

## Vision, Power and Agency: The Ascent of Ngô Đình Diệm, 1945–54

Edward Miller

*This article challenges existing interpretations of Ngô Đình Diệm by examining his activities during the decade before he became leader of South Vietnam in 1954. Diệm actively pursued power in these years, and he achieved it mainly due to his own efforts and to those of his Vietnamese allies. At the same time, he and his brother Ngô Đình Nhu were outlining the distinctive vision of modernisation which would inform South Vietnam's post-1954 nation-building strategies.*

Who was Ngô Đình Diệm? In the decades since his 1963 assassination, historians and other writers have offered diverse interpretations of his life and career. That Diệm was an important figure in the history of the Indochina Wars is not in dispute – after all, the conflict that became the ‘American war’ in Vietnam began as a revolt against Diệm’s South Vietnamese regime – but there is no consensus about why and how he came to play such a key role. During Diệm’s tenure in power (1954–63), many in Vietnam and elsewhere described him as an American puppet who had been installed and supported by Washington to serve US objectives in the Cold War. Accounts written since the 1960s, by contrast, have emphasised his notorious unwillingness to accept American advice and the fact that his alliance with the US eventually fell apart. Many scholars have thus come to reject the notion that Diệm was merely a creature of US foreign policy, and have instead portrayed him as a product of premodern ‘traditions’ such as Catholicism or Confucianism. Among these scholars, however, there is no consensus about the meaning and consequences of his ‘traditional’ qualities. In some recent histories, he appears as a sage-like national hero who was thwarted by fickle allies; in others, he is portrayed as an inflexible autocrat who was doomed by his adherence to outdated ideas about rulership.<sup>1</sup>

Edward Miller teaches in the History Department at Dartmouth College. His e-mail contact is Edward.G.Miller@dartmouth.edu

1 Both Diệm’s admirers and his critics have portrayed him as an exponent of ‘traditional’ ideas and practices. During the 1960s, authors in both camps treated Diệm’s devotion to Confucianism as proof of a premodern cast of mind; compare, for example, journalist Denis Warner’s scathing account of his rule, *The last Confucian* (New York: Macmillan, 1963) with Anthony Bouscaren’s hagiography, *The last of the mandarins: Diem of Vietnam* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1965). According to some authors, Diệm’s ‘traditional’ Confucian habits were reinforced by a Catholic identity which inclined him to favour ancient forms of government; see Bernard Fall, *The two Viet-Nams: A political and military analysis*, 2nd rev. edn (New York: Praeger, 1967), p. 236. Scholars who have written about Diệm since the end of the Vietnam War in 1975 have been more sophisticated in their analyses of him and his ideas, but their conclusions about the ‘traditional’ nature of his Confucian and Catholic convictions are strikingly similar

These seemingly disparate representations of Diệm – as US stooge, virtuous patriot or reactionary despot – are more alike than they first appear. By rendering Diệm in flat and simplistic terms, they all fail to acknowledge the particular and contingent aspects of Diệm's ideas and actions. Whether Diệm is alleged to have been merely executing American designs or manifesting 'traditional' cultural or social characteristics, the result is the same: in each case, his capacity to control his own thoughts and deeds is denied. In short, the existing representations of Diệm have refused him his due as a historical agent. The effect, as one historian recently pointed out, has been to reduce him to the historiographical equivalent of a 'cardboard cutout'.<sup>2</sup>

This article proposes to restore a modicum of agency to Diệm by examining an understudied part of his career: the decade prior to his 1954 appointment as Premier of what would soon become South Vietnam. My study challenges the received view of Diệm in two ways. First, it disputes the assertion that he spent the duration of the Franco-Viet Minh War of 1945–54 in self-imposed political isolation, quietly awaiting the arrival of his destiny.<sup>3</sup> In fact, Diệm did not remain aloof from the struggles which wracked Indochina in these years, and he had dealings with almost all of the key players in Indochinese politics. Thus, instead of portraying him as passive figure entirely or mostly dependent on the support of one or another faction or patron, the article shows that he played an active and important role in engineering his own rise to power.

Second, my analysis takes issue with the notion that Diệm's ideas and actions during 1945–54 can be taken as evidence of 'traditional' ways of thinking. As postcolonial scholars such as Ronald Inden have demonstrated, invocations of 'tradition' often betray the essentialising tendencies which infuse much of the Western scholarship on Asia and Asians.<sup>4</sup> The examples which Inden critiques are drawn from Indology, but his arguments are applicable to writings about Vietnam generally and to writings about Diệm in particular. Just as scholars of India have tended to displace the agency of Indians onto Europeans or onto allegedly essential qualities of Indian life such as caste or divine kingship, so too have scholars of the Vietnam War displaced Diệm's agency onto Americans or 'essences' such as Confucianism or Catholicism. By reducing Diệm's words and actions to the lingering effects of premodern patterns of thinking, many authors have

to those proffered earlier. For recent critiques of Diệm in this vein, see Neil Jamieson, *Understanding Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), p. 235; William Turley, *The Second Indochina War: A short political and military history, 1954–1975* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1986), p. 13; George Kahin, *Intervention: How America became involved in Vietnam* (Garden City, NY: Anchor, 1987), p. 93; and Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A history*, 2nd rev. edn (New York: Penguin, 1997), p. 229. For examples of post-1975 accounts which portray Diệm's affinity for 'tradition' in a more sympathetic light, see Ellen J. Hammer, *A death in November: America in Vietnam, 1963* (New York: Dutton, 1987), p. 52; and Pham Van Luu, 'The Buddhist crises in Vietnam, 1963–1966' (Ph.D. diss., Monash University, 1991), pp. 102–3.

2 Philip E. Catton, *Diem's final failure: Prelude to America's war in Vietnam* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 2002), p. 2.

3 For claims that Diệm was politically isolated during the 1940s and 1950s, see John Mecklin, *Mission in torment: An intimate account of the U.S. role in Vietnam* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1965), p. 31; Robert Shaplen, *The lost revolution* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), p. 111; and Frances Fitzgerald, *Fire in the lake: The Vietnamese and the Americans in Vietnam* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1972), p. 82; George Herring, *America's longest war: The United States and Vietnam, 1950–1975*, 4th edn (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2002), p. 59; and Ross Marlay and Clark Neher, *Patriots and tyrants: Ten Asian leaders* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1999), p. 119.

4 Ronald Inden, *Imagining India* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), especially pp. 1–48.

overlooked his efforts to refashion old ideas into new forms, as well as his determination to promote a distinctive vision of how Vietnam could become a modern nation.<sup>5</sup> To be sure, Diệm's vision of Vietnam's modernisation emerged only gradually, and it was far from fully formed in 1954. It was, moreover, a highly idiosyncratic vision, and his efforts to persuade South Vietnamese of its utility and merit would fail miserably in the long run, but failure does not necessarily imply insignificance or inconsequence. In order to arrive at a more historical and less caricatured understanding of Diệm's role in the history of the Indochina Wars, we must come to grips with the contingent and contemporary nature of his ideas, and to examine the specific historical context – late colonial Indochina – in which he formulated them.

### Diệm and the quest for a 'Third Force', 1945–50

For many Vietnamese nationalists, the onset of all-out war between France and the Việt Minh in December 1946 presented a stark and difficult choice. The thought of rallying to the colonial regime was distasteful to anticolonial activists who advocated independence for Vietnam, yet many nationalists also recoiled at the thought of lending support to Hồ Chí Minh and the communist-dominated Việt Minh. Some refused to cooperate with the Việt Minh on ideological grounds; others were wary of the communists for reasons of experience.<sup>6</sup> Faced with such unpalatable options, these nationalists often declined to choose either side, and decided instead to wait for the emergence of a 'Third Force' – that is, an independent party or coalition which would be both anticolonialist and anticommunist. From the mid-1940s, there were many attempts to create a Third Force in Indochina, but all of them foundered on the ideological and political fissures which divided Vietnam's myriad non-communist parties, sects and factions. As a result, many activists resigned themselves to maintaining a stance of uneasy neutrality in the conflict. The French chided such would-be Third Forcers as 'fence-sitters' (*attentistes*), while the Việt Minh derided them for 'hiding under a blanket' (*trùm chăn*).

A well-known Catholic leader and nationalist, Diệm was counted among the most prominent of the *attentistes*. This was a misleading characterisation, however, insofar as it implied that he was reluctant to take political risks. Diệm was born in 1901 into a highly accomplished Catholic family. His father Ngô Đình Khả was Grand Chamberlain of the Vietnamese imperial Court, his eldest brother Ngô Đình Khôi served as a colonial provincial governor and another brother, Ngô Đình Thục, became one of the first Vietnamese Catholic bishops. Diệm upheld family tradition by becoming an official in the imperial administration, and he rose to the post of provincial governor while still in his late twenties. His success was due not only to his talents as an administrator but also

5 Consider the following statement by the author of a best-selling textbook on the Vietnam War: 'Not perceiving the extent to which the French and Vietminh had destroyed traditional political processes and values, [Diệm] looked backward to an imperial Vietnam that no longer existed. He had no blueprint for building a modern nation or mobilizing his people' (Herring, *America's longest war*, p. 59).

6 In the spring of 1946, a short-lived alliance of convenience between the Việt Minh and non-communist parties in northern Vietnam broke down, sparking a wave of fighting and a brutal Việt Minh elimination campaign. See François Guillemot, 'Au cœur de la fracture vietnamienne: L'élimination de l'opposition nationaliste et anticolonialiste dans le Nord du Việt-nam (1945–1946)', in *Le Việt Nam depuis 1945: États, marges et constructions du passé*, ed. Christopher E. Goscha and Benoît de Tréglodé (Paris: Les Indes Savantes, forthcoming).

to the patronage of Nguyễn Hữu Bài, a Catholic who headed the Council of Ministers in Huế. Though Bài had long collaborated with the colonial regime, he had become frustrated in the 1920s with French encroachments on the Court's prerogatives, and he enlisted Diệm and his older brothers in efforts to pressure the French for reforms which would have restored a measure of Vietnamese sovereignty. In 1933, the French tried to mollify Bài by elevating Diệm to the post of Interior Minister; however, the move backfired when Bài counselled Diệm to step down in protest against French intransigence on the reform issue. Diệm's resignation established his reputation as an uncompromising nationalist, even as it also confirmed his status as a militant and ambitious Catholic leader.<sup>7</sup>

Despite later assertions to the contrary, Diệm did not lapse into political obscurity after 1933, but remained active in court politics in Huế throughout the 1930s, even though he no longer held office and was under police surveillance.<sup>8</sup> After 1940, he intensified his activism in order to exploit new political opportunities created by the Japanese occupation of Indochina. The occupation of 1940–45 was peculiar because Japan allowed the pro-Vichy colonial government of Indochina to remain in place in exchange for garrison privileges and access to provisions. Such a policy contrasted sharply with Japanese practices elsewhere in Southeast Asia during World War II, and it did not sit well with those Japanese officials who considered themselves 'idealists' on the issue of liberating their fellow Asians from European colonial rule. The discontent of these Japanese idealists provided an opening for Diệm, and by 1942 he had become embroiled in a variety of anti-French intrigues. In 1943 he dispatched an envoy to make contact with Prince Cường Để, a longtime anticolonial activist and pretender to the Nguyễn throne who had lived in exile in Japan for more than two decades, and who had ties to idealist officers and diplomats in both Tokyo and Indochina. Around the same time, Diệm established a secret political party known as the 'Association for the Restoration of Great Vietnam' (*Đại Việt Phục hưng Hội*). This party seems to have operated primarily in Diệm's native region of Central Vietnam, and its ranks were filled overwhelmingly – perhaps even exclusively – by Catholics. In the summer of 1944, the French *Sûreté* learned of the existence of Diệm's party and began to arrest its members. Diệm escaped the dragnet thanks to the help of the Japanese Consul in Huế, who smuggled him out of the city by disguising him as an officer of the Imperial Army. He was flown to Saigon, where he lived for several months under the protection of the Japanese military.<sup>9</sup>

7 For Bài's maneuvers and Diệm's 1933 appointment and resignation, see Bruce Lockhart, *The end of the Vietnamese monarchy* (New Haven: Yale Council on SEA Studies, 1993), pp. 60–86.

