

Political Monks: The Militant Buddhist Movement during the Vietnam War

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Summary: From November 1963 to July 1965, the militant Buddhist movement was the primary cause of political instability in South Vietnam. While the militant Buddhists maintained that they represented the Buddhist masses and were fighting merely for religious freedom, they actually constituted a small and unrepresentative minority that was attempting to gain political dominance. Relying extensively on Byzantine intrigue and mob violence to manipulate the government, the militant Buddhists practiced a form of political activism that was inconsistent with traditional Vietnamese Buddhism. The evidence also suggests that some of the militant Buddhist leaders were agents of the Vietnamese Communists.

The period from the end of 1963 to July 1965 has received more attention than any other segment of the Vietnam War, largely because it was during this time that President Lyndon B. Johnson reached a decision to enter the ground war. Virtually all historians of this period have recognized the weakness of South Vietnam's government as a central cause of American intervention. Few, however, have analyzed the reasons behind this weakness. Those who do address the subject generally attribute the government's frailty solely to the inferior skills and motivation of the ruling elite.¹ Some of the individuals who assumed power were indeed poor leaders, but there were others who had the characteristics of a good leader. The failure of these able

¹ See, for example: Fredrik Logevall, *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Brian VanDeMark, *Into the Quagmire: Lyndon Johnson and the Escalation of the Vietnam War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); Robert Buzzanco, *Masters of War: Military Dissent and Politics in the Vietnam Era* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); George McT. Kahin, *Intervention: How America Became Involved in Vietnam* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1986); Gabriel Kolko, *Anatomy of a War: Vietnam, the United States, and the Modern Historical Experience* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985); Jeffrey Record, *The Wrong War: Why We Lost in Vietnam* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1998).

individuals was largely the result of an outside force, the militant Buddhists.²

The dominant school of Vietnam historians, known as the orthodox school, generally portrays the Buddhists as non-Communists who were merely seeking freedom from religious intolerance and repression.³ In reality, the militant Buddhist leaders deliberately attempted to subvert every government that held power from 1963 onwards for reasons that had nothing to do with religious freedom. The vast majority of charges of religious persecution that they used to justify their actions were spurious. In addition, at least a few of the Buddhist leaders willingly collaborated with the Communists. To some extent, therefore, the Buddhist movement was engaged in covert action, and in a highly effective fashion at that. Rarely has an opposition movement undermined multiple governments so effectively and with so few resources.

Most of the information currently available on the Buddhist movement and South Vietnamese politics comes from Western sources. From the beginning of American involvement in 1950 to the end in 1975, large numbers of American governmental personnel and journalists were stationed in South Vietnam. America's European allies, most notably Britain, also had diplomats and journalists

² The political activities of the militant Buddhists during 1964 and 1965 have received surprisingly little attention. There is little or no mention of them in, for example, Buzzanco, *Masters of War*; Kolko, *Anatomy of a War*; Lloyd C. Gardner, *Pay Any Price: Lyndon Johnson and the Wars for Vietnam* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1995); George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975*, 3rd ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1996); Robert Mann, *A Grand Delusion: America's Descent into Vietnam* (New York: Basic Books, 2001); H. R. McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty: Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Lies That Led to Vietnam* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997); Marilyn B. Young, *The Vietnam Wars, 1945-1990* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991); Robert D. Schulzinger, *A Time for War: The United States and Vietnam, 1941-1975* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997). One book that does afford the subject considerable attention is Arthur J. Dommen, *The Indochina Experience of the French and the Americans: Nationalism and Communism in Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), 2001. Kahin, *Intervention*, also analyzes the Buddhists in some depth, but it omits a large amount of information that reflects poorly on the Buddhists.

³ William Duiker, *The Communist Road to Power in Vietnam*, 2nd ed. (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1996); Robert J. Topmiller, *The Lotus Unleashed: The Buddhist Peace Movement in South Vietnam, 1964-1966* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2002); David Kaiser, *American Tragedy: Kennedy, Johnson, and the Origins of the Vietnam War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000); A. J. Langguth, *Our Vietnam: The War, 1954-1975* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000); Kahin, *Intervention*; Schulzinger, *A Time for War*; Young, *Vietnam Wars*.

in South Vietnam. This article relies primarily on American and British sources, the two richest of the available sources. The relevant records for South Vietnam, or the Republic of Vietnam as it was officially called, are now in the hands of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. These records and the corresponding North Vietnamese records remain unavailable to foreign researchers. While the Socialist Republic has published some useful histories since the war, none of them contains substantial information on the Buddhist disturbances of the mid-1960s. Whenever such records become available, they will yield critical information on certain topics, particularly the North Vietnamese involvement in the Buddhist movement. The Western sources, nevertheless, provide coverage of the Buddhist movement that in most respects is very thorough, and they are considerably more objective than any Vietnamese sources are likely to be.

Indian merchants and clerics brought the Buddhist religion to Vietnam in the first century A.D. The religion soon gained a large following, and many who did not become practitioners of Buddhism adopted Buddhist rituals and principles. But Buddhism and Indian culture would never dominate Vietnam, as they would its eastern neighbors in Cambodia, Siam, and Burma. The primary source of influence was always the Chinese, who already controlled Vietnam when Buddhism first arrived and would continue to do so until the tenth century. The Chinese had deeply implanted Confucianism in Vietnam, and Confucianism would play a pre-eminent role in Vietnam for most of the country's history, up to and including the twentieth century. Although Buddhism exerted great influence over the spiritual lives of king and commoner during certain epochs, Confucianist precepts dominated familial and political relationships even among Buddhists.⁴

The South Vietnam of the twentieth century has often, and mistakenly, been called a Buddhist country. In a land with fifteen million people, there were between three and four million Buddhists, and of these only about one half practiced the religion. Roughly four million considered Confucianism to be their guiding set of beliefs.

⁴ For the history of Vietnamese Buddhism prior to the twentieth century, see Keith W. Taylor, *The Birth of Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983); Oscar M. Chapuis, *A History of Vietnam: From Hong Bang to Tu Duc* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1995); Joseph Buttinger, *Vietnam: A Dragon Embattled* (New York: Praeger, 1967); Ralph Smith, *Viet-Nam and the West* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1968).

Some of these Confucianists had a loose Buddhist affiliation, but they did not identify themselves with organized Buddhism. During the period of religious strife from 1963 to 1966, such individuals did not generally support the militant Buddhist movement. One and a half million of the nation's citizens were Roman Catholics, and between two and a half and three million belonged to the Cao Dai and Hoa Hao sects. Most of the remaining people were animists, Taoists, Protestant Christians, Hindus, or Muslims.⁵

While there had been something of a Buddhist revival in the years preceding the upheavals of 1963–1966, Vietnamese Buddhism remained relatively weak. The Buddhist masses were not brimming with religious zeal, in contrast to the Buddhists in other Asian countries. Until the Buddhist crisis of 1963, Vietnamese Buddhist monks rarely had taken an active role in national politics. They and their followers had used their religion to address their inner spiritual concerns, not the worldly affairs of the state. The Buddhists were splintered into numerous sects, none of which had a strong hierarchical organization. Vietnam's three regions—Tonkin in the north, Annam in the center, and Cochinchina in the south—each had distinctive regional groups of Buddhists. South Vietnam consisted of Cochinchina and the southern half of Annam, and it also had a considerable number of refugees who had left Tonkin and northern Annam in 1954. Vietnamese Buddhism was further divided by the Theravada and Mahayana branches, meaning Lesser and Greater vehicles.⁶

The conflict between the Buddhists and the Saigon government began on 8 May 1963, when nine civilians were killed at a Buddhist protest under mysterious circumstances. Led by the monk Tri Quang, a group of Buddhists organized demonstrations and told the foreign press that the Diem government was oppressing Buddhists. This group became known as the militant Buddhists. Diem refused to make concessions and undertake the reforms the militant Buddhists and

⁵ Ellen J. Hammer, *A Death in November: America in Vietnam, 1963* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1987), 139; Richard Critchfield, *Long Charade: Political Subversion in the Vietnam War* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1968), 70; Piero Gheddo, *The Cross and the Bo-Tree: Catholics and Buddhists in Vietnam* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1970), 187; Marguerite Higgins, *Our Vietnam Nightmare*. (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 47; CIA, Office of Current Intelligence, 'The Buddhists in South Vietnam,' 28 June 1963, John F. Kennedy Library, NSF, Box 197; CIA, 'Tri Quang and the Buddhist-Catholic Discord in South Vietnam,' 19 September 1964, Lyndon B. Johnson Library [hereafter LBJL], NSF, VNCF, box 9.

⁶ Smith, *Viet-Nam and the West*; Taylor, *The Birth of Vietnam*; Hammer, *A Death in November*.

the Americans were demanding. As a result, the United States turned against Diem. In October 1963, the U.S. embassy gave its blessing to a plot conceived by several senior generals, and on 1 November the generals ousted Diem and put him to death.

A committee of generals, led by General Duong Van Minh, took control of the government after the coup. Seeking to obtain the support of the most troublesome political groups, the new regime promptly freed all of the student and Buddhist oppositionists whom Diem had jailed. Upon the advice of the American embassy, the generals promised to implement many of the Western political reforms long championed by the Americans, including freedom of the press and freedom of political expression. Despite the release of the jailed Buddhists and the other reforms, however, the Buddhist problem did not disappear. During the regime's first month in office, three Buddhists committed suicide in protest against the government.⁷ It was the same technique that the Buddhists had used against Diem. More Buddhists would kill themselves for political purposes in the first four months after Diem's death than during all the years of Diem's presidency.

General Minh proved to be incompetent as a national leader. The other generals failed to make up for his deficiencies, and instead occupied much of their time bickering with each other and arresting former Diem supporters.⁸ The resultant governmental inactivity gave the Viet Cong an opportunity to improve their military position, which they exploited to the maximum extent possible.

This incompetent government-by-committee soon proved to be intolerable to Americans and Vietnamese alike. At the end of January, General Nguyen Khanh told the Americans that some pro-French generals were about to launch a coup, after which they intended to make South Vietnam a neutral country. A neutral South Vietnam would end its alliance with the United States and reach some sort of accommodation with the North Vietnamese. The veracity of Khanh's allegation has never been established, for want of evidence. Khanh also was appalled by the ineffectiveness of Minh and his committee of generals, and he thought he could do better. Furthermore, Khanh resented the Minh junta for killing Diem, for Khanh had liked Diem

⁷ 'South Viet Nam,' *Time*, 13 December 1963, 32.

⁸ Peer de Silva, *Sub Rosa: The CIA and the Uses of Intelligence* (New York: New York Times Book Co., 1978), 216.

and the coup leaders had promised that Diem would not be harmed.⁹ On 30 January, with the blessing of the Americans, Khanh overthrew the government in a bloodless coup. Khanh incarcerated Minh and his closest associates and made himself prime minister.

