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THE WARS OF THE SECTS:
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THE CAO DAI, HOA HAO, AND BINH XUYEN INSURRECTIONS:
" "
COCHINCHINA, 1940-1955

by
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" "

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For The Iron Duke

PREFACE

I first learned of the sects of Cochinchina in 1965, during a winter of training at the United States Army Special Warfare School at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. My instructors, all men with experience in Indochina, devoted a total of exactly one hour of lecture to these paramilitary groups. Our major concern at the time involved the more practical aspects of life in that corner of the world, and I am afraid I paid little attention to the lecture.

Subsequent tours of duty in Viet Nam led to my immediate acquaintance with some members of the sects: between my visits to Indochina, I began perusing the inadequate literature available to me on these groups. To my surprise, the subject seemed unexplored aside from passing, casual mention in articles and books dealing with the more common aspects of Viet history such as the First Indochina War. It appeared that with the exception of a very few French observers, no one had undertaken a systematic study of the sects. This thesis is thus a modest initial investigation.

The sects played a strange and complex role in Cochinchina during the tumultuous years following the establishment of the Vichy regime in 1940. In this work, I have tried to examine their origins, their philosophies, their political concepts, and their bloody, interminable struggles to win autonomous power for themselves in Cochinchina.

It would be easy to dismiss the sects as nothing more than a misguided crew of semi-literate brigands operating under weird spiritual imperatives. Nothing could be further from the truth. Any group that can put more than 10,000 well-armed troops in the field, no matter what their political or religious pretexts, ceases to be a gang of hoodlums and becomes a force that deserves serious analysis, however clumsy and ignorant they may appear at first glance.

Central to this thesis are several concepts involving the arming of the sects and their subsequent operations. First, the role of the Japanese cannot be ignored. It was the Kempeitai that armed the Cao Dai and the Hoa Hao; and the Japanese encouraged these groups and the Binh Xuyen to fill the power void that developed in Saigon during the months of August and September 1945. Second, the French Command learned a sad lesson in their dealings with the sects: to wit, it is easier to arm a group of men, than it is to direct these men after they have been armed. (If the U. S. Army Special Forces Detachments operating on the Darlac Plateau had known of the French experiences in Cochinchina, perhaps the "Rhade Revolt" of 1964 involving Montagnard mercenaries could have been avoided.) Third, the emergence of the regime of Ngo Dinh Diem proved to be the beginning of the end for the sects. During the months of April and May 1955, the Premier (with substantial American assistance) broke the backs of these semi-independent baronies.

One problem has continually plagued the progress of this work: the difficulty of securing reliable sources for the information presented herein. The reader will note a dearth of documentary materials; in my research, I have been unable to unearth governmental

proclamations and military operations orders which bear on my subject. It is highly improbable that such documentation would be extant, given the chaotic state of official records in a land that has been involved in continuous warfare since 1940. To compensate for this lacunae, I have attempted to confine myself to such sources as eye-witness accounts and personal interviews of the principle figures involved; I believe that these sources, especially where they coincide in detail, constitute an acceptable basis for this study. Hopefully, future students with greater access to French, Viet, and classified American records, will be able to provide a different and more comprehensive perspective on questions surrounding the sects.

A final word: while acknowledging the ideal of Rankean objectivity, I realize that my fascination with, and fondness for, the Viet people may slightly color this account. I ask the reader's indulgence in this matter; whenever possible, I have tried to restrain my impulses and to present a simple recitation of what happened, and why it happened.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

A project of this nature may be completed only with the positive and willing assistance of many persons. My path was made infinitely smoother by friends whose interest and enthusiasm prompted this work, and sustained me during its culmination. Limitations of space preclude the individual recognition of these comrades; but they will always have first call on my memory and love.

I would like to offer special recognition to Dr. Roy Carroll, Chairman of the History Department: on a rainy September afternoon in 1972, he took a chance on an old soldier when such risks were unfashionable. His encouragement and patience were of signal value in the preparation of this thesis. Mrs. Anita Dotson, Director of the Inter-Library Loan Department, Belk Library, provided unfailingly cheerful support of the project, dealing handily and tirelessly with obscure volumes in two foreign languages.

My Supervisor, Thomas Marvin Williamsen, deserves deep thanks; our mutual devotion to the history of the Far East has been a constant source of incentive to me. His dedication to the highest standards of historical research has been inspirational. Formally and informally, his scholarly guidance has been the decisive factor in this work.

Finally, I wish to express my appreciation to the "Friday Afternoon Colloquia of Blowing Rock", members of which pushed hard when the going was rough.

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ORTHOGRAPHIC NOTE

The Viet Nameese language is among the most difficult for American students to master. There are three major dialects (Northern, Central, and Southern) which correspond roughly to the three Ky, or regions, of Tonkin, Annam, and Cochinchina. Mutual intelligibility approximates that enjoyed by an Alabama sharecropper in conversation with a Bronx auctioneer; the same basic tongue is discernible, but only barely. In addition, many provinces of Viet Nam are noted for their own distinctive modes of pronunciation and syntax.

Another difficulty of Viet Nameese lies in the fact that it is a tonal language. No less than six different tones are found in the Northern dialect: level, high rising, low falling, low rising high rising broken, and low constricted.¹ Further, consonant clusters such as kh, ng, ngh, and nh are frequent in all dialects; these sounds, along with the ever-present vowel combinations such as oai, uoi, iai, and uye, form a language which is at once subtle, delicate, and musically discordant to Western ears. One need only reflect that each vowel holds six possible options of pronunciation, and that most Viet words have at least two vowels, to be convinced of the tonal complexity of the tongue.

Prior to the 17th century, the Viets used Chinese ideograms to represent their language. In 1627, a French Jesuit missionary,

¹Nguyen Dinh Hoa, Vietnamese - English Dictionary (Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle Co., 1968), p. vi.

Alexander de Rhodes, completed a Romanized alphabet for the Viet language.² Conscious of the tonal peculiarities of the vowels, Father Alexander employed a system of diacritical markings in combination with the standard Roman form of transliteration. His work stands to this day; while some elderly scholars in modern Viet Nam are proud of having mastered the classical Chinese characters in their youth, the overwhelming majority of literate Viets are schooled in Quoc Ngu, Rhodes' standardized alphabet.

Throughout this thesis, all rendering of proper names and place names will be offered in Quoc Ngu spelling, without diacritical markings. Accordingly, it will be necessary to employ a phonetic transliteration immediately following the initial appearance of such names. The transliteration will be of necessity a rough approximation; the writer has no pretensions to expertise in the Viet Nameese language, and allowance should be made for this deficiency.

The following examples are offered for this transliteration: Quoc Ngu (Kwohk N'guh), Viet Nam (Vee'ehk Nahm), Saigon (Shy Gohn), etc.

A word about proper names; as in other Oriental languages, the family name appears first, followed by given appellations, most of which reflect a virtue or characteristic which will (hopefully) guide the infant in later life. Individual Viet Nameese are referred to by their given names and not their family names; for example, Madame Nhu (N'yoow), rather than Madame Ngo (N'gaw). Further, several of

²Joseph Buttinger, Vietnam: A Dragon Embattled, Vol. II: Vietnam at War (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1967), p. 1195. (Hereafter cited as Buttinger, Vietnam, II.)

the persons involved in the insurrections operated under aliases; these noms de guerre will be elaborated in detail as they appear.

* * *

And now, the study begins -

Comme toujours ce voyage commencera a Saigon.³

³Jean Larteguy, Voyage au Bout de la Guerre (Paris: Presses de la Cite, 1971), p. 12.

CHAPTER I

THE CAO DAI SECT

On the night of 25 December 1925, a small group of Viet Namese civil servants were gathered in a Saigon apartment rented by Nguyen Van Chieu (N'goo-yin Vuhn Chee-oo), an administrator and sometime customs clerk of the French Colonial Administration. The group was engaged in a seance, a "table-tapping" affair by which they hoped to gain contact with various spirits. Their prospects were good for such contacts; during the past year, several mediums in Saigon had received messages from a supernatural being identified only as "Aaa", and the civil servants felt confident of further manifestations of this new and mysterious entity.

Their efforts were rewarded on that Christmas night, and in a singular fashion: the spirit "Aaa" appeared, and through some judicious rattling of the table, advised the clerks and administrators that he was in fact the Cao Dai (Kow Die), the Great or High Palace, the God Who Reigns Over the Universe. Further Cao Dai announced that he had come to "teach the Truth to the people of Viet Nam"; he directed that future seances be held with the aid of a corbeille-a-bec, or "beaked basket". This device was a bamboo affair

with a wooden pointer which, when held by a medium, would peck out messages in a fashion similar to a ouija board.¹

To Nguyen Van Chieu, Cao Dai's appearance was not especially surprising; indeed, he had been receiving 'revelations' from this deity since 1919, during his tenure as a Prefect on Phu Quoc Island off the coast of Cambodia. While on Phu Quoc, Chieu had been instructed by the anonymous spirit to prepare for the proclamation of a new religion on earth, a new faith which would eventually become universal, as it would synthesize all of the major religions of man. The outward motif of the new cult would be a great, all-seeing eye.

For all his heavenly commission, Chieu was hardly up to the task of getting Cao Daism out of seances and into the public domain. Apparently, he lacked the personal drive and enthusiasm for successful zealotry; by April 1926, his position as leader of the new faith had eroded to the extent that he was replaced by one Le Van Trung (Lay Vuhn Ch'oong).²

Le Van Trung's ascendancy is oddly reminiscent of the career of St. Augustine of Hippo. The man's character was summed up by the

¹Cf. Gabriel, Gobron, History and Philosophy of Caodaism: Reformed Buddhism, Vietnamese Spiritism, New Religion in Eurasia, trans. by Pham Xuan Thai (Saigon: Tu Hai, 1950), p. 22 (hereafter cited as Gobron, Caodaism); Lucien Bodard, The Quicksand War: Prelude to Vietnam, trans. by Patrick O'Brian (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1967), p. 31 (hereafter cited as Bodard, Quicksand War); and Bernard B. Fall, "The Political-Religious Sects of Viet-Nam," Pacific Affairs, XXVIII (September, 1955), 237 (hereafter cited as Fall, "Sects"), for accounts of the Christmas seance in which Cao Dai first appeared under his own name.

²Fall, "Sects", 237. See also U. S., Department of the Army, Pamphlet No. 550-105, Minority Groups in the Republic of Vietnam, 1966 (Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1966), p. 831 (hereafter cited as DA Pam 550-105), for a description of Trung's rise to leadership.

Viet historian Le Thanh Khoi: Trung was a "homme d'affaires de Saigon et conseiller colonial."³ Other accounts note that his affairs consisted in the main of high-rolling debauchery; his financial speculations, Chinese concubines, and opium addiction made him an unlikely candidate for spiritual leadership. However, shortly after the Christmas revelation, Chieu was directed by the corbeille-a-bec to seek out Trung and effect his conversion; the new acolyte immediately ceased his philanderings, becoming a strict vegetarian and a thorough-going ascetic.⁴

Under Trung's direction, the new religion was established in a formal way with both the French Colonial Government and the Viet populace. Taking the mellifluous title of Dai Dao Tam Ky Pho Do, or "Third Amnesty of God", the sect sought recognition from Colonial authorities on 7 October 1926. A petition was delivered by Trung to the French Governor General on that day; the document reflected the signatures of 28 of the sect's leaders and 247 adherents. The French Administration declined immediate approval, wishing to investigate the

³Le Thanh Khoi, Le Viet-Nam, Histoire et Civilisation (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1955), p. 449. Joseph Buttinger, in his Vietnam: A Dragon Embattled, Vol. I: From Colonialism to the Vietminh (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1967), p. 253 (hereafter cited as Buttinger, Vietnam, I) describes Trung as "formerly a secretary of the government who had become a colonial councillor after bold business transactions, although largely fiascos, had made him an important man." Buttinger, however, errs in ascribing the first revelations of Cao Dai to 1926. He also incorrectly identifies Chieu as "Ngo Van Chieu", possibly confusing him with the author of Journal d'un Combattant Viet-Minh (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1955).

⁴Buttinger, Vietnam, I, p. 254; Gobron, Caodaism, p. 28; and Donald Lancaster, in his The Emancipation of French Indochina (New York: Oxford University Press, 1961), p. 103 (hereafter cited as Lancaster, Emancipation), all mention this amazing personal transformation.

faith a bit further before committing itself. Undaunted, Trung immediately organized three proselyting teams for all of Cochinchina; his energy paid off with the recruitment of some 20,000 followers by the end of 1926.⁵

There were two major reasons for the astonishing success of the new religion. The typical Viet, regardless of his station in life, was (and still is) possessed of a consuming interest in the occult. Geomancers, astrologers, and mediums are familiar and respected figures in village life; their urban counterparts, while less prominent, also exercise considerable influence. A faith whose main principles were derived from supernatural messages would have an intrinsic appeal for many Viets. Secondly, Cao Daim was a synthesis of major religions, both Occidental and Oriental, embodying the best precepts of these faiths. Therefore, one could join the sect without effectively denying an earlier faith.

Despite the lack of formal French approval of the burgeoning religion, a grand ceremony solemnizing the birth of the faith took place at the village of Go Ken, a few kilometers north of the city of Tay Ninh (Tie Neeng), during the period 18-20 November 1926. In the course of the celebration, a ceremonial and religious code was promulgated. The "Holy See" was organized, and plans for the future great cathedral, to be erected at the foot of Nui Ba Den (the "Mount of the Black Virgin"), were unveiled. An underlying philosophy for the sect was expressed, and a hierarchy established.

⁵Fall, "Sects", 237. Fall's figures are derived from an unpublished Rapport sur les Cao-Dai, compiled by the French Ground Forces, South Viet Nam, Western Command, in February 1952. This writer has been unable to obtain a copy of this Report.

As mentioned earlier, Cao Daism is a synthesis of the world's major religions. By Cao Dai reckoning, two "Amnesties" of God had taken place prior to the 1925 revelation; namely, those of Moses and Jesus Christ, and those of Gautama Sakyamuni (Buddha) and Lao Tze (the exponent of Taoism). Thus, Cao Daism was the "Third Amnesty" of the Creator. Gabriel Gobron, a French convert to the Cao Dai faith, summarized the religion's principles as follows:

Cao-Daism is destined to the whole Universe, because the message which it carries is contained in every religion. The multiplicity of religions is not an obstacle to harmony if there is a subtle but nonetheless real bond which serves as a point of contact. This subtle but real bond, Cao-Daism brings it to every unprejudiced person, in all sincerity, in all fraternity, in its message: Life, Love, Truth.⁶

The secular implementation of the Cao Dai message (as derived from sessions with the corbeille-a-bec) involved five prohibitions and four commandments. The prohibitions included: murder, covetousness, gluttony, temptations by luxury, and sinning by speech. Believers were exhorted to practice brotherhood towards their fellow man; kindness toward animals; kindness towards plants; and service toward one's neighbors. Borrowing from the teachings of Gautama, Cao Daism incorporated the concept of the Eight-fold Path as a means of achieving spiritual perfection.⁷

The synthetic character of Cao Daism persisted over the years; as late as 1955, a Western journalist recorded his impressions of the faith as it was explained by a Cao Dai priest:

⁶Gobron, Caodaism, pp. 5-6.

⁷Ibid., pp. 45, 52, and 147, passim.

'Actually, ours is a Eurasian religion,' explains my guide, a tall white-clad priest. 'You see, we don't believe in a single true and uniquely sanctifying belief. The Creator has scattered the seeds of truth over the centuries and over the continents of the earth. Jesus or Buddha or Laotse: their message is at bottom only a form of the great divine truth; in their depths all religions coincide.'⁸

On further advice of the corbeille-a-bec, the spiritual hierarchy of the church was organized along Roman Catholic lines. Provision was made for six Cardinals, thirty-six Archbishops, sixty-eight Bishops, and three thousand priests; unfortunately, "the lack of worthy candidates permitted only a fraction of these offices to be filled."⁹ Authorization was also given for orders of monks and nuns.

In the matter of supreme temporal authority, a rather awkward situation arose. The "Pope" of the Cao Dai faith holds the title of Giao Tong (Head of the Church), and this "Pope" has always been the spirit of a Viet philosopher, Ly Thai Bach, who communicated with the faithful through the corbeille-a-bec. His earthly representative was, of course, Le Van Trung, who took the title Quyem Giao Tong or "Interim Pope."

To better manage the rapidly-growing faith, three administrative branches were organized at the Holy See of Tay Ninh. (The reader is invited to refer to the schematic diagram at the end of this chapter, for a clearer presentation of the relationships between the various controlling groups of the sect.) The Cuu Trung Dai was

⁸Peter Schmid, "Free Indochina Fights against Time: Vietnam's Winding, Rocky Road," Commentary, XXIV (January, 1955), 23. (Hereafter cited as Schmid, "Indochina".)

⁹Ibid., 24.

charged with executive powers for the Church and control of the armed forces; the Hiep Thien Dai was the final authority on spiritual matters; and the Co-Quan Phuoc-Thien directed charitable affairs, providing for aged and invalid members of the spiritual community.

In his capacity as Quyem Giao Tong, Le Van Trung headed the Cuu Trung Dai, organizing it into nine ministries or Vien (literally, institutes). These Vien handled such ticklish matters as finance, security, supply, and routine housekeeping functions of the church, in addition to stylization of the sect's rites. Until his death in November 1934, Trung used the Cuu Trung Dai for the mundane, routine direction of the church.

The Hiep Thien Dai, while ostensibly subordinate to the Cuu Trung Dai, actually carried the potential for the total control of the faith. The reason was simple: the corbeille-a-bec resided within this body. Accordingly, interpretations of spiritual messages were within the exclusive purview of the Hiep Thien Dai. It came as no surprise, then, that the Ho Phap (Haw Fuhp) or "Superior" of this branch was "recommended" to take command of the sect following Trung's death.¹⁰

The Ho Phap, one Pham Cong Tac (Fahm Kawng Tahk), exercised direction of the Hiep Thien Dai through two assistants and a Sacerdotal Council of twelve prelates. In addition to the three administrative branches of the sect, there were smaller organizations such as the High Assembly, the Grand Council, the Grand Assembly, the Tribunal

¹⁰Information on the administrative structure of the sect was obtained from Fall, "Sects", 238-9, and DA Pam 550-105, pp. 832-3; both sources provided detailed, though complicated, resumes of the internal structures of the three administrative bodies.

of Three Religions, and the Tribunal of the Adept. True power, however, resided with the interpreters of the messages of the corbeille-a-bec, Pham Cong Tac and his Sacerdotal Council.

It must not be supposed that Pham Cong Tac's elevation to the office of Quyem Giao Tong was effected with any particular ease. First, a period of mourning was declared following the "disincarnation" of Le Van Trung. (Such an august personage was believed to be above death in the mundane sense.) Next, a successor had to be chosen: it was then that Pham Cong Tac's control of the corbeille-a-bec became decisive. Following the one-year mourning period, an election was organized. By vote of the Council of the Faithful and the Sacerdotal Council, Tac was invested as Trung's replacement on 12 November 1935, retaining his title as Ho Phap.¹¹

Tac's victory was immediately contested by various splinter groups. Eleven separate factions protested the elections; among them were the Chieu Minh Danh sect, a miniscule offshoot organized by Nguyen Van Chieu in 1928 in the Can Tho area. Of the eleven factions, only eight survived the vicissitudes of the Second World War and the First Indochina War.¹² Pham Cong Tac's Tam Ky branch of the church retained control of the Holy See at Tay Ninh.

Under Tac's leadership, a more materialistic tone emerged in the Cao Dai philosophy. The Co-Quan Phuoc-Thien, in addition to its

¹¹Fall, "Sects", 239.

¹²See Gerald C. Hickey, Village in Vietnam (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1964), pp. 66-73 and pp. 290-4 (hereafter cited as Hickey, Village); and DA Pam 550-105, pp. 851-3, for the evolution, location, and doctrinal notions of these sects within a sect.

charitable works, was made responsible for "donations" among the faithful. Nationalism and political activity also increased, especially through contacts with the Japanese Government; these tendencies would be of paramount importance within a few years of Tac's ascension.

The most readily-visible sign of this materialistic impulse was the Great Cathedral of the Holy See. Construction of the Great Cathedral had begun in March 1927; by 22 May 1937 the edifice was completed and a grand convocation on that date formally opened the Cathedral for worship.

Rarely has there been such a consummation of religion and architecture. For those desiring a fuller understanding of Cao Daism, a description of the Great Cathedral is helpful; the structure concretely reflects the tenets of the faith. Hideous in its proportions, the Cathedral was a torturous amalgam of the worst of Notre Dame de Paris and the Forbidden City of Peking. Above the doorway, one found friezes and statuary depicting Lao Tze, Jesus Christ, Confucius, and Gautama Sakyamuni. Immediately on entering, one was confronted with the entire hagiography of Cao Daism; the high order of sainthood, including Quang Am, Quang Cong, and Moses; the general rank of Buddhist saints, both Hinayana and Mahayana; and such figures as Joan of Arc, Sun Yat-sen, Victor Hugo, John the Baptist, and other such luminaries. All were juxtaposed, and all attested to the universal character of Cao Daism.¹³

¹³Hickey, Village, p. 291.

On proceeding further into the Cathedral proper, one encountered massive pillars entwined with pink dragons; other traditional animals of the Viet bestiary, including the tortoise, unicorn, and phoenix were also represented. Overwhelming all else was an enormous globe which reflected the Divine Eye of Cao Dai, the symbol dictated to Nguyen Van Chieu in the earliest days of the faith. The effect of the Cathedral, according to a French observer, was staggering:

It has church towers like an occidental church, a clean sweep of tiled floor like a mosque, the triangle of the Hebrew synagogues. The plaster cobras and dragons give it the atmosphere of a pagoda. Confucius, Jesus Christ, Buddha, Lao Tse, etc., are depicted in a pure St. Sulpice style, but God's eye, repeated ad infinitum. . . It incites to repentance and prayer and gives one a Cain-like feeling of guilt. . .¹⁴

The floor plan of the Great Cathedral was organized into three "Dai" or sections, representing the trinity of Body, Soul, and Spirit. The "Dai of the Nine Spires of Evolution" was used for public ceremonies and routine worship services; the "Nine Spires" corresponded to the nine degrees of the hierarchy of the faith. The "Dai of the Divine Alliance" accommodated the highest order of the priesthood; it was there that the corbeille-a-bec was consulted. The third Dai, that of the "eight Cycles of Genesis", was forbidden to all but holy initiates; thus no clear explanation of its function is available.¹⁵

¹⁴French Ground Forces, South Viet Nam, Western Command, Rapport sur les Cao-Dai (n. p.), February, 1952; cited in Fall, "Sects", 238.

