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Source: *Australasian Journal of American Studies*, Vol. 27, No. 1 (July 2008), pp. 56-72

Published by: [Australia and New Zealand American Studies Association](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41054100>

Accessed: 04/05/2014 17:16

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OVERTHROWN BY THE PRESS: THE US MEDIA'S ROLE IN THE FALL OF DIEM

ZI JUN TOONG

ABSTRACT *This article examines how media coverage of the 1963 Buddhist Crisis in South Vietnam contributed to the Kennedy administration's decision to support a coup against President Ngo Dinh Diem. The article's focus on the media's role brings new perspectives to this crucial moment in US Cold War policy formation—it reveals the media's immense influence on the Vietnam War in its early stages, and shows the Buddhist Crisis as the turning point in the interaction between public policy and opinion during the war. Employing the use of memoirs, State department papers and American news media, this article sheds light on the complex relationships between media, public opinion and government policy.*

1963 was the year that Buddhists in South Vietnam were given the world's attention. Through demonstrations, protest literature, hunger strikes and self-immolations, Buddhists protested the discrimination that they had been subjected to since French colonialism, and then under the U.S.-backed Catholic government of Ngo Dinh Diem. Set in the context of Cold War-era of globalism, these Buddhists recognised that the introduction of American advisors—and more importantly, the international press—into South Vietnam as part of the war effort against Communism provided them with the opportunity to publicise their subjugation to the world and give impetus to their movement. Between May and the fall of Diem's government in November 1963, each increasingly dramatic Buddhist demonstration which the South Vietnamese Government (GVN) suppressed with mounting brutality gained international sympathy for the Buddhist movement and worldwide criticism for the authoritarian Diem government. With the eyes of the world on the U.S.-led war against Communism, the United States Government also suffered international disapproval for financially and militarily supporting Diem's repressive regime. Concurrent with the American public and Congress, governments all over the world began to question the means employed by the Kennedy administration in their battle against Communism. Diem's uncompromising stance towards Buddhists was diligently captured in the international media as the situation developed into a full-fledged political crisis. Furthermore, Diem's unpopularity was not aided by his sister-in-law Madame Ngo Dinh Nhu's

frequent anti-Buddhist public declarations to the American media, all of which Diem refused to disavow. After several failed attempts at nudging Diem towards conciliatory actions with the Buddhists, the exceedingly negative media coverage—and hence, international opinion—of Diem and the Buddhist Crisis played a central role in the Washington's decision to support a coup to overthrow the Diem government.

The controversial overthrow of Diem has been widely explored by several historians as it is regarded as one of the major turning points in the Vietnam War. There exists a debate surrounding the reasons why the Kennedy administration arrived at the decision to support a coup; some historians argue that it was Diem's overtures toward North Vietnam that guided Washington's support for the coup. My findings, based on an analysis of government documents and the news media, however, support the view that it was Diem's disfavour with international opinion that was key.

Within this debate surrounding the overthrow of Diem, some historians have focussed on the Buddhist Crisis. These historians invariably agree that Diem's handling of the situation was a major contribution to his becoming a liability to the Kennedy administration. These analyses suggest that public opinion played a role—to be a liability was to be a liability in public opinion—but these discussions often discount the centrality of the media's role. Historians such as Philip E. Catton, Seth Jacobs and Howard Jones, have focussed on the effect of Diem's overthrow on the subsequent involvement of the U.S. in South Vietnam.¹ Other historians — such as Ross A. Fisher, William Conrad Gibbons and Francis X. Winters — have attempted to allocate responsibility within the Kennedy administration for the ultimate decision to support a coup against Diem.² Historians John Prado and Ellen J. Hammer, on the other hand, recount how the Buddhist Crisis led to a coup.³ This essay adds significant weight and new detail to the idea that Diem became a liability in the way of public opinion. My focus on the media's role in the overthrow of Diem also shows that the media were important shapers of the Vietnam War well before the 1968 Tet Offensive, which is widely regarded as a turning point in the war because of the press's role.

The Buddhist Crisis began on 8 May 1963, when the international media captured snippets of the unprovoked attacks by GVN troops on peaceful Buddhist demonstrators in Hue.⁴ The day before, Buddhists had displayed flags on homes and pagodas all over Hue in celebration of the 2,507th birthday of Buddha. Under South Vietnamese law (Decree 189), only the Vietnamese national flag could be flown in public.⁵ This law, however, was rarely enforced, as exemplified by the Catholics' display of a plethora of papal flags, a week prior to the Buddhist Crisis, in celebration of the

anniversary of Diem's brother Ngo Dinh Thuc as archbishop.⁶ Thus on Buddha's birthday, police attempts to enforce Decree 189 were met with resistance. The police then took to tearing down the religious flags. The following day, the infuriated Buddhists gathered at the radio station in Hue, where their leader Thich Tri Quang was refused permission to broadcast his speech of protest against the GVN's explicit suppression of the freedom of religion and favouritism of Catholics.⁷ When exhortations of the Province Chief failed to disperse the crowd, GVN troops fired guns and threw at least fifteen grenades into the peaceful demonstration, killing 9 people.⁸

