

## *‘Only Religions Count in Vietnam’: Thich Tri Quang and the Vietnam War*

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### **Abstract**

Thich Tri Quang has long been one of the most controversial actors in the history of the Vietnam War. Scholars on the right have argued that Tri Quang was in all likelihood a communist agent operating at the behest of Hanoi. Scholars on the left have argued that Tri Quang was a peaceful religious leader devoted to democracy and a rapid end to the war. This article argues that neither of these interpretations is persuasive. As American officials rightly concluded throughout the war, there was no compelling evidence to suggest that Tri Quang was a communist agent or in any way sympathetic to the goals of Hanoi or the NLF. Drawing on the extensive archival evidence of Tri Quang’s conversations with American officials, it is apparent that Tri Quang was in fact strongly anti-communist and quite receptive to the use of American military power against North Vietnam and China. The main factor that led to conflict between the Buddhist movement and the Johnson administration was Tri Quang’s insistence that the military regimes that followed Ngo Dinh Diem were hostile to Buddhism and incapable of leading the struggle against Communism to a successful conclusion.

Thich Tri Quang’s importance in understanding the course of the Vietnam War can hardly be underestimated. In the aftermath of President Ngo Dinh Diem’s violent suppression of Buddhist protests in May 1963, Tri Quang played a major role in sparking and sustaining the long crisis that ultimately led to Diem’s removal from power in November 1963. Unwilling to return to the political sidelines after the murder of Diem and his brother Ngo Dinh Nhu, Tri Quang continued to exert his great influence over the political life of South Vietnam by granting or withholding his support from the various military regimes that ruled the country between 1964 and 1966.

Given his obvious ability to throw South Vietnam into anarchy by mobilizing both Buddhists and student demonstrators, the Johnson administration and the South Vietnamese government had little choice but to recognize his formidable power and influence. Widely acknowledged as the primary intellectual and spiritual force behind the Buddhist struggle movement, Tri Quang sparked a series of violent protests that essentially took control of several South Vietnamese cities over the spring of 1966. Neither Tri Quang nor the wider Buddhist movement survived the crisis of 1966 as a powerful political force, but few, if any, individuals in South Vietnam had a greater influence on the course of the Vietnamese conflict between 1963 and 1966.

Unfortunately, contemporary historians still know very little about Tri Quang's goals and motivations during this crucial period of the Vietnam War. Like other important South Vietnamese actors, political and religious figures such as Tri Quang clearly remain of little interest to diplomatic historians who continue to focus their primary attention on the policy process in Washington, military strategy or diplomatic efforts to end the war through negotiations. As George Herring noted long ago, 'The interaction between Americans and South Vietnamese is one of the least developed areas in the burgeoning literature of the Vietnam War. In much of the writing on the war, the South Vietnamese are conspicuous by their absence, and virtually nothing has been done on their dealings with the United States'.<sup>1</sup> The lack of scholarly interest in Tri Quang and his relationship with American officials is particularly regrettable because there is certainly no shortage of primary sources for historians to examine. American officials met regularly with Thich Tri Quang throughout 1964–1966, and these conversations provide an exhaustive survey of his beliefs on a wide range of issues. Although Tri Quang still remains a somewhat elusive figure for historians, these interactions with American officials provide an indispensable and underutilised resource for understanding both the Buddhist movement and the larger American political failure in South Vietnam.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> George Herring, " 'Peoples Quite Apart': Americans, South Vietnamese, and the War in Vietnam," *Diplomatic History*, 14 (1990), p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> I suspect that part of the reason why historians have not been more interested in Tri Quang and the Buddhists is that the *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS)* series contains only a few of the conversations between Tri Quang and the Saigon Embassy, and none of the CIA assessments of his goals and motivations. One would never suspect how much material there is in the American archives from the scant

Tri Quang was a controversial figure at the height of the Vietnam War, and remains so more than forty years later. Historians who have recently reexamined Tri Quang and the Buddhist movement have reached vastly different conclusions about his goals and motivations. In a provocative article published in 2004, Mark Moyar argued that Tri Quang ‘either was in league with the Communists or else harbored fantasies that he could hold off the Communists without the benefit of a strong, pro-American government’.<sup>3</sup> The former claim is clearly the one that Moyar believes is closer to the truth. On the charge that Tri Quang was a communist agent, Moyar writes, ‘By and large, the evidence supported this view, although there was no absolute proof’.<sup>4</sup> In advancing this argument, albeit with a far more substantial documentary record, Moyar is not exactly breaking new historical ground since Vietnam era journalists such as Marguerite Higgins, Richard Critchfield and Robert Shaplen often advanced this argument in their writings on the war.<sup>5</sup> However, as Moyar himself notes, American officials who had every self-interested reason to conclude that Tri Quang was a communist consistently rejected this assessment. As analysts from the CIA concluded in September 1964, ‘None of Tri Quang’s many Vietnamese enemies, who are anxious to denigrate him, nor others suspicious of his motives have yet been able to provide

amount of attention paid to Tri Quang and the Buddhist movement in the *FRUS* series.

<sup>3</sup> Mark Moyar, “Political Monks: The Militant Buddhist Movement During the Vietnam War,” *Modern Asian Studies*, 38 (2004), pp. 749–784 (quote on p. 783).

<sup>4</sup> Moyar, “Political Monks,” p. 756. Moyar also advances these arguments about Tri Quang in his recently published book *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954–1965* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 216–218. Despite my obvious differences with Moyar concerning Tri Quang, all students of the war will have to seriously grapple with his extensive research and revisionist assessment of many elements of the Vietnam War.

<sup>5</sup> Marguerite Higgins was the most vigorous proponent of thesis that Quang was a communist agent. See *Our Vietnam Nightmare* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965). See also Richard Critchfield, *The Long Crusade: Political Subversion in the Vietnam War* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968); and Robert Shaplen, *The Lost Revolution* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965). While Moyar does have some evidence from North Vietnamese histories of the war that suggests there was some communist infiltration of the Buddhist movement, there does not appear to be anything that directly or indirectly implicates Tri Quang as a communist agent. Such evidence would not have shocked American officials at the time who readily conceded that communists attempted to infiltrate and influence the movement. See Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken*, p. 217.

hard evidence of any current communist affiliation'.<sup>6</sup> The American intelligence community and the Saigon Embassy never wavered in their assessment of Tri Quang's motives, even at the height of the Buddhist crisis of 1966, although important officials such as Henry Cabot Lodge and Maxwell Taylor belatedly and without any evidence adopted this thesis. There were at the time, and there still are, many compelling reasons to reject the claim that Tri Quang was a conscious communist agent or even intellectually sympathetic to the political agenda of the National Liberation Front (NLF). The fact that Tri Quang was later tortured by the communist regime and has spent his life under house arrest in postwar Vietnam is just one of many reasons to doubt the Higgins/Moyar thesis.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> CIA Memorandum, "Tri Quang and the Buddhist Catholic Discord in South Vietnam, September 19, 1964, Lyndon B. Johnson Library (hereafter LBJL), National Security Files (hereafter NSF), Vietnam Country Files (hereafter VNCF), box 9, vol. 18; and Saigon Embassy to State Department, January 31, 1965, National Archives II (hereafter NA II), RG 59, Central Files, POL 13-6, box 2931.

<sup>7</sup> Tri Quang's fate after the fall of Saigon is not totally clear, but what is known does not support Moyar's thesis. Moyar suggests that Tri Quang was rewarded for his subversion after the Northern victory: 'When the Communists conquered South Vietnam in 1975, they gave Tri Quang a job in Hue and he voiced no objections to their regime, whereas they imprisoned many other monks who had a record of political activism'. There are several serious problems with accepting this assessment. First, Moyar's citation for this claim is to the *Washington Post* of November 2, 1983, but there are no articles concerning Tri Quang in the paper on that date. In all likelihood, Moyar meant to cite an opinion piece by H. Joachim Maitre, 'When Washington Ditched Diem', that appeared in the *Wall Street Journal* on that date. The idea that Tri Quang was rewarded by the communists for his role in the 1960's is not very persuasive since Maitre himself writes, 'Tri Quang was allocated to the city of Hue's sanitation department'. A position in the sanitation department of Hue surely seems more like a punishment rather than a reward, especially given the very important role Moyar and Maitre believe that Tri Quang played in the communist victory. As Moyar notes in *Triumph Forsaken*, the North Vietnamese regime has rehabilitated other covert agents after the war, but the regime has never acknowledged that Tri Quang was an agent. Virtually all other news reports on Tri Quang's fate in communist Vietnam paint a very grim portrait. For example, in a 1979 story in the *New York Times*, James Sterba reported that one of Tri Quang's subordinates reported that he 'was turned into a skeleton-like cripple during a year and a half of solitary confinement in Ho Chi Minh's Chi Hoa prison'. See James Sterba, "Ordeal of a Famed Buddhist in Ho Chi Minh City Related," *New York Times*, July 14, 1979, A2. Finally, Robert Topmiller, a historian who made several trips to Vietnam to interview Buddhists in the 1990s, reports that even today Quang remains under house arrest in the An Quang pagoda in Ho Chi Minh City. See Robert Topmiller, "Vietnamese Buddhism in the 1990's," Quang Duc Homepage, [www.quangduc.com/English/WorldBuddhism/27vietnam.html](http://www.quangduc.com/English/WorldBuddhism/27vietnam.html). The pattern of the evidence suggests a simpler conclusion: Thich Tri Quang was probably not a communist agent and Hanoi saw him as an independent figure who presented