In terms of providing national leadership, Khanh showed himself to be more capable than his predecessors. He chose, however, to continue the shuffling of province and district chiefs that had undermined the previous government.¹⁰ Some of his initial replacements were pro-Diem officials who had been ousted in November 1963. Re-entering the political stage at this point were the militant Buddhists, who in early 1964 had combined to form a single association known as the Institute for the Propagation of the Buddhist Faith, headed by Tri Quang and Tam Chau. Tri Quang and other militant Buddhists made baseless claims that Khanh—who was a Buddhist—and his predominantly Buddhist government were reverting to Diemist persecution of Buddhists. Inexperienced and easily intimidated, Khanh succumbed to this pressure. He stopped appointing pro-Diem officials, sacked some of those already in office, and put more Diem supporters in jail.¹¹

Khanh's yielding to these demands did not spare him from the criticism of the militant Buddhists.¹² While some Buddhist Institute leaders and many other prominent Buddhists approved of Khanh, Tri Quang accused him of denying religious freedom to Buddhists and giving government officials unrestricted license to imprison Buddhists.¹³ As had occurred during Diem's conflict with

⁹ Saigon to State, 4 November 1963, Foreign Relations of the United States [hereafter FRUS], 1961–1963, vol. 4, 289; Robert Shaplen, *Lost Revolution: The U.S. in Vietnam, 1946–1966* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), 230.

¹⁰ Shaplen, *Lost Revolution*, 243–4; CIA, 'Appraisal of Nguyen Khanh,' 20 March 1964, LBJL, NSF, VNCF, box 3; memcon, 12 May 1964, FRUS, 1964–1968, vol. 3, doc. 151; Dennis J. Duncanson, *Government and Revolution in Vietnam* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), 356–7; Saigon to State, 10 August 1964, FRUS, 1964–1968, vol. 1, doc. 306.

¹¹ CIA, 'The Situation in South Vietnam,' 28 February 1964, Declassified Document Reference System [hereafter DDRS], 1975, fiche 247D; Saigon to State, 22 April 1964, FRUS, 1964–1968, vol. 1, doc. 123; Ulysses S. G. Sharp and William C. Westmoreland, *Report on the War in Vietnam* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1969), 92–3.

¹² Tam Chau was somewhat less extreme than Tri Quang, favoring a government that was neither pro-Communist nor pro-American. He was the subject of NLF media denunciations far more often than was Tri Quang. Pike, *Viet Cong: The Organization and Techniques of the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam* (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1966), 204.

¹³ *New York Times*, 10 May 1964.

the Buddhists, Tri Quang only demanded more when Khanh made concessions. Unlike Diem, Khanh continued to satisfy the never-ending stream of demands. Part of the explanation for Khanh's behavior lay in his belief that resisting the Buddhists would alienate the Americans, as had happened to Diem. The other part was Khanh's political naivety and timidity. To satisfy Tri Quang, Khanh had the Army remove all Catholic chaplains.¹⁴ Pressure from Tri Quang induced Khanh to give a life sentence of hard labor to Dang Sy, a Catholic officer who was involved in the mysterious and fatal incident of 8 May 1963.¹⁵

Unlike most of the other Buddhists, Tri Quang demanded a death sentence for Diem's brother Ngo Dinh Can, whom the Khanh government was trying for various alleged crimes. Presenting what was to become his rationale for most every criticism of the government, Tri Quang warned that Can had to be executed in order to protect against a sinister conspiracy involving Catholics, members of Diem's Can Lao Party, and other former Diem supporters, which supposedly sought to bring back a Diemist government.¹⁶

U.S. Ambassador to South Vietnam Henry Cabot Lodge pleaded with the South Vietnamese leaders to spare Can's life, pointing out that the Saigon government had failed to muster any evidence against Can.¹⁷ Prime Minister Khanh, however, decided that it was more important to please the militant Buddhists than the Americans, and he had Can executed on 9 May. Khanh would not have placated the Buddhists rather than the Americans unless he possessed an enormous fear of Buddhist opposition, for the Americans could be offended easily and neither Khanh nor his country could survive without American support.¹⁸

Ambassador Lodge had supported Tri Quang strongly in 1963. Early in his tenure, in fact, Lodge had proposed having Tri Quang serve in the government as part of a plan to 'broaden the base' of the government. But during early 1964, Lodge soured on the monk and his movement. Lodge remarked in the spring, 'I do regard the Buddhists

¹⁴ Memcon, 12 May 1964, FRUS, 1964-1968, vol. 1, doc. 151.

¹⁵ Saigon to State, 14 May 1964, LBJL, NSF, VNCF, box 4; Higgins, *Our Vietnam Nightmare*, 98.

¹⁶ Saigon to State, 24 April 1964, FRUS, 1964-1968, vol. 1, doc. 125; Saigon to State, 25 April 1964, LBJL, NSF, VNCF, box 3.

¹⁷ Saigon to State, 27 February 1964, LBJL, NSF, VNCF, box 2.

¹⁸ Saigon to State, 9 May 1964, LBJL, NSF, VNCF, box 4.

as a possible source of danger to the government. In particular, I think that Tri Quang, the Buddhist leader, is a potential troublemaker. Having overthrown one government, he may feel like trying again against Khanh.' Commenting on Tri Quang's objections to Khanh, Lodge noted that Tri Quang 'has indicated to me that he does not regard Khanh as a "good Buddhist"—meaning, presumably, that he is a Buddhist who does not follow Tri Quang's direction.' On another occasion, Lodge said that Tri Quang 'is ambitious, anti-Christian, full of hatreds, and agitating against Khanh,' and that 'some communist infiltration of Buddhists exists.' Many other members of the diplomatic community and the press corps who had supported Tri Quang and other militant Buddhists in 1963 similarly became suspicious of them during 1964.¹⁹

From the beginning, many Vietnamese observers charged that Tri Quang was a Communist agent. By and large, the evidence supported this view, although there was no absolute proof. A Northerner by birth, Tri Quang had served with the Vietnamese Communists during the Franco-Viet Minh War. Tri Quang's brother was an official in the North Vietnamese government, a fact that Tri Quang himself acknowledged. When the Buddhist protests erupted in South Vietnam, this brother reportedly headed North Vietnam's covert action programs in South Vietnam.²⁰ In June 1963, Tri Quang urged his fellow Buddhists to seek assistance from the Viet Cong in opposing the Diem government.²¹ Tri Quang's methods of political mobilization bore a close resemblance to those practiced by the Communists, and they were far more advanced than those of other Vietnamese Buddhists. When the Communists conquered South Vietnam in 1975, they gave Tri Quang a job in Hue and he voiced no objections to their regime, whereas they imprisoned many other monks who had a record of political activism.²²

¹⁹ Lodge to Bundy, 25 October 1963, FRUS, 1961–1963, vol. 4, 436; Memcon, 11 May 1964, FRUS, 1964–1968, vol. 1, doc. 147; Memcon, 12 May 1964, FRUS, 1964–1968, vol. 1, doc. 151; *Newsweek*, 7 September 1964; *Time*, 4 and 11 December 1964.

²⁰ CIA, 'An Analysis of Thich Tri Quang's Possible Communist Affiliations, Personality and Goals,' 28 August 1964, DDRS, 1976, fiche 22E. Critchfield, *Long Charade*, 62–81; Higgins, *Our Vietnam Nightmare*, 29; Jean Lacouture, *Vietnam: Between Two Truces* (New York: Random House, 1966), 222.

²¹ Saigon to State, 1 June 1963, FRUS, 1961–1963, vol. 3, doc. 142.

²² *Washington Post*, 2 November 1983.

Tri Quang repeatedly claimed that he supported the war against the Communists, despite his denunciations of the government.²³ His deeds, however, were not consistent with those words. Tri Quang's actions caused enormous harm to every South Vietnamese government that held power from 1963 to 1966, and they would have destroyed the government had military leaders not decided finally to stop Tri Quang. If Tri Quang was not a dedicated Communist, then he suffered from a wild delusion that he somehow could hold off the Communists after the collapse of the Saigon government.

On 5 August 1964, the United States bombed North Vietnamese boats and naval installations in retaliation for the so-called Tonkin Gulf incidents, which consisted of two apparent attacks on U.S. warships in the Tonkin Gulf. President Lyndon Johnson used the incidents to obtain Congressional authorization for all necessary measures in Southeast Asia. General Khanh similarly believed that this moment of high international tension offered a fine opportunity to enlarge his authority. He therefore decided to declare a 'state of urgency' on 7 August. By decree, Khanh empowered his police to ban demonstrations, search private homes at any time of day, and imprison 'elements considered as dangerous to national security.' The government would impose censorship and prevent 'the circulation of all publications, documents, and leaflets considered as harmful to public order.'²⁴ Khanh also drafted a new constitution, for the purpose of increasing his own power and depriving General Minh of his remaining authority.²⁵

Instead of strengthening Khanh's political hand, however, these moves sparked a devastating political crisis. At large demonstrations in the cities, militant Buddhists and student groups—many of which were heavily influenced by the militant Buddhists—demanded that Khanh end the state of urgency and revoke the new constitution.²⁶

²³ He even reportedly received small sums from the CIA in return for information, leading to speculation that he was an American agent. Langguth, *Our Vietnam*, 292. Most probably, however, Tri Quang took such actions in order to maintain his credibility with the Americans.

²⁴ Saigon to State, 7 August 1964, LBJL, NSF, VNCF, box 7; *Time*, 14 August 1964; Shaplen, *Lost Revolution*, 270.

²⁵ William H. Sullivan, *Obbligato, 1939–1979: Notes on a Foreign Service Career* (New York: Norton, 1984), 207–8; Saigon to State, 15 August 1964, FRUS, 1964–1968, vol. 1, doc. 317.

²⁶ *New Yorker*, 19 September 1964; Saigon to FO, 24 August 1964, Public Record Office [hereafter PRO], FO 371/175472; Saigon to State, 22 August 1964, FRUS, 1964–1968, vol. 1, doc. 321; *New York Times*, 22 August 1964.

The Buddhists declared that there was a Diemist conspiracy afoot, involving Can Lao veterans, Catholics, and Dai Viets and led by Generals Khiem and Thieu. Already, the militants alleged, the Diemists were oppressing the Buddhists. Exaggerating the influence of Catholics in the Khanh government, Tri Quang told U.S. embassy officials that 'the Buddhists could not accept government by Christians.' Unless the Catholics were dispossessed of their influence in the government, Tri Quang warned, the Buddhists 'would prefer to withdraw from struggle, leaving Catholics aided by Americans to fight the Communists.'²⁷ These latest charges of religious persecution were as unfounded as the previous accusations. Maxwell Taylor, who recently had replaced Lodge as U.S. Ambassador, commented that the supposed Can Lao-Catholic-Dai Viet conspiracy was 'only a specter,' for there was no evidence that the government was trying to mistreat Buddhists.²⁸

Buddhist mobs destroyed Catholic houses and churches. Government soldiers and policemen did not intervene to halt the violence, even when the rioters were right in front of them.²⁹ Memories of the Diem regime undoubtedly convinced government officials that suppressing demonstrations, especially those led by monks, would alienate the Americans. In Da Nang, three days of clashes between Buddhists and Catholics claimed the lives of twelve people. While the Buddhists had carefully avoided antagonizing the United States in the past, they now turned some of their fury onto the Americans; 2,000 demonstrators stoned an American army billet while shouting anti-American slogans.³⁰ The militant Buddhist movement was moving further and further from the spirituality that had always characterized Vietnamese Buddhism.