Diem's reaction to the bloodshed of 8 May essentially set the tone of his conciliatory efforts towards Buddhists throughout the crisis. In the climate of the Cold War, he conveniently placed the blame of the incident on Communists, insisting that a Viet Cong agent had thrown a grenade into the crowd, and that GVN troops only fired into the crowd to protect the demonstrators. This argument, however, only served to discredit the GVN and irritate the Buddhists as it was widely disbelieved – eye-witnesses saw the GVN troops initiate attacks on the crowd without any provocation.⁹ Washington immediately recognised the inflammatory potential of the Buddhist altercation and in anticipation of 'some international reaction to [the] incident', they urged Diem to take appropriate measures to reconcile with the Buddhists.¹⁰ Instead of making the immediate efforts to rectify the situation, however, Diem only met with Buddhist leaders on 15 May, thus allowing them time to consolidate their grievances.

The flag dispute was quickly transforming into a political crisis. The Buddhists created a five-point manifesto which established the political aims of the protests that followed, and beseeched the Diem government to:

1. allow the display of the Buddhist flag;
2. grant Buddhists equal rights to those of Catholics;
3. stop the arrests and terrorisation of Buddhist followers;
4. allow Buddhists the freedom to preach and observe their religion;
5. provide compensation for the people killed on 8 May, and punish those responsible for the "murders".¹¹

During the GVN-Buddhist meeting, Diem maintained an unyielding stance towards the Buddhists. He asserted that there was no religious persecution in South Vietnam, and any injustices that Buddhists faced should be directed to local authorities.¹² While Diem did promise financial aid—amounting to a meagre 500,000 piasters (US\$7,000)—to the victims' families, he emphasised that the GVN would bear no responsibility for the events of the 8th.¹³ Expectedly, this meeting barely appeased the demands of the Buddhists. Diem's casual treatment of religious discrimination was

badly received by Buddhists, who resorted to mass meetings and demonstrations, hunger strikes and the widespread circulation of protest literature throughout Vietnam.¹⁴ The Buddhists had then become a group that was considered a political opposition.¹⁵

During these early days of the Buddhist Crisis, the American public and the Kennedy administration took little note of Vietnam. The American media was saturated with images of the civil rights battle then at home. Kennedy was, thus, devoted to dealing with protests against his own government.¹⁶ Nonetheless, from the beginning of the Buddhist Crisis, the Buddhists displayed a clear intention of courting the Western press; they carried banners in both Vietnamese and English, and selected one of the few English-speaking monks as their spokesperson so as to allow their messages to be accessible to an international audience.¹⁷ At this early stage in the Crisis, while their media efficacy is doubtful, these banners were clearly an attempt to send the messages of the Buddhist protest into living rooms around the world. These efforts certainly assisted the snowballing of the Buddhist Crisis into an international spectacle.

As June approached, the Buddhist Crisis was spinning out of control. Diem was employing increasingly brutal force to suppress protests against his government, which were spreading throughout South Vietnam. On 2 and 3 June, GVN troops broke up Buddhist demonstrations in Quang Tri City and Hue using tear gas, which caused respiratory difficulties and skin to blister.¹⁸ On the 3rd alone, it was reported that 67 youths were hospitalised and 3 were dead as a result of this.¹⁹ The following day witnessed nearly 200 youths hunger-striking at Tu Dam pagoda to protest the government's brutality and discrimination.²⁰ William Trueheart, the U.S. chargé de affaires in Vietnam, insisted that Diem make generous concessions to the Buddhists to ease tensions. It frustrated the Kennedy administration that

*Inept government handling has permitted a localized incident in Hue to grow into a potential political crisis. Unless Diem is able to reach a quick reconciliation with the Buddhists, the issue could have serious repercussions on governmental stability.*²¹

Again, nudged by pressure from Washington, Diem negotiated with the Buddhist leaders on 5 June. This time he managed to compromise on more of the Buddhists' demands, and make a radio announcement of the terms of compromise.²²

Just as the crisis appeared to be nearing an end, Diem's efforts at bringing about a settlement was compounded by Madame Nhu, who sabotaged the