¹⁵Major A. M. Savani, Visage et Images du Sud-Vietnam (Saigon: Imprimerie Francaise d'Ouvre Mer, 1953), pp. 89-90 (hereafter cited as Savani, Visage). Savani was in charge of French Military Intelligence in Cochinchina during the First Indochina War; he was personally acquainted with the prominent members of the Cao Dai, Hoa Hao, and Binh Xuyen sects. He was also a close associate of Lucien Bodard, the Saigon correspondent of Agence France-Presse.

The outre appearance of the Great Cathedral was complemented by the bizarre ceremonies it sheltered. A Cao Dai "Mass" was an awesome event:

Four times a day the gong calls the faithful to mass; at six in the morning, at noon, at six in the evening, and at midnight. Then the dignitaries stride into the basilica dressed in their red, blue, and yellow robes--colors standing for Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism respectively--with those in each stage of the hierarchy wearing their special robes and insignia. On the platform they kneel down in rows in order of rank, and while a chorus of maidens accompanied by a dissonant caterwauling of folk instruments intones a kind of liturgy, they bow to the giant eye of Cao Dai which, from a globe in front of the choir, stares down onto the twilit nave. The spectacle is unforgettable, especially at the midnight mass, when the highest dignitaries appear.¹⁶

Concurrent with its architectural triumphs and foreboding mummery, the Cao Dai sect had been active in political and international affairs since Pham Cong Tac's rise to power. Covert relations had been established with the Japanese Government during the year 1934, chiefly through the activities of a certain Matusita, a Nipponese businessman with ill-defined connections in the Japanese Consulate in Saigon. Matusita's clandestine contacts with the increasingly nationalistic Cao Dai, and other Viet groups, earned him persona non grata status with the French administration, and he was expelled from Indochina in 1938. During his relations with the Cao Dai prior to his expulsion, Matusita had begun to exercise a strong influence on Pham Cong Tac. Probably as a result of Matusita's

¹⁶Schmid, "Indochina", 23.

connivance, the messages of the corbeille-a-bec reflected a growing opposition to the Colonial Government.¹⁷

The establishment of a Vichy administration for Indochina following the Armistice of 1940 was a signal for further polemics against the French, for the myth of Caucasian superiority had been dealt a heavy blow, and Tac made use of this 'loss of face'. In addition to anti-colonial admonitions, Pham Cong Tac began espousing pro-Japanese sentiments. Admiral Decoux, the Vichy Governor-General of Indochina, fully understood the direction in which the sect was moving; thus, in August 1940, he directed the closing of all Cao Dai temples in Cochinchina, including the Great Cathedral of Tay Ninh.

Notwithstanding the closure of his temples, the Ho Phap continued his fulminations against the French, producing further divine messages which favored close relations with the expanding Japanese empire. The exasperated French finally arrested Pham Cong Tac and his lieutenants on 21 August 1941; the Ho Phap and five of his colleagues were exiled to Madagascar, where they remained until the summer of 1946. Following the incarceration of Tac, French Colonial troops occupied the Holy See on 27 September 1941.¹⁸

Prior to the Ho Phap's internment, the shadowy Matusita had surfaced again in Saigon, this time as head of the Nipponese commercial firm Dainan Koosi. In reality, Matusita was using his directorship of the Dainan Koosi as an espionage "cover" for his more significant duties as a Colonel of the Kempeitai, the Japanese

¹⁷Buttinger, Vietnam, I, p. 252.

¹⁸Savani, Visage, p. 90.

Army's security and intelligence branch. He soon re-established contact with Pham Cong Tac. However, Japanese policy during the years 1940-1942 precluded overt interference with the Vichy colonial regime; consequently, Matusita was unable to prevent the deportation of the Cao Dai leaders in August 1941.¹⁹

With Tac in exile, and the Holy See occupied by the French, Matusita was obliged to look elsewhere for Cao Dai support of the "Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere". By late 1942, the Kempeitai Colonel had made contacts in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, where a Cao Dai temple had continued to operate under the noses of the Vichy authorities. Among Matusita's collaborators in Phnom Penh was an ambitious young Viet named Tran Quang Vinh (Ch'an K'wuhng Veen'), an associate of the Ho Phap who had managed to elude the Vichy Surete and had installed himself as a director of the Phnom Penh Cao Dai Institute.

Vinh and Matusita undertook a partnership that, by February 1943, resulted in the clandestine re-establishment of Cao Dai headquarters in Tay Ninh Province. Further, the two operatives began structuring an armed unit, called the "Volunteer Interior Forces". This paramilitary band numbered in the neighborhood of 3,000 troops by March 1945; it was funded, directed, and armed (with light automatic weapons) by the Kempeitai. Cao Dai agitators had also infiltrated the dock workers of the Japanese Navy Yard in the Saigon-Cholon port complex. When the Imperial Army struck against the Vichy regime on the night of 9 March 1945, the "Volunteer Interior

¹⁹Buttinger, Vietnam, I, pp. 252-7 passim.

Forces" assisted the Japanese in the brief and bloody conflict, gleefully interning the demoralized Colons in concentration camps.²⁰

Vinh's personal motivations during this period are not easily determined. He appears to have been an opportunist of the first order, but there is no indication in available secondary sources that he realized any particular financial gain from his collaboration with the Japanese. Certainly, as Commander-in-Chief of the "Volunteer Interior Forces", he was given wide latitude in his activities by the Kempeitai. On the other hand, as will be shown, there is no doubting his intense loyalty to Pham Cong Tac. Vinh's overriding concern seems to have been his devotion to the sect. He was not unaware of the political potential of Cao Daism; indeed, as late as 1949, in a postscript to Gabriel Gobron's History and Philosophy of Caodaism, Vinh wrote that the administrative organization of the sect ". . . is that of a modern state. . . It does not lack ambitions which, however, remain within the realm of possibility: to make Cao-Daism into a religion of the State, into the national religion of Viet Nam."²¹

The Japanese coup of 9 March 1945 broke the back of the Vichy regime in Indochina; by this late date only the most fanatical Nipponese, however, could fail to sense the eventual outcome of the Second World War. By late summer of 1945, the Japanese masters of Indochina realized that they would shortly become the vanquished. It behooved them to impede the progress of the Allied re-occupation of the peninsula. Again, as they had during the Vichy era, they

²⁰Ibid., p. 260.

²¹Gobron, Caodaism, p. 182.

turned to Viet nationalist groups, hoping to spark a rage for independence that would thwart Western post-war designs for Viet Nam.

Thus, on 14 August 1945, with the support and full cooperation of their Japanese masters, the Cao Dai sect, in the person of Tran Quang Vinh, met in Saigon with representatives of various Viet political and religious groups active in Cochinchina. This coalition of organizations declared themselves the "United National Front", and planned to present the returning French with a fait accompli: an independent, self-sustaining republic which would have no truck with neo-colonial notions.²²

The Cao Dai were particularly valuable members of this Front; aside from the Hoa Hao sect, they were the only sizeable armed and organized Viet force in Cochinchina. By this time, they had developed a solid background of experience in the heady business of self-government through their church administration. Such qualities would place the faithful in the forefront of any move for independence.

Another group, however, organized and controlled by trained revolutionaries who were operating far from the Ky of Cochinchina in the jungles of Tonkin, decided to co-opt the leadership of the "United National Front". This group, the Viet Nam Doc Lap Dong Minh Hoi, was popularly known as the Viet Minh (Ve 'eck Meen'g); they were led by the son of a former mandarin who was best known by his nom de guerre of Ho Chi Minh (Haw Ch'ih Min').

The major Viet Minh effort was centered in the northern provinces of Tonkin during the First Indochina War (1946-1954).

²²Buttinger, Vietnam, II, pp. 1239-40, offers a detailed compilation of the Cochinchinese groups which formed the "United National Front".

On no account, though, did Ho Chi Minh and his comrades ignore the fertile delta of Cochinchina. To organize and direct the struggle for independence in that region, Ho dispatched a dedicated, Soviet-trained Communist named Tran Van Giau (Ch'ahn Vuhn Z'ee-yow) to Saigon, with instructions to seize control of the Cochinchinese movement for Viet independence.

Giau came very close to doing just that. On 25 August 1945, he met with leaders of the "United National Front" and persuaded them to form a "Provisional Executive Committee for South Viet Nam", or Nam Bo (Nahm Baw). The Front leaders acquiesced; they seemed to have assumed that Giau was a revolutionary nationalist rather than a Communist. Giau's Nam Bo was made up of nine members, six of whom were veterans of Ho Chi Minh's Indochinese Communist Party.²³

The exuberant street demonstrations and parades of the Nam Bo were abruptly halted following the arrival of British Gurkha troops in Saigon in the first weeks of September 1945. French troops under General Leclerc followed quickly on the heels of the British, whose duties were limited to disarming the Japanese. Neither the British nor the French had any patience with these displays of patriotism; and the "United National Front", along with the Nam Bo, soon vacated the Saigon area. By early November, a French armored unit had re-occupied the Holy See of Tay Ninh, and a return to the status quo ante seemed assured.

During the winter of 1945-46, Tran Van Giau attempted to coerce Tran Quang Vinh into yielding his command of the Cao Dai militia; with

²³Lancaster, Emancipation, p. 118.

Vinh's approval, the militia would fall under the control of the Nam Bo (i.e., the Viet Communists) and play a heroic role in the liberation of the Fatherland. Vinh was neither sanguine nor malleable; his suspicions of the Viet Minh were confirmed when they "detained" him for a few weeks to make their position clear on this matter. Fortunately, he escaped from this detention with a first-hand view of Communist plans and programs for the waging of the anti-colonial battle. As for Giau, it will be shown in a later chapter that he ran afoul of his Tonkinese leaders.

During Vinh's sojourn with the Nam Bo, command of the Cao Dai troops passed to his Chief of Staff, Nguyen Van Thanh (N'goo-yin Vuhn T'ine), who was ably seconded by such leaders as Nguyen Thanh Phuong (N'goo-yin T'ine Foo-wuhng), Duong Van Dang (Doo'uhng Vunh Dahng), and a young officer named Trinh Minh The (Ch'in Min' T'hay), of whom more will be heard shortly. These men understood that what was good for the Nam Bo was not necessarily the best for Cochinchina; they insisted on, and received, complete independence of action for their part in the struggle against the French. Their association with the Viet Minh during the winter of 1945-46 was motivated by patriotism and loyalty to their sect, ideals which tended to grate on their Communist allies.²⁴

Following his escape from the Viet Minh, Tran Quang Vinh made his way back to the Tay Ninh region, attempting in the process to resume his authority as Commander-in-Chief of the Cao Dai forces.

²⁴Cf. Ellen Hammer, The Struggle for Indochina (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1954), pp. 109-10 (hereafter cited as Hammer, Struggle); and Buttinger, Vietnam, I, p. 411, for descriptions of Cao Dai collaboration with the Viet Minh.

On 6 June 1946, however, he was arrested by French troops. Having little use for the Viet Minh, he soon entered into a compact with his captors whereby he would withdraw Cao Dai units from service with the Communists in exchange for the return of Pham Cong Tac, the Ho Phap, from his exile in Madagascar.²⁵ The French readily agreed to this proposal, and set the machinery in motion for the Ho Phap's release. As proof of his good faith, Vinh managed to produce Nguyen Thanh Phuong at the head of some 1,000 of his militia, all prepared to unite with their new allies. A joint military review was conducted at the Holy See to solemnize the pact. Nguyen Van Thanh, Cao Dai Chief of Staff, and his comrades Duong Van Dang and Trinh Minh The, declined to join in the festivities, though; they could not be won by promises, and skulked around Nui Ba Den restlessly awaiting the Ho Phap's arrival.²⁶

Their wait was fairly short, for in early August His Holiness Pham Cong Tac reappeared at the Holy See, seemingly none the worse for internment. The Ho Phap, after being apprised by Vinh of the mechanics of his release, advised Thanh and his lieutenants to return to Tay Ninh. They did so; but it took a personal directive from His Holiness to lure Trinh Minh The back from his swampy hideout to participate side by side with the French colonial troops.²⁷

With the onset of open conflict throughout Viet Nam in December 1946, Tac was quick to declare Cao Dai neutrality toward both the French and the Viet Minh. His good intentions were greeted in the first week of January 1947 by a Communist assault on the Holy See itself.

²⁵Fall, "Sects", 240.

²⁶Da Pam 550-105, p. 837.

²⁷Buttinger, Vietnam, II, p. 1062n.

Such a sacrilege could not go unpunished; thus, on 8 January 1947, the Ho Phap executed a military convention with the French Ground Forces Command for Cochinchina, promising "loyal collaboration" with the nation which had arranged his exile in earlier days.²⁸

The agreement was not one-sided. In return for his assistance, Tac received a guarantee from the French to train, equip, and advise a force of 1,370 partisans, to be designated as a "Mobile Brigade". The French also undertook to pay these troops. In addition, 16 separate "Defense Posts" of platoon and company size were authorized; these units were spotted throughout Tay Ninh Province to insure local security for the faithful. (Tac managed to increase the size of his forces by creating a "Papal Guard", a "Battalion of Honor" and a "Shock Battalion"; a transparent device to increase his strength, but it worked.)²⁹

These units were charged with ridding the Cao Dai satrapy of Communist forces; during the period January 1947 - December 1948, they performed very well, despite a marked reluctance to engage in operations outside their own territory. According to one observer, they performed so well that their aggressiveness may have cost them around 1,000 casualties during this period.³⁰

Thus began the grand period of French collaboration with the Cao Dai. Some observers have taken a cynical view of this alliance,

²⁸Fall, "Sects", 240.

²⁹See Lancaster, Emancipation, pp. 182-3; Fall, "Sects", 240; and DA Pam 550-105, p. 838, for the organization of Cao Dai forces under the terms of the 8 January 1947 agreement with the French.

³⁰Figure offered in Savani, Visage, p. 93.

though; Lucien Bodard, who was personally acquainted with the principal Cao Dai leaders, looked askance at the agreement:

Beginning from nothing, Caodaism has almost achieved its goal through brutality, hypocrisy, and subtlety. In its rise it used the Japanese, the Vietminh, the French. . . At any rate, in these last months, the Caodaists have not stopped heaping praise on the French. It was the Franco-Caodaist euphoria pure and simple. Every time a link broke in the chain of pacification, the French command had only to request more soldiers from the pope; he furnished them at once. . . In exchange for his services, he only asked for a few more weapons, a little more money; he was at once given these supplements.³¹

French equipment, advisors, and funds were administered through a formal Staff Section, the Inspectorat General des Forces Suppletives. Payment of the troops was handled through lump sum emoluments doled out to individual commanders based on the number of fighting men serving that commander. Fall has noted that French advisors were to be found with all major Cao Dai units; even smaller detachments were assisted by French junior officers and NCO's. In some instances, with these less disciplined units, the Cao Dai were not above massacring their French cadres and turning to outright banditry.³²

Despite these infrequent lapses, the French advisory effort seems to have functioned fairly well; there was even an "Officer Candidate School" of sorts where promising Cao Dai and Hoa Hao recruits were put through a five-month course on the rudiments of modern warfare.

³¹Lucien Bodard, La Guerre d'Indochine: L'enlissement (Paris: Gallimard, 1963), pp. 132-8 passim (hereafter cited as Bodard, Guerre).

³²Fall, "Sects", 241. The arrangement appears to have been analogous to the system used by U. S. Army Special Forces Detachments in their mission with the Civilian Irregular Defense Groups during the Second Indochina War, a process which this writer recalls vividly.

The equilibrium was shattered momentarily in December 1948, when the peripatetic Trinh Minh The and several hundred of his followers took to the hills in protest against what The felt were "compromises" on the Ho Phap's part with the French. After a short defection, he returned to the Holy See.³³

Trinh Minh The deserves close scrutiny, for he later played a decisive role in the events of March - April 1955 in Saigon. Donald Lancaster was well acquainted with The, and he has offered some insights into the Cao Dai leader's character:

. . . The had acquired, in the course of the prolonged and confused guerilla fighting which had devastated Cochin-China, the respect and devotion of the men under his command, together with a reputation for military prowess. His rapid promotion. . . had, however, awakened confused ambitions, which transcended the vulgar considerations of self-interest that prompted the actions of his feudal peers, and his hatred of graft and self-indulgence, capacity for ruthless action, and addiction to bouts of hysteria, contributed to the alarm and admiration with which he was regarded.³⁴

During the month of January 1949, the Ho Phap advanced a rather ingenuous proposal to his French allies; he declared his willingness to create a "Neutral Zone" in the Tay Ninh area "to serve as a refuge for repentant nationalists."³⁵ This suggestion was immediately squashed by the French, whereupon His Holiness directed that a strict posture of neutrality be adopted by all Cao Dai units. The Ho Phap also requested that his troops return their French-supplied weapons to the Holy See.

³³Buttinger, Vietnam, II, p. 1063n.

³⁴Lancaster, Emancipation, p. 233.

³⁵Buttinger, Vietnam, II, p. 1063n.

Nguyen Van Thanh, Chief of Staff of Cao Dai forces, quietly advised his men to retain their weapons, and, while acquiescing in the Ho Phap's call for a cessation of offensive action, directed his men to resist attacks from any quarter, Viet Minh, French, or otherwise. Further, he attempted to initiate contacts with the Viet Minh to inform them of the new Cao Dai policy.³⁶

The Viet Minh were in no mood to accommodate the Cao Dai troops, however. They seized the opportunity offered by this unilateral cease-fire, and began wreaking a frightful vengeance on the sect's "Defense Posts" scattered throughout Tay Ninh Province. So costly were these attacks, that on 24 June 1949 Thanh ordered a resumption of offensive operations against the Viet Minh. The Ho Phap simultaneously reversed the sect's former policy of neutrality, and pledged his allegiance to the Emperor Bao Dai (Bow Die), and, by extension, to the French Government.³⁷

The fresh protestations of allegiance by the Cao Dai brought a renewal of French aid; cooperation progressed to the point where the Ho Phap gladly permitted a Cao Dai battalion to be integrated into the French-controlled "National Army of Viet Nam" on 6 May 1950.

In the early months of 1951, the Cao Dai command structure underwent several important changes. Tran Quang Vinh, the long-time Commander-in-Chief of the sect's forces, resigned from his duties and departed for France. Nguyen Van Thanh, formerly Chief of Staff, was

³⁶Ibid.

³⁷Savani, Visage, pp. 79-84 passim.

elevated to Commander-in-Chief; and Trinh Minh The, the redoubtable leader of the "Mobile Defense Brigade", assumed duties as Chief of Staff of the Cao Dai army.

The most notable result of the command shake-up was the defection of the new Chief of Staff, along with 2,500 of his troops, on 7 June 1951. The, continuously dissatisfied with the sect's opportunistic relations with the French, headed for the swamps near the Cambodian border. His departure appears to have been approved by the Commander-in-Chief, Thanh; in the opinion of Lancaster, it is likely that Thanh viewed this "defection" as a further means of wringing concessions from the French Command.³⁸

The ensconced himself in a new headquarters area, complete with an underground broadcasting station. He designated his troops as the "Inter-Allied National Forces", began propaganda broadcasts over the "Voice of National Viet Nam", and conducted desultory operations against the Viet Minh and the French. The also promoted himself to the rank of Brigadier General, remaining in a sort of armed "Loyal Opposition" to the Ho Phap for the duration of the First Indochina War.³⁹

The French Command was understandably displeased over The's departure, and took measures to prevent support from reaching his forces through other members of the sect. The responded by commencing a campaign of terrorism in Saigon; his program involved the prolific use of plastic explosives in crowded public centers, and the outrages

³⁸Lancaster, Emancipation, p. 233.

³⁹Fall, "Sects", 240-1.

culminated with the assassination of General Chanson, the French Commissioner for South Viet Nam, in August 1951.⁴⁰

Unruffled by The's disaffection, the Ho Phap coolly requested the French Command to allow an additional force of three full Divisions to be raised among the faithful, and suggested that three posts in the Viet Government of Cochinchina be filled by Cao Dai adepts. The French rightly declined both proposals; they were fully aware that Cao Dai strength in the summer of 1951 amounted to something on the order of fifteen to twenty thousand militiamen.⁴¹ Three Divisions would have entailed an increase of 45,000 troops, with concomitant financial support, not to mention a serious question of the political reliability of these levies.

The French denial of the Ho Phap's requests resulted in a predictable decline in the vigor and frequency of the Cao Dai operations against the Viet Minh; after some haggling, additional units were formed, and a Cao Dai physician, Dr. Le Van Hoach was appointed Minister of Health in the Cochinchinese Government.⁴²

The denouement of this contretemps was typical of the long-suffering French Command's dealings with Pham Cong Tac. Quite possibly, he was the most vexatious, frustrating "ally" the Colonial troops encountered during their campaigns in Cochinchina. Lucien Bodard has offered an amusing and cynical account of an interview with His Holiness:

⁴⁰Lancaster, Emancipation, p. 234. See also Bodard, Quicksand War, pp. 200-1, for a lively account of Chanson's death.

⁴¹Figures cited in Hammer, Struggle, p. 285.

⁴²Fall, "Sects", 240-1.

I have never known a prelate with a more soothing appearance than the Cao Dai pope, His Holiness Pham Cong Tac, when he received me in his little house within the holy city of Tayninh. He was a very small Annamese, very lively, very neat, with eyes that looked ecstatic and at the same time knowing. He had tiny, beautifully shaped hands and feet, and every time he sat down he took his charming little bare feet out of his sandals. He was dressed as a seer--a long white silk robe and a conical hat with a tassel on top.

