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Chapter 11 The Buddhist Crisis

This crisis, beginning as an incident in the ancient imperial capital of Hue in central Vietnam, developed into a full-blown political uprising that no one had foreseen. I had been warned by Vo Van Hai that Diem's support was weaker, even within his own government, than most Americans realized, but I never thought the Buddhists would become the unraveling agent. While the aging patriarch Thich Tinh Khiet was recognized as the preeminent Buddhist in the country, the Buddhists were not well organized nationally, like the Catholic Church. We, and most Vietnamese I knew, were blind-sided by events. For the first several weeks I did not think it was a critical problem.

On May 8, Buddha's birthday, a crowd of about three thousand assembled in front of the government radio station in Hue to protest a government decision the previous day forbidding the public flying of Buddhist flags as part of the celebrations. This was in accord with a government decree issued in 1958 limiting the display of religious flags to homes and places of worship on religious holidays. Loosely observed in the past, it had been ignored completely by the Catholics during their own religious holidays. Although the demonstration was peaceful, the province chief ordered a Civil Guard unit and some army troops to disband the crowd. A grenade exploded, killing four children and one woman. The crowd panicked and was apparently fired on by the Civil Guard; tear gas was thrown. Some people were trampled, others were run over by one of the armored cars on the scene. Altogether eight civilians were killed and about fifteen wounded.

The next day, an orderly crowd of about five to six thousand Buddhists met at the main pagoda in Hue. A manifesto demanded that the government's order against the flying of Buddhist flags be rescinded; that Buddhists be allowed to enjoy a special regime like that afforded to the Catholics under a decree of Emperor Bao Dai, still in effect; that the government stop any arrests of Buddhist followers; that Buddhist bonzes and the faithful be allowed freedom to preach and observe their religion; and that families of the victims of the riot be compensated and the instigators of the killings punished. The manifesto stated that the five signatory bonzes were prepared to make sacrifices until their demands were realized. The province chief addressed the crowd, expressing regret and declaring that the government was ready to guarantee payments to victims' families. He was reportedly cheered, and the order concerning the flags was blamed on Bao Dai. The American consul in Hue, John Helble, thought the crisis might be nearing an end.

After an unsatisfactory meeting with a government representative, however, the Buddhist leaders took their demands directly to President Diem in Saigon. Diem reportedly responded to the first demand by saying he supported the intent of the 1958 decree, which was to subordinate all religious flags to the national flag. He promised to investigate giving the Buddhists the same land-ownership rights as the Catholic Church, whose privileges had been protected by Bao Dai's decree. Diem said suspending the practice of arrests could be exploited by subversive elements. Buddhists' rights to worship and propagate their creed, Diem said, were guaranteed by the

constitution; any suppression of it should be reported to the authorities. To the fifth and last point of the manifesto, he promised financial aid to the affected families. While technically correct, these were impolitic answers.

Behind the scenes, Diem's brother, Bishop Thuc, was insisting on a hard line from the beginning, as was Nhu, while the role of Ngo Dinh Can, the political power in central Vietnam, seemed ambiguous. Nolting discussed the problem directly with Diem on May 18, urging that an independent investigative commission be established as a face-saving way out. At that meeting he learned that Diem believed the Buddhist leaders had provoked the incident and that the grenade deaths had been caused by the VC or other dissidents, not by the government.

THE CRISIS WORSENS

Incomprehensibly, Ambassador Nolting left Saigon for home leave on May 23. I was thunderstruck when I learned about it from Bill Trueheart, and I expressed unease. Bill said Nolting was very tired, had long postponed his leave, and thought the crisis was on the way to resolution. But as Nolting later said, he "could not have made a worse mistake."

After I saw President Diem about the funding crisis on May 27, I had asked Vo Van Hai about the Buddhists. He hoped that it could be resolved. He thought the Buddhists were reasonable if handled correctly but that Nhu and Thuc were pressing Diem to take a hard line. He had been urging a soft approach, to no avail. Then he said in words I would never forget, "If one hundred people came to Diem and called something white and Nhu called it black, Diem would believe Nhu." I looked at him incredulously and asked if he really meant that. He did. I began to think we were in for real trouble. We had no one on the inside of Diem's decision making.