As they had numerous times before, Tri Quang and other Buddhist leaders were telling the Americans privately that they opposed the Communists. Yet they refused to announce their opposition in

²⁷ Saigon to State, 23 August 1964, LBJL, NSF, VNCF, box 7.

²⁸ Saigon to State, 22 August 1964, FRUS, 1964-1968, vol. 1, doc. 321; Saigon to State, 23 August 1964, LBJL, NSF, VNCF, box 7; Saigon to State, 27 August 1964, FRUS, 1964-1968, vol. 1, doc. 330; CIA, 'The Situation in South Vietnam,' 27 August 1964, LBJL, NSF, VNCF, box 7; *New Yorker*, 19 September 1964; *New York Times*, 10 September 1964; Lacouture, *Vietnam*, 211.

²⁹ *New York Times*, 31 August 1964.

³⁰ State to Saigon, 24 August 1964, FRUS, 1964-1968, vol. 1, doc. 323; Saigon to FO, 25 August 1964, PRO, FO 371/175472; Lacouture, *Vietnam*, 207-8; *New York Times*, 24, 27 August 1964.

public. Tri Quang claimed that it was not yet necessary to state his anti-Communism publicly, and that he preferred to keep quiet because it would shield him from allegations that he was working for the government or the Americans.³¹ Considering that Tri Quang's activities were gravely undermining the anti-Communist cause, it is difficult to believe that Tri Quang really considered a public declaration unnecessary. Other Buddhists claimed that they did not denounce the Communists because they were not interested in politics, only religious freedom. Yet at the same time they were condemning Khanh, the Saigon government, the South Vietnamese military, and the Americans, none of whom were impinging on religious freedom.³²

By this point in time, most impartial observers had concluded that Communist agents were playing a significant role in the militant Buddhist movement. Infiltration of the movement was very easy. Anyone could become a monk simply by shaving his head and putting on a saffron-colored robe. Prior to November 1963, the South Vietnamese police had been able to hold down Communist activity in the cities, but the post-Diem purge of police leaders had crippled the organization. The Vietnamese Communists had undertaken covert subversion numerous times before and it was inconceivable that they would not have inserted agents into such an influential and highly penetrable organization.³³ A substantial number of the Buddhists who were arrested for unruly behavior were found to be without national identity cards, which was a strong indicator of Viet Cong affiliation. Some Buddhist protesters moved in military formations under the direction of whistles and drums, and they established elaborate defenses against government forces.³⁴ The Buddhists clearly could not have developed such tactics on their own.

³¹ Saigon to State, 26 August 1964, LBJL, NSF, VNCF, box 7.

³² Saigon to State, 23 August 1964, LBJL, NSF, VNCF, box 7; State to Saigon, 24 August 1964, FRUS, 1964-1968, vol. 1, doc. 323; SNIE 53-2-64, 1 October 1964, FRUS, 1964-1968, vol. 1, doc. 368; Saigon to State, 24 September 1964, FRUS, 1964-1968, vol. 1, doc. 360.

³³ CIA, 'Deterioration in South Vietnam,' 28 September 1964, LBJL, NSF, VNCF, box 9.

³⁴ Saigon to FO, 24 August 1964, PRO, FO 371/175472; Saigon to State, 25 August 1964, FRUS, 1964-1968, vol. 1, doc. 325; CIA, 'Situation in Vietnam,' 27 August 1964, LBJL, NSF, VNCF, box 7; CIA, 'Situation in South Vietnam,' 1 September 1964, DDRS, 1979, fiche 20C; SNIE 53-64, 8 September 1964, FRUS, 1964-1968, vol. 1, doc. 341; Saigon to State, 24 September 1964, FRUS, 1964-1968, vol. 1, doc. 360; SNIE 53-2-64, 1 October 1964, FRUS, 1964-1968, vol. 1, doc. 368; *New Yorker*, 19 September 1964; *New York Times*, 29 August 1964; *Time*, 4 September 1964.

More and more people were coming to the conclusion that Tri Quang himself was a Communist. During 1964, other Buddhist leaders—including some of the most prominent of Tri Quang's former followers—began accusing Tri Quang of collaborating with the Viet Cong.³⁵ Tri Quang claimed to have no involvement with the recently established People's Revolutionary Committees in coastal Annam, which were carrying out anti-government activities and announcing aims very similar to those of the Communists.³⁶ But one of Tri Quang's lieutenants, Dr Le Khac Quyen, headed the People's Revolutionary Committee in the critical city of Hue. Tri Quang's frequent denunciations of able government leaders with no history of discriminating against Buddhists gave further cause to suspect the monk's motives.³⁷

Some high U.S. officials now were among those who believed Tri Quang to be a Communist. The CIA, however, remained unconvinced. During the riots, the agency conducted a special analysis of Tri Quang's possible collaboration with the Communists. It found that although numerous reports indicated that Tri Quang was a Communist, 'there is a lack of hard intelligence which will definitely support the belief of many Vietnamese that Tri Quang is indeed a Communist.' Based on the lack of firm evidence and an admittedly subjective assessment of Tri Quang's personality, the report concluded that Tri Quang was not an agent of the Vietnamese Communists. It attributed his opposition to the government to ambition, xenophobia, and a desire to make South Vietnam a Buddhist theocracy.³⁸

Prime Minister Khanh again displayed his susceptibility to demagogues and mass demonstrations. During a protest where

³⁵ CIA, 'An Analysis of Thich Tri Quang's Possible Communist Affiliations, Personality and Goals,' 28 August 1964, DDRS, 1976, fiche 22E; Topmiller, *The Lotus Unleashed*, 8.

³⁶ Duncanson, *Government and Revolution in Vietnam*, 355–6; CIA, 'Tri Quang and the Buddhist–Catholic Discord in South Vietnam,' 19 September 1964, LBJL, NSF, VNCF, box 9; Saigon to State, 24 September 1964, FRUS, 1964–1968, vol. 1, doc. 360; CIA, 'Deterioration in South Vietnam,' 28 September 1964, LBJL, NSF, VNCF, box 9; SNIE 53-2-64, 1 October 1964, FRUS, 1964–1968, vol. 1, doc. 368; *New Yorker*, 19 September 1964; Saigon to State, 28 September 1964, LBJL, NSF, VNCF, box 8; Shaplen, *Lost Revolution*, 279.

³⁷ See Higgins, *Our Vietnam Nightmare*, 285–6.

³⁸ CIA, 'An Analysis of Thich Tri Quang's Possible Communist Affiliations, Personality and Goals,' 28 August 1964, DDRS, 1976, fiche 22E. See also CIA, 'The Situation in South Vietnam,' 27 August 1964, LBJL, NSF, VNCF, box 7; CIA, 'Tri Quang and the Buddhist–Catholic Discord in South Vietnam,' 19 September 1964, LBJL, NSF, VNCF, box 9.

thousands were chanting 'down with military dictatorship,' Khanh joined the demonstrators in the chant in a voice as loud as any. He tried to placate his accusers rather than defend himself against the accusations or use force to restore order. Thus, he promised to satisfy the newest demands.³⁹ In Vietnam, such tolerance and coddling of the opposition resulted in a severe loss of face and hence in a loss of confidence among government personnel and the public. Inheritors of the Confucian tradition, the Vietnamese people favored the rule of the single mighty figure who brooked no opposition.

Recognizing that the situation was becoming desperate, Khanh sought out the militant Buddhist leaders on the night of 24 August. He asked Tri Quang, Tam Chau, and Thinh Minh to come talk with him at Vung Tau. They refused. Khanh then rushed to Saigon for the same purpose, which undoubtedly reinforced the Buddhists' view that they could take advantage of Khanh. The three monks presented Khanh with a written list of demands. According to this list, Khanh would nullify the new constitution, the Military Revolutionary Council would elect a president, and then the council would be disbanded, thereby removing the army from politics. The monks also demanded the dismissal of all former Can Lao members in the government. Khanh, furthermore, had to announce publicly that he was meeting the Buddhists' demands. If Khanh refused to carry out these actions, they warned, the Buddhist leadership would organize a massive campaign of passive resistance.

Immediately after his meeting with the militant Buddhists, Khanh asked Ambassador Taylor for advice. Taylor told him, 'I think it is a mistake to give in to pressure from a minority group on an issue of this importance, particularly to an ultimatum with a short deadline. To do so may only create further demands.'⁴⁰ Taylor had identified this danger by observing the last months of the Diem regime and portions of Khanh's rule. Khanh had been directly involved in those events, yet he had not learned the lesson. The South Vietnamese premier expressed a willingness to accept the Buddhists' demands, on the grounds that it would prevent Buddhist-Catholic discord in the

³⁹ Shaplen, *Lost Revolution*, 272, 274; State to Saigon, 24 August 1964, FRUS, 1964-1968, vol. 1, doc. 323; Lacouture, *Vietnam*, 135; *New York Times*, 24 August 1964; Saigon to State, 3 February 1965, LBJL, NSF, VNCF, box 13.

⁴⁰ Saigon to State, 25 August 1964, FRUS, 1964-1968, vol. 1, doc. 324.

civilian populace and the military. Khanh thought the war could not be won without Buddhist support.⁴¹

Just a few hours after this meeting, Khanh released a communiqué in which he promised to revise the constitution, cut back the press restrictions, permit public demonstrations, and correct past abuses with special field courts. As Taylor had predicted, however, these concessions only led to more demands and protests from Buddhist and student activists. Khanh then came up with a new plan, which he succeeded in selling to a rump session of the Military Revolutionary Council. Under this plan, the new constitution would be revoked, the Military Revolutionary Council would elect a new chief of state, and the council then would dissolve itself.⁴² Khanh had now yielded to all of the latest Buddhist demands and had made additional concessions.

This capitulation was still insufficient to secure an expression of support from the militant Buddhists. Only after Khanh had given them \$300,000 in cash did Tri Quang and Tam Chau agree to sign a letter expressing support for the government, which Khanh then publicized to show he had Buddhist backing.⁴³ The letter, moreover, contained yet more demands. In order to keep the monks' support, the letter stipulated, Khanh had to combat the Can Lao and create a new national assembly within one year.⁴⁴

Astute observers in Saigon recognized that Khanh's lavish concessions to the Buddhists meant that power effectively had been handed from those desiring some semblance of order and military effectiveness to Buddhist monks intent on promoting their own interests and perhaps those of the Communists. In delivering the promised concessions, Khanh would have to end many of the most effective counter-subversive measures.

