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Soc. U.O.I.2 Swords & Plowshares

Diem Assassination Was a 'Monstrous Blunder'

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Times/Post News Service

IN HIS WELL-POLISHED MEMOIR, "Swords and Plowshares," Gen. Maxwell D. Taylor sees the murder of former South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem and his brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu, as a monstrous blunder in the Vietnam War, bringing about political confusion that vastly prolonged the struggle.

Though one might answer such a theory in the words of the French diplomat who said that it is an idle exercise in history to speculate on what might have happened had that which happened not happened, the Taylor opinion stays no less weighty in the aftermath of the military coup and the killings. Taylor became ambassador to Saigon and had to cope with the consequent chaos.

As he correctly puts it, the inexcusable mistake of all who conspired to overthrow Diem was that they had planned nothing better to replace him.

The passions and attitudes of that summer nine years ago almost inevitably generated a violent climax. Diem was under heavy fire. He was being viciously assailed by the American press in Saigon, who waged their vendetta because Diem scorned them and they were being starved of news.

Public opinion in the United States, seeing Diem as a lesser evil, vented its rage against Nhu because of his oppression of the Buddhists led by Tri Quang, who was just another Vietnamese racketeer in a saffron robe. The self-immolation of several Buddhist monks in protest against Nhu's measures also served to fire American emotion. Though Taylor indicates that Tri Quang had contrived these sacrifices to topple Diem, Madame Nhu, already an object of particular loathing to the American press, intensified the get-Diem movement by

referring to them as "barbecues." Thus, in the summer of 1963, several official statements came out of Washington that seemed clearly to signal that the U.S. government would welcome the ruination of Diem.

Gen. Taylor's freshly minted memoir lifts the lid on that subject more than a little. On Aug. 24, when he was chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, there came to his desk a U.S. State Department action paper already cleared and cabled to the embassy in Saigon. What he read alarmed Taylor as it did other defense principals.

The authors of the already cabled instruction were Undersecretary of State W. Averell Harriman, Assistant Secretary of State Roger Hillsman and a White House staffer, Michael Forrestal. They had cleared their paper with Undersecretary of State George Ball while he was playing golf and with the late President Kennedy via telephone, which signifies mainly that the clearers gave only passing attention to a major and convulsive change in American policy.

Significantly, the paper had not been cleared with Secretary of State Dean Rusk, who was not anti-Diem, or the Central Intelligence Agency or the Department of Defense.

The sense of the paper sent to the new ambassador, Henry Cabot Lodge, was that the United States would no longer tolerate the presence of brother Nhu in the Saigon government. Diem, however, must be given a chance to get rid of Nhu. At the same time, Lodge was to inform key South Vietnamese generals about this change in the U.S. position. Not only that, but if at any point the generals decided to get rid of President Diem, they were told the United States would directly support their action.

So what was in essence this instruction to the ambassador? Only a twisted mind would see it other than as a license for the South Vietnamese military

to form a cabal to gun down Diem and Nhu with the approval of the United States.

Inside official U.S. circles there was no protest against the course so definitely set forth. Some of those directly concerned such as Taylor might in their own minds question the wisdom of the instruction or policy shift. But none said clearly: "What we propose to do is immoral. It is beneath the dignity of the United States that we as a government would conspire to political assassination. My conscience won't take it. So I will turn in my suit." One by one the principals fell in line with what had become, if by default, White House policy. In the end, the deed was done.

Be it said in favor of the Vietnamese military brass that they were more loath to become the executioners of Diem and Nhu than were U.S. generals and diplomats.

Taylor, however, in noting the incident, writes: "I know of no evidence of direct American participation in the coup and certainly of none in the assassination."