8 *Ibid.*, pp. 87–92.

9 For the Japanese intrigues involving Vietnamese nationalists during 1940–45 see Ralph Smith, 'The Japanese period in Indochina and the coup of 9 March 1945', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* [henceforth *JSEAS*], 9, 2 (1978): 268–301; Kiyoko Kurusu Nitz, 'Independence without nationalists? The Japanese and Vietnamese nationalism during the Japanese period, 1940–45', *JSEAS*, 15, 1 (1984): 108–33; and Tran My-Van, 'Japan and Vietnam's Caoaists: A wartime relationship (1939–1945)', *JSEAS*, 27, 1 (1996): 179–93. Diệm's involvement with the Japanese during 1943–44 is discussed in Vu Ngu Chieu, 'The other side of the 1945 Vietnamese Revolution', *Journal of Asian Studies*, 45, 2 (1986): 299, 306. On Diệm's dispatch of an envoy to Cường Để, see Cường Để, *Cuộc đời cách mạng* (Saigon: Nhà in Tôn Thất Lê, 1957), pp. 137–8. For the founding and subsequent repression of the *Đại Việt Phục hưng Hội*, see François Guillemot, 'Révolution nationale et lutte pour l'indépendance au Viêt-Nam: L'échec de la Troisième Voie "Đại Việt", 1938–1955' (Thèse de doctorat, École Pratiques des Hautes Études, 2003), pp. 206–7. Diệm's escape from Huế in the summer of 1944 is in Nitz, 'Independence without nationalists?', p. 117.

For a brief moment in early 1945, it appeared that Diệm's Japanese stratagems were going to pay off. By late 1944, Japanese leaders had decided that the time had come finally to depose the French colonial regime in Indochina. As plans for a coup were being drafted, idealist Japanese officers proposed to place Cường Đệ on the Vietnamese throne and to install Diệm as premier of a new government. Unfortunately for Cường Đệ, the senior Japanese commander in Indochina was unimpressed with the idealists' arguments, and he gutted their plans to grant 'independence' to the Vietnamese. As a result, when the coup took place on 9 March 1945, the old Prince remained in Japan and the reigning Emperor Bảo Đại was allowed to retain his crown. Bảo Đại probably knew that Diệm had earlier aligned himself with Cường Đệ; nonetheless, he still considered Diệm to be the best candidate to head the new Vietnamese government that would replace the colonial regime, and he therefore summoned him to return to Huế from Saigon. In what turned out to be a colossal miscalculation, Diệm rebuffed the Emperor's offer. He came to regret his decision almost immediately and tried to reverse it, but it was too late: Bảo Đại had already tapped the scholar and cultural critic Trần Trọng Kim to become premier in Diệm's place. Diệm had missed a golden opportunity, though not for disinterest or for lack of trying.<sup>10</sup>

The August Revolution of 1945 and the stunning rise of Hồ and the Việt Minh did not reduce Diệm's determination to pursue his political ambitions. Instead of withdrawing from the fray as the French and the Việt Minh fought over the future of Indochina, he pondered how he might exploit the current situation to build a new movement that could eventually eclipse both of these powerful rivals. He knew that constructing a viable Third Force would take time, and in the interim he could not afford to directly challenge either the French or the Việt Minh. He therefore adopted a stance of ostensible neutrality in the conflict, while at the same time taking care to establish and maintain contacts with both of the warring parties. In this way, Diệm hoped both to buy time and to expand the ranks of his supporters at the expense of his rivals.

Diệm's efforts to use his position as a fence-sitter for maximum political advantage are apparent in his relations with the Việt Minh during the late 1940s. Despite his later claims to the contrary, his dealings with Hồ Chí Minh and other Việt Minh leaders were characterised much more by flirtation than by rejection. Shortly after the August Revolution, he was detained by Việt Minh fighters in Central Vietnam. After being held for a time in a remote mountain location, he was brought to Hanoi in early 1946 to meet

10 For the planning and aftermath of the Japanese coup of March 1945, see Masaya Shiraishi, 'The background to the formation of the Tran Trong Kim Cabinet in April 1945: Japanese plans for governing Vietnam', in *Indochina in the 1940s and 1950s*, ed. Takashi Shiraishi and Motoo Furuta (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Southeast Asia Program, 1992), pp. 113–41. Shiraishi proves conclusively that Diệm received the second of two telegrams which Bảo Đại sent to him after the coup, and also demonstrates that he turned down the Emperor's request of his own volition. However, the reasoning behind his decision remains unclear. Shiraishi cites Japanese sources which suggest that he was counselled by his idealist allies to reject the premiership on the grounds that original independence plans had been diluted. However, Stein Tønnesson uses French documents to argue that Diệm's refusal was a ploy to increase his leverage, and he shows that Diệm became angry when he realised that the offer would not be made again; Stein Tønnesson, *The Vietnamese Revolution of 1945: Roosevelt, Ho Chi Minh and de Gaulle in a world at war* (Oslo: International Peace Research Institute, 1991), p. 285.

with Hồ, who offered him a position in a Việt Minh unity government.<sup>11</sup> In later years, Diệm insisted that he had spurned this offer out of hand; he also claimed that he had persuaded Hồ to release him simply by fixing the Việt Minh chief with his gaze and asking rhetorically, ‘Am I a man who fears oppression or death?’<sup>12</sup>

There is no reason to doubt Diệm’s claim that he spoke sharply and bitterly during the meeting, because he knew that Việt Minh agents had captured and executed his eldest brother Khôi a few months earlier. On the other hand, the descriptions of the meeting which he related after 1954 omitted the fact that he had been willing to join a Việt Minh government if Hồ had only conceded to his demand for control over certain aspects of policy.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, he never publicly acknowledged that he remained in touch with Việt Minh leaders for at least two years after Hồ released him. French intelligence reports from the period suggest that Diệm maintained these contacts in the hope that he might eventually persuade some Việt Minh commanders to abandon Hồ and to throw their lot in with him. According to French informants, these exchanges stirred considerable interest within Việt Minh ranks in the Nam Bộ (Cochinchina) region during 1947–48. Many Việt Minh officials expressed admiration for Diệm and also for his brother Thục, and there were even whispers that Diệm might secure the defection of Nguyễn Bình, the top Việt Minh military commander in Nam Bộ.<sup>14</sup>

At the same time that Diệm was engaged in a *pas de deux* with the Việt Minh, he was also seeking alliances with anticommunist leaders and groups. Diệm’s efforts in this regard seem to have been inspired by the example of a short-lived Third Force coalition known as the National Union Front (*Mặt trận Thống nhất Quốc gia*). The Front was formed in early 1947 at a conference of anticommunist political parties and sectarian groups meeting in Nanking, China. After a brief surge of activity in the spring and summer of 1947, it abruptly collapsed due to the assassination of one of its key leaders by the Việt Minh and to infighting among its members.<sup>15</sup> Diệm seems not to have been involved in the formation of the Front, but as it imploded he moved quickly to

11 The specific date and circumstances of Diệm’s detention in 1945 are unclear. According to French intelligence, Diệm was seized in the city of Phan Thiết while travelling to Hanoi as a member of a delegation appointed to represent a coalition of Southern Vietnamese nationalist groups. See ‘M. Ngo Dinh Diem, nouveau President du Conseil Vietnamien’, June 1954, Archives de la Ministère des Affaires Étrangères, Paris [hereafter MAE], Série Asie-Océanie, 1944–1955, Sous-série Indochine, dossier 157.

12 Karnow, *Vietnam*, pp. 232–3; see also Marguerite Higgins, *Our Vietnam nightmare* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), pp. 157–8; and Shaplen, *Lost revolution*, p. 110. One of Hồ’s aides later claimed that the Việt Minh leader feared that keeping Diệm in detention might alienate nationalists in his native Central Vietnam; George Boudarel and Nguyen Van Ky, *Hanoi: City of the rising dragon*, tr. Claire Duiker (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002), pp. 90–1. A claim that Diệm’s release was secured by Catholic Bishop Lê Hữu Từ is in Đoàn Độc Thư and Xuân Huy, *Giám mục Lê Hữu Từ và Phát Diệm, 1945–54: Những năm tranh đấu hào hùng* (Houston: Xuân Thu, 1984), p. 117.

13 Diệm had earlier acknowledged that he would have joined Hồ’s government in exchange for a measure of control over Việt Minh security policy; see Ellen J. Hammer, *The struggle for Indochina, 1940–1955* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1966), pp. 149–50; and Memorandum of Conversation, Edmund S. Gullion, 8 May 1953, *Foreign Relations of the United States* [henceforth *FRUS*] 1952–1954, vol. 13 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1982), pp. 553–4.

14 The relevant French sources are described in Trần Thị Liên, ‘Les catholiques et la République Démocratique du Việt-Nam (1945–54): Une approche biographique’, in Goscha and de Tréglodé ed., *Le Việt Nam depuis 1945*.