Moyar's critical view of Tri Quang is influenced by his strong support for the South Vietnamese who were determined to fight the communists and the NLF. A far more favourable and heroic portrait of Tri Quang can be found in Robert Topmiller's book, *The Lotus Unleashed: The Buddhist Peace Movement in South Vietnam, 1964–1966*. Very sympathetic to Tri Quang and highly critical of American involvement in Vietnam, Topmiller believes that the main goal of Tri Quang's wing of the Buddhist movement was to establish 'a civilian government through free elections with the intention of inviting the NLF to join a government dedicated to neutralism'.<sup>8</sup> In Topmiller's account, the clash between the Johnson administration and Tri Quang was largely rooted in conflicting visions and worldviews. The Buddhists and Tri Quang were strongly devoted to peace and democracy and negotiating an immediate end to the conflict. Since the Johnson administration was opposed to the Buddhist vision of the conflict, it is not at all surprising to Topmiller that Tri Quang and the Americans came to be mortal enemies. While there is certainly much to be learned from Topmiller's account of the Buddhist movement, the story of Thich Tri Quang and his relationship with the United States is much more complex than he suggests. Particularly in his treatment of Tri Quang before the crisis of 1966, Topmiller ignores virtually all of the documentary evidence that cuts against his thesis.<sup>9</sup> One would never suspect from his account that Tri Quang was often staunchly pro-American and stridently anticommunist, quite unconcerned with general principles of democracy or free speech, and extremely hawkish in his views on how the war should be fought. While there certainly was an important Buddhist protest movement in South Vietnam, it is misleading to suggest that 'peace' was one of Tri Quang's primary objectives. Tri Quang rarely spoke favourably about a neutral South Vietnam or pursuing any negotiations with the NLF before the United States and the GVN had the upper hand on the battlefield. To be sure,

the same potential dangers to their rule as he did to the rulers of South Vietnam in the 1960s.

<sup>8</sup> Robert Topmiller, *The Lotus Unleashed: The Buddhist Peace Movement in South Vietnam, 1964–1966* (Lexington, KY: The University of Kentucky Press, 2002), p. viii.

<sup>9</sup> For example, hardly any of the conversations between Tri Quang and the Saigon Embassy cited in this article appear in Topmiller's book. Topmiller does not appear to have done any research in the Central Files at NA II, where most of these conversations are filed. While Topmiller's interviews with academics and Buddhists are invaluable, it is unfortunate that many of the central arguments he advances are supported by oral history interviews rather than actual documents.

both Tri Quang and the wider Buddhist movement at times espoused anti-American sentiments and/or support for a vaguely neutralist solution to the conflict in Vietnam. Nevertheless, the simplistic picture of Tri Quang as a democratic man of peace devoted to ending the war as rapidly as possible is as untenable as the picture of him as a communist agent.

Tri Quang was neither a communist nor a democratic peace activist. He was a highly politicised actor who viewed almost everything in South Vietnam through the prism of a fundamental religious conflict between Buddhism and Catholicism. Even 'good Catholics', Tri Quang argued, had 'two strikes against them as far as the people were concerned'.<sup>10</sup> Rightly or wrongly, Tri Quang opposed a succession of South Vietnamese governments for reasons that had little or nothing to do with consciously sabotaging the war effort, as Moyar suggests, or with ending the war and establishing a civilian democratic regime, as Topmiller suggests. While American officials wanted a stable government in South Vietnam above all else, Tri Quang desired a 'revolutionary' regime that he largely defined in practice as one free of all Catholic, Diemist or *Can Lao* influences. The main problem, of course, was that Tri Quang often implied that he alone had the authority to determine the legitimacy of South Vietnamese regimes, as well as the right to remove these regimes from office if they failed to satisfy his demands. The conflict between Tri Quang and the Johnson administration was largely due to his desire to become the sole kingmaker in South Vietnamese politics, and not because of his alleged communist ties, neutralist sentiments or lack of anti-communist zeal.

### **Thich Tri Quang and the Aftermath of the Diem Coup**

American policymakers rarely thought about the political role of Buddhism in South Vietnam prior to the crisis of May 1963 that ultimately led to Ngo Dinh Diem's downfall later that year. While American officials did not think that Buddhism would quietly return

<sup>10</sup> Saigon to State Department, April 6, 1964, NA II, RG 59, POL 2 VIET S, box 2925. The best short summary of Tri Quang's guiding principle can be found in an interview he gave to journalist Robert Shaplen in 1969. 'Political parties as such mean nothing. . . . Only religions count in Vietnam, and President Nixon must adjust to that realization'. Robert Shaplen, *The Road From War* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), p. 271.

to the apolitical role it had assumed under Diem, there are few indications to suggest that they were at all concerned about the possibility of future conflicts with the Buddhist movement. That Tri Quang himself would come to lead a virtual insurrection against the GVN less than three years after being granted political asylum in the Saigon Embassy would have been unthinkable. After all, regardless of their self-interested reasons for doing so, the Kennedy administration and Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge Jr. had squarely placed themselves on the side of the Buddhists in their struggle against the Diem regime. Tri Quang himself left no doubt that he was grateful for American support. In his letter to Lodge requesting asylum, Tri Quang wrote that he hoped 'the country of freedom' would not turn him over to the Diem government, 'especially since America is helping my people fight to retain freedom'.<sup>11</sup> Just three weeks after the successful coup, he welcomed continued American involvement in South Vietnam with unabashed enthusiasm. Expressing his regret over the death of President Kennedy, Tri Quang told an American Embassy official that the United States 'must continue (to) exercise and expand its beneficial influence in Vietnam to prevent further coups or Diemist comeback and to protect Vietnamese people from excesses (of) their own government if necessary'. When it was pointed out to him that such a statement might raise justifiable fears of American colonialism, Tri Quang believed that America should not worry about such arguments since the 'people would actually feel much more secure knowing the US acting as their protector'.<sup>12</sup>

Tri Quang may not have been worried about American colonialism in November 1963, but he was concerned from the start about the nature of the South Vietnamese regime that would replace Diem's. Indeed, all of the future sources of tension between Tri Quang and the American government were present from the very beginning. The Johnson administration hoped that the coup against

<sup>11</sup> His letter can be found in Saigon to Secretary, September 2, 1963, John F. Kennedy Library (hereafter JFKL), National Security File (NSF), box 199, State cables 9/1/1963-9/10/1963. It is worth noting that Quang did not want to go to India for political refuge because of its 'neutralist character'.

<sup>12</sup> Saigon to Secretary, November 27, 1963, LBJL, NSF, VNCF, box 1, vol. 1; and Saigon to State Department, NA II, RG 59, POL 13-6, box 2931. Paul Kattenburg, the Director of the Vietnam Working Group (hereafter VWG) and who met with Quang shortly after the coup, said that he was particularly struck by Quang's emphasis on the United States using its power on the South Vietnamese government. Paul Kattenburg to Melvin Manfull, December 31, 1963, NA II, RG 59, VWG Subject Files, box 1, ORG 1.

Diem would lead to greater national unity and a stable government that would fight the war more effectively. Critically examining the nature of Diem's regime, let alone purging the governmental and military apparatus, would have fundamentally contradicted the goal of stability because virtually every official in the South Vietnamese government and the military could in some manner be labeled as a former Diemist. Whether out of conviction or tactical necessity, the Johnson administration rejected the idea that the South Vietnamese government needed any thorough reforms or purging of personnel. Tri Quang, however, never accepted the idea that religious conflict and the alleged oppression of the Buddhists by Catholics was a problem completely solved by the removal of Diem and Nhu from power. While saying that he would assess the new government on the basis of its performance, Tri Quang was concerned that many of the coup plotters were themselves Diemists, and he argued that they had acted 'more from fear that Diem and Nhu (were) alienating the US rather than from personal conviction old regime was basically wrong'.<sup>13</sup> By December 1963, Tri Quang was already indicating to American officials that he would welcome another coup if it would remove Premier Nguyen Ngoc Tho, an important figure in Diem's regime.<sup>14</sup>

There is no evidence that Tri Quang played any role in the coup that removed General Duong Van Minh from power in January 1964. Some historians, such as George McT. Kahin and Robert Topmiller, argue that Minh was removed from power because of his efforts to end the war and his willingness to accept a neutralized South Vietnam. Both Kahin and Topmiller believe that Minh had at least the tacit support of the Buddhist leadership in seeking a way out of a wider war in Vietnam.<sup>15</sup> There is some plausibility to this view since the primary leader of the coup, General Nguyen Khanh, claimed at the time that he carried out the coup precisely because he was worried that Minh and other generals were pro-French and sympathetic to the idea of a neutral Vietnam. However, the problem with this interpretation is that it is highly unlikely that Minh was actively pursuing a neutralist solution that would end the war. As David Kaiser correctly notes, no

<sup>13</sup> Saigon to Secretary, November 11, 1963, JFKL, NSF, box 202, State Cables 11/6/1963-11/15/1963.

