

# Dangerous History of 'Regime Change'

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South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem.

Official Washington justifies military and political interventions in other countries under the theory of "U.S. exceptionalism." But these "regime changes" often have unexpected results, as with the bloody coup d'état that removed South Vietnamese President Diem a half-century ago.

On Nov. 1, 1963, a half-century ago, the South Vietnamese government that the United States had backed for nearly a decade was toppled in a military coup d'état, an act of regime change approved by President John F. Kennedy.

The Saigon coup ended in the murders of President Ngo Dinh Diem and his brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu, and – though Diem's removal was intended to appease the country's restless Buddhist majority upset with Diem's favoritism toward his fellow Catholics – the operation proved disastrous for the U.S. and its allies in their fight against communist-led forces.

After the assassination of Diem – and the murder of President John F. Kennedy just 21 days later – U.S. military involvement escalated. President Lyndon Johnson dispatched the first combat units and American forces grew to a peak of 543,000 on March 31, 1969, before a gradual withdrawal and acceptance of defeat. Some 58,000 U.S. soldiers died in the war and political discord deeply divided the home front.

Yet, the details of the Diem killing remained something of a mystery for years, with President Kennedy reportedly shocked that the coup had resulted in the death of the Diem brothers. So, what exactly did President Kennedy authorize? Why did the coup end with two grisly murders? Who was at fault for the coup fiasco and the political chaos that followed?

Some of the mystery was cleared up by the leaking of the secret *Pentagon Papers* in 1971. The internal U.S. government study revealed: "For the military coup d'état against Ngo Dinh Diem, the U.S. must accept its full share of responsibility. Beginning in August of 1963 we variously authorized, sanctioned and encouraged the coup efforts of the Vietnamese generals and offered full support for a successor government."

That disclosure led to questioning what right the U.S. had to unleash such a coup d'état – a question that reverberates even more loudly today with the U.S.-backed or -botched "regime changes" in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya. This question was one that Sen. J. William Fulbright said was being ignored – not even mentioned – in all the confidential cable traffic between U.S. officials that was later evaluated by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that he headed.

In the preface to the committee's 75-page staff report, Fulbright wrote: "What is omitted

from the story of the Diem coup tells a great deal about the American policy process. Absent is any questioning by U.S. officials of the U.S. Government's right to reform the Vietnamese government or to replace it."

Zeroing in on the U.S. government's self-anointed "exceptionalism" that undergirds the interventionist impulse of many American leaders, Fulbright summed up, "The right to manipulate the destiny of others is simply assumed."

### **Lack of Debate**

U.S. complicity revealed in the *Pentagon Papers* was further lamented by Fulbright: "Perhaps the most important omission, and that which made the others possible, is the exclusion of Congress and the public from the policy-process. The facts of U.S. policy toward the Diem regime were limited to such a tight circle of U.S. officials that significant debate over the desirability of support for Diem, much less of an Indochina presence, was precluded."

Just why President Kennedy sanctioned the coup was not explained in the *Pentagon Papers* or other official disclosures. A transcript of audio-recordings of Kennedy's National Security Council meeting on Oct. 29 - just hours before the Saigon coup began - reveal that Diem's overthrow was opposed by CIA Director John McCone and Gen. Maxwell D. Taylor, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff who warned that even a successful coup would help the communists.

Robert Kennedy, the President's brother and Attorney General, interjected into the disjointed discussion, "I just don't see that this makes any sense on the face of it." He added, "We're putting the whole future of the country and, really Southeast Asia, in the hands of somebody we don't know very well." If the coup fails, he summed up, "We risked a hell of a lot, with the war."

I had been a public-opinion pollster during the 1960 election campaign that put JFK in the White House. Three years later, as a *Newsweek* reporter, I was racing through Saigon's streets to the Presidential Palace as the last coup shots were fired.

I eventually concluded that Diem, who was a Catholic in a predominantly non-Catholic country, had become a political liability for America's first Catholic president gearing up for re-election the next year. Whether the U.S. could or would have prevailed in South Vietnam with Diem as president is still debated, though - like all "alternative history" - unanswerable.

A long-time witness to world events and a prime contributor to America's defeat in Vietnam was North Vietnamese Gen. Vo Nguven Giap, who died on Oct. 4 at age 102. He masterminded the political-military "people's war" strategy that defeated America in Vietnam and to which the U.S. has yet to devise an effective counter-strategy.

Instead of Huey helicopters and green-bereted Special Forces that JFK unsuccessfully relied on for victory against Giap and his dedicated guerrillas, the U.S. today employs drones and Seal Team 6s to try to take down Islamic "terrorists."

Over the last dozen years, the U.S. military has attacked Afghanistan to oust the Taliban who were blamed for giving safe haven to al-Qaeda terrorists; invaded Iraq to remove

Saddam Hussein for purportedly hiding WMDs (though he wasn't); and providing air assets to support the overthrow and murder of Libya's Muammar Gaddafi.

However, these "regime changes" have given rise to insurgencies and civil wars that the U.S. has been unable to counter successfully. The result: more bloodshed, anguish and uncertainty across a strategically important region and the loss of American ideals, prestige, credibility, lives and money.

Of course, the U.S. involvement in "regime change" did not begin in 1963 with the Diem coup. A decade before, the CIA engineered the overthrow of Iranian Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh, who was perceived as undermining U.S. and British interests by nationalizing his nation's oil wealth.

The 1953 coup installed the Shah of Iran, a U.S. puppet who ruled as a tyrant for 26 years until he was swept aside in 1979 by the Islamic revolution that has bedeviled U.S. interests for more than three decades. Although broad outlines of the Mossadegh coup have been known for years, only two months ago did a declassified document obtained through the Freedom of Information Act explicitly confirm the CIA's orchestration.

Latin America, what some old hands in Official Washington still call "America's Backyard," has been the scene of many U.S.-engineered "regime changes" going back almost two centuries to the Monroe Doctrine and including the 1954 coup against Guatemala's elected president Jacobo Arbenz and the 1973 coup against Chile's elected president Salvador Allende. Typically such ousters are followed by years of bloodshed, repression and popular resentment toward the U.S.

Transcending this expanse of time and space was Giap's prophetic observation of 1969 just as American forces in Vietnam were peaking in numbers: "The United States has a strategy based on arithmetic. They question the computers, add and subtract, extract square roots, and then go into action. But arithmetical strategy doesn't work here. If it did, they'd already have exterminated us."

What the American strategy failed to take into account, he warned, was the determination of the Vietnamese people to chart their own future. "They don't reckon on the spirit of a people fighting for what they know is right," Giap said.

It is a lesson that Official Washington has found difficult to learn.

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