'Here's to your health,' said the pope, uncorking a bottle of lukewarm champagne at ten in the morning. He burst into a harsh peal of laughter: every few moments there was this high-strung cackle and he would choke with mirth, clapping his transparent hands and beating his feet on the ground. His gold teeth gleamed agreeably from the midst of all this cheerfulness. . .

We talked for a long time. Except during his strange fits of choking laughter,⁴³ the pope spoke in a vein of high theosophy. . .

For all of his jovial hospitality, the Ho Phap of the Cao Dai could be a very astute politician when the occasion warranted. Nor were his interests limited to Cochinchina; Tac was a keen student of international affairs, and the sect maintained an "Apostolic Delegate" in France to look after their modest interests in that nation. By the summer of 1953, His Holiness sensed the drift of events in Indochina; he became an ardent nationalist (with discreet reservations, of course). The Apostolic Delegate in France, one Ngo Khai Minh, announced in Paris on 3 August 1953 that the problems of Viet independence might well be resolved with the help of the Cao Dai hierarchy, hinting that ". . . Tay Ninh would offer a solid base for conversations in view of the fact that millions of signatures

⁴³Bodard, Quicksand War, pp. 29-31.

could back up the signature" of the Ho Phap.⁴⁴ This rather confused invitation was never accepted by either the French or the Viet Minh.

On 5 September 1953, a semi-clandestine "Congress of National Union and Peace" was organized in Saigon by various non-Communist elements in Cochinchina. While this "Congress" will be discussed in greater detail in later chapters, the general tone of the affair was exemplified by a press conference held by the Ho Phap on the day before the assembly convened. In the course of this interview, he managed to convey (with a presumably straight face) praise for both Bao Dai and Ho Chi Minh, an appeal for total independence, and a strong desire for "a close association with France".⁴⁵

The "Congress" quickly reduced itself to a farce. His Majesty Bao Dai, dissatisfied with the results of the gathering, directed a second assembly for 5 October 1953. This convention, like the first, accomplished little of substantive value. It is a fair indication of Cao Dai political strength, however, that the sect was given 17 out of 203 seats for the assembly; Cao Dai representatives made up the largest single bloc of the various groups attending the second "Congress".⁴⁶

His Majesty was equally displeased with the second "Congress", whose members were disturbingly immune to Royal suggestion. Thus, he

⁴⁴Paris-Presse - L'Intransigeant, Paris, August 4, 1953; cited in Fall, "Sects", 241. This writer was unable to obtain copies of this newspaper; nor were copies of the Journal d'Extreme-Orient, cited below, available.

⁴⁵Journal d'Extreme-Orient, Saigon, September 5, 1953; cited in Fall, "Sects", 242.

⁴⁶Lancaster, Emancipation, p. 277.

began a round of personal conferences with faction leaders at his palace in Dalat. Pham Cong Tac and Nguyen Thanh Phuong, who had succeeded Nguyen Van Thanh as Commander-in-Chief of the Cao Dai army in March 1953, visited the Emperor at Dalat during the first week of April 1954. Bodard's account of the meeting between Prelate and Emperor is devastating in its analysis of both men:

. . . Pham Cong Tac brought the Emperor his two million "sheep": but so that the sect might depend less upon the French could not His Majesty on his side provide the Caodaist army with a subsidy or at least bring a Caodaist into the government, giving him the treasury, for example, or the ministry of war? (For as Pham Cong Tac saw it a ministry and a subsidy were the same thing.) Bao Dai was full of praise for this independent spirit: he added that he would have to consider the matter and reflect deeply upon the country's best interests (above all he did not want to give any money). That was how it went: and in a few days Bao Dai had built himself up a following by means of playing upon avarice and greed. It was only when he detected sincerity or disinterestedness in a man that he had no use for him--such men were dangerous.

Apparently, the two men reached an understanding, for on 9 April 1954, the Ho Phap issued a statement supporting Bao Dai "without reservation" in the Emperor's "struggle for total independence for Viet-Nam" and "for the liberation of the Vietnamese people from the Communist yoke."⁴⁸

Alas: both Pham Cong Tac and his General, Nguyen Thanh Phuong, had been jobbed by the clever Emperor. No sooner had His Majesty departed Dalat for his villa at Cannes, than a decree was issued

⁴⁷Bodard, Quicksand War, pp. 234-5. Bodard was present at the Dalat conferences of this period, and has offered an amusing portrayal of Bao Dai, his retinue of whores and bodyguards, and the Emperor's black Scotty dog that accompanied the Royal party around the resort.

⁴⁸Fall, "Sects", 242.

(bearing the Royal Seal) on 12 April 1954, calling for the complete integration of the sect's military forces into the National Army of Viet Nam! Phuong hotly protested this usurpation of his command, and sent a circular to his subordinate commanders demanding that they ignore the Royal Decree. It is a measure of Bao Dai's influence that the Decree remained a dead letter, as far as the Cao Dai troops were concerned.

Despite this rebuff from the Emperor, Pham Cong Tac contrived to keep his balance in the slippery footing of Indochinese politics. Striking what was for him a new chord in the symphony of opportunism, His Holiness composed an "open letter" to Ho Chi Minh on 5 May 1954, scant hours before the collapse of the French garrison at Dien Bien Phu: "You and His Majesty, Bao Dai, have succeeded in liberating the country. The Vietnamese people are grateful to you." And then, sententiously, the Ho Phap offered a prophetic observation: "However, there remains a problem to be settled: reconciliation between the nationalists and the Communists."⁴⁹

Thus, the end of the First Indochina War, and the creation of the Republic of Viet Nam, found the Cao Dai maintaining a pious neutrality, dispensing plaudits of manifest insincerity to any and all factions, with devout benedictions reserved for likely victors. By the summer of 1954, Nguyen Thanh Phuong was commanding an army of some 25,000 trained soldiers who had yet to join the National Army

⁴⁹New York Times, May 6, 1954, p. 4 (hereafter cited as NYT).

under the edict of 12 April 1954.⁵⁰ And Pham Cong Tac, sitting in ecclesiastical splendor in the Holy See of Tay Ninh, the corbeille-a-bec safely in hand, held the allegiance of between one-and-a-half, and two million dedicated Cao Dai adherents.⁵¹ Few of them were particularly inclined to support the newly-appointed Premier, the staunchly Catholic Ngo Dinh Diem (N'gaw Deeng Z'yee-ehm); least of all Trinh Minh The, who chose to remain in his swampy headquarters with his loyal troops and clandestine transmitter. The would later play a strange part in maintaining Diem's power, a peculiar role that would eventually cost him his life.

⁵⁰Dennis Warner, The Last Confucian (New York: Macmillan, 1963), p. 77 (hereafter cited as Warner, Confucian).

⁵¹Estimates of the number of Cao Dai followers vary. Fall, Bodard, Buttinger, and DA Pam 550-105 all cite a figure in the range of 2,000,000. Roger Levy, in his Viet-Nam, Cambodge, Laos: 1954-1957 (Paris: Centre d'Etudes de Politique Etrangere, Comite d'Etudes des Problemes du Pacifique, 1957), notes on p. 5 that the sect's adherents numbered approximately 1,500,000 (cited in DA Pam 550-105, p. 855n.).

The Spirit Cao Dai

GIAO TONG (POPE) Ly Thai Bach (Spirit)

QUYEN GIAO TONG (INTERIM POPE)

Le Van Trung (1926 - 1934)

Pham Cong Tac (1935 - 1959) - formerly Ho Phap (Superior)

of the Hiep Thien Dai

CUU TRUNG DAI

The Nine Vien:

Lai: Interior
 Le: Rites
 Hoa: Security
 Ho: Finance
 Luong: Supply
 Hoc: Education
 Nong: Agriculture
 Cong: Public Works
 Y: Health

HIEP THIEN DAI

CO-QUAN PHUOC-THIEN

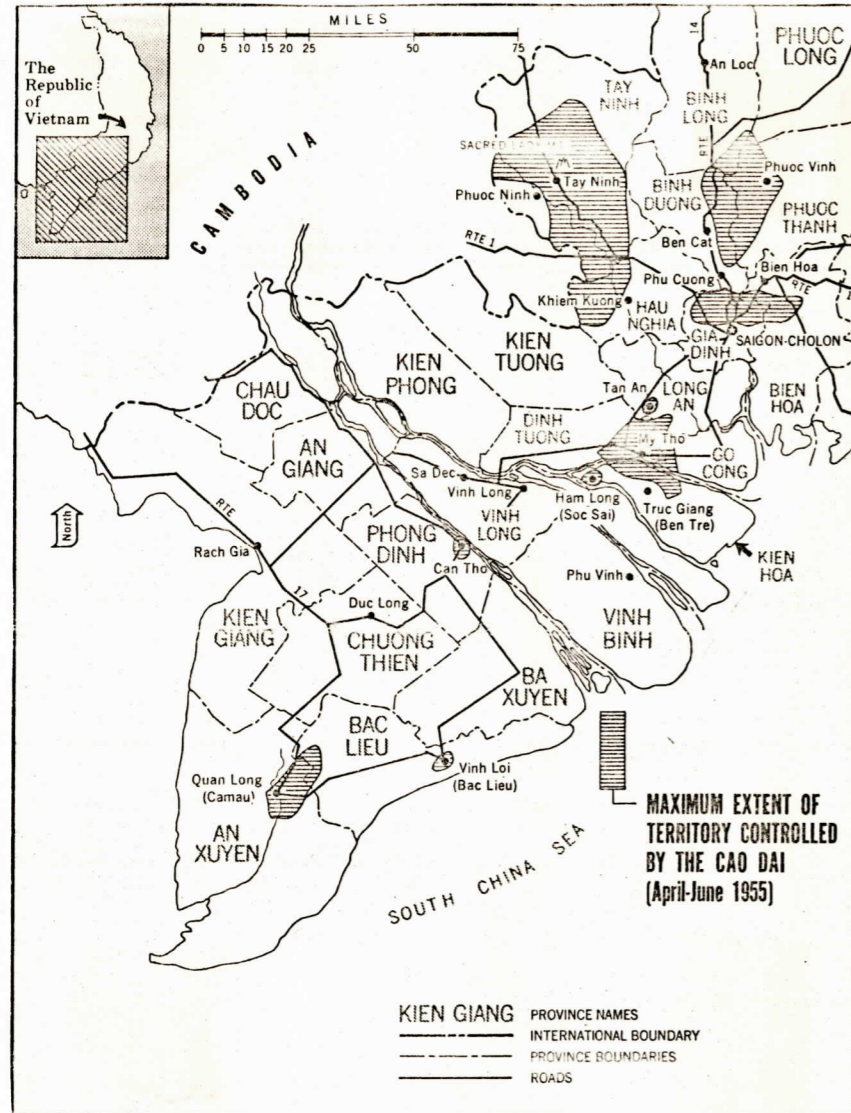
Sacerdotal Council

Charitable Works

"Donations"

Additionally, there are:

High Assembly, Grand Assembly, Grand Council, Council of the Faithful, Tribunal of the Three Religions, Tribunal of the Adept, and the Pham Mon, a secret society bound by a blood oath.



The Cao Dai

CHAPTER II

THE HOA HAO SECT

Chau Doc Province (Chow Dawk) lies along the Cambodian-Viet border, occupying a sizeable western portion of what was once known as the Ky of Cochinchina. One observer has commented on the physical unattractiveness of the Province, and offered thoughts on the troubled history of the area. It was

. . . the region west of the Bassac River, where the Vietnamese had settled among Cambodians and colonized the vast, uninhabited wasteland of mountain, scrub, and marsh. Since the days of the Nguyen Empire the region had been a refuge and a breeding ground for prophets, magicians, and faith healers, and for the secret societies that flourished¹ in the underground of the Confucian orthodox world.

The roots of the Hoa Hao (Whah How) sect are to be found in Chau Doc Province. In the 1820's, a Buddhist monk named Nguyen Van Quyen (N'goo-yin Vuhn K'woo-yin) began proselyting in the area, predicting (among other things) the end of the Viet Empire as a result of future wars with "men from the West." Quyen took the title Phat Thay Tay An (Fuht T'hie Tie Uhn), or "Master Buddha, Pacifier of the West".² The Phat Thay's prophecies enjoyed considerable currency

¹Frances Fitzgerald, Fire in the Lake The Vietnamese and the Americans in Vietnam, Vintage Books (New York: Random House, 1972), pp. 77-8. (Hereafter cited as Fitzgerald, Fire.)

²Bernard B. Fall, Viet-Nam Witness 1953-66 (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1966), p. 149. (Hereafter cited as Fall, Witness.)

during his lifetime, and were confirmed by the French annexation of Cochinchina in the 1860's. Following his death, two small-scale rebellions were undertaken by Viet patriots in the Chau Doc area in 1875 and 1913; the French handled these disturbances with sanguinary dispatch.

Memories of the Phat Thay and his teachings were still warm in the village of Hoa Hao in 1919, the year of the birth of one Huynh Phu So (H'ween Foo Show).³ So was the son of Huong Ca Bo (H'woo-uhng Kah Baw), the president of the village Council of Notables. Under normal circumstances, Bo's son could have been expected to lead an unremarkable and placid existence, eventually rising to his father's position in the village hierarchy. Unhappily, the lad seems to have failed to measure up even to the modest requirements of village life; he was lackadaisical, infirm, and sickly in his youth, and Bernard Fall has observed that So ". . . graduated from junior high school only through the influence of his father."⁴

Stern measures were in order, and young So was packed off to the Seven Mountains area north of his home village. At Nui Cam, the "Mount of Oranges", So was placed in the care of Thay Xom (T'hie Sawm), a Buddhist monk variously described as a sorcerer, a practitioner of acupuncture, and a mystic. The tutelage at the hands of Thay Xom was two-fold in purpose: So was to find relief from his

³There is some difference of opinion as to the proper transliteration of So's full name. It is rendered as "Huyen" in DA Pam 550-105; Bodard opts for "Pho So" in his Quicksand War: Buttinger, Fall, Savani, et. al, prefer the form used above.

⁴Fall, Witness, p. 149. See also Savani, Visage, p. 98, for a description of So's continuously poor health.

infirmities, and was also to receive instruction in the occult arts and Buddhist philosophy.

In addition to learning acupuncture, magic tricks, hypnotism, and other esoteric subjects, So was drilled relentlessly in the prophecies and maxims of the Phat Thay. In May 1939, Thay Xom died, and So returned to Hoa Hao.

What follows has been pieced together from conflicting accounts by witnesses whose objectivity is questionable. It appears that one evening shortly after his return, So underwent a mystical experience. The accounts agree that the night was stormy; some say that So was in bed, others maintain he was out of doors; all agree that rain and lightning were involved. The accounts further coincide in their descriptions of So's extreme nervousness and physical agitation prior to his mystical enlightenment. So suddenly prostrated himself in front of the family altar, meditated in a trance for a short while, and then began a seemingly endless discourse on the principles of Buddhism, speaking to his family and neighbors with a strange eloquence hitherto unsuspected by his associates. In the course of his monologue, So advised that he was "the apostle of Phat Thay charged with preaching a reformed Buddhism."⁵ His former nervousness and physical problems disappeared immediately upon his recovery from the trance, and his companions took this restoration to health as a miraculous sign of the validity of So's teachings.

⁵Fall, Witness, p. 149. Cf. DA Pam 550-105, p. 1023; Buttinger, Vietnam, I, p. 255; and Fitzgerald, Fire, p. 78, for accounts of So's enlightenment. This writer was told in 1969 by a Hoa Hao adept in the Republic of Viet Nam, that oral tradition in Chau Doc Province maintained So was struck by lightning while standing in his front yard. He lost consciousness for a few moments, and then dashed into his house where he commenced his monologue.

Word of So's remarkable transformation spread quickly throughout his village and the surrounding countryside. Converts to the new beliefs of Phat Giao Hoa Hao (roughly, "Reformed Buddhism of Hoa Hao village") grew with astonishing rapidity, and So was not slow in ministering to his new adherents. Using the knowledge he had gained while studying with Thay Xom, So began effecting miraculous cures of the sick and lame, practicing acupuncture, hypnotic suggestion, and traditional Asian herbal remedies. Along with medical assistance, So dispensed prophecy of a most disquieting sort: he predicted the defeat of the French, the Japanese occupation of Indochina, and the coming of the Americans. The marvelous cures, the prophetic observations, and the reformed Buddhism he espoused increased So's popularity and acceptance among the superstitious peasantry of the Chau Doc region. By the end of 1939, the Hoa Hao cult numbered several thousand adherents, all of whom seemed to have accepted the supernatural quality of So's newly-assumed divinity.⁶

What were the tenets offered by the Phat Song (Fut Showm) or "Living Buddha" of Hoa Hao? Basically, So advocated a return to absolute simplicity in the practice of Buddhism: "The cult must stem much more from internal faith than from a pompous appearance. It is better to pray with a pure heart before the family altar than to perform gaudy ceremonies in a pagoda, clad in the robes of an unworthy bonze," wrote the Phat Song.⁷

⁶Both Lancaster, Emancipation, p. 89, and Savani, Visage, p. 101, attest to the medical cures and So's prescience.

⁷Fall, Witness, p. 150.

A further explanation of Hoa Hao doctrine was presented by Savani in his study of the sects, Visage et Images du Sud-Vietnam:

No public initiation was needed to become a disciple of him who soon came to be called Master. It was enough to obey his teaching, to know how to observe the four commandments and the eight points of honesty, to recite, in a low voice, morning and evening some prayers before the 'Tran Dieu' (a rectangle of red cloth, a color symbolizing universal union, marked with four magic words, 'Buu Son Ky Huong') and not to eat fat or meat on the first, fourteenth, fifteenth, and thirtieth day of each lunar month. It was equally acceptable to offer incense to Buddha, and to place pure water and flowers on the familial altar, which was within everyone's means. Aside from the worship rendered Buddha and to the precious memory of ancestors and heroes of the fatherland, it was absolutely forbidden to make the smallest offer to spirits and evil divinities. Morally, the Master recommended virtue; he demanded that sons obey their parents, that officials be kind and just toward those they govern, and that husband and wife love one another. It was forbidden to drink alcohol and to smoke opium, to gamble and to eat buffalo and beef. In short, he held himself to the classic precepts of Buddhism, which he wanted to renew and simplify without modifying the actual doctrine.

Truly, it was not a very demanding faith in terms of fleshly deprivation. But the chief appeal of the sect seems to have been economic, especially in a land of dire poverty. So decried the erection of magnificent edifices, the ornate ceremony, and the complicated (and expensive) panoply involved in both Cao Daism and traditional Buddhism. Best of all, So maintained that the faithful could practice their beliefs anywhere at any time, thus putting them into immediate contact with the Almighty regardless of their temporal circumstances.⁹

⁸Savani, Visage, p. 86.

⁹Fall, Witness, p. 150.

Another factor which greatly broadened the Phat Song's appeal was his indigenous quality, and the home-grown aspect of his teachings. At last, the peasantry of western Cochinchina had a mystical leader who was truly one of their own, as Buttinger has observed:

What was particularly precious to the masses, who hungered for something great with which to identify, was that this authority was native, not foreign. . . The young man with the mysterious gifts, testified to by ecstatic witnesses and by the power of legend, had arisen from their own ranks, was of their own flesh and blood. He knew them thoroughly, knew their moral and material needs;¹⁰

His rapid rise to spiritual power led So to return to Nui Cam for a period of reflection and study; the movement was quickly out-running its own philosophy. In March 1940, the Phat Song, secluded in the mountain fastness where he had studied earlier under Thay Xom, wrote his Sam Gian, the "Oracles and Prayers" which formed the basis of the faith. These inscriptions were later published fragmentarily by the sect during the period 1945-1950, under the title Cach Tu Hien va Su An O Cua Nguoi Bon Dao (Rules of the Practice of the Good and on the Attitude of the Faithful).¹¹

At the end of March, So returned to the lowlands and began proselyting in earnest. Within a few months, his followers numbered over 100,000, and he had acquired a new name from those who opposed him: the Dao Khung (Dow K'oon), the "Mad Bonze". His hypnotic gaze and unfortunate habit of falling into public trances had led to this uncomplimentary title; it was noised in some quarters that perhaps

¹⁰Buttinger, Vietnam, I, p. 256.

¹¹Fall, Witness, p. 150. A copy of the Sam Gian was not available to this writer.

his earlier physical failings had been supplanted by psychological difficulties.¹²

Had he confined himself to religion, So would probably have been chalked up as another small-time leader of a remote sect. Regrettably, social theorizing became an increasingly frequent element in his preaching, and the theories boded little good for the French colonial administration. More and more, So injected heavy doses of Viet nationalism into his perorations, blaming the French for every conceivable misfortune suffered by his fellow countrymen. The French defeat of June 1940, the establishment of a Vichy administration, the arrival of Japanese troops in Viet Nam, all confirmed the Phat Song's prophecies of 1939; his followers continued to grow in strength, and, more seriously, began accompanying him about the countryside in crowds numbering in the thousands.¹³

His pronouncements soon came to the attention of the French authorities, and he was expelled from the Hoa Hao locale and sent first to My Tho, and later to Cai Be. In both neighborhoods, So continued to preach against the French with devastating effect. By August 1940, the situation was intolerable to French Administrators; firm steps were taken by the Vichy administration, who were concerned with their own uneasy relations with the occupying Japanese forces.

¹²Fall, "Sects", 244-5, offers this figure for Hoa Hao adherents of the period, and discusses the rise of the rumors concerning So's mental health.

¹³Buttinger, Vietnam, I, pp. 256-7, and Fall, "Sects", 245, both remark on the political overtones of So's preaching; both observers also comment on the crowds that followed the Phat Song during his evangelizing.