After an initial period of calm, tensions between the Buddhists and the government began to rise despite a government communiqué on May 29 affirming freedom of religion. Adding to government irritation, the Buddhists were beginning to make their case internationally. David Halberstam published a story in the New York Times on May 15 saying Diem had called the Buddhists "damn fools" for asking for religious freedom when it was guaranteed by the constitution. Diem took this as a personal insult. Meanwhile Buddhist monks in Hue, including Thich Tri Quang, went on a hunger strike, and on the first of June large crowds of Buddhists assembled at the main pagoda in that city to protest, though they dispersed peacefully. Protests continued despite the government's communiqué and despite the replacement of the government's regional delegate as well as the Thua Thien (Hue) province chief and his deputy. On June 3, martial law was declared in Hue after tear gas dispersed various demonstrations, causing some nonlethal casualties— the tear gas used was an older French variety with a blistering effect.

Finally, on June 4, a commission was appointed by President Diem to find an overall solution. Diem dispatched Colonel Chau, the province chief of Kien Hoa, to Danang to relieve the mayor, whose ineptness was causing problems. Chau was a Buddhist in good standing and with personal connections to Buddhist leaders in central Vietnam. When he asked Diem for instructions, he was told to do what he thought was right. (According to Chau's later accounts, he was able not only to negotiate a settlement with the Buddhists in Danang and its surrounding province but to assist in creating an overall accord by influencing the central Vietnam Buddhist association. He would blame Diem's brothers, Bishop Thuc and Nhu, for sabotaging the process.)

An accord was reached in private discussions between Secretary of Defense Nguyen Dinh Thuan, representing President Diem and Thich Tien Minh, head of the central Vietnam Buddhist association. Minh went back to central Vietnam and was expected to return in a few days accompanied by the patriarch, Thich Tien Khiet, to meet with Diem, after which the accord would be published. On June 8, Madame Nhu's Women's Solidarity Movement issued a statement castigating the Buddhists. This delayed any announcement of the accord, although Diem apparently had never approved or known about the statement beforehand. Then on June 11, a Buddhist bonze burned himself to death in Saigon, an act captured in a photograph that received worldwide circulation. The USIS chief, John Mecklin, characterized it as having "a shock effect of incalculable value to the Buddhist cause," as becoming "a symbol of the state of things in Vietnam." Despite the burning, less than a week later the Interministerial Committee and the Buddhist delegation issued a joint communiqué that addressed the original five Buddhist demands. The government agreed to form a committee to examine Buddhist complaints and another committee to determine who was responsible for the incidents of May 8 and to punish those responsible. An informal two-week truce went into effect to demonstrate good faith on both sides. Beneath the surface, however, positions had hardened.

On June 11, Roger Hilsman, now the assistant secretary of state for the Far East, instructed Trueheart to tell Diem the United States would publicly disassociate itself from his government unless it "fully and unequivocally meet[s] Buddhist demands." Trueheart gave Diem a paraphrase of this cable the next day, with the threat in it. (When President Kennedy found out, he ordered that no further threats were to be made and no formal statement issued without his approval.) Then there was a leak in Washington to the *New York Times* that the American government had warned Diem it would publicly condemn his treatment of the Buddhists unless he addressed their grievances. This caused a storm at the palace, which was not about to show it was responding to such overt American pressure. Nevertheless, the joint communiqué was released on June 16.