15 On the establishment of the Front, see Guillemot, ‘Révolution nationale’, pp. 474–8; for its collapse, see Jamieson, *Understanding Vietnam*, pp. 210–13.

take up the Third Force cause. In mid-1947, he aligned himself with Nguyễn Tôn Hoàn, a Catholic leader from Cochinchina and a founding member of the 'Great Vietnam Nationalist Party' (*Đại Việt Quốc dân Đảng*, usually referred to as the 'Đại Việt'). Throughout the fall of that year, Diệm and Hoàn worked in tandem to persuade anti-communists to join a new nationalist organisation known as the 'Vietnam National Alliance' (*Việt Nam Quốc gia Liên hiệp*). Though the two men would later become bitter enemies, they were drawn together in 1947 by their shared ambition to build a viable Third Force movement. Hoàn's Đại Việt connections and Diệm's network of Catholic supporters made a formidable combination, and for a brief moment it seemed as if the Alliance might succeed where the National Union Front had failed.<sup>16</sup>

According to Diệm and Hoàn, the purpose of the Alliance was to mobilise support for a new political movement under the aegis of Bảo Đại. After a brief reign as titular head of the Japanese-sponsored 'Empire of Vietnam' in 1945, the emperor had been forced to abdicate during the August Revolution. He briefly served as an advisor to Hồ's DRV government, but opted after a few months to go into exile abroad. In 1947 Bảo Đại set up residence in Hong Kong and began to entertain overtures from Diệm, Hoàn and other Vietnamese who hoped that he could preside over a union of Vietnam's fractious non-communist factions and sects. At the same time, however, the ex-emperor was also meeting with French officials who flattered him with proposals to serve as a 'mediator' between French colonialism and Vietnamese nationalism. By late 1947 the French blandishments seemed to be having their intended effect: in December, Bảo Đại briefly returned to Indochina and agreed in principle to the establishment of a new Vietnamese government within the French Union. He then repaired to Hong Kong to consider his next move and to hear advice from various Vietnamese leaders.<sup>17</sup>

Diệm was among those who travelled to Hong Kong to offer his counsel to the ex-emperor. Bảo Đại had not forgotten Diệm's previous refusals to serve under him; still, he listened carefully as Diệm urged him to hold out for more concessions from Paris. Diệm was especially strident in warning that Vietnamese nationalists would accept nothing less from France than the dominion status which Britain had recently conceded to India and Pakistan. Bảo Đại seemed receptive to these arguments; still, Diệm feared that the ex-emperor remained susceptible to the French overtures.<sup>18</sup> In February 1948, Diệm and other nationalist leaders met in Saigon to define a framework for negotiations with the French on the matter of Vietnamese independence. Diệm subsequently went back to Hong Kong in March to try to persuade Bảo Đại to support this scheme; he also lobbied French officials for additional concessions on the scope of Vietnamese sovereignty. Significantly, the plan which Diệm advocated in these meetings reflected his republican convictions: it called for the establishment of a new Vietnamese assembly which would appoint Bảo Đại as its representative in negotiations with the French, and it also stipulated that the ex-emperor would be obliged to consult with the assembly before making any agreements on the independence issue.<sup>19</sup>

16 Guillemot, 'Révolution nationale', pp. 488–91.

17 Lockhart, *End of the Vietnamese monarchy*, pp. 165–71; Hammer, *Struggle for Indochina*, pp. 208–16.

18 Philippe Devillers, *Histoire du Viêt-Nam de 1940 à 1952* (Paris: Seuil, 1952), p. 420. Bảo Đại's account of the meeting is in Bảo Đại, *Le dragon d'Annam* (Paris: Plon, 1980), p. 190. For Diệm's views of the French proposals and his concern about Bảo Đại's attitude at the time of this meeting, see Telegram, Hopper to Sec. State, 20 Dec. 1947, *FRUS, 1947*, vol. 6 (Washington: GPO, 1972), pp. 152–5.

19 Devillers, *Histoire du Viêt-Nam*, pp. 425–9.

Unfortunately for Diệm, all of his efforts were in vain. At a ‘mini-Congress’ in Hong Kong in late March 1948, Bảo Đại informed him and other Vietnamese leaders that he intended to move ahead with the establishment of a new government according to the terms offered by Paris. In June, the ex-emperor signed a second agreement with colonial officials which purported to grant Vietnam its independence as an ‘associated state’ within the French Union. After more negotiations, the details of the new Franco-Vietnamese relationship were eventually spelled out in the Elysée Accords of 8 March 1949. The Accords established limited administrative autonomy for Vietnam, but allowed France to retain overall control of diplomatic, economic and military policy. Shortly after signing the Accords, Bảo Đại returned to Indochina and declared himself head of the new and ostensibly independent State of Vietnam (SVN).

The implementation of the ‘Bảo Đại solution’ during 1948–49 was deeply disappointing for Diệm. Many anticommunist nationalist leaders and groups – including Nguyễn Tôn Hoàn and the Đại Việt party – opted to back Bảo Đại and the SVN in the hope that the new state might serve as a vehicle for the gradual realisation of Vietnamese independence. Diệm, however, was disgusted with what he viewed as the ex-emperor’s capitulation to French demands, and he decided that the time had come for him to voice his dissatisfaction publicly. On 16 June 1949, Diệm published a statement in which he implicitly rejected the Elysée Accords by repeating his demand for dominion status for Vietnam. At the same time, he also served notice that he had no intention of collaborating with the Việt Minh. In sharp contrast to his earlier willingness to consider an accommodation with Hồ, Diệm now called for a new anticolonial movement led by ‘those elements who have rendered meritorious service to the Fatherland’ and especially by ‘resistance fighters’ – a unequivocal signal that he intended to challenge the Việt Minh by luring away those of its supporters who were willing to defect to his side.<sup>20</sup>

Diệm’s statement of June 1949 signalled a major shift in strategy. By breaking publicly with both Bảo Đại and the Việt Minh, Diệm was not simply removing them from his list of potential allies. He was also declaring that he possessed what amounted to an alternative vision for the transformation of Vietnamese life and society. Later suggestions to the contrary notwithstanding, this vision was not a reactionary plan to restore traditional values and institutions. Indeed, Diệm made it clear that he considered his views to be at least as revolutionary as the proposals offered by his rivals:

It should be known that the present struggle is not only a battle for the political independence of the Fatherland, but also a social revolution [*cách mạng xã hội*] to restore independence to the peasants and workers of Vietnam. In order that each and every person in Vietnam can have sufficient means to live in a matter befitting the dignity of a man who is truly free, I advocate social reforms that are sweeping and bold, with the condition that the dignity of man will always be respected and will be free to flourish.<sup>21</sup>

For the moment, the details of Diệm’s ‘social revolution’ – including those pertaining to the crucial problem of its realisation in policy and practice – remained obscure. He also

20 Ngô Đình Diệm, ‘Lời tuyên bố của chí-sĩ Ngô-Đình-Diệm ngày 16 tháng 6 năm 1949’, reprinted in *Con đường chính nghĩa: Độc lập dân chủ: Hiệu triệu và diễn văn quan trọng của Tổng thống Ngô Đình Diệm*, vol. 1 (Saigon: Sở Báo chí Thông tin, Phủ Tổng thống, 1956), pp. 221–2.

21 Ibid.

neglected to offer any explanation of the origins of his vision or to indicate what had inspired it. Nonetheless, he had taken an important step towards the elucidation of a distinctive programme of political action and social transformation. This vision of Vietnam's future, though still protean and vague in 1949, would become steadily more elaborate and detailed in the coming years, and in various ways it would inform all of Diệm's important decisions and policies until the end of his life.<sup>22</sup>

Diệm had hoped that the publication of his 16 June statement would serve to rally public opinion in his favour. In this regard, however, the move was a failure. The statement was widely read and noted within Vietnam, but it did not produce a new upsurge of popularity for Diệm or derail the 'Bảo Đại solution'. In fact, its most immediate effect was to exhaust the patience of both the French and the Việt Minh for any further intrigues with him. As a result, he would soon be obliged to consider alternative strategies and to go in search of new allies.

### **Diệm's American exile, 1950–53**

By early 1950, Diệm's room for political manoeuvring had been drastically reduced by developments within Indochina and abroad. In February of that year, the Việt Minh achieved a diplomatic breakthrough when both China and the Soviet Union extended official recognition and support to Hồ and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV). Meanwhile, the French ratification of the Elysée Accords after a long delay led to formal American and British backing for the State of Vietnam and Bảo Đại. These international shifts presaged a general hardening of political positions within Indochina. With the DRV now tilting towards the communist bloc, Hồ and his colleagues were less willing to make concessions to secure the cooperation of non-communist nationalists. At the same time, Bảo Đại and the French turned their attention to Washington and its promised military aid in hopes of gaining the upper hand on the battlefield. The effect of these developments was to diminish the leverage which Diệm had previously enjoyed as an ostensibly neutral party in the conflict. This reduction in leverage became frighteningly apparent in early 1950 when he learned that the Việt Minh had issued orders for his assassination.<sup>23</sup> For Diệm it was time to consider alternative strategies and to seek support from other quarters. In August of 1950, he departed Indochina on a trip which he expected would last a few months; as it happened, he would be abroad for nearly four years.

Diệm probably departed Vietnam without a single strategy or master plan; instead, he seems to have been exploring a number of different ways of garnering support from various foreign groups and governments. Accompanied by Bishop Thục, who was as energetic as ever in support of his younger brother's political goals, Diệm set out first for Japan. With the help of one of his old 'idealist' supporters from the occupation years, he had his first face-to-face meeting with his old ally, Prince Cường Để, who was still

22 Significantly, the 16 June 1949 statement seems to have been the only document authored by Diệm prior to 1954 which was re-published by his government after he became leader of South Vietnam.

23 The assassination orders were intercepted by the French, who then informed Diệm that they would be unable to protect him; see Telegram, Heath to Acheson, 28 July 1950, United States National Archives II, Record Group 59, State Department Decimal File 751G.00/7-2850. References to USNA2 materials are from this record group and will be cited by their Decimal File number only.

living in Tokyo. Diệm later recalled this encounter as a pleasant affair, and presumably there was a good deal of reminiscing about the events of 1945, but there was also talk of a new collaboration between the two men.<sup>24</sup> Before departing Vietnam, Diệm and Thục had expressed interest in a scheme in which Bảo Đại would be replaced as SVN Head of State by his teenage son Bảo Long, thus paving the way for Cường Để to return to Indochina as a kind of royal regent for the young prince.<sup>25</sup> Cường Để might well have been interested in such a plan. In fact, a few weeks prior to his meeting with Diệm, the prince had attempted to travel by ship to Indochina, only to be denied entry by French authorities. As it turned out, this would be his last attempt to return to his homeland; he died in Tokyo on 6 April 1951, having spent the last 36 years of his life in exile. Years later, after Diệm became leader of South Vietnam, he arranged for the prince's remains to be brought back to Vietnam for burial in his native Huế.<sup>26</sup>

In retrospect, the most important event of Diệm's stay in Japan was not his meeting with Cường Để, but his introduction to an American political scientist named Wesley Fishel. Only 31 years old, Fishel was already establishing himself as an expert on East Asian politics. Like many political scientists of his generation, Fishel took a top-down approach to his discipline; this approach was reflected in the interest he took in Asian political elites, who were the subjects of much of his research. If Fishel wanted to study elites, however, he also aspired to influence and advise them. As one of his colleagues later recalled, Fishel made a habit from early in his career of cultivating personal connections with Asian leaders whom he deemed likely to acquire power in the future.<sup>27</sup> Fishel found Diệm to be an 'extremely keen person'; Diệm was apparently also impressed with the American academic, and the two men agreed to correspond with each other.<sup>28</sup> Fishel subsequently became one of Diệm's most enthusiastic American supporters, and Diệm would make good use of Fishel's government and academic connections during and after the period of his exile.