The Dao Khung was incarcerated in the psychiatric ward of Cho Quan Hospital in Cholon, the Chinese quarter of Saigon.¹⁴

From the French perspective, the Cho Quan sojourn did not have the desired effect upon the Phat Song. One Dr. Tam, a Viet psychiatrist, was assigned to So's case; he was promptly converted to the Hoa Hao faith by the Dao Khung. (For his strong adherence to the faith, Dr. Tam was executed by the Viet Minh in 1949.) By May 1941, So had convinced a board of French psychiatrists that he was not insane, and he was released from Cho Quan Hospital on the condition that he confine his activities to the Vinh Loi region of Cochinchina.¹⁵

In addition to his religious notions, So now numbered political victimization among his virtues; his followers quickly began a series of pilgrimages to Vinh Loi, and the Phat Song obliged them with continuing diatribes against his former keepers. This state of affairs persisted until early fall, 1942, when French patience began to run short for a second time.

It was planned by the Surete, the Vichyite security organization, to move So secretly to Laos where he would be effectively cut off from his supporters. The Japanese Kempeitai in Saigon, in the person of a Colonel Matusita, got wind of the plot, however, and intervened. So's followers and a detachment of Kempeitai troops kidnapped the

¹⁴Fall, Witness, pp. 150-1, describes So's activities following his expulsion from the Hoa Hao region, and his subsequent confinement at Cho Quan Hospital.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 151. A member of the examining board opined So was "a little maniacal, very ignorant even in Buddhist practices, but a big talker." Fall, in "Sects", 245, speaks of Dr. Tam's execution by the Viet Communists.

the Phat Song on 12 October 1942, only a few days before his transfer to Laos and obscurity. The Japanese authorities retained custody of So for the next few years on the pretext that he was a Chinese agent; the frustrated Vichy officials were unable to stifle So's continued appeals to his followers during his confinement. It was very much in the Japanese interest that the Dao Khung maintain his adherents as a counter-weight to the Vichy influence in Indochina; thus Colonel Matusita was happy to enter into a provisional alliance with the Hoa Hao leader.¹⁶

While being held in protective custody by the Kempeitai, So undertook the organization of a hierarchy for his religion. He soon reached a modus vivendi with his Japanese allies, who allowed his followers considerable leeway in their operations south and west of Saigon; soon, the Hoa Hao bands were being supplied with Japanese weapons and ammunition.¹⁷

With weapons, the faithful had become a force as well as a religious sect. The Hoa Hao organized themselves into paramilitary bands, calling themselves the Dao Xen (Dow Sin); their activities rapidly degenerated into banditry and arbitrary "tax collection" operations. As is true with all military organizations, natural leaders came to the fore. Several of these men deserve detailed consideration, for their machinations had far-reaching effects on what had begun as a simplistic religious movement.

¹⁶See Buttinger, Vietnam, I, pp. 257-61 passim, for an account of Matusita's manipulation of the sects and his adroit handling of emergent nationalism among the Hoa Hao.

¹⁷Lancaster, in his Emancipation, pp. 89-90, details the arming of the Hoa Hao by the Kempeitai.

Tran Van Soai (Ch'ahn Vuhn Sh'wye) was one of So's oldest adherents, both in chronological age and time of service. Styling himself "Nam Lua" (Nahm Loo'uh) or "Five Fires", Soai was almost fifty years old when he first fell under the influence of the Dao Khung. A contemporary observer has described him in unflattering terms:

(Soai) was of the same nature as the rice fields, the plants and the mud, as though he had sprung from them, was their emanation; at the same time bloodthirsty, canny, and stupid, possessed of primitive strength and incredible resistance; he was brave, madly so and without complications; but he had never been wounded, as if miraculously shielded.¹⁸

Another account notes that Soai ". . . had risen from the lowest level. He was a one-time hustler, soup-vendor, ricksha driver."¹⁹

Regardless of the modesty of his origins and early careers, Nam Lua had an instinctive grasp of the perquisites of high military office. Commissioning himself a "Generalissimo", Soai reached a profitable understanding with the French after 1947; he rapidly became a millionaire, collecting refrigerators and American automobiles, with heavy side investments in diamonds for his legally-recognized wife. He also took time out from operations to construct a forty-room castle of his own design, with a toilet conveniently adjacent to each room.

Another prominent figure in the Hoa Hao milieu was Lam Thanh Nguyen (Lahm Tine N'gooyin), who conducted operations under the alias of Hai Ngoan (High N'go-uhn), meaning "Doubly Stubborn". Hai Ngoan

¹⁸Bodard, Guerre, p. 145.

¹⁹Buttinger, Vietnam, I, p. 653n.

came honestly by his nickname: having been thrown into the Mekong River by the Viet Minh, with his hands tied and his body weighted down with stones, he reappeared several days later at his own funeral feast.²⁰

A third character, perhaps the most dangerous of all, rounded out the cast of Hoa Hao commanders. This was the infamous Le Quang Vinh (Lay Kwuhng Veen'h), commonly known as Ba Cut (Bah Koot). His soubriquet, roughly translated as "Third (Finger) Chopped", was acquired when this worthy, in a fit of nationalistic fervor, amputated the third finger of his right hand to signify his displeasure with the French colonial authorities. Ba Cut was also notable for his refusal to trim his hair following the execution of the Geneva Accords of 1954; his unkept appearance, and readily-visible self-mutilation, were outward manifestations of what must have been a psychopathic personality, for Fall noted in 1955 that Ba Cut was ". . . given to fits of incredible cruelty and has no sense of public duty."²¹

By August 1945, this triumvirate exercised an ever-expanding control of the regions south-west of Saigon. The power vacuum occasioned by the absence of the French administration and the Japanese surrender seemed tailor-made for the furtherance of their aims, and the commanders set forth to tighten their already paralyzing grip on the area's economy.

²⁰Ibid. The story of Hai Ngoan's resurrection is unlikely, as no other source mentions this event.

²¹Fall, Witness, p. 154. See also Warner, Confucian, pp. 105-6, for commentary on Ba Cut's mutilation and hirsute appearance. Lancaster, in Emancipation, p. 382, states that Ba Cut had "the disarming grin of a schoolboy who had carried out some successful prank: an illusion increased by the protuberant ears and defective teeth of the culprit."

Simultaneously with the Japanese surrender, the Phat Song had contrived his freedom from protective custody and directed the Hoa Hao to join other groups in the formation of the United National Front, a coalition of nationalist elements which hoped to fill the power void in Viet Nam. The Viet Minh had rapidly gained control of this loose confederation, and thus represented the administrative authority for Cochinchina in the days immediately following the Japanese collapse. The Hoa Hao, as part of the Front, were thereby allied, however uneasily, with the Viet Communists.

This tenuous alliance was dissolved at the city of Can Tho on 8 September 1945. Some 15,000 Hoa Hao troops, led by Nam Lua and Hai Ngoan, attacked a well-armed Viet Minh force in Can Tho. The attack represented a singularly rotten piece of tactical planning on the part of the Hoa Hao commanders: the disciplined Viet Minh slaughtered the faithful by the thousands. So's brother and Tran Van Soai's son were among those killed at Can Tho; the Phat Song and his lieutenants were fortunate enough to escape. The arrival of French and British troops later in the month prevented further large-scale operations against the Viet Minh by the Hoa Hao.²²

While sizeable sorties were precluded, lesser opportunities for vengeance presented themselves. Soai, especially, was crushed by the death of his son, and began a campaign of retribution that

²²Cf. DA Pam 550-105, p. 1025; and Fall, *Witness*, p. 151. Fall states that Soai's brother was executed, while DA Pam 550-105 indicates his son was killed. Given his background, it is unlikely that Soai was even aware of any brothers he may have had. Buttinger, in *Vietnam, I*, p. 412, states that Soai's son was executed by the Viet Minh after being captured at Can Tho.

terrorized western Cochinchina. Bodard has commented on the ensuing slaughter:

The entire Cochinchinese west was one massacre. As in a cult of death, the Living God (So) claimed ever more bodies, vowing the extermination of ever more enemies--in fact everyone who was not Hoa Hao. Therefrom resulted a triangle of killings, a war on three fronts, among the Hoa Hao, the French, and the Viet Minh. . . The Hoa Hao savagely ambushed French convoys to obtain their weapons; and with machine guns and rifles thus obtained they attacked the Viet Minh. . . the faithful who eliminated ten Viet Minh were to gain a higher paradise than those²³ who contented themselves with ten 'colonialists'.

One of the more gruesome sidelights of this spectacle involved the Hoa Hao disposition of prisoners. Those suspected of harboring pro-Viet Minh sentiments were tied together in groups and thrown into the nearest river where great batches of them drowned, their corpses clogging the waterways for weeks afterward.²⁴

In spite of the horrors that followed the Can Tho debacle, the Viet Minh attempted to patch up their differences with the Hoa Hao. An uneasy truce settled over Cochinchina as both sides turned their attention to the French troops who were consolidating the re-occupation of their former colony. Again, the Viet Minh effected a coalition of the various anti-colonial factions, this time styling their organization as the "National Unified Front". Hoa Hao intransigence, however, led the Viet Minh to dissolve this "Front" in July 1946.²⁵

²³Bodard, *Guerre*, pp. 142-3.

²⁴Fall, *Witness*, p. 151.

²⁵DA Pam 550-105, p. 1025, provides an account of the "National Unified Front" and its eventual dissolution.

Having realized marked success in the religious field, and only indifferent achievements along military lines, the Phat Song determined to try his hand in the political arena. To this end, on 21 September 1946, So created the Dan Chu Xa Hoi Dang (Dahn Choo Sah Hoy Dahng), the Social Democratic Association/Party, or Dan Xa, as it was popularly known. The party's platform was composed of equal parts of anti-Communism and anti-colonialism; indeed, it was difficult to determine where the Hoa Hao cult stopped and the Dan Xa began, as the latter was effectively the political manifestation of the former.²⁶

For a third time, the Viet Minh ostensibly attempted to heal the breach between themselves and the Hoa Hao. The establishment of the Dan Xa had been noted by the Communists' Nam Bo (Southern Region) Committee, and the Viet Minh realized that a political-religio-military organization could easily disrupt their plans for control of the struggle against the French. Accordingly, they advised the Phat Song that he had been appointed a "Special Commissioner" of the Nam Bo Committee. This ruse fooled no one; with memories of the Can Tho operation still fresh, So declined this honor and forthwith decamped to Duc Hoa, a town well beyond the grisly reach of his fellow "Nationalists".²⁷

Their blandishments having failed, the Communists decided to eliminate So as a factor in Viet politics. Luring him into Long Xuyen Province on the pretext of a "conciliation meeting", they executed Huynh Phu So on 16 April 1947. His body was dismembered

²⁶Fall, in "Sects," 246, and Savani, *Visage*, pp. 103-4, comment on the formation and political leanings of the Dan Xa.

²⁷Savani, *Visage*, p. 104.

and his remains scattered, ". . . lest (they) become an object of veneration and his grave a shrine for his fanatical followers."²⁸

The death of the Phat Song was a blow to his lieutenants; realizing the undesirable impact the news would have on the great mass of Hoa Hao adherents, Soai, Lam Thanh Nguyen, and Ba Cut determined to announce only that So had ". . . withdrawn and would return at a future date."²⁹ This explanation of So's disappearance enjoyed only passing acceptance among the faithful; the facts of So's "withdrawal" were soon common knowledge throughout Cochinchina.

Interneine difficulties began to affect the sect; without the strong moral leadership exercised by So, the cult suffered from the temporal ambitions of the various commanders. First off the mark was Tran Van Soai; as early as March 1947, he had entered into provisional agreements with the French officers commanding the Can Tho area. These agreements provided for Hoa Hao (in this instance, Soai's private band of some 2,000 armed troops) control over the village of Cai Von and the ferry connecting this village with Can Tho. In exchange for the establishment of this fief, Soai promised to assist the French in clearing the Viet Minh from areas under Hoa Hao control.³⁰

²⁸Buttinger, *Vietnam*, I, p. 410. Both Fall, "Sects," 247, and Lancaster, *Emancipation*, p. 183, concur in Buttinger's account of So's dismemberment. Available sources do not indicate the reason for So's willingness to attend the "conciliation meeting" with the Communists.

²⁹Lancaster, *Emancipation*, p. 183.

³⁰Edgar O'Ballance, *The Indo-China War 1945-1954: A Study in Guerrilla Warfare* (London: Faber and Faber, 1964), p. 84. (Hereafter cited as O'Ballance, *Indo-China War*.)

The French very likely considered themselves lucky to have reached such an agreement with Soai: a former enemy was now working for them in their attempt to subdue the meddlesome Communists. A glance at a map, however, will reveal the true advantage accruing from the new concord: a great deal of the rice of Cochinchina intended for Saigon must needs arrive by means of the Can Tho-Cai Von ferry across the Bassac River. The ferry, in Soai's hands, became a floating tax point. More importantly, control of the ferry implied control of a large percentage of the food supply for Saigon; this advantage would be brought sharply to Ngo Dinh Diem's attention in 1955.

But in 1947, both the French and Tran Van Soai were pleased with their rapprochement. On 18 May 1947, the French promoted the former soup vendor to the rank of one-star general (a non-existent rating, by their Army's reckoning), and gave him carte blanche in his campaign for extermination of the Viet Minh. Soai began operations with a will, turning the project into a true family affair; his legal wife, Le Thi Gam (Lay T'hee Gahm) organized a Hoa Hao "Amazon Corps" and intelligence service among the female faithful, controlled the cult's financial affairs, and ". . . occasionally arranged for the assassination of her husband's rivals."³¹

And rivals soon emerged. Soai's control extended over most of Vinh Long Province; his former comrade-in-arms, Lam Thanh Nguyen, "Hai Ngoan" of funeral feast notoriety, decided to carve out his own

³¹DA Pam 550-105, p. 1027. See Buttinger, Vietnam, I, p. 653n., for a description of Le Thi Gam's "Amazon Corps" in action.

area of exploitation. Hai Ngoan seized and held Chau Doc Province, well to the west of Soai's domain. His excesses in this region involved attacks on French units and assaults on all river craft for purposes of taxation. So troublesome did he become, that the French in January 1948 requested Soai to undertake operations against Hao Ngoan.

Still a third dissident force appeared, that of Ba Cut. The brutal amputee controlled the Long Xuyen-Thot Not area, effectively separating Soai's forces from those of Hai Ngoan. Ba Cut was even-handed in his depredations; headquartering himself in Thot Not, he took on all comers, French, Viet Minh, and other Hoa Hao groups, with sovereign indifference to political distinctions.

A final faction evolved in the Kien Phong Province area, that of the Neutralist or "Lying-down Hoa Hao". This element was commanded by Nguyen Giac Ngo (N'gooyin Zh-ee-yahk N'gaw); it was distinguished chiefly for its disdain of the other three satrapies, and a rigid observance of So's teachings.

Formal French support of Soai managed to restore a modicum of equilibrium to the confused situation. A French liaison team assisted Soai in his operations against Hai Ngoan, providing advisors, weapons, and (one suspects) financial inducements to their champion. Soai himself was immediately concerned with his northern flanks; in January 1948, he effected a mutual nonaggression pact with the Ho Phap of the Cao Dai, Pham Tac. His diplomatic efforts incensed many of the Hoa Hao faithful, who had little use for the Cao Dai sect, and Soai

was obliged to terminate his negotiations with the Ho Phap following the execution of the pact.³²

Throughout 1948, the situation fluctuated between minor raids and insincere alliances among the Hoa Hao leaders. Ba Cut bowed (temporarily) to the French, allowing his units to be disarmed. Hai Ngoan was busy consolidating his position in Chau Doc. And Nguyen Giac Ngo suddenly produced the aged Huong Ca Bo, the father of the Phat Song, calling for a "Third Force" among the Hoa Hao. The effect of Huong Ca Bo's endorsement of Ngo can only be judged properly when one understands that traditional Viet mores accord the highest respect to an aged father.³³

In the course of the confusion, Soai and Hai Ngoan decided in February 1949 to renew their old alliance, and they united against the new faction led by Ngo. And not a moment too soon: the Emperor, Bao Dai, had cannily appointed Huong Ca Bo as a member of his Privy Council, in effect denying the validity of the claims of the various factions to the Phat Song's spiritual authority. Ba Cut, for his part, persisted in his assaults on Ngo's new fiefdom, acknowledging neither spiritual nor temporal admonitions by the "Lying-down Hoa Hao".³⁴

Nguyen Giac Ngo understood the benefits to be reaped from identifying himself with Bao Dai in the peasant mind. Accordingly,

³²DA Pam 550-105, p. 1027. Hammer, Struggle, p. 211, notes that this alliance was the result of French pressure on both sects.

³³Fall, "Sects," 248, and Lancaster, Emancipation, p. 183, both mention the emergence of Huong Ca Bo under the aegis of Nguyen Giac Ngo's "Lying-down Hoa Hao".

³⁴Fall, "Sects," 248.

on 25 February 1950, he made a declaration of submission to the Emperor. This gratuitous fealty earned him nothing more concrete than a sudden attack in the following week by Tran Van Soai's troops; "Nam Lua" and his men occupied Ngo's domain, but were forced by the French to yield the newly-won territory in April.³⁵

Not to be outdone, Ba Cut also rallied to the French (for a second time) on 25 August 1950, doubtless hoping for the same emoluments granted his colleague Soai. "Nam Lua", however, retained the primary favor and support of the French commanders, being promoted to the rank of "General de Division" (an added star) on 1 January 1953 in recognition of his adherence to French hegemony in Viet Nam. Indeed, Soai had done very well for himself since his first declaration of loyalty to le belle France; a contemporary account of Soai in his military prime offers an amusing portrait of the colorful leader:

In his youth Tran Van Soai had been a stoker on a Mekong River steamer, eking out his meager income with occasional piracy. He attained a certain fame in this way and when he brought two thousand of his Hoa Hao over to the French he was rewarded, in spite of his lack of military training and his non-existent French, with the kepi of a general--and very dignified he looks in it, with his white, pointed chin-beard. Like the Caodaists, Soai keeps a headquarters in Saigon from which he spins his political intrigues, and before which, as the symbol of his multiple responsibilities, he flies no less than three flags: the Hoa Hao's, which consists simply of three H's on a white ground, the Vietnamese, and the French. He receives morning visitors in his pajamas, and the interview usually proceeds with the General sitting in dignified silence while his educated adjutant answers all the questions.³⁶

³⁵Savani, in Visage, pp. 108-9, offers a resume of Nguyen Giac Ngo's difficulties with his "co-religionist" Soai. French intervention on Ngo's side was the decisive element in this contest.

³⁶Schmid, "Indochina," 26.

Soon after Soai's promotion, it became obvious to the leaders of the several factions that the newly-formed Viet Nameese National Government, operating under the auspices of the French Union, was determined to assert control throughout the Mekong Delta. An "incursion" of this nature into the fiefs of the chieftains was not to be taken lightly; their privileges and autonomy were threatened, and with the exception of Nguyen Giac Ngo, the Hoa Hao commanders put aside their differences and joined hands against the upstart regime in Saigon.

On 1 June 1953, the Viet Nameese National Army initiated a series of attacks on Hoa Hao garrisons in Dinh Tuong and Vinh Long Provinces. After some sporadic harassment, Ba Cut and his followers took to the swamps on the night of 25 June, destroying their installations and retaining their weapons for future raids on the Nationalist interlopers. Finally, an accord was reached between the Hoa Hao leaders and representatives of the National Government on 29 July 1953, whereby the Hoa Hao would retain their economic interests, while Government appointees would assume political and civil authority within the Hoa Hao provinces.³⁷

While the summer of 1953 may have witnessed a reduction of the Hoa Hao military potential, the economic front was secure. Burgeoning profits may have persuaded the Hoa Hao leaders to take a benign view of Government administrative control of their domains. In August 1953, for example, a rice panic hit Saigon. French authorities

³⁷Details of the 29 July 1953 agreement may be found in Savani, Visage, pp. 110-11.

estimated that Hai Ngoan had stocked some 20,000 tons of the staple in hopes of just such an occurrence, while Tran Van Soai had disposed of 12,000 tons of rice at above average prices, and was sitting on another 40,000 tons for future distribution at exorbitant rates.³⁸

International events were also having an effect on the sect. On 3 July 1953, the French Government declared its willingness to grant total independence to Viet Nam at some ill-defined future date. With this declaration in mind, Ngo Dinh Nhu began organizing various Viet political groups with an eye toward his brother Diem's eventual elevation to the premiership of the nation. Nhu called for a "Front of National Union", a combine of political and religious affiliates who met on 5 September 1953 to discuss issues organic to Viet independence.

The following brief discussion of the Front's "congress" will indicate the degree of political sophistication obtaining during this period: The meeting included representatives of the Hoa Hao, the Cao Dai, the Binh Xuyen, Catholic prelates (among them Monsignor Ngo Dinh Thuc, of the ubiquitous Ngo clan), and prominent Nationalists. By any reckoning, the affair was a tumultuous one. To begin with, the gathering was to have been undertaken clandestinely. Bay Vien, the Binh Xuyen commander, had offered his headquarters compound in Cholon for the event, and had further guaranteed the security of the "congress" with his troops. Ngo Dinh Nhu had stressed the need for caution and an incremental approach to the questions of independence. Unfortunately, the various delegates were vociferous and unyielding

³⁸Figures cited in Fall, Witness, p. 154n.

in their opposition to both the French and Bao Dai. Many delegates demanded the formation of an independent republic, reforms, and elections. The entire proceeding was too much for Bay Vien (who saw his grasp on the Grand Monde gambling consortium being irreparably loosened if a republic were declared); he closed down the meeting by marching in his guards and declaring the spectacle permanently adjourned.³⁹

Bao Dai was displeased by the unsympathetic attitudes manifested by his subjects on 5 September 1953. Tran Van Soai, who had attended the "congress" as the chief Hoa Hao delegate, hastened to dispatch a telegram to His Majesty at Cannes, assuring the latter of his faithful obeisance. Sybarite he may have been, but the Emperor of Viet Nam was no fool. He appreciated the impulses that motivated the outburst against him in Cholon, and he decided to correct these instances of lese majestie. Quite simply, he called for a second meeting, this time insuring that the membership of the "congress" would be more tractable to Royal influence. Fifteen Hoa Hao representatives held forth in this "official" National Congress which began on 12 October 1953. Even with a controlled selection of delegates, fierce nationalism came to the fore, with a statement demanding complete independence surfacing on 16 October. The following day, the statement was modified to read that Viet Nam could not remain in the

³⁹ A detailed summary of the 5 September 1953 "Congress" may be found in Buttinger, Vietnam, II, p. 786. Lancaster, Emancipation, pp. 277-8, also provides an amusing account of the convocation.

