

In Viet—A Coup Designed to Fail

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Viet Nam's bloodless Army revolt on Sept. 13 has been described as a "Hollywood coup," "the crazy-man's coup" and a "puppet show." As more facts have become available during the last week, the rebellion appeared to be an attempt — and a feeble one—to grapple with the most important problem in Viet Nam—the Buddhist situation.

The rebellion did not indicate—as one would suppose—the disintegration of the Armed Forces. It indicated the misuse of the Army for political purposes. Both the Army and Prime Minister Maj. Gen. Nguyen Khanh have gained momentary strength and consolidation from this rebellion. But the coup attempt has unleashed some powerful and potentially disastrous trends for the future.

The so-called abortive coup also represented two initial, but important trends about American policy in Viet Nam. First, by approving the coup attempt American policy makers assumed that the military war against the Viet Cong Communist guerrillas was only a fraction as important as the political war against potential pro-neutralist and pro-Communist elements in Saigon. In short, it was unimportant whether the Viet Cong overran a provincial capital. The war then was clearly the political battle of Saigon and its future government.

A DIFFERENCE

The second trend about American policy here which the coup attempt illustrated was that the United States government, was distinctly, but subtly moving away from supporting Gen. Khanh. Washington was supporting Gen. Khanh fully—but not exclusively. It was a trend that had been set in motion with the arrival of Maxwell S. Taylor as Ambassador on July 7, but a trend that was unnoticed until the coup.

During the coup, American policymakers here did support Gen. Khanh fully—especially during the critical hours of negotiation with coup leaders. But they supported Gen. Khanh when the alternative was to accept Brig. Gen. Lam Van Phat, a Catholic of unstable temperament, and his associates. The Washington announcements during the coup—as interpreted here—indicated that American support was officially for the triumvirate of generals—and not for the government of Gen. Khanh. This was a marked difference.

The American government's choices in Viet Nam were to set up a strongman who would govern dictatorially and efficiently or to set up a balance of forces in which no one has the power to upset the others. The American government has attempted since the Jan. 30 coup to make Gen. Khanh a strongman—which was the point of the early spring visits to Viet Nam of Defense Secretary Robert McNamara. In daylight hours gave added advantage to the pro-Khanh forces in Saigon—the Vietnamese Air Force. A nighttime coup, in which electricity as well as the telephones were cut off, would have seriously reduced the effectiveness of the Air Force to retaliate against coup forces on the ground.

Finally, the coup was not taken seriously when Saigon heard that one of the key coup-makers—who controlled most of the troops—was Maj. Gen. Duong Van Duc, who is known by all Saigonese as an alcoholic since his wife left him and married a sergeant years ago. The other coup-leader was Brig. Gen. Lam Van Phat, who is also considered "mentally erratic." Even Gen. Khanh, when he heard about the coup-leaders told one of his close aides, "these are mad men—crazy."

PUPPETS

Since Saigonese knew these two leaders did not have the talent to pull off a successful coup, it meant they were "the puppets" of a more gifted strategist—the Chief of Staff Brig. Gen. Nguyen Van Thieu, who had always been

As far as American policymakers are concerned, the key battlefield in South Viet Nam today is coup-ridden Saigon rather than the Communist-harried provinces, Special Correspondent Beverly Deepe concludes. And the former all-out U. S. support of Premier Nguyen Khanh now is being subtly qualified as he contends with both Army dissidents and rampant Buddhists. This is the first of two reports on the tangle in Viet Nam in the wake of the latest coup attempt.

closely identified with the right-wing, predominantly Catholic Dal Viet political party. Gen Thieu like Gen. Phat is Catholic.

But to organize the massive movement of 2,000 troops into the city necessitated the "neutrality" or the approval of two other forces: his close friend and commander in chief of armed forces, Lt. Gen. Tran Thien Khiem, and American policymakers.

Indications are that he got both. As the rebel troops disarmed policemen at a checkpoint on the outskirts of the city, Gen. Khiem and his wife prepared to board a plane to Dalat, ostensibly to see their daughter in school. He and his wife met Gen. Khanh in his villa shortly after that, and he told Gen. Khanh there was an "incident" in Saigon between troops and police. But by leaving the city, he disassociated himself from the coup, he did not attempt to stop—or to support.

Almost every Saigonese accused the Americans of plotting the whole affair. During the past week, anti-American feeling has taken a sharp upward turn—and this in the future will help the Communists, pro-Communists and the Buddhists, who have already begun to make public anti-American declarations.

FINGER ON U. S.