Hilsman again cabled Trueheart on June 19, expressing displeasure over the joint communiqué and recommending a "hard hitting" demarche to Diem with a series of points, including the resurrection of an old demand for "broadening" his government. Trueheart met with Diem on June 22 and gave him a paper simply conveying Hilsman's instructions. Its tone was one of command, as to not only what Diem should do but how he should do it. which was personally insulting. Earlier the same week, Trueheart had also informed Diem that Nolting was being replaced by Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge Jr. Afterward, Thuan said Diem thought a new American policy must be in place to force him to do Washington's bidding or unseat him. Diem had said, "They can send ten Lodges, but I will not permit myself or my country to be humiliated, not if they train their artillery on this palace." The distrust and enmity of the Durbrow days had returned in full force. The State Department, mainly Hilsman and W. Averell Harriman, undersecretary of state for political affairs, thought they could move Diem by directly threatening him. Anyone who knew him, however, would understand that it would simply cause him to dig in. For Diem it was a matter of national pride and personal honor. He had refused to take orders from the French; he would refuse to take them from the Americans.

ANOTHER APPEAL FOR LANSDALE

Concern over the downward political spiral provoked me to send Trueheart a memorandum on July 5 urging that General Lansdale be asked to come on "immediate temporary assignment . . . as an official personal advisor to Diem." I had not gotten anywhere previously with Nolting on

the same subject, but now communication was almost nonexistent between us and Diem. "There is no other American," I said, "regardless of position or rank, who can evoke the same response from the president or in whom he has any comparable degree of confidence. Our attempts to influence the situation through normal channels seem unsuccessful. General Lansdale, as many of us can attest, has repeatedly demonstrated his ability to cause President Diem to act in accordance with high U.S. policy, when all other appeals . . . were unavailing. I most emphatically recommended his immediate assignment."

In view of Nolting's imminent return, Trueheart didn't think he could act on the recommendation himself. I sent an informal copy by courier to Lansdale in Washington to alert him: "I realize this is unsolicited by you and you may not approve, but it is the only thing I can think of to get us out of the mess we are now in." Trueheart agreed that I could show it to John Mecklin who, in turn, wrote a favorable covering memo for Nolting, who saw it the day after he returned. Mecklin defined the problem as "very nearly narrowed to Diem's individual personality traits, to the need to persuade him at a basic, human level to break out of the neurotic straight jacket in which he seems increasingly to be wrapping himself, and be reasonable. If any man outside the Ngo Dinh family, much less a foreigner, can achieve this, it must be done on a relatively unofficial advisory basis."

It boiled down, as much did in Vietnam, to personal relationships and an understanding of the Vietnamese and of how things worked in that context. Diem had painted himself into a corner and needed effectual help in getting out, particularly in the face of advice from Nhu. The beating he was taking from the United States only served to harden his opinions. Outrage over his treatment by the American press was clouding his vision. Mecklin sent a copy of his and my memo to General Stilwell, who told me he agreed. I had couched my recommendation in insider terms of accomplishing "high U.S. policy," but I really thought it was a chance for something positive to emerge from the complete standoff between us and Diem. Our best interests and those of the Vietnamese were essentially the same.

I saw Secretary Thuan on July 9. He asked how serious I thought the Buddhist crisis was. Very serious, I said, and asked his opinion, "friend to friend and off the record." (It was tacitly understood I would be telling the ambassador about it but no one else.) The president was "completely a prisoner of his own family," Thuan declared, emphasizing the word "completely." No member of the family was giving Diem an even partially true picture. The Nhus, and particularly Bishop Thuc, had such an inflated view of their own importance that they had no idea of how they were hurting the president. The bishop was "medieval in his outlook. The Nhus, particular Mrs. Nhu, have gone out of their minds. Nhu has no conception of reality. The one danger in the present situation not to be dismissed is that Nhu might attempt his own 'coup,' swathed as he is in delusions of grandeur. Several people have tried to tell the president the truth but he is completely deaf to any talk about his family's actions."

Thuan concluded, "The president is going to let the family ruin him; nobody can do anything to prevent it. If this continues the government is doomed unless some miracle occurs, the only question is when. If there is an overthrow it will be chaos, the end of Vietnam." I asked, "What can be done?" "The most useful thing would be to bring General Lansdale back, but the time is not yet ripe." "How do you determine when the time is ripe?"

He thought for a moment and said, “Perhaps Lansdale should be asked to come out immediately.” He would discuss this with Ambassador Nolting, who was due back shortly and who, he was sure, would understand and not take it personally.