Even before meeting Fishel, Diệm and Thục had already determined that the next stop on their itinerary would be the United States. Just as Diệm had tried to exploit

24 Translation of Letter, Ngô Đình Diệm to Wesley Fishel, 3 June 1951, Michigan State University Archives, Wesley R. Fishel papers, Box 1184, Folder 33. Fishel is not specifically identified as the recipient of the letter, but the content and date strongly suggest that Diệm wrote it to him.

25 Telegram, Gullion to Sec. State, 24 Jan. 1951, *FRUS, 1951*, vol. 6 (Washington: GPO, 1977), pp. 359–61; see also Telegram, Heath to Sec. State, 28 July 1950, USNA2, 751G.00/7-2850. According to Gullion, who was the Chargé d'Affaires at the US Embassy in Saigon in 1950 and who knew Diệm and Thục, the Bảo Long scheme envisioned a joint regency shared by Cường Để and the Empress Nam Phương, who – unlike her husband – was Catholic.

26 Cường Để's final effort to end his exile is described in Hammer, *Struggle for Indochina*, p. 275. For his acknowledgement that he and Diệm had discussed how the Prince might play a political role in Indochina, see Memorandum of Conversation, Dallas Coors, 8 Jan. 1951, USNA2, 794.00/1-851. The repatriation of his remains in 1956 is in *The Times of VN Weekly*, 21 Apr. 1956, p. 8.

27 Interview with Professor Ralph Smuckler, Washington DC, June 2001.

28 For Fishel's account of his Tokyo meeting with Diệm and Thục, see 'Memorandum on Ngo Dinh Diem', 28 Aug. 1950, included as an enclosure to Report, Spinks to Dept. of State, 2 Sept. 1950, USNA2, 751G.00/9-250. (Thanks to Joseph Morgan for providing a copy of this document.) This memorandum is unsigned, but other State Department records make it clear that Fishel was in fact the author; see the January 1951 memorandum cited in note 26. The Japanese contact who arranged all the meetings in Tokyo involving Diệm, Cường Để and Fishel during the summer of 1950 was the liberal writer and adventurer Komatsu Kiyoshi; see Fishel's memorandum cited here and Demaree Bess, 'Bright spot in Asia', *Saturday Evening Post*, 15 Sept. 1956, p. 130.

Japanese idealist sympathies to win Tokyo's support during the early 1940s, so he now hoped to turn American anticolonial sentiments to his advantage. In early September 1950, the brothers crossed the Pacific to the US and eventually arrived in Washington, where they were received at the State Department. The officials who met with them were intrigued by their proposal to use Catholic militia fighters as the core of a new Vietnamese National Army. However, the Americans were mostly unimpressed with Diệm and his potential as a leader; one official declared afterwards that Diệm was 'concerned equally if not more . . . with furthering his own personal ambitions than solving [the] complex problems facing his country today'.<sup>29</sup>

Having failed to win any promises of US support, Diệm and Thục continued on to Europe in October 1950. Diệm later reported that he had an audience with the Pope at the Vatican; he also travelled briefly to Paris, where he met with French and Vietnamese officials and arranged for a message to be delivered to Bảo Đại. The message tendered an offer by Diệm to serve as prime minister of the SVN, qualified by the stipulation that he receive sufficient authority to rein in the power of the regional administrations within Vietnam. This proposal seemed to be a climbdown for Diệm because it omitted his earlier demand that Vietnam receive dominion status before he would consent to serve in an SVN government. Bảo Đại, however, was unimpressed by Diệm's new-found flexibility, and replied non-committally.<sup>30</sup>

By December 1950, Diệm's fortunes had reached their nadir. His ventures to Japan, the US and Europe had all failed to produce the immediate political boost that he needed to rally support for a 'Third Force'; but if he returned to Vietnam, he faced political isolation and possible assassination. He therefore decided to change course, both strategically and geographically. Taking his leave of Thục, who was due to return to Vietnam, he re-crossed the Atlantic to the US; for the next two-and-a-half years, he worked quietly to build support among sympathetic Americans and waited for the political winds in Indochina to shift in his favour.<sup>31</sup> As was the case during his initial visit, not all of the Americans who met Diệm during this period of exile were impressed with him. Truman administration officials were generally underwhelmed, in part because they tended to believe that the 'Bảo Đại solution' was the best arrangement possible under the circumstances; from their perspective, Diệm's anti-French attitude was naïve and even dangerous. Though Diệm had several meetings at the State Department during 1950 and 1951, the officials there showed scant interest in his proposals. Instead, they seemed rather more concerned about persuading him to moderate his critical view of French policies.<sup>32</sup>

Fortunately for Diệm, there were other Americans who were more sympathetic to his anti-French stance and his Third Force convictions, and he proved to be remarkably successful in seeking them out. The list of prominent Americans who met and professed

29 Telegram, Acting Secretary of State to Saigon Embassy, 28 Sept. 1950, *FRUS 1950*, vol. 6 (Washington: GPO, 1976), pp. 884–6.

30 Telegram, Acheson to Saigon, 16 Jan. 1951, *FRUS, 1951*, vol. 6, p. 348. A slightly different version of the exchange between Diệm and Bảo Đại's representatives is recounted in Memorandum of Conversation, William O'Sullivan, 15 Jan. 1951, USNA2, 751G.00/1-1551.

31 Diệm's explanation of why he decided to return to the US in late 1950 is in D. M. Coors, 'Conversation with Mr. Ngo Dinh Diem, prominent Vietnamese Catholic leader', 26 July 1951, USNA2, 751G.00/7-2651.

32 *Ibid.*; see also the telegram of 28 Sept. 1950 cited in note 29.

their admiration for Diệm during the early 1950s included a Roman Catholic Cardinal, a Justice of the US Supreme Court, at least half a dozen members of Congress, numerous journalists, several important academics and even William J. Donovan, the founder and former head of the famous Office of Strategic Services (OSS).<sup>33</sup> As a group, Diệm's American admirers defied easy categorisation. Though many were Catholic, a significant number were not; Wesley Fishel was Jewish, for example. Similarly, Diệm's appeal was not confined either to conservatives or to liberals. In addition to attracting the attention of prominent conservatives like Donovan, he also impressed liberals such as Senator Mike Mansfield and the journalist Gouverneur Paulding. Indeed, the roster of American boosters which Diệm assembled during the early 1950s is notable for its inclusion of liberals and conservatives alike, as well as for its ecumenical and bipartisan qualities.

What accounts for Diệm's ability to garner the support of such a diverse collection of American notables? As virtually every account of Diệm's career has noted, part of his appeal to Americans lay in his staunch anticommunism. His stint in the US coincided with the high-water mark of McCarthyism, a period when anticommunist credentials were *de rigueur* for any foreign leader who hoped to win American support for a cause. However, if anticommunism was necessary to Diệm's campaign to attract American support during the early 1950s, it was hardly sufficient to ensure the success of that campaign. By itself, anticommunism hardly distinguished him from the French and Bảo Đại, who retained their status as official US allies.

Instead of anticommunism, some writers have fingered Diệm's identity as a Catholic as the key factor that helped him to attract American supporters. He certainly relied heavily on the Vatican connections of Thục and other Vietnamese prelates during his exile; among other things, he used these connections to arrange introductions to prominent Americans and lodging at Catholic seminaries. Moreover, he was not averse to using his status as a leader of Vietnamese Catholics in order to win support from his American co-religionists.<sup>34</sup> However, the claim that Diệm's Catholicism was the key element which explains his ability to garner American support is at best an exaggeration.<sup>35</sup> Though he discussed religious matters in his private correspondence and conversations with his fellow Catholics, he does not seem to have envisioned US–Vietnamese collaboration as a prospective Christian alliance. On the contrary, in his conversations with non-Catholic

33 Joseph Morgan, *The Vietnam lobby: The American Friends of Vietnam, 1955–1975* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), pp. 1–14.

34 For example, in a 1951 memorandum Diệm wrote to a Catholic member of Congress, he described the Catholic dioceses of Phát Diệm and Bùi Chu in northern Vietnam as a 'Third Force zone' populated by people who 'understand true Western values' and who 'are not anti-West but anticolonialist'; Ngo Dinh Diem, 'Indo China', memorandum of July 1951, enclosed in letter, Rep. Edna Kelly to Sen. Mike Mansfield, 20 July 1951, University of Montana Mansfield Library, Mike Mansfield Archives, Series IV, Box 221, Folder 14. (I am grateful to Don Oberdorfer for providing me with a copy of this memorandum.)

35 In the 1960s, it was often alleged that US support for Diệm had been orchestrated primarily by the powerful Cardinal Francis Spellman of New York; Robert Scheer, *How the United States got involved in Vietnam* (Santa Barbara, CA: Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions, 1965), pp. 20–5. More recent arguments along these lines have been less conspiratorially minded, but they still maintain that religion was the core of Diệm's appeal to Americans; see, for example, Seth Jacobs, "'Sink or swim with Ngo Dinh Diem": Religion, Orientalism and United States intervention in Vietnam, 1950–1957' (Ph.D. diss., Northwestern University, 2000).

Americans and especially in public remarks delivered during his exile, Diệm invariably eschewed religious statements and language in favour of secular arguments about shared commitments to the twin causes of anticommunism and anticolonialism.<sup>36</sup>

Rather than emphasising religion, Diệm seemed more interested in appealing to American beliefs about development, modernisation and the transformative capacity of US technology. In particular, he sought to exploit the new official interest in ‘technical assistance’ for foreign nations. In 1949 President Harry Truman announced the ‘Point Four’ programme, which dramatically increased levels of non-military US foreign aid. Though Point Four was a direct descendant of the 1947 Marshall Plan for the reconstruction of Western Europe, it was global in scale and included a broader variety of types of aid. In addition to grants and subsidies, the ‘technical assistance’ to be provided also included equipment, training and expert knowledge. As many scholars have pointed out, Point Four heralded a new American confidence in the capacity of US aid and expertise to shape economic, political and social change around the world. As a key Cold War battleground, Vietnam appeared to many American officials to be in desperate need of the help that Point Four was designed to provide. By the time that Diệm arrived in the US in 1950, a small American technical assistance programme was already operating in Indochina, and US technical aid to the Associated States steadily increased thereafter.<sup>37</sup>

In his efforts to shape the form and content of US technical assistance to Vietnam, Diệm received the invaluable help of his friend Wesley Fishel. Fishel was well positioned to assist Diệm in this regard because in 1951 he joined the faculty at Michigan State College (soon to be renamed Michigan State University). During the 1950s, under the energetic leadership of President John Hannah, Michigan State administered government-sponsored technical assistance projects in countries such as Brazil, Colombia and Japan.<sup>38</sup> Soon after arriving at the college, Fishel arranged for Diệm to work there as a consultant, which afforded the two men the chance to collaborate on a proposal for a technical assistance project for Vietnam. The 1952 letter in which Fishel presented the proposal to the US Mutual Security Agency clearly bore his influence, because it envisioned a project that was similar to the other Michigan State ventures. However, the letter also included ideas that were obviously contributed by Diệm, such as the stipulation that the programme be based in his hometown of Huế. The scope of the proposed project – which would have been much broader than the existing Michigan State programmes – also seems to have been defined largely by Diệm. He declared that Vietnam needed help in areas as diverse as ‘police science’, ‘foreign trade problems’ and

36 For example, in two speeches delivered towards the end of his stay in the US, Diệm made only one passing reference to Christianity; Ngô Đình Diệm, ‘Recent developments in Indochina’ (Address delivered to the fifth Annual Meeting of the Far Eastern Association, Cleveland, Ohio, 1 Apr. 1953) and ‘Talk by Mr. Ngô Đình Diệm before Southeast Asia Seminar, Cornell University’ (20 Feb. 1953). Copies of both of these speeches are available in the Cornell University Kroch Library.