<sup>14</sup> Saigon to Secretary, December 17, 1963, LBJL, NSF, VNCF, box 1, vol. 2.

<sup>15</sup> See George McT. Kahin, *Intervention: How America Became Involved in Vietnam* (New York: Anchor Books, 1987), pp. 182-202; and Topmiller, *The Lotus Unleashed*, pp. 15-16.

hard evidence has ever emerged that would support Khanh's claims that Minh was moving in league with France towards a neutralist solution for Vietnam.<sup>16</sup>

While the alleged conflict between the hawkish General Khanh and the peaceful Buddhist General Minh is probably one of myth, in early 1964, Tri Quang's own views about the nature of the conflict in Vietnam were much closer to Khanh's stated views than they were to Minh's ostensibly neutralist views. In his conversations with American officials in early 1964, Tri Quang was far more concerned with prosecuting the war effectively than he was with ending the conflict. After initially opposing the idea that there should be any religious chaplains in the South Vietnamese army, Tri Quang now thought that the army needed Buddhist and Catholic chaplains as well in order to bolster the 'anti-communist spirit' of the soldiers.<sup>17</sup> Like Khanh and the more militant generals around him, Tri Quang was very concerned about the supposed efforts of France to reassert its authority in the area. In fact, no Vietnamese leader exceeded Tri Quang in consistently expressing hostility to French influence. If France returned to Vietnam, Tri Quang told American officials it would lead to his 'own personal demise as well as resurgence of Catholicism to detriment of Vietnamese Buddhism'.<sup>18</sup> Finally, despite the ostensible importance of nonviolence to the Buddhist faith, Thich Tri Quang endorsed an ambitious course of military action. In a conversation with J.D. Rosenthal of the Saigon Embassy in April 1964, 'Quang volunteered that he approved of the idea of going across into Laos to cut the VC's supply line, and he was also enthusiastic about the first VNAF night bombing of VC bases. I asked what he thought about attacking the North, and he said he was for it if it could be done without drawing in Russia or Communist China'.<sup>19</sup>

American officials were understandably worried about many aspects of the Vietnam situation in early 1964, but they were not at all concerned with the Buddhist movement turning in a pro-neutralist and anti-American direction. In a major analysis of Buddhist developments since the fall of Diem, the American Embassy concluded that all of the

<sup>16</sup> See David Kaiser, *American Tragedy: Kennedy, Johnson, and the Origins of the War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), pp. 297–298. American officials asked Khanh repeatedly to provide evidence for his claims about Minh, but they never received a single shred of evidence to support the claims.

<sup>17</sup> Saigon to Secretary, January 17, 1964, LBJL, NSF, VNCF, box 1, vol. 2.

<sup>18</sup> Hue to Saigon, February 19, 1964, NA II, RG 59, POL VIET S, box 2924.

<sup>19</sup> Saigon to Secretary, April 6, 1964, NA II, RG 59, POL 2 VIET S, box 2925.

top leaders were well disposed to the United States and that even if the movement came to be dominated by 'opportunistic' leadership, it was still possible that the goals of the Buddhists and the United States would be compatible given their fear of neutralism and communist domination.<sup>20</sup> The first sign of conflict between Tri Quang and the United States was sparked by the trials of Nho Dinh Can, Diem's brother who had ruled Central Vietnam with an iron fist, and Major Dang Sy, a military officer who had issued the order to fire on Buddhist protestors in May 1963. Fearful that American Catholics and world opinion would turn against the new regime if they appeared to be engaged in the same type of religious persecution practiced by Diem, Lodge wanted Khanh to exercise restraint and to dampen passions as much as possible. Not surprisingly, Khanh's government was also concerned with appearing to be too lenient with ex-Diemists and ignoring Buddhist calls for justice. Undoubtedly, influenced by the fact that both Can and Major Dang Sy had committed their crimes in his home base of Central Vietnam and the city of Hue, Tri Quang rejected the case for leniency. Warning Lodge that his popularity would be hurt if it were known that he was opposed to Can's execution, Tri Quang believed that his execution was necessary to show that 'the old Diem crowd' was no longer in control. In a meeting with Lodge in April 1964, Tri Quang warned the ambassador that the fight against communism and Buddhist support for the United States would be hurt if Can was not executed.<sup>21</sup>

American officials were very concerned with Tri Quang's opposition to the Khanh regime, but they were unreceptive to reports that his opposition stemmed from nefarious connections with communists. In May 1964, Lodge forwarded to Washington a report from a source who suggested that the Buddhist movement was being used by the communists to whip up anti-American sentiments throughout the country. While praising his source as one who had been 'extremely accurate' in the past, Lodge made a point of recording his own belief that he felt the report was 'overstated'.<sup>22</sup> Lodge and other officials were concerned that Tri Quang was a 'potential troublemaker' and worried

<sup>20</sup> Saigon to Secretary, "Recent Buddhist Developments," March 26, 1964, LBJL, NSF, VNCF, box 3, vol. 6.

<sup>21</sup> Saigon to Secretary, April 25, 1964, LBJL, NSF, VNCF, box 3, vol. 7.

<sup>22</sup> Saigon to Secretary, May 7, 1964, LBJL, NSF, VNCF, box 4, vol. 8. The CIA also reported that allegations of Quang's neutralism and communism 'continue to be unsubstantiated'. CIA Intelligence Memorandum, "An Assessment of the Religious Problem in South Vietnam," LBJL, NSF, VNCF, box 4, vol. 9.

that he appeared to be more anti-Catholic than anticommunist, but there is little sense that these disputes with Tri Quang represented any issues of great importance.<sup>23</sup> Lodge was very optimistic about American relations with the Buddhists after a very cordial dinner with Tri Quang and other leading officials of the Unified Buddhist Association (UBA) in late May 1964. While Tri Quang was still a potentially dangerous political figure, Lodge thought he remained grateful to the United States for saving his life and that he was still receptive to American influence. In what was clearly an effort to reassure the ambassador, and one that an experienced politician such as Lodge could surely understand, Tri Quang and other Buddhist leaders stated that while their pro-American views were sincere, 'they could not be expected to show their complete hand publicly, since to do so would compromise their religious role'.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, Tri Quang argued with American officials in late May 1964 that it was helpful that some elements of the foreign press labeled him a communist since it enabled him to 'work much better in quietly countering VC influence among the faithful who already know very well he himself is no communist'.<sup>25</sup>

Tri Quang was far from reconciled to the Khanh government, which he continued to suggest was not truly revolutionary because it failed to take strong actions against the ex-Diemists. On the other hand, he was quite comfortable with the increasingly military rhetoric about 'going north' that Khanh and the generals began to put forward in the summer of 1964. Acknowledging the fact that it was unusual for a Buddhist leader to advocate violence, Tri Quang was nevertheless in favor of 'strong military measures' because he felt that 'if the war dragged on at its current level the cost in lives would be more than would be incurred in a quicker though momentarily bloodier affair'.<sup>26</sup> When the United States launched airstrikes against North Vietnam in August 1964, Tri Quang told an embassy official that both the Buddhist leadership and 'the people' approved of the attacks because it showed our 'determination' to take strong military measures.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Memorandum of a Meeting, May 11, 1964, *Foreign Relations of the United States* (hereafter *FRUS*), 1964-1968, vol. 1, p. 305.

<sup>24</sup> Saigon to Secretary, May 25, 1964, LBJL, NSF, VNCF, box 5, vol. 10.

<sup>25</sup> Saigon to State Department, June 1, 1964, NA II, RG 59, POL 6 VIET S, box 2929.

<sup>26</sup> Saigon to State Department, June 11, 1964, NA II, RG 59, POL 2 VIET S, box 2926.

<sup>27</sup> Saigon to State Department, August 10, 1964, NA II, RG 59, POL 27 VIET S, box 2945.

Despite his support for military action against North Vietnam, Tri Quang would soon emerge as the most important obstacle in the Johnson administration's path to a more energetic prosecution of the war. In the immediate aftermath of the American attacks on North Vietnam, General Khanh declared a state of emergency throughout the country that gave his government sweeping police powers over all aspects of political activity. Tri Quang's initial reaction to the decree was supportive, but he feared that Khanh was 'not clever or strong enough to enforce the new decrees effectively'. In his opinion, the population would support Khanh's new power only if he used it to finally carry out the 'revolution' and remove all remnants of the *Can Lao* and the ex-Diemists from power.<sup>28</sup> Shortly after Khanh's proclamation of a new constitution, the so-called *Vung Tau* Charter, Tri Quang concluded that Khanh was not interested in carrying out the revolution. If Khanh was unwilling to do what needed to be done voluntarily, Tri Quang informed the American Embassy that the Buddhists would have no choice but to embark on a campaign of 'noncooperation' that would force Khanh to make a final choice between the Buddhists and military officers whom Tri Quang believed to be members of the *Can Lao* or the Dai Viets. Since there was ostensibly no difference between being oppressed by the communists or the *Can Lao*, Tri Quang warned that the Buddhists would withdraw from the anti-communist struggle and let the Americans and the Catholics fight alone if Khanh failed to purge his government.<sup>29</sup>