Nolting returned to Saigon on July 11. My memo to him about Thuan included the words, “Even if events might have passed the stage at which the President could be saved, of which I am not entirely convinced [a bow toward Trueheart, who told me he had absolutely given up on Diem] General Lansdale’s presence would still be of the utmost value in helping to put together a new government.” I suggested Lansdale be assigned as a personal assistant to the ambassador, working directly for him. Nolting seemed at last favorable to the idea.

Mecklin later told me that a request for Lansdale had been forwarded to Washington. Although no such message appears in the official record, it was quoted in a memorandum to Hilsman from Paul Kattenburg, director of the Vietnam Working Group in Washington, after a lunch with Lansdale at which he volunteered to go to Saigon. Kattenburg suggested Hilsman speak positively with former senator Henry Cabot Lodge (who would become the new ambassador) about it. It is not known whether the message was ever passed on to Lodge. Lansdale would later say that during the Buddhist crisis he had tried several times, unsuccessfully, to talk to Hilsman. Given that Lansdale felt strongly that a coup against Diem had to be avoided, Hilsman may not have wanted to listen. Yet another request for Lansdale vanished into the Washington ether.

LAST EFFORTS

On July 18, President Diem broadcast a conciliatory message directing the Interministerial Committee to cooperate closely with the Buddhist delegation in settling all complaints. All government personnel were ordered to contribute actively to its implementation. As a next step, the Interministerial Committee proposed a joint government-Buddhist commission to investigate Buddhist claims. Although there were a few disturbances, relative calm ensued; the barricades around the pagodas were lifted in Saigon and Hue, and arrested Buddhists began to be released.

The next day, unrelated to the Buddhist affair, I saw President Diem to give him our June progress report on the Strategic Hamlet Program. I told him I had just been to Phu Yen, Quang Tri, and Thua Tien, where the Strategic Hamlet Program was continuing to make progress. Pigs had been distributed even to the most remote hamlets. He beamed at that, the only time he smiled during the entire meeting, except when he greeted me and said goodbye. I said that the population certainly appeared pleased but that I was concerned that many of the farmers I had seen were wearing small pieces of saffron cloth (the color of Buddhist robes). He didn’t respond. I gave him the promised report, which he indicated he would carefully read.

Then, as if he had been reading my mind, he said, “So much depends on the province chief in carrying out the hamlet program.” He launched into a detailed discussion of several province chiefs, their shortcomings and problems, and then talked about how difficult it was to find good ones: “Civilians tend to be too afraid or regulation bound while the military are often too inflexible with the population, directing instead of persuading.” He had recently replaced three province chiefs, whom he named. (The three he had replaced should have been replaced, from what we knew about them.)

Abruptly, he changed the mood and began a bitter denunciation of the American press. He could not understand why Vietnam had to be humiliated, particularly when it was one of the true

friends the United States had in Asia; correspondents didn't treat Burma, Indonesia, or Cambodia that way. He asked, parenthetically, why he was now being referred to only as "Roman Catholic President Diem," no longer just "President Diem."

I nodded sympathetically. The cultural divide between the American press and Diem seemed unbridgeable; both had become radioactive. When I thought about it afterward I was not sure any other Vietnamese government would have fared much better with the American press. Its inclination to focus on what the Americans were doing and then, mainly, on Vietnamese shortcomings, actual and perceived, not only treaded on the nationalistic sensitivities of the Vietnamese but was the antithesis of their cultural code of politeness, indirectness, and public restraint.

Diem went on to a lengthy lecture on the Buddhist problem in general, with the conclusion that Buddhism had very little political support and much of that communist inspired. "Buddhist actions are the ultimate in ingratitude. Under my government more Buddhist temples have been built than in the previous twenty or thirty years and this government has been the first to contribute to the construction of Buddhist temples." (The latter was true, I thought, but now irrelevant.)