37 For an overview of the US technical assistance programme to the Associated States, see the Mutual Security Agency pamphlet entitled ‘US technical and economic assistance to the Far East: A part of the Mutual Security program for 1952–1953’ (Washington: MSA, March 1952). (A copy of this pamphlet is contained in USNA2, RG59, US State Department Lot Files, Box 1, Entry 1393.) The classic account of Point Four and its consequences is Robert Packenham, *Liberal America and the Third World: Political development ideas in foreign aid and social science* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1973).

38 Paul L. Dressel, *College to university: The Hannah years at Michigan State, 1935–1969* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 1987), pp. 276–7.

even 'studies for the adoption of democratic institutions'.<sup>39</sup> In retrospect, the proposal demonstrates Diệm's remarkable prescience in seeking to shape the form and content of what would later become a huge flow of American assistance to his government.<sup>40</sup>

Diệm's ability to win over influential American supporters was apparent at a luncheon held in his honour in Washington on 8 May 1953. The event was hosted by Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas, who had become convinced of the need for a Third Force in Indochina during a visit there the year before. Douglas arranged the lunch to introduce Diệm to other like-minded Americans; the guests included Senators Mike Mansfield and John F. Kennedy, both of whom were destined to play key roles in Diệm's future relations with the US.<sup>41</sup> The Senators and their fellow diners were all impressed with Diệm, who spoke forcefully against Bảo Đại and the prospects for independence within the French Union and regaled his listeners with an account of his 1946 encounter with Hồ Chí Minh. As Mansfield later recalled, he left the lunch 'with the feeling that if anyone could hold South Vietnam, it was somebody like Ngô Đình Diệm'.<sup>42</sup>

As many historians have pointed out, Diệm's ability to connect with Americans such as Fishel, Mansfield and Kennedy would eventually pay off. Especially after 1954, the personal relationships that he had established during his exile helped ratify and reinforce Washington's official support for him and his government. In May 1953, however, he was not yet in a position to reap these political dividends, and his American friends had so far offered him little more than encouragement and moral support. He therefore made ready to seek his objectives by other means. During the lunch in Washington, Diệm announced that he intended to leave soon for France, and that he hoped eventually to

39 Letter, Wesley Fishel to MacDonald Salter, 14 March 1952, MSUA, Fishel Papers, Box 1184, Folder 14.

40 Fishel's letter describing the proposal seems not to have generated much interest at the MSA in 1952; however, the ideas Diệm and Fishel outlined were eventually realised in the technical assistance programme that Michigan State set up in South Vietnam after Diệm came to power in 1954. See John Ernst, *Forging a fateful alliance: Michigan State University and the Vietnam War* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 1998).

41 William O. Douglas, *North from Malaya: Adventure on five fronts* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1953), pp. 147–210; see pp. 180–1 for Douglas' sympathetic representation of Diệm as an 'honest and independent' alternative to the French. Like Douglas, Mansfield and Kennedy had also travelled to Indochina and become converts to the Third Force cause. Other Americans present at the lunch meeting included: Bill Costello, a reporter for CBS News; Ray Newton, an official of the American Friends Service Committee; Edmund S. Gullion of the State Department's Policy Planning Staff, who had met Diệm during his earlier stint as Chargé d'Affaires at the US Mission in Saigon; and Gene Gregory, who had also served in the Embassy in Saigon and had arranged to introduce Diệm to Douglas after the latter's return from Indochina. The luncheon was also attended by Hoàng Văn Đoàn, Bishop of Bắc Ninh in northern Vietnam. This information is from author's interview with Gene Gregory, Ho Chi Minh City, Mar. 2002 and letter, Douglas to Diệm, 8 May 1953, Library of Congress Manuscript Division, William O. Douglas Papers, Box 1716.

42 Don Oberdorfer interview with Mike Mansfield, 28 Aug. 1998. (I am grateful to Mr Oberdorfer for permission to use this quotation here.) Mansfield likely meant to say 'Vietnam' rather than 'South Vietnam', since the latter did not exist as a distinct political entity in May 1953. On the dinner see Memorandum of Conversation, Edmund S. Gullion, 8 May 1953, *FRUS 1952–1954*, vol. 13, pp. 553–4. The date on this document (both the published version and the original in the US National Archives) is 7 May 1953. However, based on other documents produced at the time, I believe that the luncheon actually took place on 8 May; see the letter from Douglas to Diệm, cited in note 41, which dates the meeting on the eighth. See also the enclosures in Letter, Kennedy to Dulles, 7 May 1953, USNA2, 751G.00/5-753, which show that Kennedy's office made an urgent request to the State Department on the morning of 8 May for immediate answers to questions about the current US policy on Indochina.

return to Vietnam.<sup>43</sup> Of course, neither he nor anyone else at the lunch that day could have foreseen the events that would take place over the next 12 months and that would culminate, almost exactly a year to the day later, in the surrender of the French garrison at Điện Biên Phủ to the Việt Minh. Nonetheless, even if he did not anticipate these events, Diệm would be well positioned to exploit them. Already in the spring of 1953, he was laying plans for his political comeback; the critical impetus would be provided not by his new admirers in the United States, but by the loyal supporters whom he had left behind in Vietnam.

### **Brother's keeper: The emergence of Ngô Đình Nhu, 1950–53**

It has long been assumed that Diệm was out of touch with events and sentiments in Vietnam during the period of his exile; his residence at Catholic seminaries and monasteries in the US and Europe have often been taken as indicative of a desire to retreat from world affairs in general and from politics in particular. Even before Diệm's exile had ended, some US officials were already deriding him as 'a Yogi-like mystic' who had 'just emerged from a religious retreat into the cold world' and who was therefore ill-prepared for the daunting political tasks that were ahead of him.<sup>44</sup> Those who have written about his life and career have generally agreed that he was isolated during his exile, and they therefore usually portray him as floating helplessly on a sea of intrigue when he finally returned to Saigon in the early summer of 1954.

Such a representation of Diệm is open to challenge on at least two points. First, this interpretation overlooks the possibility that his monastic retreats during the period of his exile might have been less isolating and more strategic than they appeared at the time. Very little is known about his activities during the months he spent at monasteries and seminaries in the US and Belgium during 1951–54, and the assumption that he was cut off from the outside world while he lived in these cloisters is at best an unproven hypothesis. In fact, these institutions likely provided him with a relatively secure means for communicating with his allies in Indochina, because they provided him access to international networks of Catholics who could safely carry messages that might otherwise have been intercepted by the French police. For example, Diệm received the Vietnamese Catholic activist Trần Chánh Thành during his stay at a Belgian monastery in early 1954. Since Thành had been a close associate of Ngô Đình Nhu's since at least 1952 and since he subsequently became one of the most powerful figures in the Diệm government, it seems reasonable to conclude that he was serving as a courier for Diệm as he travelled between Europe and Indochina during this critical time.<sup>45</sup>

Second, the claims that Diệm was isolated are undermined by evidence which suggests that he was coordinating his activities during his exile with the efforts of his supporters in Indochina who were working to prepare the way for his return. One of the most glaring omissions in the existing accounts of Diệm's rise to power in 1953–54 concerns the important assistance rendered by his brothers. In addition to the aforementioned support of his older brother, Bishop Thục, Diệm would also benefit during his exile from help provided by his three younger brothers Nhu, Cẩn and Luyện. While

43 See the Memorandum of Conversation cited in the previous note.

44 Telegram, Dillon to State Dept., 24 May 1954, *FRUS, 1952–1954*, vol. 13, pp. 1608–9.

45 *Times of Viet Nam Weekly*, 17 Mar. 1956, p. 7; Georges Chaffard, *Indochine: Dix ans d'indépendance* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1964), p. 30.

Cần and Luyện played important roles in Diệm's eventual success, the most crucial contributions of all were provided by Nhu.

Cần and Luyện were the youngest of the Ngô brothers, and they could not have been more different from each other. Cần was reclusive, cantankerous and the least educated of the brothers; he reportedly never once travelled outside of Vietnam, and he spent most of his time in Huế. In contrast, Luyện was a cosmopolitan and personable engineer who had studied in Europe and spoke several languages. Not surprisingly, Cần and Luyện lent support to Diệm in different ways. Cần began in the early 1950s to build a clandestine network of supporters in Central Vietnam; he used this organisation to build and consolidate support for Diệm in that part of the country, while also expanding his personal influence there. Meanwhile, Luyện was working on Diệm's behalf in Europe. After Diệm moved from the US to France in May 1953, Luyện became his main advisor and his personal representative in negotiations with Bảo Đại and other Vietnamese leaders.<sup>46</sup>

The Ngô family had no shortage of unusual and enigmatic personalities; nonetheless, Nhu was arguably the most unusual and enigmatic of them all. The fourth of the six brothers, he was said to be studious, thoughtful and reserved. He was neither provincial like Cần nor urbane like Luyện, and he displayed little interest in the imperial court politics which so preoccupied his older brothers Khôi, Thục and Diệm. Indeed, as a young man, Nhu seemed to prefer bookish pursuits to politics. He spent much of the 1930s in Paris, first taking a degree in literature and then studying paleography and librarianship at the famous École des Chartes. In the late 1930s, he returned to Vietnam and embarked on a career as an archivist; by 1945 he had attained a senior post at the future National Library in Hanoi.<sup>47</sup> After the August Revolution, Nhu became more involved in politics, and especially in his brothers' efforts to mobilise support among Vietnamese Catholics. Still, he maintained a relatively low profile down until the time that Diệm departed into exile. With his young wife Trần Lệ Xuân – later to gain international fame and infamy as 'Madame Nhu' – Nhu in 1950 was still living in relative obscurity in the town of Dalat in the southern highlands, where he indulged in his hobby of raising orchids.<sup>48</sup>

Like his brothers, Nhu was both a devout Catholic and a staunch Confucian. However, just as his education and early career were different from those of the other Ngô brothers, so too did the evolution of his ideas and his politics follow a distinctive course. In France, Nhu had been profoundly influenced by the lay Catholic philosopher

46 Ibid., pp. 27–30; and 'Ngô Đình Luyện', undated biographical summary, MAE, série VLC, sous-série Sud-Vietnam, dossier 22. On Cần, see Cao Văn Luận, *Bên giòng lịch sử, 1940–1965* (Saigon: Trí Dũng, 1972), pp. 180–9.