Many of the South Vietnamese generals were among those deeply troubled by this state of affairs. The generals who had given Khanh their consent at the rump session of the Military Revolutionary Council had done so reluctantly, and in considerable measure because

⁴¹ Saigon to State, 25 August 1964, FRUS, 1964-1968, vol. 1, doc. 325; Saigon to State, 27 August 1964, FRUS, 1964-1968, vol. 1, doc. 330; CIA, 'Details of the 26 and 27 August 1964 Meetings of the Military Revolutionary Council,' 1 September 1964, DDRS, 1977, fiche 278A.

⁴² Saigon to State, 25 August 1964, FRUS, 1964-1968, vol. 1, doc. 325; *The Pentagon Papers: The Defense Department History of Decisionmaking on Vietnam*, Senator Gravel edition (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971-1972), vol. 3, doc. 86.

⁴³ *New Yorker*, 19 September 1964.

⁴⁴ Saigon to State, 26 August 1964, LBJL, NSF, VNCF, box 7.

of Khanh's firm American backing. Some of the generals who had been absent from the rump session were outraged when they learned what had transpired, decrying Khanh for adopting measures certain to undermine the government's authority. The most prominent of the generals opposed to Khanh's Buddhist policy were Generals Khiem and Thieu. They were soon attempting to gain support for replacing Khanh with General Duong Van Minh, and they were able to obtain the cooperation of many others who had sided with Khanh initially.⁴⁵ The cabal went to Taylor and sought permission to remove Khanh. Taylor, however, replied that there should be no more coups because they would weaken the government further. This warning sufficed to prevent the generals from moving against Khanh.⁴⁶ Several days of squabbling among the generals resulted in an agreement that Khanh, Minh, and Khiem would form a triumvirate that would govern for two months, until a new government could be formed.

The triumvirate brought paratroopers to Saigon and put an end to the rioting.⁴⁷ This initial decisive action, however, was not followed by others, and it soon became obvious that the triumvirate lacked unity and a sense of purpose.⁴⁸ Khanh made the key decisions while Khiem and Minh had little influence, and Khanh remained a servant of the militant Buddhists. Pressure from the Buddhists and the People's Revolutionary Committees caused Khanh to sack many civilian and military officials who were not considered anti-Buddhist, including some of the country's best leaders.⁴⁹ Buddhist clamoring also caused Khanh to end press censorship and order the release of all the people arrested during the rioting, at least eleven of whom were known Viet Cong leaders.⁵⁰

⁴⁵ Saigon to State, 26 August 1964, FRUS, 1964-1968, vol. 1, doc. 328; Saigon to State, 27 August 1964, FRUS, 1964-1968, vol. 1, doc. 330; Saigon to State, 2 September 1964, FRUS, 1964-1968, vol. 1, doc. 336.

⁴⁶ Saigon to State, 26 August 1964, National Archives II [hereafter NA II], RG 59, Central Files, 1964-1966, box 2946; Saigon to State, 26 August 1964, FRUS, 1964-1968, vol. 1, doc. 328.

⁴⁷ *Pentagon Papers*, vol. 3, 86; *New York Times*, 29 August 1964.

⁴⁸ Saigon to State, 2 September 1964, FRUS, 1964-1968, vol. 1, doc. 336; Saigon to State, 4 September 1964, FRUS, 1964-1968, vol. 1, doc. 338; CIA, 'Situation in South Vietnam,' 1 September 1964, DDRS, 1979, fiche 20C; Saigon to State, 28 September 1964, FRUS, 1964-1968, vol. 1, doc. 365.

⁴⁹ Westmoreland to Taylor, 6 September 1964, FRUS, 1964-1968, vol. 1, doc. 340; Saigon to State, 28 September 1964, LBJL, NSF, VNCF, box 8; Duncanson, *Government and Revolution in Vietnam*, 355-6.

⁵⁰ *New York Times*, 3, 10 September 1964.

These moves and Khanh's other concessions to the Buddhists increased opposition to the government among the generals and also among civilian Catholics, former Can Lao members, and Dai Viets.⁵¹ These groups expressed nostalgia for the Diem regime, which had performed much more effectively than its successors. On 13 September, elements of the military transformed this dissatisfaction into open rebellion. The coup attempt began in Saigon under the leadership of former Minister of the Interior Gen. Lam Van Phat and IV Corps Commander General Duong Van Duc. These two men were disgusted with Khanh's weak leadership and especially his subservience to Buddhist demands. They were among those officers whom Khanh had just decided to remove in response to Buddhist pressure.⁵² The rebel forces took the city center without having to fire a shot, but they were unable to find the elusive Khanh, who had fled to Dalat when the excitement started.

On national radio, General Phat announced that he had overthrown the government and was going to arrest Khanh.⁵³ The new leadership would restore the philosophy of Diem, Phat said, and Diem's prestige would provide strength to the regime.⁵⁴ Phat described his political plans in private conversations with Deputy Ambassador U. Alexis Johnson and General William C. Westmoreland, who was the head of the U.S. military command. The Americans, however, concluded that the rebel leaders were ill-prepared to create a new government. They told Phat and his colleagues to end the revolt, and warned that the United States still supported the existing regime. The American opposition to the coup dissuaded other generals from joining the rebellion, which then convinced Phat and Duc to give up.⁵⁵

⁵¹ CIA, 'Situation in South Vietnam,' 1 September 1964, DDRS, 1979, fiche 20C; Harris, 'Government of Vietnam,' 2 September 1964, NA II, RG 319, Westmoreland Personal Papers, box 39.

⁵² William C. Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1976), 72-3; Saigon to State, 24 September 1964, FRUS, 1964-1968, vol. 1, doc. 360; Saigon to State, 14 September 1964, DDRS, 1979, fiche 94F.

⁵³ Saigon to State, 24 September 1964, FRUS, 1964-1968, vol. 1, doc. 360.

⁵⁴ Nguyen Cao Ky, *Twenty Years and Twenty Days* (New York: Stein and Day, 1976), 49-50.

⁵⁵ Saigon to State, 13 September 1964, FRUS, 1964-1968, vol. 1, doc. 348; Saigon to State, 14 September 1964, DDRS, 1979, fiche 94F; U. Alexis Johnson, *The Right Hand of Power* (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1984), 414-5; Westmoreland to Wheeler, n.d., FRUS, 1964-1968, vol. 1, doc. 351; Saigon to State, 24 September 1964, FRUS, 1964-1968, vol. 1, doc. 360; Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, 72-3.

Distraught by the persistent feuding among the South Vietnamese elites, the Americans warned Khanh, Minh, and other prominent South Vietnamese that further infighting could cause the United States to withdraw its support of South Vietnam, which was certain to lead to the country's destruction.⁵⁶ These warnings, however, had little effect. After the coup attempt, Khanh replaced three of the four corps commanders and six of the nine division commanders for failing to support him during the coup.⁵⁷

Montagnard tribesmen and the Vietnamese Confederation of Labor, from observing Khanh's concessions to the Buddhists, concluded that now was the time to demand concessions for themselves. Khanh proceeded to satisfy the demands of both groups. Ambassador Taylor, once again demonstrating his strong grasp of the South Vietnamese political situation, observed that by making these concessions, 'Khanh contributes further to the atmosphere of weakness that increasingly surrounds him.' Khanh 'has survived only by making virtually unending concessions to every pressure group that has presented itself. There is general recognition that such a process cannot continue indefinitely and still have anything left deserving the name of a government. We are now close to that stage.'⁵⁸

Other disorders continued in the cities, most notably a large riot in Qui Nhon that disabled the local government for a short time. Viet Cong participation in the unrest grew further.⁵⁹ In the cities of northern South Vietnam, government commanders did nothing to stop the rioters and provocateurs. They were not receiving any orders from their superiors, and they had learned from experience that those who tried to enforce the law would be removed in response to Buddhist complaints. Demoralization set in among the governmental officials in cities throughout the country, including Saigon.⁶⁰

The High National Council, a recent creation containing representatives from the country's major groups, assembled in late October to select the nation's new leadership. The council chose the aging Pham Khac Suu as chief of state, and Suu selected Tran Van Huong as

⁵⁶ Saigon to State, 14 September 1964, FRUS, 1964-1968, vol. 1, doc. 352.

⁵⁷ Saigon to State, 4 November 1964, DDBS, 1985, fiche 122.

⁵⁸ Saigon to State, 24 September 1964, FRUS, 1964-1968, vol. 1, doc. 359.

⁵⁹ SNIE 53-2-64, 1 October 1964, FRUS, 1964-1968, vol. 1, doc. 368.

⁶⁰ Saigon to State, 28 September 1964, LBJL, NSF, VNCF, box 8. See also CIA, 'Deterioration in South Vietnam,' 28 September 1964, LBJL, NSF, VNCF, box 9; SNIE 53-2-64, 1 October 1964, FRUS, 1964-1968, vol. 1, doc. 368.

prime minister, which was the position with the most power.⁶¹ Huong, like Diem, was a stubborn and conservative nationalist who disliked the Communists but had refused to serve in the Bao Dai government. He was one of the very few men with the stature and determination that would be needed to end the political chaos in Saigon. He opposed Khanh's policy of lenience towards the Buddhists and intended to implement a policy similar to Diem's, whereby order would be restored even if it meant suppressing Buddhist opposition.

Like Diem and unlike Khanh, Huong viewed Tri Quang as an implacable menace to national survival. During an interview with the American journalist Marguerite Higgins, Huong said of Tri Quang, 'He talks like a Communist. The things he does help the Communists. But you Americans want absolute proof. And evidence is not the same as absolute proof. We can prove that Thich Tri Quang held a secret meeting with Viet Cong leaders near Cap Saint Jacques. But Thich Tri Quang is capable of saying that he was down there trying to convert the Communists to Buddhism—and some people would believe him!'⁶²

The militant Buddhists immediately put Huong to the test. They organized demonstrations to denounce his government and they demanded the resignation of his cabinet. In a public communiqué, they called Huong 'stupid, a traitor, a fat, stubborn man without any policy.' The Huong government was 'not revolutionary' and contained 'vestiges of the Diem regime,' which was a particularly unjustified charge since most members of the government had been chosen for their lack of partisan political activities. Tri Quang offered no alternative to Huong, saying, 'We never want anything, and to say that Buddhism wants this or that is wrong. We never sponsor anybody.'⁶³ This statement ignored his organization's fierce denunciations of Diem, Khanh, Huong, the Catholics, the Can Lao, and the Dai Viets, as well as the pledge of support that Tri Quang had sold to Khanh in August. Tri Quang's sponsorship of, and opposition to, political individuals would only grow in the coming months.

⁶¹ Taylor to Johnson, 28 October 1964, FRUS, 1964–1968, vol. 1, doc. 389; Maxwell Taylor, *Swords and Plowshares* (New York: Norton, 1972), 322–3; Saigon to State, 4 November 1964, DDRS, 1985, fiche 122.

⁶² Higgins, *Our Vietnam Nightmare*, 261.

⁶³ Lacouture, *Vietnam*, 215–6. Saigon to State, 6 November 1964, FRUS, 1964–1968, vol. 1, doc. 404; *Washington Post*, 23 November 1964; *Time*, 4 and 11 December 1964; Saigon to State, 4 December 1964, LBJL, NSF, VNCF, box 10.