This was followed by a blow-by-blow account of the Buddhist affair. To sum it up: the government had been right and the Buddhists wrong from the beginning. The VC, not the Civil Guard or the army, had set off the plastic charges during the incident in Hue. I said, "No matter what is true, Mr. President, from the information I have it appears that over 95 percent of the population in Thua Thien and Quang Tri provinces believes the government was at fault." (This was an estimate I had gotten from our provincial reps during my recent visit.) "That might have been true right after the incident," he said, "but this is no longer the case. I strongly object to a conciliatory attitude toward the Buddhists while they are systematically trying to subvert the government. The government's weak position has been forced on it. The current situation is comparable to the attempted 1960 'paratrooper coup' when Ambassador Durbrow's representations lowered the prestige of the government and almost resulted in its overthrow." (This was evidence of the lingering bitterness over how Durbrow's actions were seen as favoring the 1960 coup, a perception the State Department had adamantly refused to acknowledge.)

I asked the president, "Do you feel you always get the truth from your own people?" He replied, "I do not believe everything I am told and I have my own private sources of information. The Buddhist claim that the government is carrying out mass arrests is only a provocation." "This may be so," I said, "but there are specific incidents of Buddhists being arrested with no apparent cause. A Buddhist monk who left the American embassy was trailed by several policemen who tried to arrest him, so he fled back into the embassy for sanctuary. It created a very bad impression."

Emerging from his depressed mood he asked if I knew what Lansdale was doing. He was still in the Pentagon, I said. "Do you think the ambassador might have any objections to Lansdale's coming out to Vietnam again if it could be arranged?" "I discussed it with Nolting," I said. "He seems favorable to the idea." "What do you think General Harkin's reaction might be?" "I don't know;" I replied, "but I don't think he would object, because Lansdale, if he came, would not be concerned with military affairs."

I reported the meeting to Ambassador Nolting, commenting that Diem was convinced that he was being kept informed accurately (which he was not) and in the minutest detail (which he

seemed to be). He felt that his sincere efforts to satisfy just claims were being willfully disregarded by enemies manipulating the Buddhists, misinterpreted by Western newsmen because of animosity against him, and that their distortions were given too much credence by the American government. Negative stories in the *Times of Vietnam* seemed an accurate reflection of his views. "Despite his obvious friendliness throughout the conversation toward me personally," I said, "it was most depressing to find him with his mind so closed, and so convinced he was being unfairly treated." Diem's heart was clearly not in his conciliatory public statement of the day before. If anything was to come of it, something had to give soon on both sides.

At our meeting on July 9, Thuan had asked if I could talk to General Van Thanh Cao about the Buddhist crisis. Cao was involved in mediating with the Buddhists; as a Cao Dai, he was considered reasonably neutral by both sides. Curiously, I had gotten a call from Cao around the same time asking for me. When I saw Cao, he had just come from an informal meeting of most of the Vietnamese army generals with Ngo Dinh Nhu. Nhu had discussed the Buddhist problem very frankly, admitted the government had made mistakes and soliciting the cooperation of the generals in overcoming the crisis. Nhu had characterized Ngo Dinh Can's handling of the situation in Hue as "stupid" and had criticized Bishop Thuc. Cao believed Nhu had concluded the government's situation was desperate and that it had to change tactics. What Nhu had to say, Cao thought, was generally well received. Afterward we discussed ideas on handling the Buddhists. I knew Cao was not accepted as a "member of the club" by the other generals and that accordingly his opinions were based on overt reactions he observed. Other sources agreed on the substance of the meeting but ranged in reaction from downright hostility to receptivity. It was clear Nhu was trying to co-opt the generals. According to General Kim, Nhu had even said he would not blame the generals if they were thinking of a coup; he would be with them.

In another meeting with Thuan on 20 July, I told him what Diem had said to me about the Buddhists. He replied that Diem had been forced to make his reconciliation statement and that indeed his heart wasn't in it. General Cao was to be named as the secretary of the proposed joint government-Buddhist investigative commission, if it got off the ground. Had we, Cao and I, come up with any ideas on how to get the commission going? As an immediate move, I suggested that a permanent secretary be named for the existing Interministerial Committee and that the committee begins its own independent investigation without waiting for the joint commission. The permanent secretary should have his own staff, office, and an airplane at his disposal. Buddhists and newsmen could beinvited to join him on trips to investigate Buddhist complaints. It was a way to get the whole matter out in the open to show good faith. Cao was willing to serve as the permanent secretary. Thuan asked for something in writing, which I subsequently got to him before the end of July. Thuan told me later that he discussed it with the president but that Nhu's idea of a crackdown killed it.

