoes throughout many works.<sup>28</sup>

Finally, Eisenhower relenting under the emphatic disapproval shown by Collins, the state department issued orders to Paris and Saigon to prepare for a coup to oust Diem and install Quat as the new President of South Vietnam, and wait for further instruction. This is when, according to Diem and pro-Diem supporters, that the Binh Xuyen began shelling the presidential palace with 60-millimeter mortar fire, sieging the entire palace. Republic of Vietnam troops began surging through the streets, opening fire on Binh Xuyen operations and hideouts, and began pushing towards Cholon, home to Binh Xuyen headquarters. After hours of vicious fighting, Diem’s troops appeared to have the battle in hand. In one swift stroke, Diem had united the army under his command and the army had crushed the Binh Xuyen, routing them, and running them from Vietnam for good. Dulles immediately rescinded the orders from the State Department

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<sup>25</sup> Lecture by Professor Mulready-Stone, KSU, March 13, 2012.

<sup>26</sup> Collins, *Lightning Joe*, 384.

<sup>27</sup> Anderson, “J. Lawton Collins,” 127.

<sup>28</sup> Schulzinger, *A Time For War*, 85.

personally, and a protesting Collins found himself ignored. Collins finished his tour of personal ambassadorship in Vietnam quietly, and silently handed off control of the region to the next “official” U.S. Ambassador, never once believing that Diem had the ability or leadership to pull his population and army together into one cohesive unit.

The battles for Saigon and Cholon against the Binh Xuyen were not as epic and climactic as they sounded to the United States, but the government willingly embraced the illusion. The Binh Xuyen were Mafioso-style gangsters and crime lords, with a relatively small number of members who were effective at intimidation, bribery, and threats. The other two large main sects in South were the Cao Dai and the Hoa Hao with veritable armies: thousands of religious soldiers with heavy weaponry. The most firepower the Binh Xuyen were able to field were heavy machine guns and light mortars. Combine this with the lesser number of associates within the Binh Xuyen had, and it was the weakest of the sects. Moreover, this power play against the Binh Xuyen was, as Anderson put it, “no chronological accident,” and that Diem almost undoubtedly started the fight.<sup>29</sup> It is almost a certainty that someone in the State Department notified Diem that support was eroding fast, and Diem had nothing left to lose. Diem, in April 1955, knew the United States and France were almost certainly dropping him. Diem had to act fast. If he did nothing, Dr. Quat would replace him. If his attack failed, the same result would occur. However, if his attack succeeded, if he could even give the illusion of having control, then the United States would back Diem once again. Diem chose to fight against the smallest and weakest of the sects, and one he was planning to move against regardless. This apparent rallying of armed forces convinced the State Department and especially Dulles that while Diem was the only

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<sup>29</sup> Anderson, “J. Lawton Collins,” 139.

option, he was finally gaining acceptance among wider sections of the population, when the reality of the situation was that it was a giant fluke.

### **Diem's Rule, post-Binh Xuyen**

Diem, post-Collins mission, instituted a series of lukewarm land reforms that, at best, achieved mixed results. "Land reform" was four separate policies focused on resettlement, redistribution, and reform of the land. The resettlement portion of the reform (1956) was the most successful, but the Agrovilles and Strategic Hamlet Programs fell flat due to confusing policies and poor implementation.<sup>30</sup> The Kennedy administration took the reins with Diem taken for granted as a fixture of South Vietnam. However, public opinion inexorably turned against Diem, with the crackdowns on Buddhists, and Madame Nhu causing trouble, Diem assassination plots ran rampant. Kennedy finally approved one of the plots to arrange for a coup in South Vietnam. Many of the officers and soldiers who helped drive the Binh Xuyen from Saigon and Cholon participated in the coup, with brothers Nhu and Diem loaded into an APC for transport out of the country, and were executed by two soldiers in the APC soon after. Madame Nhu went into exile to France, and a militaristic regime installed itself. If anything, this regime was even more unstable than Diem's and may have even accelerated the fall of South Vietnam as a nation. Ho Chi Minh reportedly stated upon hearing Diem's death, "I cannot believe they would be this stupid,"<sup>31</sup> and from that point, "leaders" of the country were generals and other high-ranking officials, often cycled in and out within spans of merely months. Less than a year after, the stories of the USS Maddox and USS Turner Joy broke, the Tonkin Gulf Resolution signed, and

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<sup>30</sup> Lecture by Professor Mulready-Stone, KSU, March 13, 2012.