Although the militant Buddhists usually resorted to vague generalities when explaining their opposition to Huong, what certainly bothered them most was Huong's intent to restore order and resist Buddhist demands. Buddhist leaders fiercely condemned Huong's plans to curb public protests, and some even called for a reduction in the government's military activities.⁶⁴ Buddhist leaders announced that they preferred continued disorder and governmental disintegration to a capable Huong government, despite the obvious fact that it would abet the Viet Cong. 'It is better to have a political vacuum than have Huong in power,' one Buddhist leader said. 'This government will have to go.'⁶⁵

The Buddhist pressure notwithstanding, Huong refused to tolerate unruly protests or make concessions. When the militant Buddhists and students organized large demonstrations, Huong sent troops to disperse the crowds with fire hoses and tear gas. The soldiers did their job efficiently.⁶⁶ The militant Buddhists claimed that government security forces caused numerous fatalities and injuries in the first weeks of Huong's term, but no one actually perished and the number of injuries was far lower than Buddhist leaders alleged.⁶⁷ Huong also imposed censorship and shut down ten newspapers suspected of collaborating with the Communists.⁶⁸

At a large anti-government demonstration in late November, the militant Buddhists stepped up the violence. A mob consisting of militant Buddhists and other protesters hurled rocks at policemen and hit them with clubs. A few oppositionists threw concussion grenades of the sort used by the Viet Cong, prompting a paratroop officer to fire his pistol in their direction. Rounds from his pistol killed a fifteen-year-old boy. The Buddhists then issued an ultimatum demanding that the army and police not touch any demonstrators and that Huong be removed from office. Huong responded by prohibiting public gatherings and closing schools. Reflecting his suspicion of Communist

⁶⁴ Lacouture, *Vietnam*, 212–13.

⁶⁵ *Time*, 4 December 1964.

⁶⁶ Taylor to Johnson, 17 November 1964, FRUS, 1964–1968, vol. 1, doc. 413; *Washington Post*, 23 November 1964; *New York Times*, 23 and 25 November 1964; *Time*, 4 December 1964; Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience of the French and the Americans*, 628.

⁶⁷ Taylor to Johnson, 24 November 1964, FRUS, 1964–1968, vol. 1, doc. 421. The militant Buddhists had grossly exaggerated the extent of governmental violence since the last months of Diem's rule.

⁶⁸ Saigon to State, 16 December 1964, FRUS, 1964–1968, vol. 1, doc. 448.

complicity, Huong announced on the radio that the disorders were the fault of 'irresponsible people who have either innocently or deliberately fallen in with the Communist plan.'⁶⁹

Huong succeeded in quelling the unrest in Saigon, but he did not make progress in several other important fields. Buddhist intrigue and disagreements arising from Buddhist protests sharpened divisions within the South Vietnamese leadership. Huong's cabinet and the military leadership were split into pro- and anti-Huong factions, and some of the anti-Huong individuals were conspiring with Tri Quang. Because of this disunity and the devastation that had taken place already, Huong could not resuscitate the administrative apparatus across the country. 'The effects of the political impasse in Saigon gradually are making an appearance in the provinces,' Taylor commented in one report. 'Civilian officials, in particular, are uncertain how to act and normally follow their instinctive tendency toward timidity when there is not a clear voice of authority to direct them.'⁷⁰

At the beginning of December, after conferring with President Johnson in Washington, Ambassador Taylor undertook a covert program to curb the Buddhist opposition. He ordered U.S. embassy officers to find ways to isolate Tri Quang and Tam Chau from the rest of the Buddhists. The conditions were suitable for this type of effort, for more and more Buddhist leaders were becoming disenchanted by Tri Quang's fierce opposition to sabotage governments that had demonstrated no religious intolerance. At the end of the year, Mai Tho Truyen and his Cochinchinese Buddhists broke with Tri Quang. Attempts to unite the Cochinchinese Buddhists with other groups against Tri Quang, however, did not succeed because of fractiousness among the Buddhists.⁷¹

Taylor also attempted to reduce Tri Quang's oppositionist ardor by applying direct pressure. Embassy officials informed Tri Quang and

⁶⁹ *Time*, 4 December 1964.

⁷⁰ NSC working group, 'Intelligence Assessment,' 24 November 1964, LBJL, NSF, VNCF, box 45; *Pentagon Papers*, vol. 2, 342; Saigon to State, 6 January 1965, FRUS, 1964-1968, vol. 2, doc. 14.

⁷¹ Cooper to Bundy, 'Stability of South Vietnam's Government, Report No. 1,' 10 December 1964, FRUS, 1964-1968, vol. 1, doc. 444; Saigon to State, 16 December 1964, FRUS, 1964-1968, vol. 1, doc. 448; Saigon to State, memcon, 18 December 1964, LBJL, NSF, VNCF, box 11; Taylor to Johnson, 16 December 1964, DDRS, 1988, fiche 55; CIA, 'Thich Tri Quang,' 29 January 1965, LBJL, International Meetings and Travel, box 29.

other Vietnamese leaders that the U.S. commitment to Vietnam could not continue unless everyone united behind the Huong government. These threats were based on the questionable premise that Tri Quang did not want the Americans to abandon South Vietnam. For those Buddhists who were agents of Hanoi, such American threats only encouraged them to oppose Huong. Simultaneously, the CIA was making covert approaches to Tri Quang's lieutenants and urging them to exert a moderating influence on the monk. The pressure campaign did not bear much fruit. Tri Quang and other Buddhist leaders continued to condemn the government in public for its supposed anti-Buddhism, and they threatened to denounce the Americans as well if they kept supporting Huong.⁷²

The next political crisis began on 19 December, and once again it was provoked and influenced by the militant Buddhists. Khanh and a group of energetic young generals called the Young Turks asked the High National Council to retire all military officers with more than twenty-five years of service. Both Khanh and the Young Turks thought that the older officers not only were lacking in talent but also were excessively sympathetic towards the militant Buddhists. The High National Council turned down the request, which prompted the young generals to dissolve the High National Council and arrest its members.⁷³

Taylor was infuriated when he found out what had taken place. He had expected the generals to inform him of such plans in advance, and he believed that the move was politically disastrous.⁷⁴ The move was part of a scheme by Khanh to gain effective control over the government, Taylor suspected, and past events had led Taylor to

⁷² CIA, 'Buddhist Plans,' 3 December 1964, LBJL, NSF, VNCF, box 10; CIA, 'The Situation in South Vietnam,' 9 December 1964, LBJL, NSF, VNCF, box 11; Saigon to State, 16 December 1964, FRUS, 1964-1968, vol. 1, doc. 448; *New York Times*, 11 December 1964; Cooper to Bundy, 'Stability of South Vietnam's Government, Report No. 1,' 10 December 1964, FRUS, 1964-1968, vol. 1, doc. 444; Taylor to Johnson, 16 December 1964, DDCS, 1988, fiche 55.

⁷³ CIA Watch Office to State, 25 December 1964, DDCS, 1979, fiche 132C; Ky, *Twenty Years and Twenty Days*, 52; memcon, 21 December 1964, FRUS, 1964-1968, vol. 1, doc. 454; Historical Division of the Joint Secretariat, *The Joint Chiefs of Staff and the War in Vietnam* (Washington, DC: Joint History Office, 1970), chap. 15, 5; Johnson, *Right Hand of Power*, 417.

⁷⁴ Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, 93; Michael Charlton and Anthony Moncrieff, *Many Reasons Why: The American Involvement in Vietnam* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1978), 217.

the conclusion that Khanh was incapable of governing effectively and resisting Buddhist pressures.⁷⁵

Taylor actually had misinterpreted what had happened, for Huong had concurred in the dissolution of the High National Council, and the Young Turks had supported it as a means of giving more power to Huong, not to Khanh. Huong had allied himself with the generals so that they would help him against the militant Buddhists, whom he viewed as the country's worst problem.⁷⁶ When Taylor subsequently urged Huong to reject the disbandment of the High National Council, Huong brushed him off with the remark that the Vietnamese people 'take a more sentimental than legalistic approach,' and thus the role of the High National Council was far less important than the 'moral prestige of the leaders.'⁷⁷ American advisers and intelligence officers who were in contact with Vietnamese generals found that the military leadership similarly did not think it important that their actions had been illegal.⁷⁸

Beset by anger, Taylor berated the Young Turks. 'Now you have made a real mess,' Taylor told them. 'We cannot carry you forever if you do things like this.' Nguyen Cao Ky, the commander of the South Vietnamese Air Force, replied that change was needed, for 'the political situation is worse than it ever was under Diem.' Ky explained that the council had to be dissolved out of practical necessity. 'We know you want stability, but you cannot have stability until you have unity,' he said. Some members of the High National Council were spreading coup rumors and creating doubts, Ky asserted, and 'both military and civilian leaders regard the presence of these people in the High National Council as divisive of the Armed Forces due to their influence.'⁷⁹ In a country where factionalism was making it nearly impossible to accomplish anything and where split authority created confusion in the minds of the Confucianized people, the dissolution of the High National Council was, in fact, likely to improve governmental performance.

⁷⁵ Saigon to State, 20 December 1964, FRUS, 1964-1968, vol. 1, doc. 452; memcon, 21 December 1964, FRUS, 1964-1968, vol. 1, doc. 454.

⁷⁶ Taylor to Johnson, 23 December 1964, FRUS, 1964-1968, vol. 1, doc. 461.

⁷⁷ *Newsweek*, 18 January 1965.

⁷⁸ Saigon to State, 23 December 1964, FRUS, 1964-1968, vol. 1, doc. 460; Saigon to State, 24 December 1964, LBJL, NSF, VNCF, box 11; CIA Watch Office to State, 25 December 1964, DDFS, 1979, fiche 132C.

⁷⁹ Airgram A-493, 24 December 1964, DDFS, 1978, fiche 433D.

During a private meeting with Khanh, Taylor denounced the dissolution of the High National Council and said that it was inconsistent with the stability and loyalty that the Americans wanted from the South Vietnamese government. Khanh responded that both sides needed to be loyal in a relationship, and asserted that his country was not an American satellite. Once, Khanh recalled, Diem had said that the United States had not been loyal to him. Taylor blurted out that he had lost confidence in Khanh. Khanh fired back that an ambassador should not behave in such a way.⁸⁰

Following this tempestuous exchange, Khanh initiated a fiercely anti-American propaganda campaign. Over Radio Vietnam, he announced that it was 'better to live poor but proud as free citizens of an independent country rather than in ease and shame as slaves of the foreigners and Communists.'⁸¹ Khanh told an American journalist that 'if Taylor did not act more intelligently, Southeast Asia would be lost.' In order to succeed in Vietnam, the Americans would have to be 'more practical' and stop trying to make South Vietnam into a copy of the United States, which was a completely justified jab at Taylor's insistence on preserving the High National Council.⁸²

Huong did not take a firm stance against the generals' recent actions, which eventually convinced the Americans to mend relations with South Vietnamese leaders. Khanh seemed willing to go along. On 6 January, the army officially turned political control over to a new civilian government led by Huong.⁸³ Khanh and some of his military cohorts, however, immediately joined with Tri Quang in new machinations aimed at subverting this government.⁸⁴ Buddhist and student leaders organized strikes and demonstrations and issued fresh condemnations of Huong. An interfaith committee pleaded with the militant Buddhists to settle alleged grievances by meeting with

⁸⁰ Memcon, 21 December 1964, FRUS, 1964–1968, vol. 1, doc. 454; Saigon to State, 21 December 1964, DDRS, 1979, fiche 206D.