Without much hope, and as a final shot in the dark, I drafted a letter, at Vo Van Hai's suggestion, for Diem to ask President Kennedy for Lansdale directly. Later Hai told me Diem had almost sent the letter, but Nhu was against it. Except for this last salvage attempt, I kept Nolting verbally informed of what I was doing. I remember him expressing discouragement at the cryptic and tepid public support from Washington for Diem's July 18 conciliatory statement. George Ball (under secretary of state for economic affairs), Harriman, and Hilsman were not interested in supporting Nolting. In fact, Harriman had angrily suggested to Hilsman on August 1 that he be recalled "at once." The official policy was wait and see, which had the effect of

supporting the Buddhists, whose objective by this time was clearly the Diem government's overthrow.

I was intensely frustrated by my inability to change the course of events. It was perhaps too much to expect, from a second-ranking position in the AID mission with no real authority, but the need was so tangible that I had to try.

RUNNING RURAL AFFAIRS

While intervening where I could in the Buddhist crisis, I remained busy with Rural Affairs, getting out to the provinces as often as I could. One trip to central Vietnam was particularly memorable. Using an Air America plane, capable of short-field takeoffs and landing, on informal loan from Lou Conein, I stopped in Phu Yen, where Burns took me to see a new combat hamlet on the edge of the pacified zone. Besides Burns' Vietnamese bodyguards (assigned by the province chief, over Burns' objections, and whom he humorously nicknamed Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John), we were accompanied by the province chief and a few provincial Civil Guard troops. Approaching the hamlet we received scattered shots from a distant tree line. The next thing I knew I was in a roadside ditch with Burns on top of me. "For God's sake, Bob," I yelled, "get off of me and shoot somebody!" He looked at me and said, "I don't want to lose my source of funding." Nobody was hit. The rest of the visit went without incident. It was the only time I was fired at, except for some routine VC potshots at helicopters and planes.

After Tuy Hoa, I flew to the northernmost South Vietnamese provinces, Thua Thien and Quang Tri, to inspect some of the more remote strategic hamlets off the main coastal highway. We landed in rice paddies, still dry because the rains had not yet come, where we were met by small provincial delegations. At one remote hamlet in Thua Thien, nestled against the mountains, I was greeted by an elderly hamlet chief; he was tall and gaunt, with a wispy goatee, wearing a long, black formal gown, and a fierce look. I explained that I was there to find out his economic needs. He looked at me for a moment and said, "Never mind our economic needs, what we really need are guns. All we have are a few French rifles and old shotguns. The VC are better armed." I tried turning the discussion back to economic development, but he would have none of it, repeating emphatically, "Guns, more guns, better guns." I gave in, saying, "Okay, we will help you." I had no direct source of arms but thought Lou Conein might. When I got back to Saigon I went directly to Lou's house and told him about the old guy, whose image I could not get out of my mind. I needed Lou's help to honor my promise. After a spate of swearing about being nothing but a "goddam arms merchant"—" Don't expect me to go around arming hamlet militia"— Lou said he would get the old guy some carbines, which he did.

Meeting the old man and seeing the fire in his eyes was an elemental reminder of why we were there. It was a feeling shared by most of us who worked directly with the Vietnamese in the provinces and hamlets. We felt duty bound to honor their will to resist.