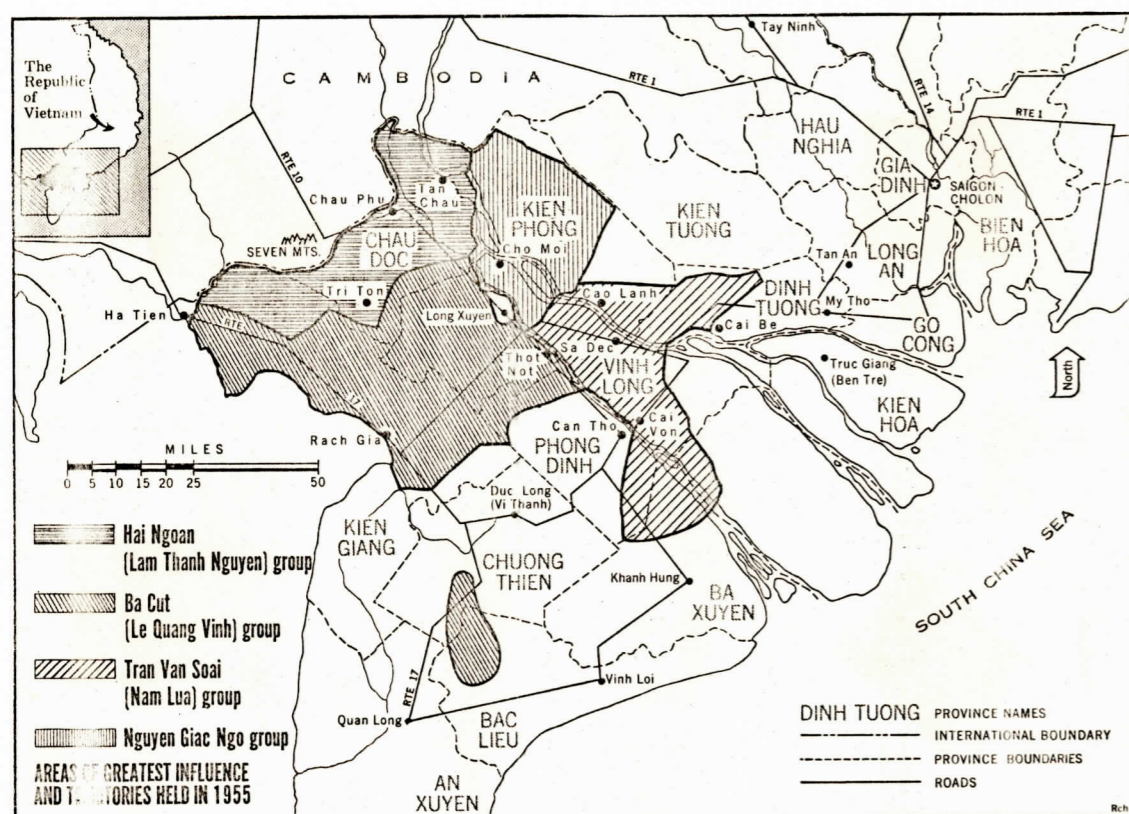
French Union "in its present form", a revision that hardly satisfied the French or Bao Dai.⁴⁰

Following the Geneva Accords of July 1954, the Hoa Hao maintained their unsteady internal alliances, retaining their economic strangleholds on the Mekong Delta while ostensibly acknowledging the Diem government. Viet independence from France did little to upset the Hoa Hao scheme of dominance. The private armies were intact under their respective commanders; Hoa Hao interests in gambling, as well as the rice trade, continued to fatten individual coffers and placate the troops, and the faithful numbered over a million. Indeed, as of the end of 1954, one source estimated the armed strength of each of the leaders as follows: Tran Van Soai led 7,000; Hai Ngoan commanded 2,600; Ba Cut supervised 1,000; and Nguyen Giac Ngo relied on 1,500 troops.⁴¹

Controlling the upper half of the Mekong Delta, supported by fanatical religious adherents, and with a fine disdain for the bumptious new Republic and its Catholic Premier, the Hoa Hao were not likely to surrender their power without a struggle.

⁴⁰ Buttinger, in Vietnam, II, pp. 1066-7, provides statistics on the membership of the 12 October 1953 "Congress". Of 200 delegates, 140 belonged to the "Big Five" political or religious groups, i.e., the Dai Viet Party, Cao Dai, Hoa Hao, Binh Xuyen, and Catholic elements. Anti-French sentiment appears to have been stimulated by a Dr. Pham Huu Chuong, a Dai Viet delegate who was "the guiding spirit of the virulent anti-French speeches made." Lancaster, Emancipation, p. 278, also comments on Chuong's influence on the October meeting.

⁴¹ Figures for the various Hoa Hao units were derived from Savani, Visage, p. 112.



The Hoa Hao

CHAPTER III

THE BINH XUYEN GANG

Criminal groups are not noted for their maintenance of internal organizational records; illiterate bandits are even less conscientious about such fine points. The student of the Binh Xuyen (Beeng S'ooyin) organization is therefore at a decided disadvantage when he attempts to unravel the tangle of myths, lies, and distorted recollections which clouds the origins of the group. Unlike the Hoa Hao and the Cao Dai sects, the Binh Xuyen lacked a written record, a definitive tradition of genesis and growth. One commentator has provided an insight of sorts into the activities of the gang prior to 1945:

At the gates of the Chinese city of Cholon, beyond the river thronged with bright junks that is its busy highway, lies a comfortless, unfruitful wasteland whose inhabitants could never maintain themselves from the products of their own soil. For centuries it has been the custom among the Binh Xuyen to sally out after harvest-time, fall on their richer neighbors, and bring back loot on which to live until the next harvest.

A second observer, Lucien Bodard, was on close terms with Le Van Vien (Lay Vuhn Vee-in), the leader of the Binh Xuyen in the gang's days of greatest power. Bodard has presented a similar version of the organization's early operations:

¹Schmid, "Indochina," 26.

In those days there existed a wretched, down-at-heel gang, never more than one jump ahead of the police, which practiced the old fashioned kind of banditry. This gang generally attacked poor, defenseless people and held them to ransom, cutting off little human samples which they posted to the family if there was too much in the way of bargaining.

A third source, also personally acquainted with the Binh Xuyen during the period of 1950 to 1954, noted that the gang took its name from the administrative district (roughly comparable to the American township) in which their hideouts were originally located.³ In addition to kidnapping and forays into the Saigon area, the gang was especially adept at extracting protection money from the wealthy Chinese merchants and bankers of Cholon.

Despite the paucity of reliable material concerning the organization's early years, some details are known. It appears that during the Japanese occupation of Indochina, the gang was led by one Muoi Tri (Muh'oyee Ch'ee), who was an associate of Huynh Phu So, the founder of the Hoa Hao sect. Tri had befriended So while the latter was attempting to escape from the Viet Minh Nam Bo Committee; for his assistance to So, Tri was condemned to death by the Communists. In some manner, Tri evaded this sentence and managed to convince the Nam Bo Committee that it would be to their advantage to accept an alliance with the Binh Xuyen, incidentally saving his own skin in the process. Other leaders of the gang during this period included

²Bodard, Quicksand War, pp. 115-6.

³Lancaster, Emancipation, pp. 137-8. This writer well recalls his first ride through Binh Xuyen District in 1966. The turmoil of war had failed to erase the especially smelly miasma of poverty, crime, and general deviousness that seemed to permeate the area. If ever there were a Viet counterpart to New York City's "Hell's Kitchen", Binh Xuyen District was surely the place.

Duong Van Ha, a Communist sympathizer, and his brother Duong Van Duong, minor figures who were pushed aside by Le Van Vien in 1945.⁴

While the Hoa Hao and the Cao Dai sects espoused religious principles and ethical philosophies, the Binh Xuyen remained unencumbered by such considerations. No high-minded moral questions, no esoteric plans for salvation, no political attachments for this group of swamp pirates and urban hooligans; the Binh Xuyen were criminals, purely and simply. They collaborated with the Japanese, they collaborated with the French, they collaborated with the Viet Minh, with Ngo Dinh Diem, with the Hoa Hao and the Cao Dai. These alliances were based on sheer greed and personal aggrandizement. It would not be stretching a point to recognize the Binh Xuyen as having been Viet Nam's equivalent of the Mafia; indeed, in speaking of the gang just prior to their defeat in 1955, Bernard Fall summarized their unique position:

(The Binh Xuyen) professes no particular religion nor does it advocate a particular political program. In American terms, it means transforming 'Murder, Inc.' into a unit of the National Guard and raising the gang leader to the rank of brigadier-general.

Any discussion of the Binh Xuyen must perforce include a review of Le Van Vien's career with the organization, for it was he who raised the gang to the heights of power, and it was he who eventually caused their downfall. For all practical purposes Le Van Vien was the Binh Xuyen, as his control of the organization was total, absolute in a sense that Westerners may find difficult to comprehend.

⁴Buttinger, Vietnam, I, p. 654n.

⁵Fall, "Sects," 250.

Little is known of his early life. Fall notes that the gangster was a chauffeur for the French colonial administration prior to World War II.⁶ Lancaster, who was personally acquainted with him, states that Le Van Vien became an outlaw at an early age after having killed an opponent in a brawl.⁷ Vien then gravitated into the Binh Xuyen gang, where his first assignments seem to have involved hold-ups and ambushes along the roads leading south from Cholon. It was during this period that he acquired his alias, "Bay Vien" (Bye Vee-in), or "the seventh Vien". In the course of such an ambush, Bay Vien was captured by the authorities and sent to the infamous penal colony on the Isle of Poulo Condore in the South China Sea.

By dint of careful planning and patient, secretive effort, Bay Vien constructed a raft and made his escape from the prison isle, sailing back to the mainland of Viet Nam and eventually rejoining his Binh Xuyen comrades. By September 1945, following the death of Duong Van Duong and the defection of Muoi Tri to the Viet Minh, the escaped convict had seized control of the Binh Xuyen.⁸

Physically, Bay Vien was living proof of the old theory of a man's physiognomy reflecting his inner character. Swarthy, coarse-featured, and brutish, the Bay Vien looked every inch his role of

⁶Ibid.

⁷Lancaster, Emancipation, p. 429. Jean Larteguy, in his novel Les Centurions (Paris: Presses de la Cite, 1957), presented a fictional account of a Cholon gangster modelled closely on Vien. In the novel, the hoodlum had begun his career by killing a ricksha driver in a quarrel over a ten-piastre coin. While Larteguy's work is fiction, his novels are invariably based on actual events and easily-recognized participants in these events. Given his diverse sources and long experience in Indochina, it is reasonable to suspect that Larteguy has written, in the guise of fiction, an accurate account of Bay Vien's first major crime.

⁸Lancaster, Emancipation, p. 429. Bodard, in his Quicksand War, p. 115, also mentions the escape from Poulo Condore.

gang lord. The interested reader may refer to two photographs of Bay Vien made in 1955: in the first photo, the hoodlum is stifling a yawn behind a massive fist; in the second picture, he is resplendent in full fig of a Viet Nameese National Army General, his crew-cut slicked down with pomade.⁹ The reporter Bodard paints an equally grim picture when he described Bay Vien as

. . . an Asian Vautrin, the leader of a gang exerting all his strength in digging himself into his new racket. He was already in his working clothes, a khaki shirt and shorts. His head was exaggeratedly square, a block whose harshness was emphasized still more by his crew-cut hair. Everything about him was trim, sharp, exact, frighteningly massive. As he spoke to me. . . his eyes sparkled like two little coals in his smooth face.¹⁰

The Binh Xuyen emerged from the demimonde of petty crime into public view during the tense months of August and September 1945. With the surrender of Japan, and the concurrent return of French forces to Indochina, Viet nationalism had experienced a renaissance. In the major cities of Tonkin, Annam, and Cochinchina, patriotic groups demonstrated night and day their opposition to attempts by the French to reimpose colonialism. In the course of these demonstrations in Saigon, a group of heavily-armed men appeared bearing a large green flag inscribed with the candid legend "Binh Xuyen Bandits".

While their banner may have been amusing, the activities of the Binh Xuyen were not. In the chaos precipitated by the Japanese

⁹"A Feudal Fracas in Vietnam," Life, April 18, 1955, pp. 46-7. See also John Mecklin, Howard Sochurek, and Francois Sully, "Civil War, The View of Those Caught in It," Life, May 9, 1955, pp. 26-33.

¹⁰Bodard, Quicksand War, p. 115.

surrender, outrages and atrocities were perpetrated by both the French and the Viet citizenry of Saigon. The month of September 1945 was characterized by massacres, assassinations, and extreme brutality on each side. Several authorities have held the Binh Xuyen directly responsible for the slaughter of some 150 French women and children in the Cite Heyraud quarter of Saigon on the night of 24-25 September.¹¹

Apart from their criminal ambitions, the Binh Xuyen experienced a surge of patriotism which led them to join the "Provisional Executive Committee" of the Viet Minh Nam Bo (Southern Committee), at the time headed by Tran Van Giau (Ch'ahn Vuhn Zh'ee-yow). Giau was a dedicated Communist charged with extending Viet Minh control over the newly-emerging Viet Nationalist groups in Cochinchina; he saw in Bay Vien the kind of criminal whose rapaciousness and greed could be put to good use on behalf of Communism. Bay Vien returned Giau's compliment by putting the armed troops and wealth of the Binh Xuyen at the disposal of the Nam Bo. The honeymoon was short-lived, however, in spite of Bay Vien's subsequent appointment as "Director of Municipal Affairs" for the Nam Bo: sometime in the latter months of 1945, Giau presented the gangster with a list of Viet intellectuals and nationalists who had been selected by the Viet Minh for assassination.

¹¹Cf. Buttinger, Vietnam, I, p. 332, and Lancaster, Emancipation, p. 131, wherein the latter notes "450 French or Eurasians were either kidnapped or murdered." Fall, in Two Viet-Nams, cites a figure of 450 on p. 71. However, Fall opted for only 150 casualties when writing of the massacre in 1955. (See Fall, "Sects," 250.)

Along with the list came a request for the Binh Xuyen to handle the unpleasant details of the affair.¹²

Killing for monetary gain or to avenge personal honor was one thing; political eliminations were tricks of a far different trade, and Bay Vien was shocked at Giau's concepts of governmental expediency. He resolutely declined to undertake such assassinations, whereupon relations between the Binh Xuyen and the Viet Minh sunk to a level of vengeful neutrality, each group keeping a wary eye cocked on the other for signs of betrayal to the returning French.

And with good reason, for the French were vigorously reclaiming the Saigon area. The Nam Bo Committee was obliged to depart the Saigon-Cholon area, and Bay Vien and his troops, numbering in the neighborhood of 1,300 desperadoes, soon retired to their old haunts in Binh Xuyen District. In January 1946, Tran Van Giau was recalled by his masters in Tonkin, and turned over command of the Nam Bo to Nguyen Binh (N'goo-yin Beeng). Giau's relief was occasioned by his failure to take advantage of the power vacuum in Saigon during the transition period, and by his inept handling of the Binh Xuyen opportunity; Binh was determined not to make the same errors.¹³

Following his appointment as commander of the Nam Bo, Nguyen Binh assessed the new situation confronting the Viet Minh in Cochinchina. After some reflection, he decided to organize terror squads to deal with both the French and anti-Communist Viets in Saigon.

¹²See Lancaster, Emancipation, p. 138, for a resume of Giau's attempts to co-opt the Binh Xuyen gang, and his presentation of assassination plans.

¹³Ibid. See also Savani, Visage, p. 119, for Binh Xuyen strength figures, and a recitation of Giau's relief from command.

These terror squads, the urban guerrillas of the Viet Minh, would later learn that like the Phoenix, the Binh Xuyen could rise again from its own ashes.

While the Viet Minh and the Binh Xuyen lacked the slightest trust in each other, there is some evidence that cooperation between the two continued. Bay Vien, for example, had added "tax collection" on behalf of the Viet Minh to his repertoire of peccadilloes; he failed, though, to make a fair division of the proceeds with the Nam Bo. Further, one of his lieutenants, a certain Maurice Thien, was rumored by Lucien Bodard to be a member of the French Intelligence Service. Withal, the Binh Xuyen were proving to be expensive collaborators from the Viet Minh point of view. Accordingly, Nguyen Binh decided to rid himself once and for all of the exasperating hoodlum and his cronies.

Bay Vien was invited to meet with the Nam Bo in the Plain of Reeds, for the ostensible purpose of confirming him in his new office of "Commander of Viet Minh Military Zone 7", a sinecure involving nominal control over Viet Minh operations east of Saigon. No stranger to trickery, Bay Vien thoughtfully made sure to bring along two hundred of his hand-picked bodyguards, who were ordered to kill Nguyen Binh at the first sign of treachery.¹⁴

¹⁴There is great confusion as to the year in which this meeting took place between Nguyen Binh and Bay Vien. All sources agree that the conference occurred in the month of May. However, DA Pam 550-105 states "On May 20, 1946 Vien left Rung Sat. . . for the Plaine des Joncs" (p. 812). Buttinger, in Vietnam, I, places it in 1947 (pp. 410-11); while Lancaster, in Emancipation, on p. 429, states that Vien "rallied to Bao Dai in June 1948," following the imbroglio. Warner notes in Confucian: "In May 1948 (the Viet Minh) invited Le Van Vien to their headquarters" (p. 96). Schmid, "Indochina," 26, declares ". . . in June 1948 (Bay Vien) went over to the French with his followers." Bodard, in Quicksand War, pp. 112-3, describes the business in gory detail, but fails to date it! However, judging from internal evidence in his recapitulation, it appears that Bodard is speaking of 1948.

The conference progressed about as one would expect; Bodard has presented a colorful account of this meeting between gangster and revolutionary:

Nguyen Binh welcomed him with the words, "You have betrayed us but I forgive you." The two men embraced. But the clasp was scarcely loosened before the killers came for Bay Vien. He had time to roar 'Help!' and a furious struggle broke out in Nguyen Binh's headquarters, Bay Vien fled blindly across country and reached his oldest haunt, the village of Binh Xuyen near Cholon--in his distress he returned to the place where his gang had first been formed. . . Bay Vien was safe, but more than a thousand of his soldiers, surrounded in the rice paddies by the Viet Minh, had had their throats cut.¹⁵

The affair was definitely a set-back for the former criminal masters of Cholon. While Bodard may have exaggerated the casualty figures for the sake of an exciting story, the fact remains that much of the armed strength of the Binh Xuyen was lost in this affray with the Viet Communists. And Bay Vien was thrown back to the same position in which he had found himself after the daring escape from Poulo Condore; he had only his animal-like cunning, his keen wits to sustain him in this period of defeat.

Shortly after his escape from Nguyen Binh, the gangster realized that his only hope for survival lay in throwing in his lot with the French. Following several conferences with Major Savani, the chief of the French Intelligence Service for Cochinchina, Bay Vien proclaimed himself violently anti-Communist and won formal French recognition for his new-found "loyalty".¹⁶

¹⁵Bodard, Quicksand War, p. 113.

¹⁶DA Pam 550-105, p. 812. Bodard also offers a first-hand account of Bay Vien's recruitment by the French in Quicksand War, p. 114.

Thus, in the summer of 1948, the illiterate gang lord began his slow climb back to power. The French would not let him reassert his suzerainty over the vice rackets of Cholon; not officially, that is. They desired that he turn his energies to the removal of the Viet Minh terror squads from the Saigon scene. In this endeavor, Bay Vien was only too happy to assist his former enemies: had not Nguyen Binh put a price on his head of five million piastres? Concerning this reward, the hoodlum told an acquaintance: "I have had too much to do with the Viet Minh to let myself be killed like any old son of a bitch. I am going to do the killing, not them."¹⁷

Bay Vien made especially good on this promise; so much so, that in years to come mothers would still their crying children by the mere mention of his name. But to do a proper job of securing Saigon, the hoodlum needed a proper organization. Luckily, he had left behind a few of his old lieutenants prior to setting out for the Plain of Reeds, and these men returned to serve him once again. Among them were the brothers Tai and San, "a foxy pair of Vietnamese who had long since been cast off by their respectable family,"¹⁸ These two handled political and military questions for the new "Binh Xuyen National Armed Forces". Another subaltern, already mentioned in this narrative, was Maurice Thien. According to Binh Xuyen legend, Thien was a well-educated metisviet, or Eurasian, who kept a fine stable of horses at the Phu Tho racetrack. It was Thien who handled the "insurance" provided by the Binh Xuyen for the notoriously tight-fisted Chinese

¹⁷Bodard, Quicksand War, p. 115.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 121.

financiers in Cholon. Sadly, Thien came to an unpleasant end while seated in a barber's chair; he was shot by a colleague, one Sanmarcelli, a half-Corsican, half-Viet gunslinger who shared his responsibilities for smooth operations in Cholon. Sanmarcelli, it seemed, had long harbored a jealous dislike for his co-worker.¹⁹

As a result of his increasing commitments and French recognition, Bay Vien began to grow deeply concerned with such matters as morale, esprit de corps, and (of all things), his public image. To further the pride of his troops, he designed a flag: the device consisted of a yellow star (a throwback to his Viet Minh days) on a green field, bordered in red.²⁰ A marching band was also organized, which thumped out martial airs to cheer the spirits of his recruits. Best of all, a new headquarters compound sprang up in Cholon near the Pont-en-Y bridge, a fine command post that housed the various staff sections of his growing army. This new compound was chiefly remarkable for the juxtaposition of a monument to the Binh Xuyen who had fallen while fighting the French, and a citation praising the gang's bravery, duly signed by a French General Officer! (In addition to the headquarters area at Pont-en-Y, Bay Vien maintained a "business office" at 31 Rue de Canton in the center of Cholon.) His troops were decked out in French tropical uniforms with snappy berets; they soon amounted to some 5,000 well-disciplined mercenaries.²¹

¹⁹Ibid., p. 122.