47 'Ngô Đình Nhu', in *Souverains et notabilités d'Indochine* (Hanoi: Éditions du Gouvernement Général de l'Indochine, IDEO, 1943), p. 62; 'Curriculum Vitae of Mr. Ngô Đình Nhu', undated, Texas Tech University, The Vietnam Archive, John Donnell collection, Box 2, Folder 22, Box 2 [hereafter 'Donnell papers']. Nhu seems to have retained his job at the National Library during the period in which Hanoi was under the control of the Việt Minh; see 'Lịch-sử đầy đủ về gia-đình Cụ Ngô-Đ.-Diệm', *Saigon Mới*, 23 June 1954.

48 Author's interview with Gene Gregory, Ho Chi Minh City, Mar. 2002. One of Nhu's associates later recalled accompanying him on a visit undertaken on Diệm's behalf to a Catholic region near the Lao border in 1946; A. J. Langguth, *Our Vietnam: The war, 1954–1975* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000), p. 87. A Catholic source reports that Nhu was forced to flee by sea from Hanoi to the diocese of Phát Diệm upon the outbreak of war in December 1946, and from there managed to travel overland to Huế; Đoàn Độc Thư and Xuân Huy, *Giám mục Lê Hữu Từ*, p. 116.

Emmanuel Mounier. In his books and in the pages of his journal *Esprit*, Mounier responded to the Great Depression and the suffering it caused by developing a critique of liberal capitalism; he particularly decried the liberal preoccupation with individualism, arguing that it led inevitably to isolation, alienation and exploitation. Yet as a conservative Catholic, Mounier was unwilling to embrace Marxism because its materialist precepts gave short shrift to what he called the ‘spiritual’ dimensions of human nature. Instead of capitalism or communism, Mounier looked forward to a postcapitalist social order in which both individual material needs and communal prosperity would receive their due – but without either one becoming the exclusive focus of social policy. Instead, Mounier proposed to focus attention on the development of the total person (*la personne*), which he defined as inclusive of spiritual needs as well as material concerns. Mounier’s emphasis on the ‘person’ as an antidote to the individual was a key theme in his writings, and he therefore came to describe his ideas as ‘Personalism’.<sup>49</sup>

By the time Nhu returned to Indochina from France, he had become an enthusiastic Personalist who was convinced that Mounier’s doctrine – which he translated into Vietnamese as *nhân vị* – could be applied in Vietnam.<sup>50</sup> Especially after 1945, the possibility that Personalism might represent a ‘third path’ to social development seems to have become particularly attractive to Nhu. For Nhu, Mounier’s rejection of both liberalism and communism became congruent to the Third Force politics which Diệm was promoting. That Nhu found his older brother to be receptive to his ideas is reflected in the fact that Diệm’s remarks and writings from this period contain references to terms adopted from the Personalist lexicon.

After 1950, Nhu became a leading figure in the efforts to mobilise support for Diệm among non-communist Vietnamese. At the same time, he also grew more ardent in promoting Personalism as a guide for Vietnam’s social and political development. In April of 1952, Nhu outlined his views on Personalism in a talk at the newly established Vietnamese military academy in Dalat. He acknowledged that the concept of *nhân vị* was originally a Catholic idea, but insisted that it had a universal relevance and utility, especially in war-torn Vietnam. Addressing the non-Catholics who made up the majority of his audience, he declared that ‘the anxieties of Catholics are like an echo answering the worries that are roiling your own hearts and souls’. All Vietnamese of all political and

49 Emmanuel Mounier, *Personalism*, tr. Philip Mairet (London: Routledge and Paul, 1952), pp. 17–19 (individualism) and 103–5 (social order). The views of Mounier and other French Personalists can be distinguished from American Personalism, which flourished in Boston in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries under the intellectual leadership of Borden Parker Bowne. Although both brands of Personalism drew inspiration from Roman Catholic theology, American Personalists tended to be more staunchly idealist than their French counterparts, who acknowledged the independent existence of material reality even as they argued it should not be overemphasised. See ‘Personalism’ in *The encyclopedia of philosophy*, ed. Paul Edwards, vol. VI (New York: Macmillan, 1967), pp. 106–9; and ‘Personalism’ in *The Cambridge dictionary of philosophy*, ed. Robert Audi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 575.

50 In translating Personalism as *nhân vị*, Nhu was following the lead of Father Bửu Dưỡng, a Catholic priest and scholar who coined the term in lectures he delivered during the 1940s. See Nguyen Trai, ‘The government of men in the Republic of Vietnam’ (unpublished manuscript, 1962), p. 139; a copy of this document is available in Widener Library at Harvard University. It is not clear whether Nhu actually studied with Mounier in France; some of his Vietnamese associates claimed he had, but he denied it on at least one occasion. See ‘Nhu and Personalism’, undated notes, Donnell papers, Box 3, Folder 14.

religious backgrounds, Nhu argued, had to join together in ‘a sudden and fierce unanimity’ in order to ‘preserve the person’ (*bảo vệ nhân vị*) against the forces which threatened to crush it. These forces included liberalism and communism, both of which offered only ‘false liberation’ and perpetual war.<sup>51</sup>

Though his audience did not know it at the time, Nhu’s speech was a harbinger of things to come. Besides being long, dense and abstract – qualities of his which many Vietnamese would come to know and resent over the ensuing decade – the speech featured many of the key themes which would characterise both his and Diệm’s later speeches and pronouncements about the utility and value of Personalism. These themes included not only the dangers posed by liberalism and communism but also the importance of ‘spiritual’ concerns as opposed to mere material considerations. In addition, the speech also highlighted Nhu’s conviction that what Vietnam needed was nothing less than a thoroughgoing revolution:

These are great undertakings, and they can be summarized as a politico-economic revolution [*một cuộc cách mạng chính-trị kinh-tế*], aimed at making the Person the focus of concern. I say ‘revolution’ because it will be a great waste if we try to patch over the fissures in a creaky house, when what is needed is to transform the entire internal structure of the house.<sup>52</sup>

Like Diệm, Nhu clearly understood by the early 1950s that the creation of a Third Force in Vietnam would depend on more than mere promises to return to ancient traditions, values and practices. In order to succeed, such a movement would have to promote transformation and revolution – albeit along non-communist lines. Nhu believed that Personalism could form the basis of a new universal ideology that would appeal to all Vietnamese, non-Catholics as well as Catholics.

If Nhu fancied himself as a philosopher, he also knew that the movement he envisioned would require a great deal of organising; as it turned out, his true talents lay more with the latter than the former. Perhaps as early as 1950, Nhu had formed the nucleus of a new political party which eventually became known as the *Đảng Cần lao Nhân vị*; this name would later be officially translated as the ‘Personalist Labour Party’ or ‘Labour Party for Human Dignity’, but it was colloquially referred to both by Vietnamese and Americans simply as the ‘Cần Lao’.<sup>53</sup> At its inception, the Cần Lao organisation seems to have operated entirely in secret, and little is known about the early years of its existence. The party functioned as a network of cells, and most recruits generally knew the identities of only a handful of their fellow members. After 1954 its existence was officially acknowledged, but its activities still remained mostly confined to the shadows. Eventually the Cần Lao would become the most important and most infamous component of Diệm and Nhu’s security apparatus. In its early years, though, Nhu’s key objective was the mobilisation of support for a new nationalist political movement headed by Diệm.

51 Ngô Đình Nhu, ‘Sự góp sức của người Công-giáo vào hòa-bình ở Việt-Nam’ (Speech delivered on 18 Apr. 1952 at Dalat Military Academy), reprinted in *Xã Hội* [henceforth *XH*], Feb. 1953, pp. 5, 14, 18–22.

52 *Ibid.*, p. 21.

53 The precise date and circumstances of the formation of the Cần Lao party remain mysterious, but it seems certain that the party was established prior to Diệm’s return from his exile in 1954; he told Wesley Fishel in 1955 that it had been formed sometime around 1952. See Memorandum, Fishel to Collins, 7 Mar. 1955, *FRUS, 1955–1957*, vol. 1 (Washington: GPO, 1985), p. 111.

The name which Nhu selected for his political party was revealing. Specifically, the use of *cần lao* (meaning ‘labour’ or ‘hard work’) reflected Nhu’s intense interest in the latent political potential of the Vietnamese working masses. Contrary to what some observers supposed, this interest in labour organising (where ‘labour’ was understood to include both industrial workers and poor tenant farmers) stemmed less from any admiration of Leninist organising practices than it did from his embrace of certain ideas associated with French syndicalism. In particular, he endorsed the syndicalist notion that workers should be organised into groups such as unions or cooperatives to ensure that their interests would not be subordinated to the interests of capital. Though Nhu tended in his public and private discourse to place the accent on the Personalist elements of his philosophy, the style and substance of his organising efforts also bore the imprint of these syndicalist principles.<sup>54</sup>

Besides the secret activities of the *Cần Lao*, Nhu also undertook more overt kinds of organising. These initiatives included establishing an alliance with a labour activist named Trần Quốc Bửu, a veteran organiser who had been affiliated at various times with the Cao Đài religious sect and the Việt Minh. In the late 1940s, after becoming disillusioned with communism, Bửu fell in with a French labour organiser who educated him in the ideas and tactics of the Christian Democratic trade union movement. After a brief stint in Europe, Bửu returned to Việt Nam in 1949 and began illegally unionising urban and rural workers. In 1952, changes in the SVN’s labour laws permitted Bửu to legalise his confederation of unions under the moniker of the ‘Vietnamese Confederation of Christian Workers’ and to affiliate with the Brussels-based International Federation of Christian Trade Unions.<sup>55</sup> It is not clear when and how the two men began to collaborate with each other, but Nhu had become closely associated with Bửu’s Confederation by 1953. In February of that year, Nhu and his allies began publishing a journal in Saigon entitled *Xã hội* (Society) which strongly backed Bửu and the Confederation. Besides coming out in support of unionism, the journal also staunchly supported the creation of workers’ and farmers’ cooperatives – a stance which prefigured the policies that Diệm and Nhu would implement later as leaders of South Vietnam.<sup>56</sup>

As events in the later 1950s and early 1960s demonstrated, Nhu’s efforts to build broad support among Vietnamese workers and peasants for his revolutionary objectives would fail in the long run. However, eventual defeat does not preclude the possibility of

54 The syndicalist inclinations of the *Cần Lao* party and its founder were later explicitly acknowledged by party officials: ‘The program of the Can Lao Nhan Vi follows syndicalist lines, advocating co-management of national industries by representatives of capital and labour and workers’ participation in the profits and technical development of industries. The party has taken a strong position of support for agrarian reform for the same reason, namely that possession is a right of the worker’; *Times of Vietnam Weekly*, 25 Feb. 1956, p. 9.