In May and June, six new provincial reps arrived, including two newly minted Foreign Service officers, Vladimir Lehovich and Richard Holbrooke, the first to serve with Rural Affairs. Not knowing what to expect, they arrived at the Saigon airport in coats and ties, which Ralph Boynton, our administrative officer, told them to take off. "Rural Affairs," he declared was, "a shirt-sleeves outfit, a can-do operation." Holbrooke was somewhat brash and outspoken but obviously very bright. Lehovich was quieter, seemed more thoughtful, and spoke excellent French (his father and mother had been White Russian émigrés to the United States). Both had taken six months of Vietnamese language training in Washington, but were not yet fluent. I

thought the action orientation of Rural Affairs would be great experience for the Foreign Service and took a special interest in these first two. As a way of getting their feet wet I initially assigned them as assistants to two of our area reps.

I learned that Bob Friedman, assigned to Ba Xuyen (Soctrang) in the southern Delta, was completely at odds with Lieutenant Colonel Chieu, the province chief. Chieu, withdrawn and remote, kept Friedman at arm's length and seemed uninterested in anything except the mechanical hamlet-building part of the program. I visited Chieu to see if I could patch up the situation, but I came away annoyed with his attitude. Usually I could get through the characteristic Vietnamese reserve of province chiefs to make a human connection, but not with him. I was determined to pull Friedman out, but the province was too important to leave unattended. Holbrooke volunteered for the job, and I decided to send him. He was only twenty-two, much younger than Friedman, but I figured his youth and his brashness would be advantages. It was also a way of sending a message to Chieu. Holbrooke did well despite Chieu, and so did Lehovich who would later take over a province in the Delta.

Around this time Rural Affairs was visited by two State Department inspectors from Washington who wanted to perform an end-use audit of our program in one of the provinces. It was obviously important that they get an accurate view. Where best to send them? Phu Yen had the most advanced and widely varied development and agricultural programs, but Burns' no-nonsense personality and unconventional take on things was a risk. I wasn't certain how the inspectors would react. Still, I thought, progress there might speak for itself. I had been struck the last time I had visited not by the statistics of progress, however impressive, but by the population's high morale.

When the inspectors returned after three days in Phu Yen, they had a story to tell. On their first day, after a morning briefing, a visit to a nearby hamlet, and lunch, Burns had taken them to a combat hamlet on the edge of the secure zone, where the pig program was already in full swing. The hamlet's pig pens were so constructed that all of their waste was washed into two large pits to ferment until it was ready to be spread on the fields as fertilizer. The pits were now full, and one needed to be emptied, in which the waste had cooked enough to be spread as fertilizer. Little had been done about it except by one Vietnamese, who was already shoveling.

"Who's that?" the inspectors asked. "The province chief," Burns replied. "You guys have to help us; we've got to get this done before dark or the VC might get us." With that, Burns took extra shovels from the back of his jeep, gave one to each of the inspectors, took one for himself, jumped into the pit, and began shoveling. The inspectors had little choice but to take off their ties and coats and join in. They described this to me with great enthusiasm, saying it was "the first time we ever saw American aid personnel and their counterparts getting their hands dirty really doing something for rural people." They went on to talk about the other hamlets visited, the schools and self-help projects they had seen, but what really excited them was shoveling out that pit. It sounded like an epiphany. I wanted to laugh out loud. Who else but Burns could make a couple of crusty, straight-laced inspectors from Washington happy shoveling pig shit in their street clothes?

My own future with Rural Affairs was becoming uncertain, however. I was now too deeply involved to want to leave, but I had been hearing from my mother that my father was ill, without any details. Then I got a letter from him saying he was better but reminding me of my promise, the anniversary of which was September 25. He needed me to take over the family business. I

had been so occupied between Rural Affairs and the Buddhist crisis that I had not given it much thought, but now I was faced with a decision. I didn't want to go back, but I had to talk to him. While Rural Affairs had made great progress and could very well have carried on without me in more normal circumstances, the fragility of the Diem government made my personal relationships with key Vietnamese an important consideration. I wrote Stoneman explaining my dilemma and suggesting I come back to Washington to talk about my future. Stoneman agreed that I should return, leaving the timing up to me.