⁸¹ Saigon to State, 22 December 1964, NA II, RG 59, Central Files, 1964–1966, box 2949.

⁸² William M. Hammond, *Public Affairs: The Military and the Media, 1962–1968* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, 1988), 119; *The Joint Chiefs of Staff and the War in Vietnam*, chap. 15, 8.

⁸³ Shaplen, *The Lost Revolution*, 297–8; Saigon to State, 12 January 1965, FRUS, 1964–1968, vol. 2, doc. 24; Saigon to State, 20 January 1965, FRUS, 1964–1968, vol. 2, doc. 29.

⁸⁴ CIA, 'Thích Tri Quang's Campaign to Bring Down the Tran Van Huong Government,' 21 January 1965, DDRS, 1976, fiche 24E.

Huong's representatives rather than by protesting in the street, but to no avail.

During a meeting with Ambassador Taylor, Tri Quang insisted that the United States should force Huong's resignation. Taylor replied that the Vietnamese people needed to support Huong in the interest of governmental stability. Encouraged by Huong's early successes in suppressing militant Buddhist disturbances, the Americans viewed Huong as a much better leader than Khanh. In addition, U.S. embassy officials had become more disenchanted than ever with Tri Quang because of his baseless accusations against the government and his lack of constructive political ideas.⁸⁵

After one meeting with Tri Quang, Taylor complained, 'All we got was another repetitious airing of grievances which ring true only in the ears of the leaders of the [Buddhist] Institute.'⁸⁶ When Tri Quang alleged that the police had killed four people and injured thirty who were walking to a pagoda for prayer, the Americans investigated the incident and discovered that no one had been killed, that only four people had been wounded, that the incident had been instigated by a known troublemaker, and that no troops had attempted to suppress demonstrators.⁸⁷ Khanh himself conceded to Alexis Johnson that Buddhist complaints about the Huong government were 'groundless,' for the alleged acts of persecution were 'non-existent.'⁸⁸

Embassy officials also were impressed by recent Buddhist failures to mobilize people for demonstrations. These failures, the Americans concluded, showed that the militant Buddhists did not represent the Buddhist masses.⁸⁹ The Americans decided that the Saigon government would have to stand up to Tri Quang's Buddhist Institute at some point, and the sooner the better because the task would grow harder with each Buddhist victory.

These harsh judgments of the militant Buddhist movement were echoed by a host of other Western sources, including the Western

⁸⁵ Saigon to State, 16 January 1965, LBJL, NSF, VNCF, box 12; Saigon to State, 3 February 1965, FRUS, 1964-1968, vol. 2, doc. 59; Manfull, memcon, 4 February 1965, FRUS, 1964-1968, vol. 2, doc. 63; Saigon to State, 11 February 1965, FRUS, 1964-1968, vol. 2, doc. 105; Saigon to State, 25 January 1965, LBJL, NSF, VNCF, box 12; Saigon to State, 26 January 1965, LBJL, NSF, VNCF, box 12; CIA, 'The Situation in South Vietnam,' 26 January 1965, FRUS, 1964-1968, vol. 2, doc. 39.

⁸⁶ Saigon to State, 20 January 1965, FRUS, 1964-1968, vol. 2, doc. 29.

⁸⁷ Rosenthal, memcon, 17 January 1965, LBJL, NSF, VNCF, box 12.

⁸⁸ Saigon to State, 25 January 1965, LBJL, NSF, VNCF, box 12.

⁸⁹ Saigon to State, 31 January 1965, DDRS, fiche 2000, 9; Saigon to State, 11 February 1965, FRUS, 1964-1968, vol. 2, doc. 105.

news organizations that had supported Tri Quang's cause in 1963. Peter Grose of the *New York Times* reported, 'Vietnamese and foreign observers agree that [Buddhist policy] is not a policy springing from the deep feelings of the faithful but rather an attempt by the monks to attain straightforward political power.' The Buddhists were no longer able to organize great numbers of people, he observed, and 'their public demonstrations, more openly political now, are more unruly, out of keeping with the placid tenets of the Buddhist religion.'⁹⁰ *Newsweek* commented that Tri Quang and his colleagues 'speak for only a small minority of Vietnam's Buddhists.' Except in the cities, the militant Buddhists 'are little known and many of the rural Buddhists who do know of them intensely disapprove of their perversion of religious fervor to political ends.'⁹¹

American embassy officials continued to believe that most of the top Buddhist leaders opposed the Communists, but more and more of them entertained suspicions that at least Tri Quang was collaborating with the Communists. Embassy experts agreed that less senior Buddhist leaders, particularly those close to Tri Quang, were in league with the Viet Cong. Most prominent among this group was Thich Huyen Quang, the Secretary General of the Buddhist Institute and a close friend of Tri Quang. Numerous people inside and outside the Buddhist movement had accused him of having Communist sympathies. Huyen Quang's deputy, Tran Dinh, had been similarly identified.⁹²

The Communists, indeed, were accelerating their efforts to infiltrate opposition groups at this time. A Viet Cong leader later revealed that the Communists were making new efforts to use allegedly non-Communist organizations to spread anti-American and anti-government propaganda. According to the North Vietnamese Communist Party Central Committee, the covert Communist networks in the cities were soaring to unprecedented heights. In a March 1965 resolution, the committee declared, 'The urban movement has grown strong in all the large cities and almost all the small cities.'⁹³

On 18 January, in a break with his usual hard-line stance, Huong attempted to placate the Buddhists by dismissing two ministers

⁹⁰ *New York Times*, 23 January 1965.

⁹¹ *Newsweek*, 8 February 1965.

⁹² Saigon to State, 31 January 1965, DDRS, fiche 2000, 9; *Newsweek*, 8 February 1965.

⁹³ *Mot So Van Kien Cua Dang Ve Chong My, Cuu Nuoc*, Tap II (1954-1965) (Hanoi: Su That, 1985), 211-27.

whom militant Buddhist leaders had criticized.⁹⁴ But concessions served Huong no better than they had served Diem or Khanh. At a press conference two days later, Tri Quang and several of his followers announced that they were starting a hunger strike that would continue until Huong stepped down.⁹⁵ Thien Minh, Tri Quang's closest comrade in the Buddhist movement, added that if Huong were not removed, then the Buddhists would 'call for peace.'⁹⁶ Among the South Vietnamese, a public call for peace was viewed as an attack on the Saigon government, for it was a common Communist propaganda measure aimed at eroding South Vietnam's will to continue the war. Because Hanoi held the upper hand militarily, a peace deal obviously would favor Hanoi and likely would involve an American withdrawal.

Tri Quang promised that the Buddhist leadership would organize no more demonstrations until after the Tet holiday, and Tam Chau promised that there would be no demonstrations during the hunger strike.⁹⁷ Following a familiar pattern, the militant Buddhists quickly broke these promises. Under the leadership of Tri Quang and Tam Chau, the Buddhists initiated a rabidly anti-American protest campaign on 23 January. Its claims were as wildly overblown as those of previous militant Buddhist efforts. In Saigon, Buddhists and students conducted sizeable demonstrations outside the U.S. embassy and the U.S. Information Service's Abraham Lincoln Library. The protesters attacked the government for repressing Buddhists, derided Huong as Taylor's 'lackey,' and demanded that Taylor leave the country. Monks and nuns carried banners demanding peace. After demonstrators broke windows and doors and attacked riot policemen with stones, Huong sent paratroopers to disperse them with tear gas and clubs.

In Hue, 5,000 demonstrators sacked the two-story U.S. Information Service Library, then burned 8,000 books. Tri Quang's associate Huyen Quang released a communiqué stating, 'The policy of the United States Ambassador and Huong, lackey of the United States Ambassador, is to let leaders of Vietnamese Buddhism die and to exterminate Vietnamese Buddhism.' In Da Nang, Quang Tri, and Nha Trang, militant Buddhists convinced shop and restaurant owners to deny service to Americans. As a result of calls from Buddhist leaders

⁹⁴ *New York Times*, 19 January 1965.

⁹⁵ Saigon to State, 20 January 1965, LBJL, NSF, VNCF, box 12.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ Rosenthal, memcon, 17 January 1965, LBJL, NSF, VNCF, box 12; Saigon to State, 20 January 1965, LBJL, NSF, VNCF, box 12.

to undertake self-sacrifice, a bonzess in Nha Trang committed suicide by setting herself on fire, and a monk in Saigon stabbed himself during a large student demonstration. Buddhist ruffians also set a Catholic person on fire in Saigon.⁹⁸

In the northern provinces, Khanh and his principal co-conspirator, General Nguyen Chanh Thi, took no action to control the mobs or protect American and South Vietnamese property. They reasoned that the chaos would ruin the Huong government and allow them to take over.⁹⁹ As the riots were raging, Khanh made a deal with the Buddhist leaders. The armed forces would take control of the government, get rid of Huong, respect 'religious freedom,' and purge any supposed Diemists who had not been purged after the many preceding purges. In return, the Buddhists would support the new government for at least two years, and would send Tri Quang, Tam Chau, and Ho Giac out of the country.¹⁰⁰

When Alexis Johnson learned of these plans, he warned Khanh that the United States wanted the military to support the Huong government. Khanh simply ignored him. On the morning of 27 January, Khanh led a bloodless coup with the support of General Thi and Air Marshal Ky. He convinced the Armed Forces Council to put him in charge of the government, with the assurance that he would leave politics once a twenty-man advisory council had chosen a civilian chief of state. Some of the senior South Vietnamese officers, however, gave their approval to this arrangement only because they thought it would backfire, facilitating the removal of Khanh and the suppression of the militant Buddhists.¹⁰¹

⁹⁸ Saigon to State, 25 January 1965, LBJL, NSF, VNCF, box 12; CIA, 'Thich Tri Quang,' 29 January 1965, LBJL, International Meetings and Travel, box 29; Saigon to State, 31 January 1965, DDSR, 2000, fiche 9; Saigon to State, 28 January 1965, FRUS, 1964-1968, vol. 2, doc. 45; Truong Nhu Tang, *A Vietcong Memoir*, 95-8; Shaplen, *The Lost Revolution*, 300; *New York Times*, 23, 24, and 25 January 1965; CIA, 'Buddhist leader Thich Tri Quang's support of the concept of a civilian government,' 29 January 1965, DDSR, 1977, fiche 27B.

⁹⁹ Saigon to State, 12 January 1965, FRUS, 1964-1968, vol. 2, doc. 24; Saigon to State, 25 January 1965, LBJL, NSF, VNCF, box 12; Saigon to State, 26 January 1965, LBJL, NSF, VNCF, box 12.