If American policymakers had any doubts about the power of Tri Quang to decisively influence the political situation in South Vietnam, they were certainly dispelled by the violent protests and demonstrations that erupted in several Vietnamese cities in late August 1964. Tri Quang's influence over the content of the protests was clear because one of the main grievances voiced by the demonstrators was the perceived presence of too many former Diemists in the government. American officials wanted Khanh to act decisively to restore order in Saigon and other cities, but the general instead decided to essentially place the future of his regime in the hands of Tri Quang and the Buddhists. To the great consternation of

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Tri Quang's opposition to Khanh can be followed in Saigon to Secretary, August 23, 1964, LBJL, NSF, VNCF, box 7, vol. 16; Saigon to Secretary, August 23, 1964, LBJL, NSF, VNCF, box 7, vol. 16; and the series of conversations included in Saigon to State Department, August 26, 1964, NA II, RG 59, POL 15 VIET S, box 2933.

the American Embassy and the leadership of the South Vietnamese military, Khanh was unwilling to risk a decisive confrontation with Tri Quang. In the view of Lieutenant General Tran Thien Khiem, Tri Quang's demands were seen as much too credible for Khanh to simply ignore them: 'Khanh felt there was no choice but to accept since the influence of Tri Quang was so great that he not only turn the majority of the people against the government but could influence the effectiveness of the armed forces'.<sup>30</sup>

American officials were in constant contact with Tri Quang throughout the crisis and repeatedly tried in vain to dissuade him from his course of open confrontation. Unlike during the crisis of 1963, American officials now felt that there was very little proof to back up Buddhist complaints of oppression by Khanh's government. A renewed round of protests and demonstrations so soon after the airstrikes on North Vietnam, which Tri Quang himself had advocated, was viewed by American officials as short-sighted and an act of betrayal. American officials believed that South Vietnam's situation was so perilous that all disagreements between Buddhists and Catholics needed to be subordinated to the fight against the "common enemy" of the Viet Cong and North Vietnam. In contrast, Tri Quang thought that the first and necessary stage of struggle required a thorough purification of the GVN itself before any progress could be made against the communists and their supporters. Although Tri Quang did not get his complete and thorough purge of every alleged Diemist from the GVN, Khanh's government was immobilized and it was unclear who exactly was controlling governmental affairs in Saigon.

Greatly disturbed by the chaotic situation in South Vietnam, CIA analysts began their most serious effort to determine the nature of Tri Quang's goals and intentions. Needless to say, the revised American assessments of Tri Quang's motives were far from reassuring. In two lengthy reports, Tri Quang was portrayed as a demagogue, strongly anti-Catholic, a fanatical nationalist, and a megalomaniac whose ultimate goal was to establish South Vietnam as a Buddhist theocracy.<sup>31</sup> CIA officials also believed that he wanted the ultimate removal of American forces from Vietnam and that he was in favour

<sup>30</sup> Telecon with General Westmoreland, August 25, 1964, LBJL, NSF, VNCF, box 7, vol. 16.

<sup>31</sup> CIA Intelligence Information Cable, "An Analysis of Thich Tri Quang's Possible Communist Affiliations, Personality, and Goals," August 28, 1964, LBJL, NSF, VNCF, box 7, vol. 16; and CIA Memorandum, "Tri Quang and the Buddhist Catholic Discord in South Vietnam," September 19, 1964, LBJL, NSF, VNCF, box 9, vol. 18.

of some sort of neutralism, although they added that his version of neutralism was far removed from that of a DeGaulle. As alarmist as these reports seem to be, and the CIA assessments were surely intended to raise serious concerns, the analysts still rejected the idea that Tri Quang was either a communist or sympathetic to the armed opposition in South Vietnam. After a thorough assessment of all the evidence put forward by Tri Quang's many detractors, the CIA concluded that there was simply no hard evidence to validate any of the claims of communist influence. Given the makeup of his personality, the CIA concluded, "It is difficult to envisage Tri Quang acting as an 'agent' for anyone, be it Hanoi, Peking, or Moscow".<sup>32</sup> Since any effort to remove him from the Vietnamese scene would be a disaster, the CIA concluded that he was a 'fact of life' who could not be ignored because 'any anti-communist regime in South Vietnam that is to stand any chance of surviving must have Tri Quang's acceptance if not his support'.<sup>33</sup>

After the crisis of August 1964 simmered down, Tri Quang went out of his way to reassure embassy officials that he was not opposed to continued U.S. involvement in South Vietnamese affairs. Fredrik Logevall suggests, 'Quang and other Buddhist militants also opposed the steady increase of American influence in South Vietnam and they became steadily more outspoken against it in the last half of 1964'.<sup>34</sup> Such a view of Tri Quang, however, is belied by the views he consistently expressed to American officials from September to November 1964. Criticism of the GVN was perfectly appropriate in Tri Quang's view, but he felt that Buddhist groups should avoid criticism of America 'because U.S. aid was absolutely essential to the anti-communist struggle'.<sup>35</sup> When a young Buddhist was arrested for distributing anti-American pamphlets in early September, Tri Quang

<sup>32</sup> "Analysis of Tri Quang," August 28, 1964. The September 19 analysis from the CIA was less emphatic than the earlier one since it argued that Tri Quang 'was probably not a communist'. While noting that the CIA rejected the assessment, Moyar writes, 'Some high U.S. officials now were among those who believed Tri Quang to be a communist'. The September 19 report does say that there were some 'well-informed U.S. observers inclined to this view', but I have not found any evidence at all which identifies a specific 'higher level official' who shared this view. See Moyar, "Political Monks," p. 760.

<sup>33</sup> "Tri Quang and Buddhist Catholic Discord," September 19, 1964.

<sup>34</sup> Fredrik Logevall, *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), p. 240.

<sup>35</sup> Saigon to State Department, September 2, 1964, NA II, RG 59, POL 2 VIET S, box 2926.

urged the Americans not to misinterpret the act. 'The Buddhists', he argued, 'were definitely not anti-American; on the contrary, they greatly trusted U.S. motives and intentions in Vietnam, as compared to their deep suspicion of the French and British, and they fully realized the necessity for maintaining U.S. support here'.<sup>36</sup> Tri Quang also made it clear to American officials that they should not be worried about a series of editorials in the Buddhist journal *Hie Trieu Am* that seemed to advocate a neutralist line that put the NLF and the GVN on the same level. According to Tri Quang, the author of the editorials was subsequently relieved of his duties because his poor writing had caused the Buddhist movement to be wrongly perceived as neutralist.<sup>37</sup>

Tri Quang's expressed his own views on 'neutralism' in September 1964 to American officials, and, as the CIA suggested, they were different than the neutralism associated with France. Tri Quang believed that 'all neutralism *per se* was not necessarily bad' but he was opposed to any neutralism that would permit a return of French influence to Vietnam.<sup>38</sup> In addition, he believed that American officials needed to recognize there were different types of neutralism. Cambodia's weak neutralism was bad because it was exploited by the communists, whereas Egyptian neutralism 'suppressed its local communists quite severely'.<sup>39</sup> Tri Quang also emphasized that he was not supportive of current Buddhist calls for neutralism. When American officials indicated their displeasure at a draft proposal put forward by the Venerable Quang Lien calling for the withdrawal of American and VC forces from South Vietnam, Tri Quang reassured them that Lien had been told to drop the project and that he would be in danger of losing his position within the movement if he refused.<sup>40</sup>

It is certainly tempting for historians of the Vietnam War to see the reemergence of the Buddhist movement in August–September 1964 as a nascent peace movement rebelling against the war and the American role in South Vietnam. However, this temptation should

<sup>36</sup> Saigon to State Department, September 9, 1964, NA II, RG 59, POL 15 VIET S, box 2933.

<sup>37</sup> Saigon to State Department, September 16, 1964, NA II, RG 59, POL 2 VIET S, box 2926.

<sup>38</sup> Saigon to State Department, September 9, 1964, NA II, RG 59, POL 15 VIET S, box 2933.

<sup>39</sup> Saigon to State Department, September 16, 1964, NA II, RG 59, POL 2 VIET S, box 2926.

<sup>40</sup> Saigon to State Department, September 28, 1964, NA II, RG 59, POL 15-7 VIET S, box 2937.

also be resisted, particularly if the views of Tri Quang are presented as the main support for this thesis. As it had been since he left the American Embassy in November 1963, Tri Quang's overwhelming target of criticism continued to be focused on the too prominent role of ex-Diemists in the GVN and the unwillingness of the regime to purge these elements. This focus on internal affairs continued to be prominent in his rare public speeches as well. In a speech at the Tu Dam Pagoda on October 1, as well as in an open letter to the faithful published the next day in *Lap Truong*, Tri Quang never even referred to the war.<sup>41</sup> If someone read Tri Quang's speech and letter and knew nothing at all about the Vietnam War, he or she would confidently conclude that the current conflict was strictly a civil war between the Buddhists and their alleged Can Lao oppressors. Americans, the Viet Cong and North Vietnam were not even peripheral players in Tri Quang's public airing of his views.