²⁰Schmid, "Indochina," 26.

²¹Strength figures offered by Bodard, Quicksand War, p. 114.

Yet, something was lacking. Bay Vien was keenly aware of his own shortcomings, both cultural and intellectual; he tended to be rather shy at social gatherings of Saigon's upper crust, gatherings to which he was constantly being invited following his commissioning as a Colonel in the French-controlled "Guard of Viet Nam" in 1948. He set out to improve himself in this department, and he succeeded after a fashion. With the acquisition of a Jaguar automobile, he was able to participate in sports car rallies and gymkhanas; after intensive coaching by Jacques Long, a metisviet subordinate who advised him on affaires sociales, he developed a taste for brandy and soda and light conversation at cocktail parties given by the hostesses of the French community in Saigon. Unfortunately, Bay Vien spoke no French, so pleasantries were exchanged through Jacques Long, his interpreter. Fond of animals, he set up a miniature zoo at the Pont-en-Y compound; this menagerie included a pet tiger (which sometimes accompanied him on his rounds of Saigon), a leopard, a python, and a crocodile. Much was to be made of this zoo following the seizure of the Binh Xuyen headquarters in 1955.

Indeed, by 1949 the former convict had become almost respectable. His minions were busy liquidating Viet Minh by the score within Saigon--Cholon proper, and attending to "road safety tax" collections on the thoroughfares leading out of the twin cities. And the boss himself, Warner comments, ". . . had acquired the Noveautes Catinat, the city's best department store, twenty houses, a hundred shops, a fleet of river boats,"²² among other, less savory holdings.

²²Warner, Confucian, p. 96.

Bay Vien had in fact reached total accord with duly-constituted authority, a situation about which most gang lords dream, but never actually realize. He was regaining his iron grip on Saigon's vice with his left hand, and accepting French salutes with his right. For his part of the bargain, the twin cities were kept clear of the pernicious Viet Minh; for their part, the French turned a blind eye to Binh Xuyen enterprise.

And enterprise there was. Soon, the opium trade attracted Bay Vien's interest, and he set up a processing plant in the Pont-en-Y compound. He also acted to insure that the only opium smoked in the infamous dens of Cholon bore the Binh Xuyen imprimature. His "road agents" precluded the smuggling of inferior products into the city.²³

Prostitution was another lucrative field which demanded Bay Vien's attention. Previous to his intervention, whoring in Saigon had been conducted on a laissez-faire basis with little in the way of organization or responsible control. Bay Vien quickly corrected this disorderly state of affairs: he organized the Palais de Glace, which was touted as Asia's biggest brothel. Le Van Vien was titled Directeur of the concern. Quite possibly it was indeed Asia's largest establishment of this nature: one source claimed that six hundred filles de joie plied their profession at the "Hall of Mirrors", while another put the figure at no less than 1,200! Life magazine ran a suitably discreet photograph of the establishment in its issue of April 18, 1955;

²³Alfred W. McCoy (with Cathleen B. Read and Leonard P. Adams II), The Politics of Heroin in Southeast Asia (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), pp. 109-118, passim, gives a detailed account of the gang's involvement in the opium rackets.

its denizens were the quintessence of Viet delicacy and demure shyness, if the picture is to be believed.²⁴

While the drug trade and organized prostitution were profitable (and, from the French perspective, tolerable) concerns, the Binh Xuyen gang had not forgotten its origins: the old Asian games of squeeze and "Cumshaw" (a system of organized graft) were given new twists with the gang's rise to respectability. By tradition the victims of the protection racket were the Chinese entrepreneurs of Cholon. Further, the smaller businessmen, the keepers of miniscule barrooms, tiny opium houses, and two-cot cribs, all felt the presence of the Binh Xuyen tax collector. No establishment was safe from such exploitation, although Bay Vien was careful to set limits to the amounts extracted from those under his "protection". An old Saigon hand has detailed the system in this description of an "inspection tour" by a Binh Xuyen Major:

Everywhere we appeared there was an immediate respectful silence. The woman of the place would come cringing forward with greasy tumblers and a bottle of brandy by way of compliment. And every time a young fellow would slide up to the officer and whisper a brief report. He was a Binh Xuyen agent. They were scattered everywhere: they literally sprang out of the ground. After one of them had made his report it was decided to punish an overrapacious policeman. The oppressed bawd thanked the major on her knees.

This tour through wretchedness and vice seemed to me to go on forever. What I saw on every side was an infinity of poor people, all under the 'protection' of the Binh Xuyen.

Afterwards we went into the regions of more costly pleasures. But throughout this quarter too, in the dance halls with their taxi girls, the well-run opium dens, the top brothels and the Chinese

²⁴Cf. Lancaster, Emancipation, p. 378n., and Warner, Confucian, p. 98, for these figures. "A Feudal Fracas in Vietnam," Life, April 18, 1955, pp. 46-7, set the total at 600.

hotels, there appeared the little rat-faced Binh Xuyen agent with his whispering. But here he came up to us more discreetly and he wore a suit--he even talked a little pidgin French. We visited dozens of joints in this way, and when we said good-bye to one another at about four in the morning, the Binh Xuyen Major said, 'You see how Bay Vien maintains order in Cholon, and what trouble he takes to look after the people.'²⁵

Prostitution, drugs, shake-downs, road (and canal) collection points. . . but Bay Vien and his cohorts were still unsatisfied. There was one area of criminal activity which eluded their control, that of organized gambling.

In early 1949 there were two major gambling concerns in the greater Saigon locale: the Grand Monde (located in Cholon), and the Cloche d'Or, a counterpart establishment in the Gia Dinh quarter of the city. These organizations preyed on the Viet's inveterate love of games of chance; even the poorest "nha que" or peasant was welcome to participate in the low-stake games, wagering his pitiful handful of piastres with the same excitement as that exhibited by a Chinese dowager thrilling to the click of mah-jong tiles. Since 1946, both the Grand Monde and the Cloche d'Or had been controlled by a shadowy group of Chinese known as the "Macao Combine"; it appears that these individuals turned an acceptable profit during their tenure as directors. One source calculated in 1955 that ". . . the equivalent of 100 milliard francs (some 100 million) were estimated to have changed hands in the course of the preceding eight years" at the two gaming houses.²⁶

²⁵Bodard, Quicksand War, p. 120.

²⁶Lancaster, Emancipation, p. 379n. The author derived this figure from the French newspaper Combat, 18 January 1955, a copy of which was unavailable to this writer.

It cannot be assumed that the overhead of these establishments was limited to normal operating expenses and whatever the fortunate player could claim as his winnings. In Asia, such large-scale enterprises generally involve certain emoluments to various parties outside the business. One observer has stated "A daily royalty of 400,000 piastres had to be paid to the state. . . also. . . the daily sum of 1,000,000 piastres in semi-official expenses--protection money, marks of esteem. . . (the Viet Minh) insisted upon getting as much as the state."²⁷ Pay-offs aside, the Grand Monde and its sister house conducted such a massive volume of business as to guarantee sizeable profits. As late as 1955, the "take" at the Grand Monde was conservatively estimated at 500,000 piastres per day.²⁸

One should not imagine these gambling centers as an Asian equivalent of the Casino at Monte Carlo or an Oriental version of Harold's Club; an habitue of the Grand Monde has provided his vivid impression of "the action" offered to the clientele:

. . . a great courtyard of beaten earth: it stank, the ground was greasy with filth, and gutters plowed their way across it. At night thousands of naked bulbs showed corrugated-iron buildings set down on bare cement. There were about fifty of them, and each contained four or five gaming tables. . .

The Grand Monde was a clip joint raised to the highest power, a grinding mill, all that was most squalidly simple and organized. The tables went on one after another forever. They were mere crudely painted planks, daubed with figures or characters. There were all the games from all over the world, a score of them and more--games with cards, dice, large balls, little balls, knuckle bones, and many other things.

²⁷Bodard, Quicksand War, p. 108.

²⁸Schmid, "Indochina," 26.

But the chief of them were bat-quan and tai xieu, Chinese forms of gambling with extraordinarily involved combinations.²⁹

In addition to the more exotic forms of gambling, the Grand Monde also operated a daily "numbers game" involving the traditional "Thirty Six Beasts" of Sino-Viet mythology. The same level of integrity prevailed in this contest as was to be found at the bat-quan tables.

Obviously such a choice plum could not escape Bay Vien's notice, functioning as it did in his own fief of Cholon. Unfortunately, he could not move in and seize control of the Grand Monde in his usual manner, for the establishment had a silent partner in addition to its Chinese directors: His Majesty Bao Dai was heavily involved in the yearly awards of the institution's operating license.

There are no records of Bao Dai's connection with the Grand Monde, for obvious reasons. However, authoritative sources have indicated that the continued Chinese control of Saigon gambling was contingent upon the Emperor's approval; and the Emperor's approval was contingent upon the amount of "esteem" he could extract from the Macao Combine. By 1949 Bao Dai had grown impatient with his share of the Grand Monde's profits; the daily "cut" to the Viet Minh also irritated him. An accord was quickly reached between the Emperor and the Binh Xuyen warlord: Bay Vien would assume the directorship of the Grand Monde and the Cloche d'Or, and Bao Dai would assume a more substantial share of the house winnings. The Macao Combine was not

²⁹Bodard, Quicksand War, p. 104. See also Schmid, "Indochina," 29, for a further description of the Grand Monde.

notified of this agreement; the first indication of new ownership came with the explosion of a grenade among the gaming tables at the Grand Monde. Several acts of terrorism followed, all of which convinced the Chinese owners that their interests had been superseded. Taking their business elsewhere, they abandoned the field to Bay Vien and his new "partner".³⁰

Bay Vien's first act on assuming control of the Grande Monde was to halt the 400,000 piastre pay-off to the Viet Minh. A large contingent of his troops insured there would be no problem of selective terrorism by the Communists against the gambling halls; play resumed with an even higher rate of profits for the new owners. "Under New Management" was the watchword for the Grand Monde at the beginning of 1950:

Men with submachineguns were hidden everywhere, and at the slightest incident they came darting out. Behind its high sheltering walls the Grand Monde turned into a fortress. . . Bay Vien had to be able to defend it by force of arms, for he wholly refused to share its profits with any of the other organizations. . . although he was forced to yield the state its dues, he did away with the private payments and all the sums provided for the members of the Saigon government and the police authorities. Bay Vien kept everything for himself--himself and his sleeping partners, the Emperor and the imperial cabinet. . . (he) added little subsidiary enterprises to the main concern. . . Hideouts were set up for the smuggling of gold and cigarettes, and workshops for forging everything that needed to be forged. . . Neither the police nor the customs made their way into the Grand Monde or even thought of trying to do so. Even the Viet Minh refrained from interfering with the Grand

³⁰ See Buttinger, Vietnam, II, p. 784, concerning this phase of Bao Dai's relations with Bay Vien. Cf. Bodard, Quicksand War, pp. 122-3, for an account of the Dalat conference wherein agreement was reached between Emperor and warlord in regard to the Grand Monde. Fall, Schmid, Warner, and Lancaster all mention His Majesty's connivance in this matter.

Monde and clashing with Bay Vien's armed gang, firmly dug in, secure in their control of vice, in their legality and in their armaments.³¹

The shaky "legality" of the Binh Xuyen was substantially improved in April 1952 by the commissioning of Bay Vien as a Brigadier General in the Viet Nameese National Army. This elevation did not distract the warlord from his responsibilities to the French and the Emperor. Terrorism launched by the Viet Minh against the European community in Saigon met with swift and gruesome reprisals by the Binh Xuyen. So effective was this "counter insurgency", that in February 1953, a fourth battalion of Binh Xuyen was created with the mission of ". . . ensur(ing) the security of the road from Saigon to the coast at Cap St. Jacques that had been repaired and reopened to traffic."³² This fourth battalion brought unit strength to a known total of 8,000 mercenaries, most of whom were paid with French-supplied piastres.³³

Throughout the spring and summer of 1953, the Binh Xuyen went about their affairs with sanguinary, grasping thoroughness. The burgeoning empire of vice, like any large conglomerate, demanded careful accounting of personnel and resources. While Bay Vien was functionally illiterate, no one ever questioned his mathematical abilities; he handled the abacus and the modern adding machines with equal ease, and woe betide any whose accounts failed to balance.

Mention was made in earlier chapters of the semi-clandestine "Congress of National Union and Peace" convened by Ngo Dinh Nhu on 5 September 1953. As stated earlier, Bay Vien had provided his head-

³¹ Bodard, Quicksand War, pp. 111-2.

³² Lancaster, Emancipation, p. 277.

³³ O'Ballance, Indo-China War, p. 195.

quarters for the convocation. Peculiarly enough, the warlord was elected to chair the proceedings. One may assume that the affair left something to be desired from the point of view of parliamentary niceties. The vilification of Bao Dai and condemnation of the French did not sit well with Bay Vien; both of his unofficial backers would take a dim view of this exercise in democracy. Before further heresy was committed, the gang leader closed down the "Congress", using his mercenaries to herd the shouting delegates out of the Binh Xuyen compound. Realizing that the Emperor would be displeased on learning of the meeting, Bay Vien quickly joined Tran Van Soai in composing a telegram to His Majesty, swearing continued fealty.

Note has been taken of Bao Dai's response to the unauthorized convention of September. His carefully planned "official" National Congress began on 12 October 1953 at the Saigon town hall, with the clear understanding that questions of independence would be considered only within the framework of membership in the French Union. Binh Xuyen representation amounted to nine delegates, a greater number than that allotted to such groups as the Buddhists, commercial interests, the press, and ethnic minorities such as the Montagnard tribes. The Binh Xuyen faction was not as large as either the Hoa Hao or Cao Dai delegations, being allotted only nine seats.³⁴

The meeting remained orderly until 16 October, when a demand for total independence from France was unanimously approved by the Congress. One may wonder if Binh Xuyen patriotism had finally

³⁴Refer to Buttinger, Vietnam, II, p. 1066, and Lancaster, Emancipation, p. 277n., for comparative strengths of the various delegations.

triumphed over greed. In any event, the demand was modified to a slight degree on the following day, with appropriate expressions of confidence in Bao Dai and a call for a popularly-elected national assembly.

Following this foray into representative government, the Binh Xuyen gang returned to the management of its opium business, the Grand Monde, the Palais de Glace, and similar ventures which were less likely to disturb political equilibrium. By April 1954, though, Bay Vien's appetite for power was troubling him again: this time, the goal was complete control of the Saigon-Cholon Police Department.

Such an ambition was not as fantastic as it may appear at first glance. Obviously, the man with access to Department files would have myriad opportunities for blackmail of persons who had had difficulties with the authorities. Moreover, under the Saigon system, entry and exit visas, vending licenses, indeed, a plethora of various types of authorizations were all handled by the police. Very little business transpired in Saigon without some sort of police authority; in short, the possibilities for graft were endless.

Bay Vien, busy fulfilling his duties as a Brigadier General of the National Army (and pursuing his other interests), had no desire to take personal command of the police and security forces. Bao Dai did not wish to participate directly in the acquisition of the official police force by the Binh Xuyen. The two partners were therefore obliged to work indirectly on this new potential source of revenue.

On 10 April 1954 the Emperor executed a decree (which was not promulgated until 12 April, following His Majesty's departure from

Saigon for Cannes) which, among other things, formally incorporated the private armies of the sects into the Viet Nameese National Army. Bao Dai further suggested to his cousin, Prince Buu Loc, that a certain Lai Huu Sang (Ly'ee Hu-uh Shahng) should be appointed to the Director-General's post of the Saigon-Cholon Police and Security Services.³⁵

Sang was a comrade-in-arms of Bay Vien, a reliable lieutenant of long standing. It was Sang who had handled the Binh Xuyen's first contacts with the French Intelligence Service in June 1948, following the Plain of Reeds debacle, when Bay Vien was hunted by both the French and the Viet Minh.³⁶ And Sang, following his appointment as Director-General, would handle police affairs for the gang.

As in the case of the Grand Monde, money changed hands. An American reporter on the scene later wrote that Bay Vien paid a sum of 40,000,000 piastres for Bao Dai's connivance in the appointment of Sang.³⁷ It was a small price to pay for the final legitimization of the Binh Xuyen; surely, the expense would be returned by judicious exploitation of the new opportunity.

The former Director-General of Police, Mai Huu Xuan (My'ee Hu-uh S'oo-Wahn), took a commission in the National Army; in doing so, he brought with him several hundred police and security personnel who

³⁵Lancaster, in his Emancipation, p. 307, provides an analysis of the means by which the gang assumed control of the police force. He also notes Bao Dai's role in this matter.

³⁶Fall, "Sects," 250. In this article, Fall refers to the Director-General as Lai Huu Tai; all other sources give his name as Sang. It is possible that Fall confused the brothers Tai and San mentioned by Bodard in his review of the gang's "staff officers" (see n. 17).

³⁷Figure cited by Robert Shaplen, The Lost Revolution (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), p. 116 (hereafter cited as Shaplen, Revolution).

did not relish continued roles in the law-enforcement apparatus. Their transfer to the National Army was a matter of self-preservation; the new masters of the police were the same people with whom these men had carried on a losing struggle since 1945, and it was doubtful that Sang and his companions would deal gently with these individuals if they remained in the Department.³⁸

The transfer was completed by the end of April 1954; reliable members of the Binh Xuyen occupied the most responsible and advantageous positions within the Department, and gang members had filled the personnel gap caused by the hiatus of Xuan's followers. The irony of the situation caused some comment: the Binh Xuyen were now to combat the very vices on which they had fattened over the past eight years.

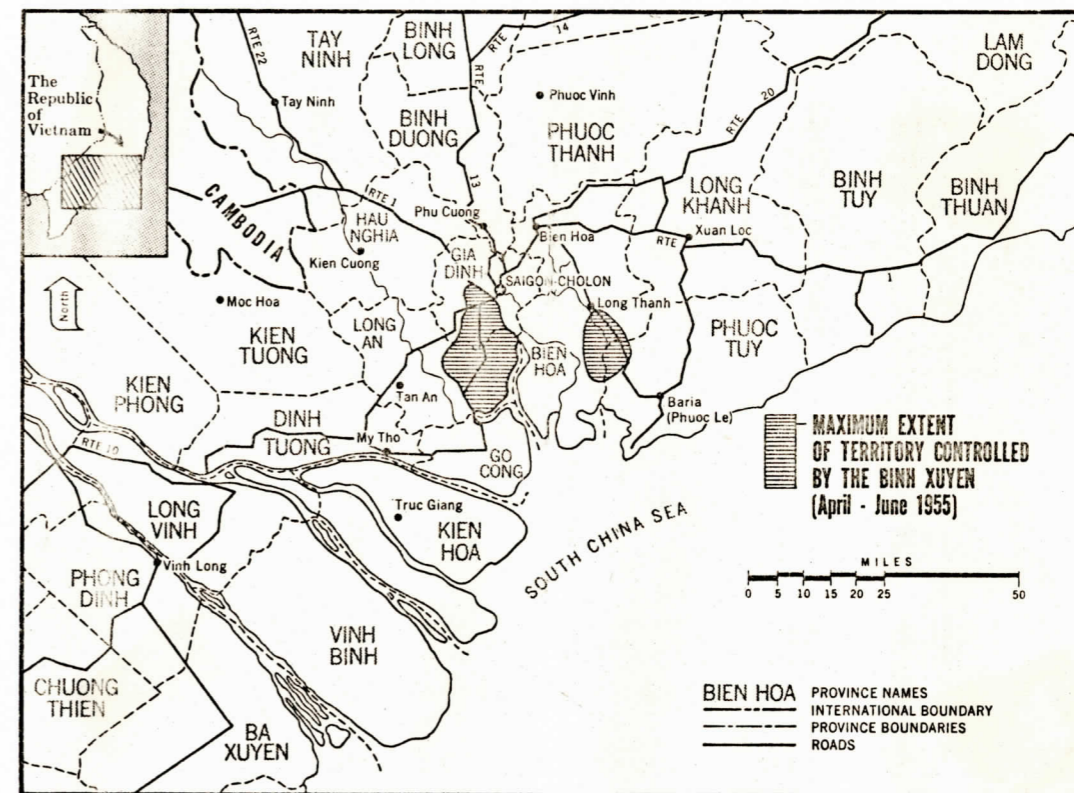
On the other hand, the gang appears to have reached the apogee of its power in the months following the acquisition of the Police Department. Bay Vien had come a very long way from his Poulo Condore days: he now directed prostitution, gambling, drugs, and protection within the twin cities, and he commanded the organization charged with the elimination of such rackets. His troops were nominal members of the National Army, but they still answered to him. And Bao Dai backed him completely.

Only moral indignation on the part of an equally powerful figure, an incorruptible national leader, could shake the gang lord out of his Cholon command post. In June 1954, it was improbable

³⁸Lancaster, Emancipation, p. 307, reviews the reactions of Mai Huu Xuan and his comrades to the Binh Xuyen takeover of the police and security functions.

that the nation could produce such a personage. And then Ngo Dinh Diem appeared on the scene: a celibate, a rigid Mandarin of the old school, a man who burned with a Jesuitically intense hatred of all that he himself defined as "evil".

The former chauffeur and the ex-seminarian would have little in common with each other; their future enmity would shake the new Republic of Viet Nam to its very foundations.



The Binh Xuyen

CHAPTER IV

THE JESUIT MANDARIN

Retrospection is a haftless sword in the hand of the historian; too often, the advantage of hindsight is twisted by ex post facto concepts and research is colored by fashionable 'verdicts' of men and events. These truisms are especially pertinent in the case of Jean-Baptiste Ngo Dinh Diem, Prime Minister of the Associated State of Viet Nam, and later, President of the Republic. It is difficult, when considering Diem, to repress the images of the years 1960-1963; one thinks immediately of self-immolations in Saigon, rioting students and Buddhist monks, the sinister figures of Ngo Dinh Nhu and Madame Nhu, and, finally, of the portly President of the Republic lying in a pool of blood and filth in the back of an armored personnel carrier, shot by his own officers early on the morning of 2 November 1963.¹

Quite likely, these images will remain predominant for future students of Viet Namese history. Unhappily, they overshadow the man and his activities; today, his earlier successes of 1954-1955 are frequently ignored, if not derided. An examination of his background may resolve the paradox of his miserable fall; for no one, on the day of his appointment as Premier, would have logically predicted the circumstances of his death.