55 Edmund S. Wehrle, ‘“No more pressing task than organization in Southeast Asia”: The AFL-CIO approaches the Vietnam War, 1947–1964’, *Labor History*, 42, 3 (2001): 277–95; *Times of Vietnam Magazine*, 4 Mar. 1962, pp. 18–19. Significantly, the Confederation’s Vietnamese name (*Tổng liên đoàn Lao động Việt Nam*) did not indicate the group’s Christian affiliation; this undoubtedly reflected Bửu’s determination to attract non-Christian workers as well as Christians, and also his own identity as a Buddhist.

56 ‘Tổng-liên-đoàn Lao-động V.N.’, *XH*, Feb. 1953, pp. 31, 34; ‘Bản kiến-nghị của Liên-hiệp Nghiệp đoàn Trung-Việt gửi Tổng-liên-đoàn Lao-động V.N.’, *XH*, July 1953, p. 16; Dân Sinh, ‘Tìm hiểu tổ-chức hợp-p-tác-xã’, *XH*, 15 Sept. 1953, p. 23; Dân Sinh, ‘Mục-đích và phương-pháp huấn-luyện’, *XH*, 10 Nov. 1953, pp. 33–4; and Dân Sinh, ‘Màu sắc tổ-chức hợp-p-tác-xã các nước’, in the same issue, pp. 28–9.

interim victories; the fact that the Ngô brothers were later overthrown does not prove that their ideas and plans were always ineffective, or that they were doomed from the outset. Indeed, in the factionalised and fragmented world of Indochinese politics during the 1950s, Nhu's ability to wield power through both mass organisations and clandestine networks was a potent tool. Diệm seemed to understand this, and during his exile he counted heavily on Nhu to lay the political groundwork for his return. As it turned out, Diệm's faith in his younger brother was well placed; by the summer of 1953, Nhu was already plotting the tactics and strategies which would carry Diệm to power.

### **Diệm's campaign for the premiership, 1953–54**

Diệm's decision to depart the US for Europe in May 1953 was the opening move in a new political gambit. Though the war in Indochina still appeared stalemated, he and his allies had detected a political shift which they hoped to use to his benefit. Nhu, from his vantage point in Saigon, noted that many non-communist nationalists were becoming impatient with Bảo Đại and his strategy of seeking independence within the French Union. In the four years since the signing of the Elysée Accords, France had made few concessions to Vietnamese nationalism, and the State of Vietnam remained at best only nominally independent from Paris. Most nationalists were also frustrated with SVN Premier Nguyễn Văn Tâm, who was widely regarded as a Francophile and an autocrat. Finally, nationalist sentiment had been piqued by Paris' unilateral decision in early May 1953 to devalue the Indochinese piaster, a move which both contravened earlier agreements with the Associated States and exacerbated inflation and hardship within Indochina.<sup>57</sup> As dissatisfaction with France and Bảo Đại swelled, the Ngô brothers sensed that the time had come to make a new bid for power.

As they made their plans, Diệm and Nhu knew that they would have to tread carefully. They needed to discredit Bảo Đại and his strategy of seeking independence via piecemeal concessions; however, they would also have to refrain from direct criticism of the ex-emperor, lest he become so annoyed that he would reject Diệm's candidacy out of hand. Fortunately for the brothers, events in the summer of 1953 provided exactly the kind of opportunity they needed. In early July the French government proposed a new round of talks with the Associated States aimed at 'perfecting' their independence within the French Union. Had the French made such an offer in 1949 or 1950, it might have been viewed as a validation of Bảo Đại's gradualist stance; by 1953, however, the prospect of more negotiations only fuelled the nationalists' anxieties about French sincerity.

In a series of meetings with other nationalist leaders during July and August, Nhu adroitly exploited these anxieties. Working in tandem with Nguyễn Tôn Hoàn of the Đại Việt – who, as noted above, had collaborated briefly with Diệm in 1947–48 before rallying to the SVN – Nhu floated the idea of convening an unofficial 'Unity Congress' (*Đại hội Đoàn kết*) in Saigon in early September, after Bảo Đại had departed for France. The idea of a Congress was quickly embraced by many of the nationalists who had been counted among Bảo Đại's most prominent supporters; besides Hoàn of the Đại Việt, these included the Cao Đài leader Phạm Công Tắc, General Trần Văn Soái of the Hòa Hảo sect, General Lê Văn Viễn of the Saigon-based Bình Xuyên syndicate and several key Catholic figures. In addition, several groups that had previously withheld support from

57 Hammer, *Struggle for Indochina*, pp. 281–6, 300–1.

Bảo Đại and the SVN (such as the nationalist *Đông minh Hội* and *Việt Nam Quốc dân Đảng* parties and certain Buddhist organisations) also agreed to attend the Congress. General Viễn consented to let the event take place at Binh Xuyên headquarters in Saigon.<sup>58</sup>

The Unity Congress on 5–6 September 1953 was a chaotic affair. The 55 delegates in attendance endorsed a statement which fiercely denounced Bảo Đại's gradualist policies. As soon as the statement was signed, however, the participants began to bicker about its implications. General Viễn became concerned that the Congress was becoming uncontrollable, and he brought the event to a premature end by closing the conference hall after just two days. The Cao Đài's *Tắc*, who had been harshly critical of Bảo Đại in remarks issued before the conference, now joined with the chiefs of the Binh Xuyên and Hòa Hảo in sending a telegram to the ex-emperor that reaffirmed the loyalty of all three groups to the SVN. Nhu, meanwhile, announced that the Congress had produced a new political organisation known as the 'Movement for National Union and Peace' (*Phong trào Đại đoàn kết và Hòa bình*); however, he also was careful to distance himself from some of the harshest of the anti-Bảo Đại statements by denying that the Congress had adopted an official political stance.<sup>59</sup>

As an exercise in coalition building, the Unity Congress was a failure. For Nhu and Diệm, however, the event was intended mainly to force the hand of Bảo Đại, and in this regard it turned out to be a brilliant success. From France, Bảo Đại sought to regain the political high ground by announcing that an official 'National Congress' would take place in Saigon in October. The senior leaders of the Cao Đài, Hòa Hảo and Binh Xuyên immediately agreed to participate, along with representatives of most other nationalist groups. Nhu and his allies, however, were conspicuously absent when the meeting convened on 12 October 1953. At first, the Congress seemed likely to deliver the expected affirmation of support for Bảo Đại and his policies. However, on 16 October the delegates suddenly approved a resolution that rejected participation in the French Union in favour of 'total independence'. Bảo Đại loyalists subsequently managed to qualify the offending statement with an amendment that an independent Vietnam would not remain in the Union 'in its present form', but the political damage had been done. Intended as a show of nationalist support for Bảo Đại, the National Congress had instead revealed the extent of the nationalist dissatisfaction with him and his policies.<sup>60</sup>

Diệm and Nhu had disassociated themselves from the October Congress, no doubt because they feared that it would serve to shore up support for Bảo Đại.<sup>61</sup> They soon

58 For the planning of the September Congress, see Guillemot, 'Révolution nationale', pp. 628–32.

59 A detailed account of the Unity Congress is contained in Telegram, Kidder to Dept. State, 22 Sept. 1953, USNA2, 751G.00/9-2253. For published accounts, see *Tiếng Dội*, 8 Sept. 1953; *Le Monde*, 8 Sept. 1953; and Donald Lancaster, *The emancipation of French Indochina* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961), pp. 275–7. Bảo Đại did not mention the September conference in his memoirs, but he did acknowledge rebuffing a request for a Congress made by Nhu and others during the summer of 1953; Bảo Đại, *Dragon d'Annam*, pp. 312–13. For the announcement of the creation of the Movement for National Union and Peace, see Phong Thủy, 'Ý-nghĩa và giá-trị cuộc Đại-hội Đoàn-kết ngày 6-9-53', *XH*, 15 Sept. 1953, p. 2.

60 For details on the October Congress proceedings, see *Vietnam Presse*, 31–36 (12–17 Oct. 1953) and *Le Monde*, 17–20 Oct. 1953.

61 See Diệm's letter published in *Le Monde*, 25–6 Oct. 1953. The efforts of Nhu and his allies to stake out a distinct political position in advance of the October Conference are detailed in Sturm to Dept. of State, 'Press conference held by protagonists of "National Congress" of early September 1953', 16 Oct. 1953, USNA2, 751G.00/10-1653.

discovered, however, that the unanticipated outcome had prompted Bảo Đại to take a friendlier approach to Diệm and to reconsider the possibility of appointing him to the premiership. In early October, before the National Congress had even opened, Bảo Đại consented to meet privately with Diệm in Paris; it was their first face-to-face meeting in four years.<sup>62</sup> After the Congress debacle, the ex-emperor became even more conciliatory. In a second meeting with Diệm in Cannes on 26 October, he broached the possibility of Diệm's appointment to the premiership with a 'hypothetical' inquiry about his willingness to serve.<sup>63</sup> The former monarch would put off making a decision about Diệm for some months after this meeting; nonetheless, it was clear by the end of 1953 that the Ngô brothers' gamble was already paying big dividends. Bảo Đại's prestige and standing among his subjects had been shown to be miserably low. Diệm's strong anti-French stance, in contrast, appeared to be very much in keeping with the general tenor of nationalist sentiment in Saigon, and therefore seemed suddenly to be something that the ex-emperor could ill afford to do without.

In the months following the October Congress, the pressure on Bảo Đại continued to increase and Diệm and Nhu continued to push their advantage. In December 1953, Bảo Đại bowed to nationalist complaints and dismissed the autocratic Premier Tâm. By replacing Tâm's government with a caretaker cabinet headed by Prince Bửu Lộc, a member of the royal household, Bảo Đại hoped to buy time to look for a way to shore up his faltering support among his subjects. Time was now at a premium, though, and the Ngô brothers were unrelenting. In early March 1954, after Bảo Đại assented in principle to the creation of a new National Assembly, Nhu and his allies published an article in Saigon in which they claimed victory and also pressed for further concessions. This move provoked schisms within the ranks of several nationalist groups; while some leaders rallied to Bảo Đại, factions within the Cao Đài, Hòa Hảo and Đại Việt publicly backed Nhu and his 'revolutionary nationalist' demands.<sup>64</sup>

As the political infighting in Saigon intensified, word arrived from the North in mid-March that the Việt Minh had laid siege to the French garrison at Điện Biên Phủ. This news, in tandem with the French government's agreement to hold talks on Indochina at an upcoming Great Power conference in Geneva, suddenly made the possibility of a French withdrawal from Vietnam appear imminent. In Paris, Bảo Đại sensed that he was running out of options. As the French position at Điện Biên Phủ became more precarious, the ex-emperor sent word to Diệm via his youngest brother, Ngô Đình Quyền. Điện Biên Phủ fell to the Việt Minh on 7 May 1954; a few days later, Diệm arrived in Paris for another audience with Bảo Đại. According to the latter's account of the meeting, Diệm was so coy that he initially pretended to have no interest in the

62 Telegram, Dillion to Dulles, 14 Oct. 1953, USNA2, 751G.00/10-1453; the meeting took place on 12 October. As early as September, Diệm was described by an American source as confident that he and Bảo Đại were about to reconcile (Smith to Saigon and Paris, 14 Sept. 1953, USNA2, 751G.00/9-1453).

