

# Nine years after a fateful assassination— The Cult of Diem

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By ROBERT SHAPLEN

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**A**MONG the ever-increasing scores of graves in Mac Dinh Chi cemetery, the oldest and most prestigious one in Saigon, now spread across several blocks near the American Embassy in the downtown area, are two unmarked slabs of marble around which miscellaneous mourners occasionally place wreaths or scatter a few flowers. Each week fresh pots of blooming plants are set on the tombstones by the gravekeepers, who are paid by members of the family of President Ngo Dinh Diem of South Vietnam and his Rasputinlike

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brother and closest advisor, Ngo Dinh Nhu, both of whom were murdered in midmorning of Nov. 2, 1963, approximately 20 hours after the start of the military coup that overthrew them.

Following the assassination of the two brothers, which took place in an armored car after they were captured in a Catholic church where they had sought refuge, the two shot and bayoneted bodies were originally buried in a corner of the military headquarters compound on the northern edge of the city close to Tan Son Nhut airport. They were placed there as a precaution to avoid further mutilation by anti-Diemist fanatics. At 3 o'clock one morning two years later, the remains were said to have been secretly brought to the Mac Dinh Chi cemetery. It was believed that the generals who planned and executed the coup did not want the embarrassment of having the ghosts of their two victims permanently haunting them at headquarters, particularly since Saigon at the time was full of rumors of new coups and counter-coups.

Until two years ago, the two graves, originally just small mounds without any marble topping, were scarcely noticed. A handful of relatives and friends of the two men paid homage to them each Nov. 2 and sometimes on Sundays during the year. But on the anniversary of their

deaths in 1970, between 1,000 and 2,000 people, including the wife of President Nguyen Van Thieu — Thieu's father is buried alongside—appeared at the graves in what can be said to have marked the formal beginning of a revival of Diemism in South Vietnam. Last Nov. 2, more than 5,000 mourners visited the graves and attended a requiem mass at the Saigon cathedral that was previously announced in the newspapers by a committee of Diem's admirers. Several thousands more who were simply curious passers-by, and a sprinkling of anti-Diemists as well, helped cause a huge traffic jam.

These reverential demonstrations in behalf of Diem are a manifestation of the psychological and political changes that have taken place in Vietnam in the decade since his death. But in seriously re-evaluating Diem's historic role and analyzing his complicated personality, the ceremonial and nostalgic tributes, in themselves, can be easily misconstrued. They are symbolic and symptomatic performances, typically Vietnamese in their hidden meanings, flagellative and purgative, and their message is one of both longing and admonishment. On the surface, they represent the natural and human inclination to look upon the past more favorably than the present. Under the circumstances of the long and destructive war the Vietnamese have suffered since 1963, and especially since the large-scale American involvement after 1965, the days of Diem now seem peaceful and golden to many people who feel themselves worse off today than they were before. However, that is not true of all Vietnamese, and if one stands back and regards the image of Diem in a larger historical light, the picture is considerably more complicated.

**D**ISCUSSIONS about Diem nowadays are particularly haunting in the light of the new Communist offensive in South Vietnam, which may well be a climactic one. Many experienced observers believe that had Diem lived the "big war" would never have materialized and the South Viet-

namese would not have suffered anywhere near 120,000 dead and 500,000 wounded—100,000 of them permanently incapacitated—or that today there would be 350,000 war orphans. These figures date back to 1961, when the American involvement that has cost us 55,000 lives began on a small but gradually increasing scale, with advisers and funds. By the time of the coup, there were 12,000 advisers in Vietnam, but those who knew Diem best feel that neither he nor Nhu would ever have invited or allowed 550,000 American soldiers to fight in their country, and to permit the devastation caused by air attacks, including bombing and defoliation. There is evidence that shortly before the coup took place—and for several months afterward—the first tentative efforts were initiated both by the Saigon Government and the National Liberation Front to come to some sort of accommodation. These efforts might well have led to nothing, as so many subsequent ones involving Hanoi and Washington as well as the Front and Saigon have, and the war might have continued anyway, although on a much smaller scale than came to be the case in the post-Diem era.

If there had been a smaller war, or if a political agreement had been reached in the days before Hanoi completely dominated the N.L.F., South Vietnam might well have come under some form of Communist domination one way or another within two or three years. This remains a political possibility today, and if that happens, despite Vietnamization and despite continued American air and other logistical support, it will be due primarily to the inability of the many governments that succeeded Diem's to create a nation capable of withstanding the more united, patient, dedicated, and better-led Communists. Still and all, looking back in 1963 with all the imponderables of the past and present in mind, almost all

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