¹Buttinger, in his Vietnam: A Political History (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1968), p. 472, (hereafter cited as Buttinger, Political History), advises that Mai Huu Xuan "is believed to have given the order for the murder of Diem . . ."

Jean-Baptiste Ngo Dinh Diem (literally, Ngo of the Burning Jade) was born on 3 January 1901, the third of six sons of Ngo Dinh Kha (K'ah). There is no question of his birth date; some sources maintain he was born in the village of Dai Phuong, Quang Binh Province, while most authorities cite his birthplace as the Imperial City of Hue. The point is not insignificant; Diem himself maintained that he had been born in Hue, and with good reason: following the partition of 1954, Quang Binh Province lay above the demarcation line between North and South Viet Nam. Diem had no desire to be cast as a "Northern" Catholic by virtue of his birthplace.²

His father, Ngo Dinh Kha, was a Mandarin of the highest degree serving in the Imperial Court of the Emperor Thanh Thai (reigned 1889-1907) as Minister of Rites and Grand Chamberlain.³ (One source has added ". . . keeper of the eunuchs to the Emperor. . ." to Kha's duties.)⁴ The Ngo family was devoutly Catholic, and had been so since the seventeenth century. Robert Shaplen, in the course of an interview with Diem in 1962, learned much of the early history of the Ngo clan:

. . . the Ngos had been privileged mandarins--scholar-courtiers--since the sixteenth century. . . In the small village. . . in Quang Binh Province, where the Ngo family tombs still stand, the people believed that the proximity of the Ngo ancestors assured good fortune and prosperity, and they used to seek to bury their dead alongside, creeping into

²Cf. Bernard B. Fall, The Two Viet-Nams (2nd rev. ed.; New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1967), p. 235 (hereafter cited as Fall, Two Viet-Nams); and Buttinger, Vietnam, II, p. 1253.

³Buttinger, Vietnam, II, p. 1253.

⁴Fitzgerald, Fire, p. 108. This assertion concerning Kha's duties is found in no other source.

the graveyard by night. "They didn't have more than indifferent success," Diem told me. "We planted rows of trees to keep them away."

Sometime in the seventeenth century, the Ngos were converted to Catholicism, and around 1870, during a period of anti-Catholic violence, a pagan mob attacked their home and drove nearly a hundred members of the family into the village church, where they were burned alive. One of the few who was not wiped out was Diem's father. . . .

In addition to Diem, Kha's household included five other sons and three daughters. Little is known of the sisters, but the brothers all attained prominence in later life. Ngo Dinh Khoi (K'oy-ee) became a Governor of Quang Nam Province under the French; Ngo Dinh Thuc rose to the rank of Archbishop of Vinh Long; Ngo Dinh Nhu became Diem's closest adviser and companion in death; Ngo Dinh Can (Kahn) attained the Governorship of Hue upon Diem's elevation to the Premiership; and the youngest brother, Ngo Dinh Luyen (Loo-yin), served as the Republic of Viet Nam's Ambassador to Great Britain (despite his early training as a mechanical engineer).⁶

At an early age Diem evinced a marked aptitude for diligent study, a strong religious impulse, and a disdain for the French Colonial Administration. This latter trait was likely due to Kha's dismissal from the Imperial Court in 1908. The French, having exiled the Emperor Thanh Thai in 1907, summarily discharged the Mandarin Kha for his obstinate devotion to the subversive sovereign. Diem's anti-French bias, and his complementary Viet patriotism, were carefully nurtured by his father.

Diem's schooling proceeded at the Lycee Quoc Hoc, an institution in Hue which combined many of the better features of classical

⁵Shaplen, Revolution, p. 105.

⁶Buttinger, Vietnam, II, p. 1253.

Viet scholarship and French intellectual training. Appropriately, Ngo Dinh Kha had been one of the founders of the Lycee Quoc Hoc; young Diem performed exceptionally well at the Lycee, earning a reputation for tireless application and rigid piety.

At the age of fifteen, the studious lad entered a Viet Catholic monastery with intentions of studying for the priesthood. After several months, though, he withdrew from the monastery. His reasons for leaving are still unclear; his brother, Archbishop Thuc, later suggested that Diem ". . . found himself incapable of accepting church discipline because he himself was too strong-willed."⁷ Diem's vow of chastity (and subsequent misogyny) seem to date from this period.

After taking a competitive examination (and falsifying his age in order to qualify for the test), Diem entered the French-administered School for Law and Administration at Hanoi in 1917. His choice of this institute appears to have been dictated by pragmatic considerations: short of emigrating to France for study, graduation from Droit et Administration was the only legal avenue of advancement for Viet youth. Swallowing his distaste for the Colons, Diem applied himself and graduated first in his class in 1921.⁸

Diem's accomplishments as a scholar had attracted the notice of his French mentors; following a short stint at the Royal Library in

⁷Information on Diem's early education and sojourn in the monastery is derived from Shaplen, Revolution, p. 109, and Buttinger, Vietnam, II, pp. 1253-1254. Buttinger also offers a description of the Lycee Quoc Hoc. Ironically, a certain Nguyen That Thanh of Nghe An Province, later known as Ho Chi Minh, had attended the same Lycee some ten years earlier (Fall, Two Viet-Nams, p. 238).

⁸Buttinger, Vietnam, II, p. 1254.

Hue, the young graduate was appointed a District Chief in Annam at the wage of twelve piastres per month. He was responsible for the orderly administration of some seventy villages, and he quickly gained a reputation for competence and honesty in the office.⁹

During the period 1925-1929, Ngo Dinh Diem became increasingly aware of embryonic attempts at political agitation by Viet Communists amongst the peasantry throughout Annam. Characteristically, he began an intensive study of Marxism. His devotion to the Church and conservative ideals convinced him that Communism, even under the guise of nationalism, was not the solution to Viet Nam's problems. Consequently, he assisted in the apprehension of over one hundred agitators during his term as District Chief; rather than turning these men over to the French, however, Diem consigned them to instruction by village notables in Confucian ideas of citizenship. His early grasp of the threat posed by Communism prompted him to forward a report on the menace to the French Administration. The report was cavalierly disregarded, but the Yen Bay revolt of 1930 proved the accuracy of the young administrator's assessment.

Diem's ability and character led to his promotion, in 1929, to the office of Governor of Binh Thuan Province. From his headquarters in the city of Phan Thiet, he ranged throughout the Province's three

⁹ Ibid.

hundred villages, adjudicating, advising, and administering the motley population of Viets and Cham tribesmen.¹⁰

Due to his enviable standards of integrity, Diem was appointed in 1931 by the French to investigate charges of corruption among the Viet administrators of Annam. True to his task, he pursued malfeasance with a dogged sense of rectitude. So successful was he, that in May 1933 the young Emperor Bao Dai appointed him Minister of the Interior for the Protectorate of Annam.

The appointment to a ministry, while remarkable for a man so young, did not serve to dilute Diem's rigid standards of patriotism and piety. The business ended badly; by July of the same year, he had resigned in disgust, returning to the family home in Hue and chiding the Emperor for being ". . . nothing but an instrument in the hands of the French authorities."¹¹ (One source maintains that Diem held his post as Minister until September 1933, resigning due to internecine rivalries at the Imperial Court.)¹²

Throughout the period 1922-1940 Diem remained in Annam, studiously unruffled by outside events. He was content to indulge

¹⁰ Fall, Two Viet-Nams, p. 238. Again, an odd point of historical congruence: Nguyen That Thanh served as a teacher at the Lycee Dac Thanh in 1911-1912 during his residence in Phan Thiet following his expulsion from the Lycee Quoc Hoc (Ibid., p. 86). The unpretentious schoolhouse still stands; this writer enjoyed a short tour of the building in March 1970. The Lycee is regarded with a sort of queasy awe by the citizens of Phan Thiet; during my tour, mention was made of 'Uncle Ho's' tenure at the school, but my Viet companions declined to discuss Diem's reign as Province Governor.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 239.

¹² See Robert Scigliano, South Vietnam: Nation Under Stress (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1963), p. 16, for this version of Diem's resignation from his Ministry.

his passion for photography and gardening; his brother Khoi, in the meantime, served as Governor of Quang Nam Province at the behest of the French. Diem was not completely idle, however; while withdrawn from public life, he carried on a lively correspondence with Prince Cuong De, a Viet nationalist who had been exiled to Japan. He also made several trips to Hanoi to confer with Phan Boi Chau, the "Grand Old Man" of Viet anti-colonialism.¹³

In 1942 Ngo Dinh Khoi was removed from his Governorship by Vichy authorities. The Ngo family had fallen under French surveillance for their covert activities in the interests of Viet independence; it appears that during this period, Diem struck up contacts with the Japanese Government. Indeed, in July 1944, Diem narrowly evaded arrest by the Vichy Surete. Only by abandoning Hue for Saigon, and taking shelter with a Japanese friend in that city, was he able to remain outside French custody.

The extent of Diem's collaboration with the Japanese authorities will never be known. Fall has reported that he ". . . was seen during the Japanese occupation 'in a Japanese captain's uniform'";¹⁴ no other sources have mentioned this incident. There is no doubt, however, that some sort of agreement was reached between Diem and the Japanese, for, following the coup of 9 March 1945, he was offered the post of Prime Minister of Viet Nam.

¹³Buttinger, Vietnam, II, p. 1254, indicates that Diem was "left to his own devices" during this period. Fall, in Two Viet-Nams, p. 239, observes that "Diem now retired to a life of study and reading."

¹⁴Fall, Two Viet-Nams, p. 235.

Much has been made of this offer, and Diem's subsequent refusal to serve. Shaplen is of the opinion that Diem declined in order to avoid being tarred with the collaborationist brush.¹⁵ Buttinger is not so sanguine; he maintains that "The truth, however, is that Diem was ready to accept the Japanese offer, but the Japanese, on second thought, decided to install a man they considered more manageable."¹⁶

Regardless of his reasons (or those of the Japanese), Diem avoided this transient accolade. In the turbulent months of August and September 1945, with Tran Van Giau's Nam Bo Committee running wild in Saigon, and French re-occupation anticipated daily, the former Province Governor opted for a return to his home in Hue. Diem stood little to gain by remaining in Saigon. Giau's Communists would be suspicious of him as a result of his activities during 1925-1929, and the French would be equally eager to fulfill their intentions of July 1944 toward him. Diem's brother Khoi, the former Governor of Quang Nam Province, had run afoul of the Communists around this time, and the Viet Minh murdered both Khoi and his son during the confused interval between the Japanese surrender and the restoration of French control.¹⁷

Leaving Saigon in September, Diem was apprehended by the Communists in the village of Tuy Hoa on the Annamese coast. His captors

¹⁵Shaplen, Revolution, p. 110.

¹⁶Buttinger, Vietnam, II, p. 1255.

¹⁷Shaplen, Revolution, p. 110, and Fall, Two Viet-Nams, p. 240, both mention Khoi's execution.

force-marched him to the northernmost reaches of Tonkin, dragging him fever-ridden and exhausted to Ho Chi Minh's field headquarters near Tuyen Quang. There, he regained his strength thanks to the ministrations of Montagnards of the Tho tribe, who supplemented the Communists' skimpy rations.¹⁸

By February 1946 Diem's physical condition had improved to the point where he was brought to Hanoi, still under guard, for a meeting with Ho Chi Minh. In later years, this tete-a-tete was recounted in a light very favorable to Diem:

'Why did you kill my brother?' asked Diem. 'It was a mistake,' replied Ho. 'The country was all confused. It could not be helped.'¹⁹ Angrily, Diem turned on his heel and walked out.

Robert Shaplen's recitation of the conference, based on an interview with Diem, differs somewhat, especially in its denouement:

When he confronted Ho, Diem immediately said, 'Why did you kill my brother?' Ho said it had been a mistake, that he hadn't known about Khoi. 'I told him he was a criminal,' Diem said, in repeating this conversation to me. Ho suggested they forget about the past and asked Diem to stay on with him at the palace or in a nearby house and work with him. Diem said that if he remained, he would have to be apprised of everything that went on at all times. Ho gave an evasive answer, and Diem then asked, 'Am I free to go?' Ho told him he could, but warned him he would find the countryside hostile. 'I'm not a child and will take the risks,' Diem replied. The conference ended and, since it was late, Diem remained in the palace that night. The following morning, at six, he simply got up and left, and no one stopped him.²⁰

¹⁸Shaplen, Revolution, p. 110, provides a description of the hardships encountered by Diem during his captivity.

¹⁹Stanley Karnow, "South Viet Nam--The Firing Line," Time, August 4, 1961, pp. 18-30. There is no corroborative evidence to support this version of the conversation.

²⁰Shaplen, Revolution, p. 110.

It is instructive to note that by Diem's own account, he might have accepted a role in Ho Chi Minh's government under certain conditions.

Diem returned to his family home in Hue, whiling away the years between 1946 and 1950 by fitful negotiations with Bao Dai. The Emperor, mindful of Diem's reputation for civic virtue, hoped to entice the scholar-administrator into the Premiership of the Associated States of Annam and Cochinchina. Diem refused to entertain such ambitions without assurances of independence from France. His demands for social and economic reforms far exceeded any plans the French were willing to approve, and thus a stalemate between Emperor and Mandarin ensued.

In the spring of 1950, Diem learned that the Viet Minh had sentenced him to death in absentia. Informing the French authorities in Hue of his plight, and requesting police protection, he found the Colonial Administration markedly unsympathetic: he was told that no police were available for such duties.²¹

Thus, in August 1950, Ngo Dinh Diem, accompanied by his brother Archbishop Thuc, departed Viet Nam for a more salubrious climate. The two sailed from Saigon with the avowed purpose of attending the celebrations of the Holy Year in Rome; but much else was accomplished during this tour, which lasted four years.

The first port of call was Japan, where Diem visited Prince Cuong De, the Viet patriot who was eking out his final years in exile.

²¹Ibid., p. 112. Buttinger and Fall comment on the inability of Diem to reach an understanding with Bao Dai during the early post-World War II period.

Diem attempted to arrange an appointment with General Douglas MacArthur; the General was sorely pressed by events in Korea at the time, and did not accommodate him. The trip to Japan was not completely without value, however. While there, Diem made the acquaintance of Wesley Fishel, the Michigan State University professor who later became one of his chief American advisers.²²

From Japan, the brothers visited the United States during the months of September and October. Passing onward to Rome, they enjoyed a Papal Audience and side trips to France and Switzerland during November and December. In January 1951, the brothers separated and Diem returned to the United States.

He took up residence at the Maryknoll Seminary of Lakewood, New Jersey, later moving to a seminary of the same Order at Ossining, New York. Diem began an extensive round of lectures (in French) at universities in New York, Michigan, and Ohio. He became a prolific contributor of articles on Viet Nam and its struggle against Communism, and he cemented some important friendships during this second visit to America. Such men as Francis Cardinal Spellman, Congressman Walter H. Judd of Minnesota, Senator Mike Mansfield, and the Junior Senator from Massachusetts, John F. Kennedy, were deeply moved by the diminutive scholar's deep religiosity and his pronounced detestation of Communism.²³

²²Fall, Two Viet-Nams, p. 242. Following extensive service in Viet Nam with the Michigan State University Group, Fishel contributed numerous articles on Viet Nam to journals and newspapers.

²³Fall, Two Viet-Nams, p. 243.

Mansfield, especially, was fulsome in his praise of Diem.

Writing in 1956, he noted that

If Viet Nam has not set in the Communist mold-- as was almost universally expected a year ago--it is due in large part to Diem. . .

I met him for the first time in the United States in early 1953. Although he was then in one of his frequent self-imposed exiles (sic!), he possessed a deep conviction and an almost buoyant confidence that he would someday steer his country between colonialism and communism toward freedom. He had a unique training for the mission which he had set for himself. Reared in the classical atmosphere of an Oriental court (his father was a Mandarin), he had nevertheless been educated in the democratic and humanistic precepts of the West. He understood the pitfalls of both colonialism and communism. . .

When I talked with Ngo Dinh Diem three years ago at a luncheon given by Justice William O. Douglas, there seemed little likelihood that this man--outlawed by both sides in the Indochina conflict--would ever have an opportunity to put his nationalist idealism into practice.²⁴

During his American sojourn Diem received three tentative offers of the Premiership from Bao Dai; he declined each in turn on the basis that his hands would be effectively tied by both the French and the Emperor.²⁵

In May 1953 Diem departed the United States for Belgium. Arriving in that country, he moved into the Benedictine Monastery of Saint-Andre-les-Bruges and established contact with Viet exiles and students throughout Europe. He also formed a lasting friendship with Father Raymond de Jaegher, a Belgian priest who later assisted in the

²⁴Senator Mike Mansfield, "Reprieve in Vietnam," in Vietnam Anatomy of a Conflict, ed. by Wesley R. Fishel (Itasca, Ill.: F. E. Peacock Publishers, Inc., 1968), pp. 134-5.

²⁵Shaplen, Revolution, p. 112.

resettlement of Catholic refugees from North Viet Nam following the partition of 1954.²⁶

The fall of Dien Bien Phu on 6 May 1954 found Diem in Paris, where he had moved in order to increase his influence among Viet emigres and keep himself better posted on events in his homeland. With the granting of independence for Annam and Cochinchina on 4 June 1954, the stage was set for Diem's return to the "Associated State of Viet Nam" as Premier of the new nation. On 16 June 1954, His Majesty Bao Dai requested his former Minister of the Interior to form a new Viet Government.

There is no clear explanation for the Emperor's selection of Ngo Dinh Diem as Premier. Fall has offered a consideration of this question, and an account of the haggling that preceded the appointment:

It remains to this day a matter of speculation why Diem was pulled out of the hat at this juncture. Any of the factors widely adduced--American pressure, French pressure, or Bao-Dai's own belief that Diem would be a convenient scapegoat for a hopeless situation--may have played its part in the choice.

Yet Diem did not step into the fight unarmed. He demanded from Bao-Dai something the latter had thus far always been wise enough to refuse to his Premiers: full and complete civilian and military powers. After three days of hesitation, Bao Dai yielded. Diem received absolute dictatorial powers on June 19.²⁷

One may assert that the appointment fell upon Diem by default, although he had several attributes that made him an ideal candidate for the Premiership. Most importantly, he was for all intents and purposes unknown in South Viet Nam, having left public service in 1933.

²⁶Fall, Two Viet-Nams, p. 243.

²⁷Ibid., p. 244.

The man was apparently incorruptible. He had strong personal reasons for his anti-Communist sentiments. He was untainted by the slightest hint of collaboration with the French and he seemed to have excellent connections with powerful figures on the American political scene.

On the other hand, Ngo Dinh Diem was a Catholic, and this was no small consideration in a land where the miniscule Catholic minority was ineradicably associated in the public mind with treason, foreign domination, and an alien culture forcibly imposed on an essentially Confucian society. And Diem was no nominal Catholic; his single-minded devotion to his faith burned with an intense, Jesuitical harshness. Bernard Fall has analyzed this facet of the Premier's personality:

His faith was made less of the kindness of the apostles than of the ruthless militancy of the Grand Inquisitor. . . . To a French Catholic interlocutor who wanted to emphasize Diem's bonds with French culture by stressing "our common faith," Diem was reported to have answered calmly: "You know, I consider myself rather as a Spanish Catholic," i.e., a spiritual son of a fiercely aggressive and militant faith rather than of the²⁸ easygoing and tolerant approach of Gallican Catholicism.

The effect of Diem's appointment on the shattered and disparate populace of the newly-independent nation could be gauged in religious as well as political terms. Since the year 1533, there had been a strong anti-Catholic bias in Viet Nam.²⁹ Diem's family, as has been noted, had suffered in their turn from such prejudice. A major consideration for the new Premier would be the religious question:

²⁸Ibid.

²⁹Buttinger, Vietnam, I, p. 114.

his task of unifying Catholic and Buddhist in Viet Nam would be a paramount goal. Unhappily, he failed dismally in this effort; as early as 1955, there were signs that he failed to appreciate the seriousness of the issue. Ellen Hammer, a keen student of Viet affairs of the period, presented this comment on the religious problem:

There is little evidence that Ngo Dinh Diem, profoundly conscious of his own good intentions, appreciated the problem of unity. . . There was even a danger that (Diem) might make religion an issue in Viet Nam, as it had not been for a century. Diem himself was a militant Catholic and his government turned openly to the Catholic minority in the south for the support which the Confucianist and Buddhist majority was slow to give. The public reacted bitterly to this sectarian policy.³⁰

Apart from his religious proclivities (but inextricably linked to them), Diem's personality reflected the indefinable mystique of rigid morality which had been inculcated during his early days as a student and seminarian. Withal, a sense of elitist rigidity seems to have informed his every action during his tenure as Chief of State. The word 'compromise' was simply not in the man's vocabulary; and his sense of noblesse oblige was hardly calculated to excite ardent support among his constituency. Unlike his northern nemesis, 'Ba Cu'ng' (Uncle) Ho, Diem would be unable to strike a personable pose when addressing his fellow citizens:

. . . the President is not a popular spellbinder. His personality on public view is more likely to elicit respect than affection. His public addresses tend more to be lectures on the responsibilities of independence and citizenship than inspired orations. . .³¹

³⁰Ellen Hammer, The Struggle for Indochina Continues--Geneva to Bandung (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1955), p. 26. (Hereafter cited as Hammer, Struggle Continues.)

³¹John T. Dorsey, Jr., "South Viet Nam in Perspective," Far Eastern Survey, XXVII (December, 1958), 178.