63 The circumstances of the second meeting were reported in *Vietnam Presse*, 45 (27 Oct. 1953); see also *Le Monde*, 28 Oct. 1953. Bảo Đại's query about Diệm's willingness to serve was reported to US officials by a member of the imperial entourage (Telegram, Dillion to Dulles, 28 Oct. 1953, USNA2, 751G.00/10-2853).

64 Guillemot, 'Révolution nationale', pp. 627–34.

premiership. Bảo Đại was obliged to ask him a second time to take the job, imploring him to see that *'le salut du Vietnam l'exige'* (the salvation of Vietnam depends on it).<sup>65</sup>

The events which took place in Saigon and France during 1953–54, and Diệm and Nhu's involvement in them, have important implications for our understanding of Diệm's rise to power and the alleged American involvement in securing his appointment. It has long been asserted that US officials secretly pressured Bảo Đại to select Diệm.<sup>66</sup> Historian David L. Anderson, however, has pointed out that senior officials in the Eisenhower administration were only 'vaguely aware' of Diệm in early 1954, and that available American official documents do not support the allegations of a covert US campaign on his behalf. Instead, Anderson argues that Bảo Đại's decision was shaped primarily by his convictions that the SVN would need US support in order to continue to exist, and that Diệm was the leader who was best able to secure this support.<sup>67</sup> While Anderson's claim might appear at first to be of relatively minor significance, it looms large in the continuing debate over the origins and evolution of the US involvement in Vietnam during the 1950s.

The evidence presented here suggests that Anderson's explanation is correct but incomplete. In addition to international considerations, Bảo Đại's decision was crucially shaped by political developments in Vietnam. By the spring of 1954, events had validated Diệm's decision to hold out for 'true' independence from France. Even before the French defeat at Điện Biên Phủ, the popularity of Diệm's stance on the independence issue as compared to Bảo Đại's had been apparent. Moreover, Nhu and his allies had demonstrated convincingly that Diệm retained considerable political clout within Vietnam. As Bảo Đại himself later acknowledged in his memoirs, the esteem in which the brothers were held by their fellow nationalists was a crucial part of his political calculus:

From my earlier experience with him, I knew that Diem had a difficult character. I was also aware of his fanaticism and his messianic tendencies. But, in the present situation, there was no better choice. He was well-known to the Americans, who appreciated his intransigence. In their eyes, he was the man best suited for the job, and Washington would not be sparing in its support of him. Because of [Diệm's] past and because of the presence of his brother at the head of the 'Movement for National Union', he would have the cooperation of the fiercest nationalists, those who had brought down Tam and then Buu-Loc. Finally, because of his intransigence and his fanaticism, he could be counted on to resist communism. Yes, he was truly the right man for the situation.<sup>68</sup>

65 Bảo Đại, *Dragon d'Annam*, p. 328. Bảo Đại implied that this exchange with Diệm took place in June 1954; however, contemporary sources show that Diệm had accepted Bảo Đại's offer during an earlier meeting in mid-May (Telegram, Dillion to Dept. State, 24 May 1954, *FRUS 1952–1954*, vol. 13, p. 1608).

66 Early formulations of this theory are found in Chaffard, *Indochine*, pp. 19–20, 26–9 and Robert Scheer and Warren Hinkle, "The 'Vietnam Lobby'", *Ramparts*, July 1965, pp. 16–24. In his memoir on Vietnam, US official Chester Cooper noted that some Americans had concluded that the CIA was backing Diệm as early as the spring of 1953; Chester Cooper, *The lost crusade: America in Vietnam* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1970), p. 120. Allegations of US influence also appear in Townsend Hoopes, *The devil and John Foster Dulles* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1973), p. 251; Marilyn Young, *The Vietnam wars, 1945–1990* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), p. 44; Kahin, *Intervention*, p. 78; and Jacobs, "Sink or swim", pp. 100–16.

67 David Anderson, *Trapped by success: The Eisenhower administration and Vietnam, 1953–1961* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), pp. 41–64, especially pp. 52–5.

68 Bảo Đại, *Dragon d'Annam*, p. 329.

Historians have so far failed to turn up any documentary evidence of a secret US plot to install Diệm as premier in the spring of 1954, but even if such a plot had been hatched and executed, it would not have had much of an effect on Bảo Đại's decision. By May of 1954, Bảo Đại had been overtaken by events and outmanoeuvred by Diệm and Nhu. He was left with little choice but to offer Diệm the premiership on the terms that the latter had long demanded: 'full powers' over all aspects of the SVN government, military and economy.

On 16 June 1954 – exactly five years to the day after he had issued his manifesto for an alternative approach to 'social revolution' – Diệm formally agreed to form a cabinet, and thus returned to political office for the first time since 1933. For Diệm, who had endured a decade of political frustration, the moment was replete with vindication. Of course, he was too experienced in the vicissitudes of Indochinese politics to believe that his triumph was complete, or his long-term success assured. On the contrary, he knew that his appointment granted him nothing more than the opportunity to grapple with the daunting and enormous tasks confronting the SVN government. Nonetheless, Diệm now had the political opening which he had sought with such determination for so long, and he relished the accomplishment. 'The hour of decision has arrived', he declared immediately after his appointment was announced.<sup>69</sup> As events would demonstrate, the decisions made in 1954–55 did indeed have profound consequences for Vietnam and for all of the foreign powers who sought influence there. By dint of patience, perseverance, planning, opportunism and no small amount of luck, Diệm had secured a chance to shape many of those decisions. It was the role of a lifetime, and he would play it to the hilt.

### Conclusion

When Diệm arrived in Saigon on 25 June 1954 as Prime Minister-designate of the SVN, many in Vietnam and elsewhere expected that his tenure in office would be brief. The state which he took over still functioned mostly at the behest of French colonial officials, whose reactions to his appointment ranged from resigned acceptance to untrammelled hostility. American officials, meanwhile, were sharply divided among themselves over whether or not to support him. If he could not count on foreign support to maintain him in office, neither could he expect to preserve his rule simply by manipulating the levers of state power. The Vietnamese National Army was commanded by Francophile generals who were deeply suspicious of Diệm. SVN authority was mostly limited to Vietnam's large cities and towns, and the countryside was a patchwork of *de facto* independent satrapies. Even in Saigon, Diệm's power was circumscribed by the fact that the local police force was under the control of the Bình Xuyên. Within weeks of taking office, the scope of his control was further reduced by the announcement that the French and the DRV had reached an agreement at Geneva to divide Vietnam into northern and southern zones in advance of nationwide elections in 1956 – elections which were widely expected to result in a communist victory.

Despite all this, Diệm's position was not as hopeless as it appeared to be. Over the next 18 months, he would rally the army, rout his sectarian rivals, oust Bảo Đại and

69 Ngô Đình Diệm, 'Tuyên bố khi nhận lập Chánh-phủ (Ba-Lê, 16-6-1954)', in *Con đường chính nghĩa*, vol. 1, p. 13.

proclaim the formation of a new South Vietnamese state with himself as President. A thorough discussion of how Diệm managed to defy expectations and consolidate his authority during 1954–55 is beyond the scope of this essay; nonetheless, the arguments presented here suggest that the received wisdom about him and the means by which he sustained himself in power after 1954 may need to be revised. Three points in particular stand out.

First, at the time of his elevation to the premiership, Diệm was not as lacking in Vietnamese allies as he is often supposed to have been. Besides his Catholic backers, he was able to count on support from certain key non-Catholic leaders and groups, thanks in large part to the efforts of his brothers during the period of his exile. The activities undertaken by Nhu during the early 1950s (such as the creation of the Cần Lao party and the recruitment of Trần Quốc Bửu's labour unions) were especially significant, because they would provide the means by which Diệm was able to mobilise support during the tumultuous first months of his rule.

Second, Diệm in 1954 was neither beholden to the US nor particularly inclined to follow American advice. No reliable evidence exists to support the claim that Diệm owed his appointment to a pressure campaign conducted by US officials on his behalf. Instead, he secured the premiership through a combination of good fortune and careful coordination of his activities with those of his supporters in Indochina. Since Diệm was neither dependent on American support nor following US directives prior to June 1954, there is no reason to assume that he suddenly became highly reliant on American officials for guidance after that date. Having come to power mainly through his own efforts and those of his brothers, Diệm was not inclined to defer to Americans on matters of policy and political strategy. On the contrary, he returned to Saigon more determined than ever to follow his instincts and to pursue his plans for consolidating and expanding his power. Diệm's tendency to keep his own counsel should be kept in mind when analysing events which took place after 1954, and especially when evaluating his relations with American officials.

Finally, Diệm's words and deeds during the period 1945–54 demonstrate the inadequacy of the existing representations of him as a 'traditional' figure who was uninterested in modernisation and development. Despite his penchant for intrigue, Diệm sensed that the ultimate success or failure of his new regime would hinge on more than secret plots and schemes. In his first speech delivered after his return to Saigon, Diệm reaffirmed his intent to promote revolutionary change in Vietnam:

In this critical situation, I will act decisively. I will move with determination to open a path to national salvation. A total revolution (*một cuộc cách-mệnh toàn diện*) will be implemented in every facet of the organization and life of the nation.<sup>70</sup>

As in his earlier statements on such matters, the vision of revolution that Diệm offered in June 1954 was still inchoate and vague. Yet it was a vision nonetheless, and he had staked the success of his new regime on his ability to realise it. With Nhu's help, Diệm's vision would gradually become more detailed and elaborate in the coming months and years. By 1957, the regime had publicly embraced Personalism as its official ideology and

70 Ngô Đình Diệm, 'Hiệu-triệu quốc-dân khi về tới Saigon, ngày 25-6-1954', in *ibid.*, p. 16.

declared the 'Personalist Revolution' to be the ultimate objective of its policies. As this choice of words suggested, Nhu's notion of *nhân vi* was the conceptual keystone of this new ideology. Throughout the period until 1963, the Ngô brothers continued to refine this ideology, even as they presented it as the rationale underpinning their nation-building policies in areas such as economic development, agrarian reform and national security.

In the end, the Personalist Revolution would not come to pass. As Diệm's critics (and even many of his admirers) noted, the Diemist brand of Personalism was not only intricate but also incredibly abstract and often so dense as to be impenetrable. Though it informed and shaped the regime's policies, it had little utility as a means of generating support for those policies. To say that Diệm's vision was unrealised, however, is not to say that it was inconsequential, or that it should be dismissed as merely the delusion of a hopelessly backward tyrant. As many Vietnamese and more than a few Americans discovered, Ngô Đình Diệm possessed a formidable capacity to inspire those who met and heard him; that he could also be boring, imperious and even cruel should not obscure this capacity. Like many other leaders, Diệm wrapped his ambitions for power together with his vision of the future in complicated and sometimes contradictory ways. Unravelling the complex of Diệm's politics and his ideas is therefore a crucial step towards a revised and richer understanding of his role in the long and tangled struggle to shape the modern destiny of Vietnam.