When Tri Quang did talk about the war and the international situation with American officials in this period, his views continued to be consistently anticommunist and pro-American. In a statement that many anti-war activists would have endorsed themselves, Tri Quang assured American officials that neither he nor the Buddhist movement could ever be anti-American, 'though they might at times oppose specific policies if considered wrong or unwise'.<sup>42</sup> In October 1964, Tri Quang assured American officials that he and the Buddhist movement would now turn their attention to the anti-communist cause. With the promise of a more democratic government ahead and the defeat of Khanh's Vung Tau Charter, Tri Quang believed that the Buddhists could now 'direct their primary efforts against the communists'.<sup>43</sup> Tri Quang's concerns about communism in Asia extended beyond Vietnam. In the aftermath of China's acquisition of the atomic bomb, Tri Quang believed that the Buddhists needed 'to work on the international scene to help build Buddhist resistance to communism in Southeast Asia'.<sup>44</sup> In his view, China's nuclear capability 'placed a high premium on U.S. conventional power and

<sup>41</sup> Both the speech and the letter can be found in Saigon to State Department, October 16, 1964, NA II, RG 59, POL VIET S, box 2924.

<sup>42</sup> Saigon to State Department, September 28, 1964, NA II, RG 59, POL 15-7 VIET S, box 2937.

<sup>43</sup> Saigon to State Department, October 23, 1964, NA II, RG 59, POL 27 VIET S, box 2948.

<sup>44</sup> Saigon to State Department, November 2, 1964, NA II, RG 59, POL 15 VIET S, box 293.

also on increased defensive strength of the Asian nations themselves to resist Chinese expansion and penetration'. Concern about China was so important to Tri Quang that he wanted to go abroad to speak to other Buddhists about the 'necessity for a continued U.S. presence in Asia'.<sup>45</sup> Not surprisingly, as late as November 1964, American officials were very happy with the political thoughts and ideas of the Buddhist movement; 'Buddhist attitudes are favorable, and the necessity of the U.S. presence in Vietnam and the rest of Asia is acknowledged'.<sup>46</sup>

However, the relative warmth of American relations with Tri Quang after the August crisis represented a lull before an even more violent storm. Tri Quang and the Buddhist movement ostensibly welcomed the transition to a new civilian regime, but it quickly became apparent that some elements of the Buddhist movement were opposed to the new premier, Tran Van Huong. The rapid emergence of opposition to Huong took American policymakers by surprise since Huong had been an early and vocal critic of the Diem regime. Tri Quang himself had indicated to American officials his support for Huong on October 30, but less than a day later he changed his mind saying that he now agreed with those who believed that Huong was 'too old, ineffective, without a clear program, and surrounded by self seeking politicians'.<sup>47</sup> Huong's emphasis on themes of order and keeping religion out of politics and education also helped fuel Buddhist opposition to his regime. By late November 1964, the Buddhist movement in Saigon was sponsoring demonstrations aimed at forcing Huong to resign his position as premier.

The Buddhist movement is often viewed by historians as one split between a moderate wing led by Thich Tam Chau and a more radical wing led by Tri Quang. However, the struggle against the Huong regime clearly shows that such a categorization can be very misleading. During the early phase of the crisis, it was Tam Chau who played the leading role in agitating the students and the faithful against Huong. While demonstrations raged in Saigon, Chau's base of influence, there were no demonstrations in Tri Quang's home base in Hue. Quang made it clear to American officials that he did not favour open action against Huong at this time. He also stated on more than one occasion

<sup>45</sup> Saigon to State Department, November 5, 1964, NA II, RG 59, POL 2 VIET S, box 2926.

<sup>46</sup> "Current Estimate of Political Situation in South Vietnam", November 25, 1964, NA II, RG 59, VWG Subject Files, box 5, POL 1: Vietnam/Other Areas.

<sup>47</sup> Saigon to State Department, November 2, 1964, NA II, RG 59, POL 15 VIET S, box 293.

that Tam Chau had mistakenly allowed himself to be manipulated by outside forces in calling for demonstrations.<sup>48</sup> Indeed, throughout the early stages of the crisis, American officials continued to believe that Quang was genuinely reluctant to force another governmental crisis and they were somewhat hopeful that he would serve as a moderating force on Tam Chau and the wider Buddhist movement.<sup>49</sup> However, whatever differences may have existed between Tri Quang and Tam Chau at the start of the anti-Huong campaign, they were not great enough for American officials to divide the two venerables. Steadfast in their determination that Huong must resign, Tri Quang and Tam Chau launched a joint hunger strike on December 12.

American policymakers backed Huong completely in his struggle with the Buddhists. Ambassador Maxwell Taylor did not believe that the Buddhists had any legitimate complaints against Huong's government and he thought that it was very important for the South Vietnamese government to stand firm against 'small but vocal' protest groups.<sup>50</sup> Despite the fact that both Tri Quang and Tam Chau indicated a willingness to negotiate their differences with the Huong regime, as well as a desire to have the United States mediate the conflict, Taylor was unwilling to meet them or act as an intermediary between the Buddhists and the Huong regime. He was also unreceptive to having Lodge send a letter to Tri Quang or making any offers of American economic assistance that would be controlled by the Buddhists themselves.<sup>51</sup> Taylor's intransigent position towards Tri Quang and the Buddhist movement was surely a defensible one, but it also guaranteed that the crisis would become more protracted. The Buddhists and Taylor had a common enemy after General Khanh abolished the High National Council on 20 December 1964, but Taylor

<sup>48</sup> Saigon to State Department, November 17, 1964, NA II, RG 59, POL 1 US VIET S, box 2878; and Saigon to State Department, November 27, 1964, NA II, RG 59, POL 15 VIET S, box 2933.

<sup>49</sup> Saigon to Secretary, December 1, 1964, LBJL, NSF, VNCF, box 10, vol. 23. Moyar's account in *Triumph Forsaken* implies that Tri Quang was the main figure behind the early opposition to Huong, but this was not the view of the Saigon Embassy. See Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken*, p. 334.

<sup>50</sup> Draft Memorandum of Conversation between Taylor and Ambassador Khiem, December 2, 1964, NA II, RG 59, VWG Subject Files, box 5, POL-1, Memoranda of Conversation.

<sup>51</sup> Saigon to State Department, December 16, 1964, FRUS, 1964-68, vol. 1, pp. 1000-1009.

was not interested in pursuing a course that might have exploited Tri Quang's longstanding distrust of Khanh.<sup>52</sup>

What type of regime Tri Quang wanted to see in power in South Vietnam was less than clear. At times, he suggested that the Buddhist movement would call off its protests if Huong were merely replaced by a more sympathetic figure such as Phan Huy Quat. However, he also indicated to American officials that he would willingly support an even more authoritarian government in South Vietnam as long as it was 'truly revolutionary'.<sup>53</sup> If such a regime were willing to outlaw the Can Lao Party, Tri Quang was willing to accept the regime having full authority to prohibit strikes, restrict freedom of speech and regulate political parties, which he suggested must all 'have clear-cut anti-communist goals and anti-neutralist ideals'.<sup>54</sup> While Tri Quang was evidently unable to garner support for his larger transformation of the GVN, he did manage to achieve the end of the Huong government in late January by throwing Buddhist support to Khanh. American policymakers were shocked that Tri Quang had managed once again to successfully play the role of kingmaker in South Vietnamese politics. Having fully staked American prestige on the maintenance of civilian government, CIA analysts were increasingly concerned about the future of governance in South Vietnam. American political leverage was greatly reduced, and the CIA concluded that the Buddhists 'are strong enough to make unworkable any set of political arrangements their leaders care to oppose'.<sup>55</sup>

In the aftermath of the coup, American analysts understandably returned to the question of whether Tri Quang's efforts were inspired by communist sympathies or connections. Moyar suggests that the American Embassy in Saigon was becoming more sympathetic to the argument that the Buddhist movement was communist inspired:

American embassy officials continued to believe that most of the top Buddhist leaders opposed the Communists, but more and more of them entertained suspicions that at least Tri Quang was collaborating with the Communists.

<sup>52</sup> Tri Quang indicated to American officials that he would be interested in working against Khanh if Huong satisfied Buddhist demands. See Saigon to Secretary, December 24, 1964, LBJL, NSF, VNCF, box 11, vol. 24.

<sup>53</sup> Saigon to State Department, January 5, 1965, NA II, RG 59, POL 2 VIET S, box 2927.

<sup>54</sup> CIA Intelligence Information cable, January 10, 1965, LBJL, NSF, VNCF, box 12, vol. 26.

<sup>55</sup> CIA, "SNIE 53-65: Short-Term Prospects in South Vietnam," February 4, 1965, *Estimative Products on Vietnam 1948-1975* (Washington, DC: GPO, 2005).

Embassy experts agreed that less senior Buddhist leaders, particularly those close to Tri Quang, were in league with the Viet Cong.<sup>56</sup>

Unfortunately, Moyar's assessment cannot be sustained by the only evidence he cites: a January 31 cable from the Saigon Embassy. The cable was jointly prepared by the embassy officers and intelligence officials who met frequently with Tri Quang and the Buddhist movement, but Taylor himself endorsed it by saying it reflected the views of senior officials as well. After acknowledging all of the ways that the Buddhist movement's activities seriously hurt the anti-communist cause, the embassy officials emphatically emphasized that they were 'not of the opinion at present time that they are deliberately communist or that their goals include deliberate creation of a situation in which communists would gain political control of SVN.... In short, thesis that UBA leaders working for communists much less credible than interpretation that they (are) working for themselves and employing irresponsible means to further their ends, which can be exploited to communist advantage'.<sup>57</sup> Although very concerned about the tactics and ideas of some of Tri Quang and Tam Chau's associates, embassy officials certainly did not 'agree' that this meant they were in league with the Viet Cong. To be sure, the Saigon Embassy did think that the communists were stepping up their efforts to infiltrate the Buddhist hierarchy, but the important point it made was that none of these rumors about VC connections were considered proven, and the embassy repeated its conclusion that the communists did not control the policies of the UBA.<sup>58</sup> Finally, what is also interesting about the views of the Saigon Embassy is that it worried far more about a government composed of figures closer to Tam Chau, often seen as the more anti-communist bonze, than it were about one whose members might be closer to Tri Quang.