¹⁰⁰ Saigon to State, 25 January 1965, LBJL, NSF, VNCF, box 12; Saigon to State, 26 January 1965, LBJL, NSF, VNCF, box 12; CIA, 'The Situation in South Vietnam,' 26 January 1965, FRUS, 1964-1968, vol. 2, doc. 39.

¹⁰¹ Manfull, memcon, 4 February 1965, FRUS, 1964-1968, vol. 2, doc. 63; Saigon to State, 30 January 1965, LBJL, NSF, VNCF, box 12; Saigon to State, 27 January 1965, FRUS, 1964-1968, vol. 2, doc. 41.

On the very day of the coup, Tri Quang was already whispering about forcing Khanh out of office, and the next afternoon he began efforts in that direction.¹⁰² His first step was to notify the generals that the Buddhists would no longer fulfill their promises to stay out of politics, support the government, and send the three monks abroad. The promises were null and void, according to the militant Buddhists, because the military had promised to oust the government on 25 or 26 January but had not done so until 27 January. In addition to being preposterous, this explanation was dishonest, for Tri Quang had known all along that the coup would not take place until 27 January.¹⁰³ This act of duplicity was one of the most egregious committed by the militant Buddhists to date, and it significantly bolstered their detractors' argument that they were deceitful men who cared more about destroying the existing government than destroying the Viet Cong. The renunciation of the promises enraged some of the generals; one told the Americans that if Khanh did not stand up to the Buddhist Institute now, 'his life would be in danger.'¹⁰⁴

Khanh did not stand up to the Buddhists but instead gave in to their demands once again while doing his best to cling to power. He transferred Pham Van Dong from command of the capital military district to the position of II Corps commander, which moved him from the center of power to an area where he would have minimal influence over Saigon's politics. Pham Van Dong had upset the militant Buddhists by his effective suppression of Buddhist demonstrations and riots in Saigon.¹⁰⁵

Once again, the Buddhists did not return the favor. It was the Buddhists who would determine the country's next leader, and Khanh would not be it. The top position went to Dr Phan Huy Quat, whom Tri Quang had long been promoting for the job. Many observers suspected that Quat was entirely under the control of Tri Quang. Most of the other members of the government also were Tri Quang allies who were strongly opposed to 'Diemism,' which in militant Buddhist parlance

¹⁰² CIA, 'Buddhist leader Thich Tri Quang's support of the concept of a civilian government,' 29 January 1965, DDRS, 1977, fiche 27B.

¹⁰³ CIA, 'Decisions and Discussions at the 31 January Armed Forces Council meeting,' 2 February 1965, LBJL, NSF, VNCF, box 13; CIA, 'Situation in South Vietnam,' 26 January 1965, FRUS, 1964-1968, vol. 2, doc. 39.

¹⁰⁴ Saigon to State, 30 January 1965, LBJL, NSF, VNCF, box 12.

¹⁰⁵ CIA, 'Decisions and Discussions at the 31 January Armed Forces Council meeting,' 2 February 1965, LBJL, NSF, VNCF, box 13.

meant vigorous anti-Communism and unwillingness to tolerate the destructive activities of the Buddhist movement.¹⁰⁶

On 19 February, just three days after the new government came to power, another coup began under the leadership of Gen. Lam Van Phat and Col. Pham Ngoc Thao.¹⁰⁷ The rebels captured the Saigon radio station and Tan Son Nhut airport, but Khanh once more evaded his captors, this time escaping to Vung Tau. Most units in the vicinity of Saigon chose not to take sides in the dispute.¹⁰⁸

As had occurred in the coup of 19 September 1964, the chief conspirators declared admiration for Diem, and they favored a return to a government more closely resembling Diem's. On Saigon Radio, the rebels announced, 'Lodge was wrong in encouraging the coup against Diem rather than correcting mistakes.' Phat and Thao informed Ky privately that they and their fellow rebels would agree to end their coup if Khanh were removed. The three of them struck a deal, after which the rebel forces dispersed quickly and without incident. The Armed Forces Council ordered Khanh to leave the country at once. After an unsuccessful effort to rally support among officials in the provinces, Khanh agreed to step down and go abroad.¹⁰⁹

Once the Quat government began operating, it adopted a host of measures favored by Tri Quang. It released every person who had been detained during anti-Huong demonstrations, some of whom

¹⁰⁶ Saigon to State, 16 February 1965, FRUS, 1964-1968, vol. 2, doc. 123; Taylor, *Swords and Plowshares*, 336; Saigon to State, 16 January 1965, LBJL, NSF, VNCF, box 12; Critchfield, *The Long Charade*, 130; Saigon to State, 23 February 1965, FRUS, 1964-1968, vol. 2, doc. 154; Saigon to State, 27 February 1965, FRUS, 1964-1968, vol. 2, doc. 169; CIA, 'Phan Huy Quat,' 29 January 1965, LBJL, International Meetings and Travel, box 29.

¹⁰⁷ Col. Pham Ngo Thao, an inveterate plotter, was a secret Communist agent. Whether Hanoi had ordered Thao to foment this rebellion is not known.

¹⁰⁸ INR, 'Saigon: Coup in Progress,' 19 February 1965, DDRS, 1994, fiche 229; CIA, 'The Situation in Vietnam,' 20 February 1965, DDRS, 1976, fiche 149B.

¹⁰⁹ MACV to NMCC, 19 February 1965, LBJL, NSF, VNCF, box 13; CIA Vietnam Working Group, 'Implications of the Saigon Coup Events,' 20 February 1965, LBJL, NSF, VNCF, box 14; CIA, 'The Situation in Vietnam,' 19 February 1965, DDRS, 1976, fiche 26A; Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, 96-7; INR, 'Saigon: Coup in Progress,' 19 February 1965, DDRS, 1994, fiche 229; MACV to NMCC, 19 February 1965, LBJL, NSF, VNCF, box 13; State to Saigon, 19 February 1965, FRUS, 1964-1968, vol. 2, doc. 147; Corcoran, 'Saigon Coup Situation,' 19 February 1965, LBJL, NSF, VNCF, box 45; CIA, 'The Situation in Vietnam,' 20 February 1965, DDRS, 1976, fiche 149B; Shaplen, *Lost Revolution*, 312; Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, 96-7; John M. Taylor, *General Maxwell Taylor: The Sword and the Pen* (New York: Doubleday, 1985), 307; MACV to NMCC, 21 February 1965, LBJL, NSF, VNCF, box 14; MACV to NMCC, 22 February 1965, LBJL, NSF, VNCF, box 14.

were Communists. In order to satisfy Tri Quang and prevent further rebellions, Quat and his key military supporters carried out yet another round of purges. Among the casualties of these purges were General Pham Van Dong, General Tran Van Minh, Col. Tran Thanh Ben, Admiral Chung Tan Cang, and General Dan Van Quang—able men whom Tri Quang opposed because they had suppressed unruly Buddhist demonstrations or otherwise interfered with his plans. Quat and his allies dispersed authority across the military, preventing any single officer from holding too much power.¹¹⁰

Because of the purges, the fragmentation of the military leadership, and the Buddhists' approval of Quat, the Quat regime faced much less open opposition than previous governments. At the beginning of April, the CIA was able to report, 'For the first time since the ouster of the Diem regime, the progressive deterioration of the political situation seems to have been arrested.' Stability, however, had come at a heavy price. The government's purges and its compliance with other Buddhist demands led to a major weakening of the military leadership. During no other period in its twenty-one-year history would the Republic of Vietnam fight the Communists so poorly as during Quat's rule. On 26 March, General Westmoreland observed that the South Vietnamese armed forces had 'begun to show evidence of fragmentation, and there is no longer an effective chain of command. The Armed Forces are run by committee. The committee itself is an arena for intrigue and personal ambition.'¹¹¹ The miserable performance of the Quat regime proved a truth that had become evident during Khanh's time in office: a government dominated by Tri Quang and his militant Buddhist cohorts would not prosecute the war with skill or vigor.

While Tri Quang and other Buddhist Institute leaders expressed approval of the Quat government and refrained from creating disturbances, they did not stay away from other forms of mischief.

¹¹⁰ CIA, 'The Situation in Vietnam,' 26 February 1965, DDRS, 1983, fiche 91; CIA, 'Individuals and Cliques in South Vietnam,' 25 February 1965, LBJL, NSF, VNCF, box 14; McCone, memcon, 25 February 1965, FRUS, 1964–1968, vol. 2, doc. 165; CIA, 'The Situation in South Vietnam,' 14 April 1965, DDRS, 1979, fiche 239A; Anne E. Blair, *There to the Bitter End: Ted Serong in Vietnam* (Crow's Nest: Allen & Unwin, 2001), 114–16; Critchfield, *The Long Charade*, 140–2; Saigon to State, 25 May 1965, FRUS, 1964–1968, vol. 2, doc. 314; Shaplen, *The Lost Revolution*, 344; CIA, 'The Situation in South Vietnam,' 26 May 1965, DDRS, 1979, fiche 244A.

¹¹¹ Westmoreland, 'Commander's Estimate of the Situation in South Vietnam, 26 March 1965, LBJL, Westmoreland Papers, History Backup, box 5.

Quang Lien and several additional leaders from the Buddhist Institute openly espoused a peace plan involving the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Vietnam. Other high officials of the Buddhist Institute, Tri Quang among them, told American officials that they disagreed with Quang Lien. In front of other audiences, however, these individuals endorsed Quang Lien's position. Tri Quang told the *Hong Kong Standard* that Hanoi and Washington should 'start immediate talks' to bring peace, for 'we have suffered too much, both in human lives and in what we have.'¹¹² When the Americans inquired about the interview, Tri Quang resorted to his common tactic of telling the Americans that he favored America's policy. He claimed that he did not really mean that the United States should negotiate now, and that in fact he thought the Americans should avoid negotiations until the military situation improved.¹¹³

A few weeks later, Tri Quang advised Taylor to bomb North Vietnam.¹¹⁴ In this instance, there is direct evidence that the advice was a tool to maintain America's favor so that the militant Buddhists could continue their subversive activities. Robert Thompson, a renowned veteran of Britain's counterinsurgency in Malaya and subsequently a senior adviser to the South Vietnamese government, recalled that after making this recommendation to Taylor, Tri Quang 'went straight to the French to explain that he was only lulling Taylor's suspicions so as to have a free hand to press on with his undercover campaign for peace at any price.'¹¹⁵

Casting further doubt on Tri Quang's professed enthusiasm for an American war against the Communists was a letter that the monk sent the Americans in mid-May. In the letter, Tri Quang portrayed the United States as South Vietnam's tormentor rather than its savior. He charged that whereas the Americans 'are prejudiced toward having confidence in and plotting in favor of the Catholics,' they 'worry and hesitate about the Buddhists as the ruler does the natives.' The Vietnamese people thought the Americans were 'using Catholics to exterminate Buddhists' and were 'certain that all oppression is

¹¹² *New York Times*, 28 February 1965; Saigon to State, 26 February 1965, NAII, RG 319, Central Files, 1964-1966, box 2952; Hong Kong to State, 19 February 1965, LBJL, NSF, Country File, Asia and the Pacific, China, box 238; Rosenthal, memcon, 27 February 1965, LBJL, NSF, VNCF, box 14; Saigon to State, 17 March 1965, FRUS, 1964-1968, vol. 2, doc. 202.