THE RAID ON THE PAGODAS

By August 15, as Ambassador Nolting was preparing to leave, to be replaced by Henry Cabot Lodge, conciliation was still not working. The government didn't trust the Buddhists, and vice versa. Though Nhu had told Nolting he supported a conciliatory line, in fact he was working behind the scenes to undermine it and clearly had the upper hand with Diem. Nhu was also maneuvering the Vietnamese army into supporting a confrontation. Madame Nhu told CBS-TV in an interview that aired on August 1 that all the Buddhists had done was "barbecue a bonze with imported gasoline." This was repeated in the international press and was followed by a Reuters dispatch on August 3 saying Nhu was threatening to crush the Buddhists at the Xa Loi Pagoda (the center of Buddhist agitation in Saigon and the base of the main agitator, Thich Tri Quang). A showdown was in the offing, but Diem, according to Nolting, had promised not to take violent action. He had, at Nolting's urging, given an interview to Marguerite Higgins of the New York Herald Tribune; her article, published on August 15, the day Nolting left, quoted Diem as saying, "The policy of utmost reconciliation is irreversible."

A brief and deceptive calm seemed to come over Saigon. Although the Buddhists continued to agitate, self-immolations occurred in the provinces, and one girl in Saigon reportedly chopped off her own hand in protest, previously arrested Buddhists were being released. On August 20, however, a critical meeting took place at the presidential palace. Vietnamese army generals, apparently alarmed by what appeared to be government indecisiveness, met with President Diem and Counselor Nhu to urge martial law, with the intent of peacefully returning the monks who had assembled in Saigon back to their home provinces and keeping them there.

I was awakened early in the morning of August 21 by our houseboy, Dung; someone was at our gate with a message for me. It was Director Brent's driver; the note said that Brent had been told by the Marine guard at USOM headquarters that the streets were barricaded around the Xa Loi Pagoda, access to the USOM building was blocked, and the streets were full of soldiers and police. Brent's home telephone line had been cut, as had those of all top U.S. civilian officials. My telephone was still working, so I called Bert Fraleigh at home to advise the other Rural Affairs personnel who were in Saigon to stay home.

My USOM car was always parked in our carport overnight, so when my driver, Binh, showed up about at eight for my usual drive to USOM, I told him to take me instead to the embassy, as fast as he could. As we exited our driveway, I noticed policemen guarding the entrance to the Buddhist temple next door. At the embassy, there was some confusion, but the word was that the government had declared martial law in the middle of the night and early in the morning had raided the pagodas where supposed agitators were hiding. The main objective in Saigon was Xa Loi, where a large number of monks had been arrested. Some had been hurt. Two monks had escaped and were holed up in the USOM building, where they were requesting asylum. No Americans had been informed in advance, and no one at that point understood what

was going on. I briefly saw Trueheart, who was shaking his head and saying, “Now the fat’s really in the fire.” The pagoda raids sent shock waves through the local American mission, and also through Washington, where it was seen as a complete breach of Diem’s promise of reconciliation to Nolting. The conclusion drawn was that Diem and Nhu had decided to present Ambassador Lodge with a fait accompli. The Vietnamese started pressing the USOM mission to disgorge the two monks who had taken refuge there; Trueheart stalled for time. I went back home to await further developments.

Word about the raids would reach Ambassador Lodge by phone from Washington on August 21 after he had gone to bed in Tokyo, where he had stopped en route to Saigon. Lodge detested long flights and had contemplated a leisurely trip to Vietnam via Hong Kong, but now he would fly by American military plane direct to Saigon, arriving late in the evening of the twenty-second. The best aircraft the military could find was a prop-driven Lockheed Constellation, which took nine hours to make the trip. In Saigon, we were all waiting for the American shoe to drop. Ambassador Nolting was in Honolulu, on his way home. When he heard about the raids he was so shocked that he sent a personal telegram to President Diem: “This is the first time that you’ve ever gone back on your word to me.”

Long after, Nolting would see Nguyen Dinh Thuan in Paris. Thuan told him he had taken the telegram to Diem. Diem had shaken his head when he read it, saying, “He doesn’t know what the provocation was.” I would later hear from various sources that the supposed provocation constituted reports by Nhu that the Buddhists were stockpiling arms inside Xa Loi, which was untrue.