State Department officials in Washington fully endorsed the views of the Saigon Embassy. When the journalist Marguerite Higgins published a story in *The Washington Star* warning that the Johnson administration needed to wake up to Tri Quang and his alleged

<sup>56</sup> Moyar, "Political Monks," p. 773.

<sup>57</sup> Saigon to Secretary, January 31, 1965, NA II, RG 59, POL 13-6 VIET S, box 2931.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid. Tri Quang himself acknowledged that the Viet Cong had probably infiltrated the lower levels of the organization, but he pointed out that they had infiltrated every other organization in the country as well. See Saigon to State Department, February 4, 1965, POL 2 VIET S, box 2927.

intrigues with communists, Secretary of State Dean Rusk directed the head of the VWG to privately respond to Higgins. Thomas Corcoran, the Director of the VWG, correctly noted it was not true that intelligence officers were convinced of Quang's communist connections and that this fact was somehow being suppressed by policymakers in Washington. Based precisely on the opinions of the Vietnamese-speaking officers of the embassy, Corcoran argued that it was impossible to make any final or definitive comments as to Tri Quang's goals and motives. Although some of the words and actions of the Buddhist movement might benefit the communists, Corcoran noted that 'they also do much to oppose and frustrate Communist attempts to extend their control over the Vietnamese people'.<sup>59</sup>

In the aftermath of Huong's removal from the government, Tri Quang sought to reassure the Saigon Embassy that his efforts were not reflections of an underlying anti-Americanism. In interviews with Saigon English language newspapers, Quang acknowledged that there was some Buddhist resentment against Ambassador Taylor and America's staunch support for Huong, but he also argued that the Buddhists were incapable of anti-Americanism: 'There is no such thing as anti-Americanism. One can only be anti-American if one is Communist or chauvinistic. Buddhism being neither Communist nor chauvinistic, there is no anti-Americanism'.<sup>60</sup> In private conversations with embassy officials, Quang sought to convey the idea that he was still a strong ally of the American government and that he lamented the extreme actions of some of his associates in the Buddhist movement. Although Americans were understandably despairing of the situation in Vietnam, Tri Quang did not believe that the United States could or should accept the possibility of defeat. While repeating his previous idea that there were acceptable and unacceptable versions of neutralism for Vietnam, Tri Quang argued with American officials that 'the U.S. was still greatly needed in Vietnam to prevent a communist takeover. There was still hope for victory, and the U.S. must not get discouraged and give up. But the U.S. must think in

<sup>59</sup> Corcoran to Higgins, February 18, 1965, NA II, RG 59, POL 13-6 VIET S, box 2931.

<sup>60</sup> Saigon to Department of State, "Interview by Tri Quang in English-Language Dailies," February 3, 1965, LBJL, NSF, VNCF, box 13, vol. 27. Of course, Tri Quang's words cannot be taken literally since the Buddhist movement did at times promote anti-American sentiments. What he probably meant to convey was that these expressions of sentiment were tactical rather than fundamental expressions of Buddhist views of America.

terms of victory and must accept its full responsibility in the war effort'.<sup>61</sup>

What Tri Quang viewed as his own responsibilities in the war effort, however, remained very hard to discern. In early February 1965, the CIA reported that Tri Quang had said that 'he would very much enjoy working on large-scale anti-communist programs . . . the military and the Americans could manage the fighting but the Buddhists would fight the psychological war, which he considered far more important'.<sup>62</sup> Although there are many reasons to question how sincere Tri Quang was in his expressions of anti-communist zeal, American policymakers never seemed to have any great interest in channeling Tri Quang's abundant energies in this direction. Part of the explanation for the lack of interest is surely due to the lack of trust American officials had in Tri Quang and the fear that his anti-communist programs might interfere with the goals of the United States or the Government of South Vietnam. However, it is also clear that American officials accepted the idea that Tri Quang's anti-communist efforts could be most successful if he was not seen as completely allied with the U.S. government.

Tri Quang's stated desire for working independently and behind the scenes might have been a flimsy rationalization for inaction, but it is also true that he did help out the American war effort in the spring of 1965. American officials became increasingly concerned in February 1965 that the Buddhist movement was going to openly embrace the idea of an end to the war through a negotiated settlement with the NLF. These fears were realized later in the month when Thich Quang Lien published a manifesto that called for a mutual withdrawal of the NLF and American forces from the South. Lien, a prominent Buddhist monk who had studied at Yale, included statements of appreciation for past American assistance, but such statements did not in any way alter the Saigon Embassy's alarm at an appeal that it believed was naïve and dangerous.<sup>63</sup> Following right on the heels of the start of the Rolling Thunder bombing campaign against North Vietnam, American officials were concerned that the Buddhist movement's

<sup>61</sup> Saigon to State Department, February 4, 1965, NA II, RG 59, POL 2 VIET S, box 2927.

<sup>62</sup> CIA Intelligence Cable, February 2, 1965, *Declassified Documents Reference System*, 1976070100060.

<sup>63</sup> Saigon to State Department, March 4, 1965, NA II, RG 59, POL 27 VIET S, box 2953.

call for a negotiated settlement would interfere with their ability to prosecute the war.

Tri Quang fully shared the embassy's concern about the activities of Thich Quang Lien's peace movement. Significantly, when asked by an embassy official whether his proposal had the support of the Buddhist leadership, Lien only responded that it had the support of the supposed 'moderate' Tam Chau. Lien did not mention whether it had the support of the 'radical' Tri Quang and with good reason since he was vehemently opposed to an immediate call for negotiations.<sup>64</sup> In fact, Tri Quang was wholeheartedly in favour of the Rolling Thunder campaign and he even supported extending its scope. In his view, 'We must continue the airstrikes on North Vietnam as a necessary part of the diplomatic-military offensive. The strikes must not be limited to retaliation for VC attacks on U.S. bases and personnel, as this was bad for Vietnamese morale; they must be in answer to the general VC campaign against the South and against the people themselves'.<sup>65</sup> If American military activities were open to criticism in any way, Tri Quang felt that the problem was that they simply did not go far enough. Using a language and logic that American strategists would have fully understood, Tri Quang believed that the bombing campaign against North Vietnam should 'be concentrated within a short period of time and with rapidly increasing intensity, to force the North to some reaction as soon as possible and to prevent giving the communists enough time to prepare themselves psychologically and militarily'.<sup>66</sup> J.D. Rosenthal, the American embassy official closest to Tri Quang throughout this period, marveled at his ability to set aside any religious qualms concerning the Rolling Thunder campaign. Indeed, according to Rosenthal, 'Far from having any moral or ethical misgivings about the bombings, he seems worried that the opportunity presented by them will be wasted because they have not been intense enough'.<sup>67</sup>

<sup>64</sup> Saigon to Secretary, March 1, 1965, LBJL, NSF, VNCF, box 14, vol. 30.

<sup>65</sup> Saigon to State Department, March 3, 1965, LBJL, NSF, VNCF, box 14, vol. 30.

<sup>66</sup> Saigon to State Department, March 22, 1965, LBJL, NSF, VNCF, box 15, vol. 31.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.* Noting Quang's call for airstrikes, Moyar argues in "Political Monks" that 'there is direct evidence that the advice was a tool to maintain America's favour so that the militant Buddhists could continue their subversive activities' (p. 779). Unfortunately, the direct evidence is simply a quote from British counterinsurgency specialist Robert Thompson: 'Tri Quang told General Taylor that he favored American bombing of the north, and then went straight to the French to explain

Tri Quang's open endorsement of Rolling Thunder might have bolstered the American position at a moment when it was under attack by a population greatly concerned about the implications of an extensive air campaign against North Vietnam. The State Department believed that it was 'obviously desirable' for the embassy to get Tri Quang to make his positions on airstrikes known to the wider population.<sup>68</sup> The problem, however, was that neither Tri Quang nor the American Embassy shared the view that it was obviously desirable for him to come out publicly in favour of airstrikes. As Tri Quang explained to embassy officials, a religious leader could not be expected to openly support a violent course of military action. After hearing Tri Quang explain his position, Rosenthal did not protest his decision and 'assured him we understood his position'.<sup>69</sup> The fact that Tri Quang was unwilling to openly support Rolling Thunder certainly did not mean that his position was irrelevant or unhelpful to the American effort in Vietnam. Working behind the scenes, Tri Quang helped ensure that Lien's peace manifesto would have no wider impact. Less than three weeks after Lien published his appeal for peace, his movement was over due to both government repression and Tri Quang's efforts to ensure that it was not endorsed by the Buddhist movement. Tri Quang himself had no qualms about the use of government repression to break up the peace movement. He thought it was an 'excellent' idea when the GVN proposed deporting three peace movement members to North Vietnam as punishment.<sup>70</sup> In a conversation the following month with Premier Phan Huy Quat, Tri Quang reportedly told him that Lien should have been arrested and that his peace movement should have been treated as harshly as all the other peace movements.<sup>71</sup>

that he was only lulling Taylor's suspicions so as to have a free hand to press on with his undercover campaign for peace at any price—or rather at the communist price'. The origins of this quote are certainly obscure; Moyer cites Critchfield's *The Long Charade*, but it also appears in Higgins' 1965 book, *Our Vietnam Nightmare*, pp. 285–286. Neither Higgins nor Critchfield provide any idea about where and when Thompson allegedly made this statement. The idea that Tri Quang would reveal such a view is dubious in itself, but the idea that he would choose to reveal it to 'the French' is hardly believable given his consistently extreme anti-French views. In short, it is hard to see how the Thompson quote can be seen as viewed as serious evidence concerning Tri Quang's motives.