¹¹³ Rosenthal, memcon, 27 February 1965, LBJL, NSF, VNCF, box 14.

¹¹⁴ Saigon to State, 22 March 1965, LBJL, NSF, VNCF, box 15.

¹¹⁵ Critchfield, *The Long Charade*, 131-2.

organized and condoned by the Americans.' The Americans would lose the war, Tri Quang warned, unless they stopped favoring the Catholics.¹¹⁶ These allegations were absurd, not merely because no one was attempting to exterminate the Buddhists, but also because neither the Americans nor the South Vietnamese government had shown any favoritism towards Catholics over Buddhists.

During Quat's rule, new groups demanding peace or neutralization sprouted in South Vietnam, and the production of propaganda by such groups surged. Quat was surprisingly vocal in opposing these groups. There would be no peace, he proclaimed, until the North stopped infiltrating people to the South. He announced that the government would take 'all necessary measures to smash the fallacious propaganda maneuvers that the Communists are waging with a view to deceive public opinion, sow confusion among the population, take advantage of the credulous... and carry out their Machiavellian maneuver to take over all of Vietnam.' Quat fired 300 civil servants who had signed a document demanding negotiations to end the war. He did not, however, take action against anyone in the Buddhist Institute for advocating peace or neutralization. Quat convinced Quang Lien to back away from his neutralization program, but only at the price of releasing all peace movement leaders who had ties to the Buddhists.¹¹⁷

A new political crisis developed in Saigon at the end of May 1965. It began when Chief of State Suu blocked an attempt by Quat to replace two ministers whom both Quat and the Americans considered to be incompetent.¹¹⁸ Suu received encouragement to resist Quat from Cochinchinese politicians and Catholic leaders, who objected to Quat's favoritism towards the militant Buddhists.¹¹⁹ As the crisis developed, Tri Quang began to step away from his firm pro-Quat position, for

¹¹⁶ Saigon to State, 15 May 1965, NA II, RG 59, Central Files, 1964-1966, box 2959.

¹¹⁷ CIA, 'The Situation in Vietnam,' 28 February 1965, DDRS, 1978, fiche 31C; Saigon to State, 2 March 1965, FRUS, 1964-1968, vol. 2, doc. 177; *New York Times*, 27 February and 7 March 1965; Saigon to State, 12 March 1965, LBJL, NSF, VNCF, box 14; CIA, 'The Situation in Vietnam,' 28 February 1965, DDRS, 1978, fiche 31C; Shaplen, *Lost Revolution*, 319-21.

¹¹⁸ Saigon to State, 25 May 1965, FRUS, 1964-1968, vol. 2, doc. 314; CIA, 'The Situation in South Vietnam,' 26 May 1965, DDRS, 1979, fiche 244A; CIA, 'The Situation in South Vietnam,' 4 June 1965, DDRS, 1978, fiche 35A; Saigon to State, 25 May 1965, LBJL, NSF, VNCF, box 17; CIA, 'The Situation in South Vietnam,' 9 June 1965, LBJL, NSF, VNCF, box 18.

¹¹⁹ CIA, 'The Situation in South Vietnam,' 4 June 1965, DDRS, 1978, fiche 35A; CIA, 'The Situation in South Vietnam,' 9 June 1965, LBJL, NSF, VNCF, box 18; Saigon to State, 5 June 1965, FRUS, 1964-1968, vol. 2, doc. 332; Saigon to State,

Quat was showing a certain degree of independence that Tri Quang found troubling. In a conversation with the U.S. consul in Hue, Tri Quang said that if Quat could not get out of the current crisis without granting concessions to his opponents, the military should take his place. Tri Quang apparently was worried that Quat would concede too much to Catholics and others of whom Tri Quang disapproved, and that he would take further steps against neutralists. If Quat needed to be removed, Tri Quang said, the new head of state should be 'a man who has no religious beliefs.' The only name he mentioned was his close ally General Thi. 'Thi is nominally a Buddhist,' he said, 'but does not really care about religion,' a judgment that was very suspect because of Thi's consistent and ongoing collaboration with the militant Buddhists.¹²⁰

On 9 June, Quat appealed to the South Vietnamese generals to mediate the dispute.¹²¹ During a meeting with Quat, the generals made clear that they were fed up with the political ineffectiveness of the civilian government. They also were upset by the purges of the South Vietnamese military during Quat's rule, and by large military defeats suffered in recent weeks. Disheartened by the generals' criticisms, Quat agreed to step down and turn the government over to the military.¹²²

Everything was proceeding according to Tri Quang's desires, until the new leadership was chosen. The top positions went not to General Thi but to Air Marshal Ky, who became prime minister and executive chairman, and General Thieu, who assumed leadership of the ruling committee of generals. The military leaders clearly wanted to put an end to Tri Quang's dominance of the government, for Ky and Thieu were more interested in fighting the Communists than in appeasing the militant Buddhists.

This attitude quickly became evident. Ky, Thieu, and the other generals decided that the new government would begin by holding a 'no breathing week.' The week's activities included the imposition of censorship, the closing of many newspapers, and the suspension of civil liberties. Their next objective was to consign the bickering

26 May 1965, LBJL, NSF, VNCF, box 17; CIA, 'The Situation in South Vietnam,' 26 May 1965, DDRS, 1979, fiche 244A.

¹²⁰ Saigon to State, 12 June 1965, LBJL, NSF, VNCF, box 18.

¹²¹ *Pentagon Papers*, vol. 2, 434; CIA, 'The Situation in South Vietnam,' 9 June 1965, LBJL, NSF, VNCF, box 18.

¹²² Johnson, *Right Hand of Power*, 437; Bui Diem, *In the Jaws of Victory*, 146-7.

Saigon politicians to a 'village of old trees,' where they would 'conduct seminars and draw up plans and programs in support of government policy.' On the question of opposition from religious and political groups, they resolved to 'ignore such opposition groups with the stipulation that troublemakers will be shot.' The generals also took measures to organize the entire population into paramilitary organizations. Infusing the civil administration with energy and direction, the leading generals wasted no time in putting their plans into action.¹²³

Tri Quang apparently had not mounted strenuous opposition to the appointments of Ky and Thieu and had believed that he could manipulate them as he had done with Khanh. At first, Tri Quang professed support for the new regime. Within a month, however, once the government had shown some signs of promise, Tri Quang was demanding its removal. He denounced Thieu for having belonged to Diem's Can Lao Party—despite the fact that Thieu had played a leading role in Diem's overthrow—and accused him of having 'fascistic tendencies.' Tri Quang alleged that the 'ex-Can Lao around General Ky were sabotaging his program.' As before, Tri Quang's generalizations far exceeded his specific charges. When pressed to provide an example of the sabotaging of Ky's program, Tri Quang could offer only this bizarre answer: 'Ky's decision to shoot all speculators, since such a move could obviously never be implemented.'¹²⁴

Tri Quang would continue his groundless denunciations of the government and his insatiable demands for concessions—which together constituted his principal means of undermining the government—until the Buddhist Crisis of 1966. When that crisis erupted, rebellious Buddhists caused so much trouble that government leaders used the army to shut down the militant Buddhist movement by force, once and for all. Ky would banish Tri Quang to a mountain retreat. The government finally had its showdown with the militant Buddhists, and it was richly rewarded. Never again would the

¹²³ Nguyen Cao Ky, *Buddha's Child: My Fight to Save Vietnam* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2002), 142; CIA, 'Military Plans for a Revolutionary Government to Replace the Present Government of Vietnam,' 11 June 1965, DDRS, 1978, fiche 35B; Saigon to State, 17 June 1965, FRUS, 1964–1968, vol. 3, doc. 5; Saigon to State, 21 June 1965, DDRS, 1979, fiche 455B.

¹²⁴ memcon, 9 July 1965, LBJL, NSF, VNCF, box 20; Saigon to State, 11 July 1965, LBJL, NSF, NSC History, DMUSF, box 43; memcon, 14 July 1965, LBJL, NSF, VNCF, box 20; Saigon to State, 27 July 1965, LBJL, NSF, VNCF, box 19.

Buddhists cause such political trouble for the South Vietnamese government.

From the Diem era all the way through the Buddhist Crisis of 1966, Tri Quang and the rest of the militant Buddhists pursued the same strategy. They sought to weaken the existing government by protesting publicly and extracting one concession after another. Securing religious freedom was not one of their main goals, for their religious freedom was never in jeopardy. Instead, what they sought was political dominance. Some militant Buddhists wanted a government that favored the Buddhists over other groups within South Vietnamese society, while others were secretly conniving to open the way for a Communist government. Had the South Vietnamese military failed to resist the militant Buddhists in 1965 and suppress them in 1966, it is likely that the militant Buddhists would have steered the government into the Communist camp, for the movement's leading figure, Tri Quang, either was in league with the Communists or else harbored fantasies that he could hold off the Communists without the benefit of a strong, pro-American government.

The political successes of the militant Buddhist movement were dependent upon the leadership of the Saigon government and the attitude of the United States. After a series of fruitless concessions, Ngo Dinh Diem stopped giving in as it became clearer that the concessions did nothing to placate the Buddhists. He stifled the Buddhist movement by shutting down the pagodas and arresting key figures, but this victory was fleeting because it prompted the United States to support Diem's overthrow. Nguyen Khanh permitted open opposition to his regime and spent much of his time making concessions to the Buddhists, but all these measures achieved was a weakening of the country's anti-Communist forces and further protests and demands from the militant Buddhists. Tran Van Huong chose to follow the example of Diem rather than that of Khanh, refusing to tolerate public disorders or to meet the Buddhists' demands. This policy clearly had better prospects for success, and the Americans now were more amenable to tough action. Huong, however, could not finish implementing it because Khanh threw him out.

The influence of the militant Buddhists reached its zenith when the country was ruled by Phan Huy Quat, who did everything that the Buddhists wanted for much of his time in power. Quat's actions brought the effectiveness of the South Vietnamese war effort to an all-time low, reinforcing the lesson of the Khanh era that effective

prosecution of the war was incompatible with fulfillment of the militant Buddhists' demands.

The principal objection that Khanh and others had raised to using Diem's methods against the militant Buddhists was that they would alienate the Buddhist masses to such a degree as to cripple the war effort. Khanh greatly overestimated the influence of the militant Buddhists on the masses; only a small minority supported the militant Buddhist cause. The Buddhist Crisis of 1966 would show that the militant Buddhists could be crushed without destroying the war effort. The suppression of the Buddhists during 1966 permanently freed the government from harmful Buddhist pressures and made possible a greater degree of national cohesion in South Vietnam from then onwards.