<sup>31</sup> Professor Mulready-Stone, KSU, March 13, 2012.



the United States militaries began mobilizing to move to Vietnam, supporting a regime that no longer existed headed by a man who was no more.

### **Collins, post-Vietnam**

Collins, after his return, held the opinion that Diem would not be able to succeed in South Vietnam, but kept quiet and regained his generalship in NATO before retiring a month later. Collins and Diem had come to respect one another in a professional capacity. Collins actually liked Diem as a person, but was unable to recommend him as a head of state. Collins received from Diem a picture Diem himself, with the inscription “To General J. Lawton Collins, in appreciation of his unstinting and sincere efforts to assist us in our struggle for independence and democracy,” signed “Ngodinhdiem,” and dated “May, 1955.”<sup>32</sup> Collins returned to the United States that night. Anderson’s view of Diem’s legacy as that of a patriot that had some good qualities, but those qualities did not equalize out his inexperience in government, his stubbornness, or the narrowness of his political base.<sup>33</sup>

After the Collins mission, Diem never was able to rally large portions of the population to himself, or even rallying the military to his cause. More than one United States veteran memoir of the Vietnam War paints the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) as apathetic, poorly trained, and far more interested in self-preservation than the preservation of the state. ARVN units during the fall of Saigon in 1975 eventually turned on each other as well as firing on the approaching People’s Army of Vietnam (PAVN). ARVN forces showed their true colors and displayed a poor omen of their future at the Battle of Ap Bac in January of 1963. ARVN troops

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<sup>32</sup> Collins, *Lightning Joe*, 410.

<sup>33</sup> Anderson, “J. Lawton Collins,” 145

intercepted communist radio transmissions from a small town called Ap Than Thoi, and moved an overwhelming force into the area with armored personnel carriers and United States helicopter support. The APCs quickly bogged down in rice paddies and mud and became large stationary targets for the North Vietnamese fighters supplied with Soviet and Chinese weapons, including anti-armor weapons. South Vietnamese forces were quickly routed, the entire operation an abysmal failure. Of note to the United States were the half-dozen US helicopters shot down and more damaged, some severely.<sup>34</sup> This trend continued into Johnson's presidency, the United States militaries holding up what Anderson calls "the fiction" that there was a viable government in Saigon.<sup>35</sup>

Diem was in many ways the man that Vietnam needed to lead it away from communism, but sadly, he went about it in quite the wrong way. Brutal suppression instituted where understanding or even begrudging tolerance would have served better. Where Diem resisted American influence, perhaps taking the advice of United States diplomats more experienced in government may have prolonged his rule or spared his country. When Diem cloistered himself inside the presidential palace relying on his family, broadening his support would have led to a more harmonious relationship with the public and with others in his government. Collins, by contrast, was a professional career military officer sent to Vietnam for his vast worldwide experiences. Under Collins, much to his chagrin, United States foreign policy decided that backing Diem was the best choice, despite numerous pieces of evidence to the contrary. Collins nearly turned Washington D.C. against Diem, but in the end, a healthy dose of luck kept Diem in power and gave U.S. officials false hope that Diem would be able to pull through, and it was in

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<sup>34</sup> Lecture by Professor Stone (Guest Lecturer), KSU, March 15, 2012.

<sup>35</sup> Anderson, "J. Lawton Collins," 147.

1963, eight years after the Collins mission, that hope finally faded. By that point, the United States was so heavily involved in South Vietnam it was almost a given that someone or something would drag the U.S. into armed conflict with North Vietnam. Perhaps the most telling feelings of Collins are those of his mission to Vietnam postscript. “Unfortunately, my forecast of Diem’s inability to overcome the vast obstacles that beset him proved to be largely correct. Despite his, and our, failures in Vietnam, he was a dedicated Vietnamese patriot whose brutal murder was despicable and wholly unwarranted. He deserved a better fate at the hands of his countrymen.”<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Collins, *Lightning Joe*, 411.