<sup>68</sup> State Department to Saigon, March 2, 1965, LBJL, NSF, VNCF, box 14, vol. 30.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Saigon to State Department, March 19, 1965, NA II, RG 59, POL 2 VIET S, box 2927.

<sup>71</sup> Saigon to State Department, May 6, 1965, LBJL, NSF, VNCF, box 17, vol. 34.

American relations with the Buddhist movement were never as positive as they were during the spring of 1965. Tri Quang and other Buddhists had long recommended Phan Huy Quat for a leading role in the government and his appointment as premier effectively ended Buddhist opposition to the GVN. Satisfied with the composition of the GVN, Tri Quang finally turned to the anti-communist campaign that he had been promising for a long time. Sparked by increased VC activities in Central Vietnam, the Buddhists took increasing steps to combat infiltration of their ranks and to refrain from participation in Viet Cong sponsored demonstrations.<sup>72</sup> Embassy officials were very impressed with the degree of anti-communist sentiments shown by university students from the Buddhist Student Association.<sup>73</sup> Analysts from the CIA reported that 'Buddhist leaders have taken several quiet steps suggesting a more firmly anti-communist posture'.<sup>74</sup> The mood of despair about Buddhist power that had gripped American policymakers in January was now replaced with a cautious optimism about the possibilities of collaboration. While acknowledging that working with the Buddhists on an anti-communist campaign might pose certain risks, the CIA's Deputy Director of Plans, Richard Helms, recommended that the United States should take a 'reasonable gamble' and provide greater covert support to the Buddhists.<sup>75</sup>

The deeper collaboration between the United States and Tri Quang envisioned by Helms did not come to fruition. Tri Quang continued to voice increasingly hawkish sentiments on the war in his private conversations with American officials, but the perils of working more closely with him were starkly revealed in a letter he sent to Henry Cabot Lodge in May 1965. Tri Quang rarely communicated with American officials through formal letters and it is clear that this letter represented an effort to express his deepest thoughts on the situation in Vietnam. Unfortunately, the thoughts expressed in the letter revealed that the religious conflict in Vietnam between Buddhists and Catholics remained his overriding concern. In his view, Catholics were not sincere anticommunists and the Buddhists believed that American

<sup>72</sup> Saigon to Secretary, April 7, 1965, LBJL, NSF, VNCF, box 16, vol. 32.

<sup>73</sup> Saigon to Secretary, April 12, 1965, LBJL, NSF, VNCF, box 16, vol. 32.

<sup>74</sup> CIA, "The Situation in South Vietnam," April 7, 1965, LBJL, NSF, VNCF, box 16, vol. 32.

<sup>75</sup> Memorandum for Director of Central Intelligence, "CIA Proposals for Limited Covert Civilian Political Action in Vietnam," March 31, 1965, LBJL, McCone's 12 Points, box 194.

policies were biased in favour of Catholicism. The Americans were considered by the people to be no different than the French in 'using Catholics to exterminate Buddhists'. If America were to avoid losing the war, they had no choice but to reverse policy and advocate a revolutionary policy, which Tri Quang essentially defined as 'the evil Can Lao Catholic elements and the reactionary Dai Viet bunch must be gotten rid of'.<sup>76</sup> Needless to say, American policymakers were appalled at the sentiments expressed by Tri Quang. There was never the slightest chance that the United States was going to agree with Tri Quang and adopt a political strategy based on the primacy of combating Catholicism in South Vietnam. In the absence of any agreement on the fundamental nature of the conflict in South Vietnam, there were real limits as to how much either side could collaborate with the other.

The decision of the South Vietnamese generals to remove Quat from power in 1965 led to a noticeable change in Tri Quang's relationship with the United States. This change had little or nothing to do with any opposition to American plans for escalating the war or any principled opposition to the end of civilian rule. Like the generals themselves, Tri Quang was critical of Quat's less than energetic conduct of the war.<sup>77</sup> Indeed, he continued to advocate courses of military action that went far beyond anything envisioned by American policymakers. As late as July 1965, Tri Quang was still telling American officials that he supported a joint invasion of North Vietnam and that he thought the Johnson administration needed to go after China's nuclear capability.<sup>78</sup> After meeting with American peace activists from the Fellowship of Reconciliation, Tri Quang told embassy officials that he found them 'absolutely ignorant' and had told them that war at this point was necessary for the Vietnamese people.<sup>79</sup> Tri Quang was also unconcerned about moving away from the principle of civilian rule. As he had stated in the past, Tri Quang believed that a military regime could more easily enact the revolutionary measures and impose the discipline necessary for a more effective prosecution of the war.<sup>80</sup>

<sup>76</sup> Tri Quang to Lodge, May 13, 1965, LBJL, NSF, VNCF, box 17, vol. 34.

<sup>77</sup> Saigon to State Department, May 6, 1965, LBJL, NSF, VNCF, box 17, vol. 34.

<sup>78</sup> Saigon to State Department, July 21, 1965, LBJL, NSF, VNCF, box 20, vol. 37.

<sup>79</sup> Saigon to State Department, July 10, 1965, LBJL, NSF, VNCF, box 20, vol. 37.

<sup>80</sup> Saigon to Secretary, June 12, 1965, LBJL, NSF, VNCF, box 18, vol. 35.

Tri Quang's criticism of the new government was based on one simple element that was easily predictable given his previous history: the appointment of Nguyen Van Thieu as Chief of State. Thieu, a Catholic, had long been a major symbol for Quang of the unwillingness of the GVN to make a clean break with the Diem era of Catholic domination. Tri Quang had hoped that General Nguyen Chanh Thi, known for his sympathies with the Buddhists, would be chosen. After reciting all of Thieu's alleged past crimes against the Buddhists, Tri Quang told American officials that he believed that Thieu was a CIA agent installed 'so as to assure a government responsive to U.S. desires once we have sent 500,000 troops here'.<sup>81</sup> However, while Tri Quang's rhetoric of opposition to the new regime was very similar to the rhetoric employed in the past, his actions were now much more restrained. Indeed, the period from June 1965 up to the Buddhist crisis of March 1966 was easily the most stable time in the post-Diem era.

### **The Buddhist Crisis of 1966 and the American Failure in Vietnam**

If Tri Quang was a communist operative during the Vietnam War, it would not at all be an exaggeration to claim that the North Vietnamese successfully carried out 'one of the most ingenious and effective uses of covert action in history'.<sup>82</sup> American analysts in Saigon and Washington entertained this possibility many times during the course of the war and consistently concluded that the evidence did not support the charge. These analysts were by no means blind to Tri Quang's many faults and the numerous obstacles he placed in the way of a stable GVN able to prosecute the war effectively. While the argument that Tri Quang was simply playing American analysts for dupes with his anti-communist and hawkish sentiments can never be disproved with any evidence, it should be kept in mind that Tri Quang's intended targets were not gullible peace activists or idealistic academics opposed to the war, but veteran analysts intensely committed to winning the war in Vietnam such as John Negroponte and George Carver. As Carver noted, the idea that Tri Quang was simply espousing hawkish, anti-communist sentiments to win over

<sup>81</sup> Saigon to Secretary, June 22, 1965, LBJL, NSF, VNCF, box 19, vol. 36.

<sup>82</sup> Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken*, p. 218.

American officials 'is simply not convincing to one who has personally discussed such subjects with him'.<sup>83</sup>

It is indeed true, of course, that Tri Quang's efforts added little to the anti-communist cause and that, regardless of his intentions, his interventions into South Vietnamese politics often wound up serving the goals of the communists and the NLF. American analysts acknowledged this grim reality numerous times, but they saw this problem as an intellectual mistake on Tri Quang's part, one rooted in his personal characteristics, rather than as conscious design. His frequent interventions in politics and his calls for a vague 'social revolution' were inherently incompatible with the American aim of political and social stability. However, American analysts surely recognized that his basic argument was far from illegitimate or wrong; namely, the war could not be won unless the government of South Vietnam reflected the aspirations of the people and could rally the population against the NLF. Tri Quang surely did not represent all of the Vietnamese people, or even a majority of Buddhists, but there was no doubt that he represented a potent and organized political force. On the eve of the Buddhist crisis, American analysts had not yet figured out how to channel Tri Quang's actions on to more constructive paths, but they had also rejected the idea that he or the Buddhist movement he lead could simply be ignored or pushed aside.