While Diem was rabidly anti-French, vestiges of the 'Old School Tie' of Droit et Administration continued to peek through his austere image of nationalism. The traditions of the Mandarinate and the Colonial Administration were an integral part of his nature; conversely, these virtues would alienate him from those he attempted to lead. Diem's uneasiness with, and distrust of the Viet populace were graphically described by Bernard Fall, in an unflattering comparison with the Phillipines' Ramon Magsaysay:

. . . Diem. . . is the archetype of the Vietnamese intellectual. Highly cultured, he neither knows nor trusts the masses and does not know how to use them. He does not, like Magsaysay, visit the villages dressed in ordinary soldiers' uniform or an open-collared shirt. On the contrary, photographs of his visits to the ragged refugees who have just escaped the Viet Minh and have lost everything have pictured him and his aides in immaculate white suits in the best 'colonial' tradition.³²

It was typical of Ngo Dinh Diem that for several years following his assumption of power, cultural events throughout South Viet Nam were inaugurated by a rendition of Suy Ton Ngo Tong-Thong ("Venerate President Ngo"), a paean of praise that was declared compulsory for all such gatherings.³³

In June 1954, however, these personal liabilities were not immediately evident. On the day of his acceptance of the Premiership, Diem released a statement that clearly defined his feelings toward his fellow citizens, and his attitudes toward the French:

³²Bernard B. Fall, "Indochina Since Geneva," Pacific Affairs, XXVIII (March, 1955), 6.

³³John C. Donnell, "National Renovation Campaigns in Vietnam," Pacific Affairs, XXXIII (March, 1959), 75.

Several times in the past I have had to refuse to take office. . . This time I accept. This is the hour of decision. I face a grave military situation which is in grave need of correction. It is the logical result of a long series of misunderstandings and errors.

With regard to France, the feeling of our people was expressed on August 20, 1945, by His Majesty Bao Dai in his message to the people of France: the Vietnamese people passionately desire their independence and France will be able to safeguard her interests in Viet Nam only if she will remain there as a privileged friend.³⁴

A few days were spent by the Premier-designate in assembling a Cabinet from members of the Viet emigre colony in Paris. Sadly, Diem was unable to convince the more capable of his fellow exiles to join him. Prominent nationalists and leaders of the Viet Catholic community declined service with the new government; it is possible they felt that the Mandarin had accepted a mess of political pottage from the hands of the Emperor, and he would last only a few months in his freshly-conferred office. This inability to attract diverse and experienced subordinates was to plague the Premier for years to come. One source has noted that ". . . (Diem) surrounded himself with men whose inexperience matched his: his first cabinet did not contain a single minister who had served. . . in any previous Saigon administration."³⁵ Thus it happened that Ngo Dinh Diem returned to Viet Nam with only his brother Luyen, a cousin, Nguyen Van Thoai, and the family lawyer in tow.

³⁴The Republic of Viet Nam, Major Policy Speeches by President Ngo Dinh Diem (Saigon: Press Office, Presidency of the Republic of Viet Nam, November, 1956), pp. 5-6. Diem was not elected President of the Republic until October 1955. The above quotation was cited in Robert J. MacAlister, "The Great Gamble: United States Policy Toward South Viet Nam From July, 1954 to July, 1956 (unpublished M. A. dissertation, University of Chicago, 1958), p. 85. (Hereafter cited as MacAlister, "Gamble".)

³⁵Brian Crozier, "The Diem Regime in Southern Vietnam," Far Eastern Survey, XXIV (April, 1955), 50. (Hereafter cited as Crozier, "Diem Regime".)

His brother Nhu had been dispatched to Saigon earlier to generate an appropriate display of enthusiasm for the Premier's arrival.³⁶

Diem and his party flew out of Paris on 24 June 1954, arriving at Saigon's Tan Son Nhut airport the same day. It was apparent that Nhu had failed in his mission of preparation; Diem's return to his homeland was something less than an occasion for popular expressions of frenzied support. One observer characterized the events of 24 June in trenchant terms: "The reception accorded Diem was not the sort given to a returning national hero who had fought for the liberation of his homeland. The masses stayed away; it was clear that the name of the man to be honored sparked no fire in their hearts."³⁷

Another eyewitness account of Diem's arrival is significant in its depiction of the reception committee at Tan Son Nhut:

He was welcomed at the airfield by some 500 people, including personal friends, Roman Catholic priests, village notables with goatee beards, and in the front rank an old gentleman with a red turban, royal blue tunic, and bare feet shod in wooden patterns, representing the Catholic communities of Annam who were to provide the new Government with some semblance of popular support. Diem also received an enthusiastic message from Mgr. Pham Ngoc Chi, the Apostolic Vicar of Bui Chu, assuring him of the support 'unto death' of the 1½ million Roman Catholics in the north, . . .³⁸

Bad timing may well have had something to do with the pitiful turnout of Tan Son Nhut. Diem arrived on a day of national mourning in protest against the intentions of the Geneva negotiators to partition

³⁶Buttinger, Vietnam, II, p. 850.

³⁷Ibid.

³⁸Lancaster, Emancipation, p. 328.

the Viet nation. This period of mourning, and Diem's relative anonymity, combined to guarantee a cool reception to the new leader.

Diem's immediate reaction did not improve the situation:

Betraying his monastic outlook on life, but perhaps also an awareness of the trials that lay ahead for him and his people, Diem walked from the airplane toward the crowd gathered to receive him without a smile. . . many had a distinct premonition of impending tragedy, and for those who had never seen him before, Diem's cold expression blighted the hopes that the strength of his face must have briefly raised.³⁹

Diem's arrival in Saigon was preceded by that of another person-
age who would play a decisive part in the Premier's struggle to remain
in power. Three weeks earlier, on 1 June 1954, Colonel Edward G.
Lansdale, United States Air Force (on temporary duty with the Central
Intelligence Agency), landed at Tan Son Nhut ". . . with a small box
of files and clothes and a borrowed typewriter. . ."40 Lansdale's
'cover' was that of Assistant Air Attache; in reality, he was charged
with organizing and directing the Saigon Military Mission, a covert
organization supervised by the CIA. Working quickly, Lansdale assembled
a team of twelve American officers who had experience in clandestine
paramilitary operations. In the course of a thirty-day tour of Annam
and Cochinchina, Lansdale made the acquaintance of many unusual figures
on the Viet Nameese scene, among them Le Van Vien, Tran Van Soai, Le
Quang Vinh, and Trinh Minh The.

Lansdale was particularly well-qualified for his assignment in
Viet Nam. He had spent the summer of 1953 advising French forces in

³⁹Buttinger, Vietnam, II, p. 851.

⁴⁰"Report of the Saigon Military Mission," undated, unattributed,
and unpublished; quoted in Neil Sheehan, et. al., The Pentagon Papers
(New York: Bantam Books, 1971), p. 54. (Hereafter cited as Pentagon
Papers.)

Indochina on the more arcane aspects of unconventional warfare. In
the late 1940's and early 1950's, he had been instrumental in
assisting Ramon Magsaysay in his campaign against the Hukbalahap, the
Filipino Communist insurgents. Lansdale's experience and energetic
application of counterinsurgency theories made him a natural selection
for the implementation of American policies in Viet Nam. In late
May 1954, he received a personal cable from Secretary of State John
Foster Dulles directing him to proceed immediately to Saigon. The
crisis of Dien Bien Phu, and the apparently inevitable Communist
dominance of Southeast Asia, required a steady hand to oversee
American interests; and Lansdale's brief from the Secretary of State
amounted to a carte-blanche directive to prop up the new government
which would shortly come into being.⁴¹

In the months to come, Edward Lansdale and Ngo Dinh Diem would
find a happy commonality of purpose; the carefully obscure American
Colonel would act as mentor, confidant, and sparkplug to the faltering
Premier. Their first meeting occurred the day after Diem's inauspicious
arrival at Tan Son Nhut. The introduction set the tone for their
future partnership:

. . . (Lansdale) wrote a long memorandum to Diem, based
largely on what he had found out in his month of research.
Accompanied by George Hellyer, the American public affairs
officer, who spoke French, he took the plan to the palace
to give it to Diem personally. Everything was in a
turmoil there, and Lansdale and Hellyer wandered around
for some time; finally they asked a plump man in a white
suit, who was sitting alone on a couch, where they might
find Premier Diem. 'I'm Diem,' the man replied. . .

⁴¹Shaplen, Revolution, p. 102; and Pentagon Papers, pp. 633-4.

'After that,' Lansdale says, 'the ice was broken. To me he was a man with a terrible burden to carry and in need of friends, and I tried to be an honest friend of his.'⁴²

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Thus began the association between the two men that would lead within a year to Diem's great ordeal, a conflagration that would entail the loss of countless lives and millions of American dollars, and an irrevocable commitment of U. S. foreign policy. At the time of their meeting, though, neither Diem nor Lansdale felt that a threat could come from any quarter than that of the Communists; the enemy facing South Viet Nam was 'reunification' under the northern regime. The activities of the Cao Dai, the Binh Xuyen, and the Hoa Hao were of small concern to these two men on the morning of 25 June 1954, as they sipped tea and decried the villainy being perpetrated in Geneva in the name of Viet independence.

In Ngo Dinh Diem, the sects met their nemesis. Given Diem's intensity of purpose and total conviction of righteousness, it could not have been otherwise: the Jesuit Mandarin had room for only one leader in his scheme of government, and his only difficulty was in solving the question of how, rather than whether, the sects were to be broken as political and military entities. Buttinger has offered a cogent analysis of Diem's methods during the first months of 1955:

Looking upon himself as a man with a mission that could not be abandoned, Diem resolutely took the only road open to him: short-term political maneuvers to divide and neutralize his enemies, and even to buy their temporary cooperation--

⁴²Shaplen, Revolution, pp. 103-4.

until he gained enough strength to smash them separately. He made concessions, played one side against another, and was determined at the opportune moment to take back what he had granted. In . . . a ruthless and unscrupulous game of many-sided intrigues, he dealt separately with his opponents. . .⁴³

Beginning on 9 January 1955 with the closing of the Binh Xuyen's Grand Monde and Cloche d'Or gambling houses, Diem imperceptibly brought the sects to heel. On 14 January a Hoa Hao Colonel, Nguyen Van Hue, brought 3,500 dissidents into the Saigon Government fold.⁴⁴ And on 14 February, the redoubtable Trinh Minh The, leader of the Cao Dai "Loyal Opposition", arrived in Saigon at the head of his 5,000 mercenaries, pledging fealty to Diem. The's new-found loyalty to the regime appears to have been rooted in a heavy bribe offered by Diem's emissaries to his jungle camp at Nui Ba Den; the mercenary's allegiance to Diem was roundly denounced by Pham Cong Tac, the Ho Phap of the Cao Dai sect.⁴⁵

Other figures such as the Hoa Hao leader Tran Van Soai and the Cao Dai Chief of Staff, Nguyen Thanh Phuong, also found it worth their while to cooperate with Diem. Various sources have indicated that Soai's allegiance was bought with \$3,000,000 in U. S. currency; Nguyen Thanh Phuong held out for \$3,600,000 (and a promise of monthly payments for his Cao Dai troops); and The, after a three-day volte-

⁴³Buttinger, Political History, p. 392.

⁴⁴Buttinger, Vietnam, II, p. 867.

⁴⁵Crozier, "Diem Regime," 53. Buttinger, in Vietnam, II, p. 1101, states that The's price in February 1955 was 20 million piastres, or about \$570,000 in U. S. currency.

face in early March, was swayed back into the Government camp to the tune of \$2,000,000.⁴⁶

The preponderance of evidence suggests that Colonel Edward G. Lansdale played a key part in exciting the patriotism of these mercenary commanders. However, in an interview with Robert Shaplen, Lansdale vociferously denied having anything to do with "bribery": "The most I ever paid (The) was a cup of coffee or a meal when he visited me. . . All he finally got was a month's pay for his troops. . ." ⁴⁷

By the middle of March 1955, only Le Quang Vinh (the infamous "Ba Cut" of the Hoa Hao sect) and Bay Vien, commanding the Binh Xuyen gangsters, were left in armed opposition to the Diem Government. These two leaders retained control over their private armies, with Hoa Hao strength being estimated at 5,000, and Binh Xuyen elements totalling near 2,000 in Saigon proper, with 4,000 troops in reserve.⁴⁸ A "Unified Front of National Forces", comprising those leaders such as Bay Vien and Pham Cong Tac (neither of whom could be bribed or induced into supporting the Diem regime), was organized on 3 March to bring pressure on Ngo Dinh Diem.⁴⁹ On 21 March this "Front" gave the Premier

⁴⁶Fall, Two Viet-Nams, pp. 245-6. Fall's figures are derived from his Saigon informants. MacAlister, in "Gamble," p. 89, and Buttinger, Vietnam, II, p. 1101n., accept these amounts as accurate. (Buttinger states, "I myself know but cannot name the American intermediaries who carried funds to Vietnamese recipients." He cites a total figure of \$12,000,000 in bribes to the sect leaders.) William Henderson, "South Vietnam Finds Itself," Foreign Affairs, XXXV (January, 1957), 287, also cites these bribes.

⁴⁷Quoted in Shaplen, Revolution, p. 117.

⁴⁸NYT, April 21, p. 8.

⁴⁹See Roy Jumper, "Sects and Communism in South Vietnam," Orbis, III (Spring, 1959), 88, for composition of the "United Front".

a five-day ultimatum for the establishment of a new government in which sect representation would predominate; letting the ultimatum expire without action, Diem moved against the Binh Xuyen on 27 March.

On that date, Diem ordered National Army paratroops against the Binh Xuyen enclaves of the National Police Headquarters and the Surete building. The Binh Xuyen yielded the Police Headquarters, but barricaded themselves in the old Surete building. A short truce was arranged by the Commanding General of French Forces, Paul Ely. (As one observer noted, the French were not especially anxious for Diem to succeed in his struggle with the sects: "There is a strong group of French who have no interest in any Vietnam not controlled by them.")⁵⁰

On the night of 29-30 March, however, skirmishing flared anew between the Binh Xuyen and the Government forces. By dawn of 30 March, the gangster mercenaries had been forced from the Surete building. The combat had cost the National Army 6 killed and 36 wounded; the Binh Xuyen lost 10 killed and 20 wounded. As is the usual case in urban warfare, civilian casualties were the highest, with 10 citizens being killed, and 58 wounded by cross-fire and stray rounds from automatic weapons.⁵¹ Again, French intervention resulted in an uneasy truce which lasted until 28 April.

French actions were not limited to works of statesmanlike neutrality. One commentator has offered conclusive evidence of French support of the Binh Xuyen during this critical juncture, support

⁵⁰Sal Tas, "Behind the Fighting in South Vietnam," The New Leader, XXXVIII (May 9, 1955), 12.

⁵¹Casualty figures derived from Buttinger, Vietnam, II, p. 871; Lancaster, Emancipation, p. 385. Crozier in "Diem Regime,"⁵³ offers total figures of 26 killed and 112 wounded, with no distinction between armed units and civilians.

which included arms, ammunition, and communications equipment. Indeed, a French ambulance heading into Binh Xuyen territory was intercepted by Government troops; the vehicle was discovered to be hauling arms and ammunition to the beleaguered gangsters. Most serious was the capture of several French officers who were fighting shoulder to shoulder with the Binh Xuyen against Diem's paratroops.⁵²

Relative calm ensued following the truce of 30 March. The Cao Dai forces had gone over completely to Diem in defiance of orders from the Ho Phap; with the exception of "Ba Cut", the Hoa Hao commanders had opted for service with the National Army. Ba Cut restricted himself to cutting off the rice supply for Saigon for several days in April; as the main body of his force was in the Can Tho region, he could undertake no decisive tactical moves against Saigon.

On 26 April, Diem's patience finally wore short: he sent the Binh Xuyen an ultimatum, directing that the gangsters rally to the Government within 48 hours, or be prepared to face an inevitable defeat. Binh Xuyen bravado had remained strong during the truce; in the third week of April, a spokesman for the gang had observed:

Diem is getting weaker every day. The army does not follow him and all his ministers are abandoning him. Bao Dai is encouraging us to hold out until the liquidation of the Prime Minister. The French are now entirely on our side and the Americans are changing their attitude. If Diem starts a battle, he will only fall that much sooner. . . .⁵³

At noon of the 28th, Diem's paratroops opened fire on the Lycee Petrus Ky, a Binh Xuyen stronghold on the Boulevard Gallieni.

⁵²See MacAlister, "Gamble," pp. 121-7, for a detailed account of French support of the Binh Xuyen.

⁵³Hammer, Struggle Continues, p. 37.

An hour later, the Binh Xuyen mortared the Norodom Palace (Diem's official residence), and vicious street combat began in earnest.

There is no accurate estimate of the number of killed and wounded during the days that followed. Life magazine, in a pictorial account of the operations against the Binh Xuyen, suggested that perhaps 500 persons were killed, and noted that ". . . a two-square-mile area on the Boulevard Gallieni was a smoking mass of rubble and much of the city was a shambles."⁵⁴ Buttinger advised, "An estimated 20,000 people were made homeless" during the bitter clash in the heart of the city.⁵⁵

On 30 April, National Army troops fought their way into the Binh Xuyen Headquarters compound at the Pont-en-Y, Cholon. Later it was reported that the cage in the compound for Bay Vien's pet tiger, was littered with human bones and bits of National Army uniforms.⁵⁶ Bay Vien himself, however, had made good his escape to a swampy area known as Rung Sat; months later, he re-appeared in France, taking a villa on the Riviera near his former partner, the Emperor Bao Dai.

The power of the sects was finally smashed by 3 May 1955, although Trinh Minh The was killed in action on that day (and killed under peculiar circumstances).⁵⁷ The collapse of the Binh Xuyen

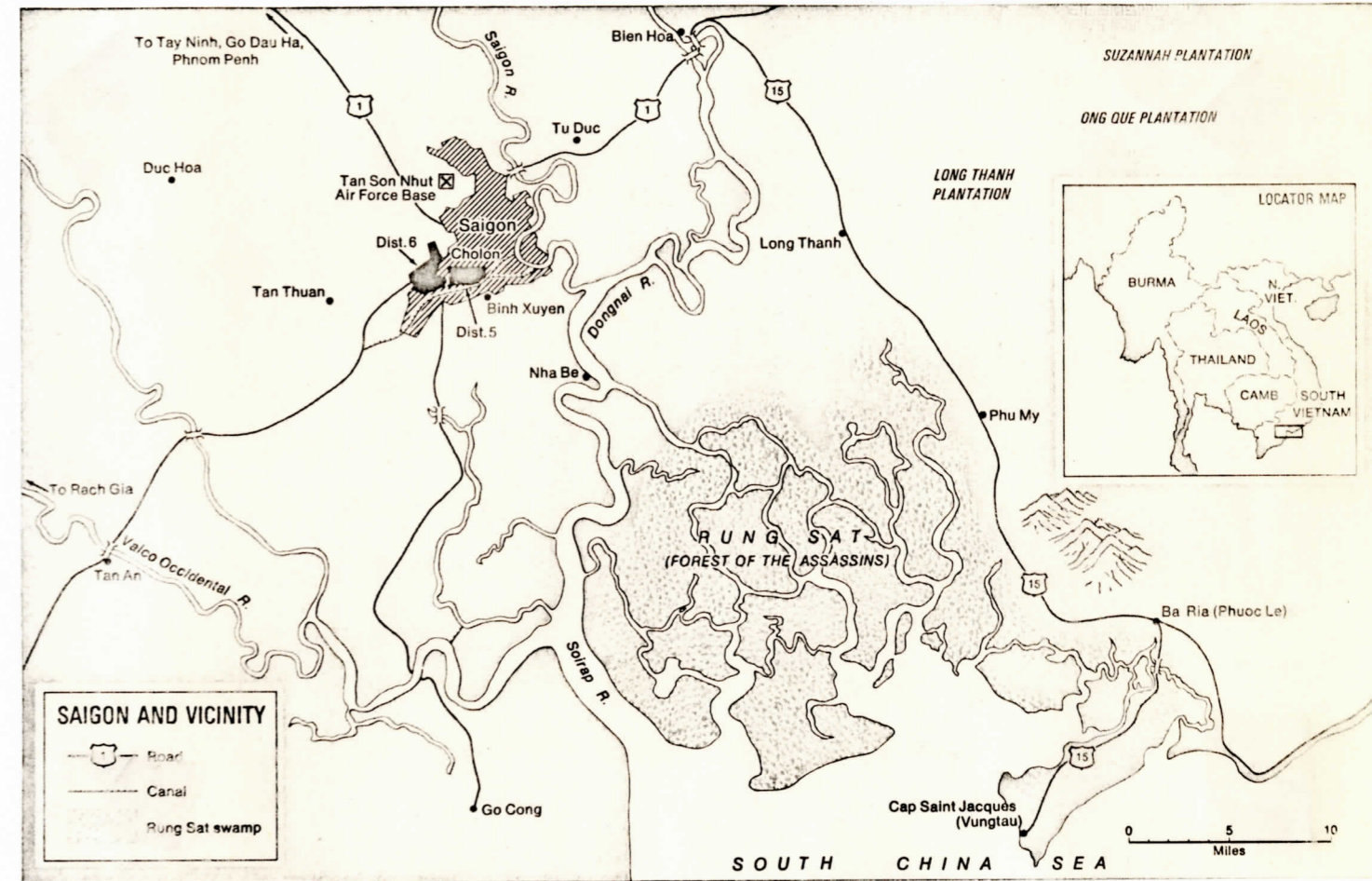
⁵⁴John Mecklin, Howard Sochurek, and Francois Sully, "Civil War, The View of Those Caught in It," Life, May 9, 1955, pp. 26-33.

⁵⁵Buttinger, Vietnam, II, p. 879.

⁵⁶Warner, Confucian, p. 85.

⁵⁷Shaplen, Revolution, pp. 125-6. The appears to have been shot from behind while directing mop-up actions against the Binh Xuyen. Rumor at the time indicated that perhaps Diem found his new ally a bit too effective, and had arranged his assassination.

signalled the final triumph of Ngo Dinh Diem. Through bribery, appeals to patriotism, and military force, the Jesuit Mandarin had routed his most dangerous enemies in the Republic of Viet Nam.



Saigon and Vicinity

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