While the Vietnamese people, editors, newspaper men, and even close aids of Gen. Khanh, have perhaps exaggerated the U. S. engineering of the coup, there are signs that Americans were involved. No one knows to what degree or at what

A BALANCE

This has clearly failed. The latest attempt was to set up a balance of forces in which Gen. Khanh was balanced off by the other generals of the triumvirate; in which the Army and the Catholics offset the growing political dominance of Buddhists; in which the young officers in the Army offset the old ones; in which the anti-Communist forces are no longer attempting to beat the Communists—politically or militarily—but to maintain a balance with them.

With luck—and a lot of it—this scheme might maintain the status quo in Viet Nam until after the November election. But it will not solve the problems—nor will it permit the effective prosecution of the anti-Communist war.

More than anything, the coup attempt represented the end of one phase in Viet Nam, and the beginning of another. No one knows what the new phase will bring, but both the optimists and pessimists here predict it will be disheartening.

Almost every indicator during the past week showed that the coup attempt was not genuine—that it was a coup designed to fail. The first—and only—action necessary for success would have been to seize American-backed Prime Minister Maj. Gen. Nguyen Khanh and kill him. Only then would the U. S. be willing and able to withdraw its support from the Khanh government and recognize the rebels.

DISBELIEF

For several reasons the Vietnamese in Saigon did not believe the coup was genuine—even as the tanks and troops moved into Saigon. First, no serious coup-plotter would select the 13th day of the month. It's considered unlucky by the very superstitious Vietnamese.

Secondly, the coup was made in Saigon—and only in Saigon—but the Prime Minister was in Dalat, 150 miles north, in a mountain resort villa. Thirdly, a coup

levels—and the facts will probably become more obscure and slanted as Communist propagandists unleash their version.

Washington's first announcements of surprise about the coup are widely accepted here as insincere. American intelligence agents knew about the coup at least 18 hours before the troops rolled down Saigon's treeing, that too was reported because of their tips to some correspondents. When the troops moved from the 7th Division area south of Saigon at 4 a. m. Sunday morning, that too was reported at that time, according to American advisers this correspondent talked with in division headquarters in My Tho.

The initial actions of surprise by key Americans here are also accepted as insincere and part of the "puppet show." American Ambassador Maxwell D. Taylor was in Honolulu, Deputy Ambassador U. Alexis Johnson was hopping into his golf clothes—and stayed in them all day—when he was first notified about the coup shortly after 7:30—two hours before the troops were in the heart

of Saigon. Gen. William C. Westmoreland, commander of the American military command-Viet Nam, was already working in his office, but he's generally at the headquarters every Sunday. However, his chief of staff, who had just arrived in city of Da Nang, 350 miles north of Saigon, was telephoned and immediately returned to the capital

A WARNING

According to reliable sources, Gen. Khanh was telephoned in Dalat about 9 a. m. by a Vietnamese Army major. The American high command here did not directly notify him, but some sources say the American Embassy wrote him a letter at 8 a. m. However, the Americans, while not notifying Gen. Khanh, did send at 9 a. m. an American in civilian clothes to the National Pagoda, who warned the Buddhist leaders of the coup and urged them to go into hiding because of the pro-Catholic feelings of the rebel leaders.

It is the distinct impression not only among the Saigonese—but also among Gen. Khanh's aides—that the Americans were helping Gen.

Khanh—and every one else, too. This is perhaps unjustified, but it is a powerful impression which American policymakers must take into account in future developments. Two American Air Force generals worked during periods of the coup with the pro-Khanh resistance corps, headed by a Vietnamese Air Force general.

Early in the afternoon, American civilians visited Gen. Khanh in Dalat, and Deputy Ambassador Johnson was a powerful personality during the late evening negotiations. However, Gen. Khanh's aides noted unhappily that two Americans were seen with rebel leader Gen. Duc when he was the high military command in Saigon. Their names and agencies they were assigned to will soon be circulated in the streets of Saigon—not only by pro-Khanh officers, but by the Buddhists and Communists. Four other civilian-clothed Americans were seen with Gen. Duc later in the day. The American version of this involvement is that the Americans were liaising with the rebels to prevent bloodshed on the streets and to plea with him to begin negotiating with the pro-Khanh forces.

And if true, as sources close to the Buddhists insist, the American alert to the pagodas will be most difficult to explain in the coming months.

A second article tomorrow concludes that the anti-Buddhist coup paradoxically helped the Buddhists—and that Americans in South Viet Nam may never be trusted again.