Ironically, it was Henry Cabot Lodge who was largely responsible for changing the American approach to Tri Quang during the Buddhist crisis of 1966. Given his role in sheltering Tri Quang from Diem during the 1963 crisis, Lodge was understandably viewed as a sympathetic figure by the Buddhists. Lodge was very critical of Tri Quang's whipping up of anti-Catholic sentiments during the trials of Major Dang Sy and Ngo Dinh Canh, but as late as March 1965, he urged the Johnson administration not to give up on the Buddhists because of their crucial role in South Vietnam.<sup>84</sup> However, throughout the Buddhist crisis of 1966, Lodge supported the very confrontational stance adopted by the GVN towards the Buddhist struggle movement. Lodge fully supported Ky's decision to remove General Nguyen Chanh Thi from I Corps despite the fact that Thi was thought to be popular with the Buddhists. While acknowledging that he could not provide

<sup>83</sup> Carver to McNaughton, "Consequences of a Buddhist Political Victory in South Vietnam," LBJL, NSF, VNCF, box 63, 1 EE (4) Post-Tet Political Activity.

<sup>84</sup> Memorandum by Lodge, "Recommendations Regarding Vietnam," March 8, 1965, *FRUS*, 1964-1968, vol. 2, pp. 415-420.

any proof, Lodge now endorsed the idea that Tri Quang and other Buddhists were consciously serving the ends of the communists and the NLF.<sup>85</sup> Throughout the crisis, Lodge was consistently hawkish and supportive of the GVN's efforts to crush the militant Buddhists.

To be sure, Lodge had some support in Washington for his tough stance towards Tri Quang. Maxwell Taylor, whose term in Saigon was marked by recurrent government crises sparked by the Buddhists, thought that Lodge needed to convey to the GVN leaders 'our sense of the importance of destroying Tri Quang as a political force'. Taylor had rejected the idea that Tri Quang was a communist when he was the Ambassador to South Vietnam, but he now thought that Lodge and the GVN 'should develop a plan to expose Tri Quang to the Vietnamese public and the international world as a Communist-supported rebel intent upon destroying the non-Communist government in Saigon for the benefit of the VC and Hanoi'.<sup>86</sup> While American policy prior to the Buddhist crisis was based on the idea that Tri Quang was troublesome but not a communist, Lodge now based American policy squarely on the idea that he was essentially an integral part of the communist effort. Tri Quang's views throughout the crisis were essentially the same as they had always been, but Lodge essentially wrote him off as a legitimate political actor. 'We should be clear in our minds', Lodge cabled Washington in April 1966, 'that the Buddhist leadership are our adversaries'.<sup>87</sup>

The tragedy of American policy during the Buddhist crisis is that numerous officials in the Johnson administration did reject precisely the position that Lodge advocated, but to very little effect. The State Department repeatedly questioned Lodge's decisions and assumptions throughout the crisis. Secretary of State Dean Rusk personally asked Lodge not to endorse the claims that the Buddhist leaders were communist since they still had no proof of a connection and because such a line would be resented by the many Buddhist leaders who were demonstrably not communists.<sup>88</sup> After hearing Cy Sulzberger of the *New York Times* emphasize the importance of the Viet Cong in running the Buddhist struggle movement, Robert Komer told him that he had 'seen little hard evidence which would confirm that the VC had

<sup>85</sup> Lodge Weekly Telegram, March 23, 1966, *FRUS*, 1964-1968, vol. 4, pp. 225-229.

<sup>86</sup> Maxwell Taylor, "Comments on the Present Situation in South Vietnam," April 8, 1965, LBJL, NSF, VNCF, box 29, vol. 50.

<sup>87</sup> Lodge to Secretary, April 8, 1965, LBJL, NSF, VNCF, box 29, vol. 50.

<sup>88</sup> Rusk to Lodge, April 6, 1965, LBJL, NSF, VNCF, box 46, NODIS, vol. 3.

largely run the Hue-Danang affair. Sure, there were lots of low-level reports of infiltration efforts, and no one would doubt that the VC had tried, but I couldn't give him hard evidence if it didn't exist'.<sup>89</sup> Komer regretted that Lodge was telling Sulzberger and other journalists an interpretation of the Buddhist crisis that was simply wrong and not shared by many other officials. In Komer's own view, the Johnson administration needed to keep the Buddhist crisis in perspective and 'calm the hysterical': 'Tri Quang and others were by no means trying to get the Americans to leave Vietnam. We do *not* see the dissident Buddhists as basically neutralist, or eager to negotiate. They know as well as the GVN that this would leave them all to the tender mercies of the VC. Rather what the dissidents sought (and they told us so repeatedly) was by demonstrations, anti-US banners, and even immolations *to pressure and embarrass the US into backing them instead of Ky*'.<sup>90</sup>

Komer's assessment was widely shared within the Johnson administration. Thomas Hughes, the Director of the Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR), sent a lengthy analysis of the standoff between the Buddhists and the GVN in March that did not even indirectly imply that the Buddhists were driven by anti-Americanism, a desire for neutralism, or an end to the war at any price. The roots of the crisis, Hughes argued, were to be found in 'long-standing grievances against the Ky-Thieu leadership which is felt to have moved too slowly and grudgingly to legalize its status, hold national elections, and return the reins of government to elected officials—in general reversing rather than furthering the 1963 revolution'.<sup>91</sup> The CIA's basic approach to the Buddhist crisis was very compatible with INR's. In several lengthy and thoughtful papers, George Carver rejected the entire idea that the war would necessarily be lost even if the militant Buddhists came to power in South Vietnam. While acknowledging the short-term problems a Buddhist victory might entail for the immediate war effort, Carver believed that the basic compatibility of American and Buddhist aims would remain. Carver certainly did not believe that Tri Quang and

<sup>89</sup> Komer Memorandum to Bill Moyers, June 3, 1966, LBJL, Files of Robert Komer, box 4, Moyer/Christian Folder. As Komer noted with regret, Sulzberger probably received these views from Lodge and his Deputy Ambassador, William Porter.

<sup>90</sup> Komer to Bill Moyers, June 2, 1966, LBJL, Files of Robert Komer, box 3, White House Chronological Folder March–December 1966. Emphasis in original.

<sup>91</sup> Hughes to Rusk, March 19, 1966, "GVN Crisis Hardening But Compromise Seems Possible," *FRUS*, 1964–1968, vol. 4, pp. 292–293.

other militant Buddhists should be handed the reins of power, but he did think that American policy could not be successful without the active support of the Buddhists. In fact, Carver strongly implied that American interests might be better served with a Buddhist victory since 'a government in which the Buddhists had a predominant voice could provide a focus for emergent Vietnamese nationalism which, eventually, could give the whole non-communist nationalist structure a stronger foundation than it currently enjoys'.<sup>92</sup> Carver's fundamental argument was not original; Tri Quang had long argued that the GVN could not triumph over the NLF and North Vietnam unless it had a stronger and more popular foundation.

A coalition of the State Department, the CIA, and Robert Komer would appear to be quite formidable, but it was Lodge who ran the show since he was the only one who met and consulted regularly with Ky and Thieu. Although Lodge did occasionally listen to the State Department's concerns about his handling of the crisis, he always did so reluctantly. After every previous crisis sparked by Tri Quang, American policymakers sought to restore good relations since it was obvious to all that the Buddhists could not be erased from the calculus of how a viable non-communist society was to be constructed in South Vietnam. For Lodge, however, there was to be no reconciliation with Tri Quang or the militant Buddhists even after they had been crushed by the GVN military in June 1966. When the State Department expressed its disappointment that no candidates from the Buddhist struggle movement were running in the elections for the new Constituent Assembly, the convening of which was the major concession won by the opposition, Lodge replied that the militant Buddhists were not a 'loyal opposition' and that he objected to any efforts designed to encourage them to participate in the political process.<sup>93</sup>

For the most part, Tri Quang and the militant Buddhists remained outside the political process of South Vietnam for the rest of its existence. Mark Moyar believes that that the GVN's use of force in the spring of 1966 showed that 'the militant Buddhists could be

<sup>92</sup> Carver, "Consequences of a Buddhist Political Victory in South Vietnam; and CIA Intelligence Memorandum, "Thich Tri Quang and Buddhist Political Objectives in South Vietnam," LBJL, NSF, VNCF, box 30, vol. 51. The quotation is from the latter document. Carver is not listed as the author of the document, but there is little doubt that he was responsible for its main ideas.

<sup>93</sup> Lodge to William Bundy, July 26, 1966, LBJL, NSF, VNCF, box 34, vol. 56.

crushed without destroying the war effort'.<sup>94</sup> Perhaps, but another interpretation is that the crisis simply showed that the Buddhists could be militarily defeated, which no one ever doubted in the first place. Whether the Johnson administration and Tri Quang could have ever worked out a productive relationship that might have been able to harness the power of the Buddhist movement against the North and the NLF is far from clear, and there are certainly many reasons to be skeptical that such a partnership was either possible or desirable. However, what seems much less open to debate is that the destruction of Tri Quang and the Buddhist movement in 1966 further reduced the already slim prospects of a popular non-communist regime emerging in South Vietnam.

<sup>94</sup> Moyer, "Political Monks," p. 784.