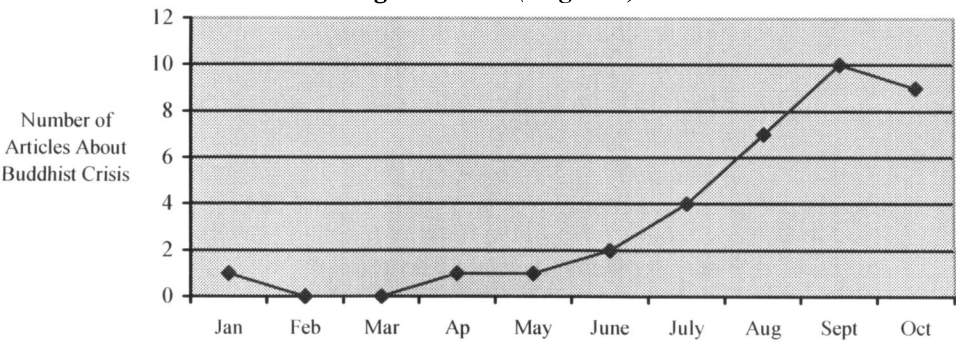
GVN’s attempts at making concessions to the Buddhists with anti-Buddhist public statements. The day after the compromise, Madame Nhu, through her Women’s Solidarity Movement (WSM), issued a resolution to the press that countered the government’s policy of reconciliation.²³ It castigated Buddhist demonstrators as anti-nationalists ‘exploited and controlled by communism’.²⁴ Trueheart insisted that Diem ‘disavow it’ as the resolution was highly damaging to the truce agreement.²⁵ More importantly, Trueheart was concerned that

*[Madame Nhu’s] statement will damage American public and Congressional support for GVN. U.S. Government cannot be expected continue aid and assist GVN at heavy cost in men and material unless this policy [is] fully supported by American citizens.*²⁶

This, eventually, became the reason the Kennedy administration decided to support a coup to overthrow Diem. Diem, however, said that Madame Nhu was free to express her opinions.²⁷ With this, Diem set a precedent that emboldened Madame Nhu later to make public statements directly to Western media, only to assure an international audience that GVN was a cruel dictatorship.

While major newspapers followed the worsening situation in Vietnam, it was not until 11 June 1963 that the Buddhist Crisis took centre stage in world news. The weekly-released *Time* magazine’s coverage of the Buddhist affair is indicative of this (see Figure 1). In fact, articles about the crisis were published only in the third week of June, the week immediately following the event that would cement international focus on the GVN and compel an international audience to question U.S. involvement in Vietnam.

Figure 1. *Time* (magazine)



On the morning of 11 June 1963, a seventy-three year old monk Thich Quang Duc sat down at the intersection of Saigon's major boulevards, and with an audience of some 350 fellow demonstrators and curious passers-by, Quang Duc consigned himself to death by fire.²⁸ In the background, banners in English and Vietnamese read 'A Buddhist priest burns himself for our five requests'.²⁹ This scene was captured by the only two U.S. reporters who had not disregarded the tip from a Buddhist spokesperson that "something important" would happen that day.³⁰ *New York Times* reporter David Halberstam most articulately describes the sight he witnessed, 'As he burned he never moved a muscle, never uttered a sound, his outward composure in sharp contrast to the wailing people around him.'³¹

Even people who were not present at the scene were moved by Halberstam's report and the monk's selfless sacrifice. Malcolm Browne, a reporter for the Associated Press, was also present and retained sufficient composure to keep taking pictures. As his photographs made the front pages of newspapers everywhere, critics of the Diem government multiplied. Kennedy later commented that 'no news picture in history has generated so much emotion around the world as that one'.³² Quang Duc's sacrifice turned public opinion against the Diem regime; even Marguerite Higgins, one of the few supporters of Diem in the Saigon press corps, was compelled to assume Diem's guilt:

*What was President Ngo Dinh Diem doing to cause these Buddhists to choose such a horrible death as self-immolation? ...The fact that [this question] presumed a priori the guilt of Diem bothered me not at all...it was my presumption too.*³³

The media efficacy of self-immolations is undeniable. Quang Duc's suicide successfully called attention to the desperate situation of Buddhists in South Vietnam, whose protests appealed to the most cherished American value: freedom of religion.³⁴

If the self-immolation of Quang Duc failed to capture the attention of the international public, the CBS interview with Madame Nhu certainly did. Of Quang Duc's ultimate sacrifice, she callously remarked, 'What have the Buddhist leaders done? ...They have barbecued one of their monks whom they have intoxicated...' ³⁵ Diem, expectedly, refused to denounce Madame Nhu's statement.³⁶ At this point, even Americans inclined to give the Diem regime the benefit of the doubt were appalled by this trivialisation of Quang Duc's sacrifice and Diem's refusal to denounce it.³⁷ As Jacobs observed,

*Madame Nhu...was the president's sister-in-law, she lived in the palace, and she held a seat in the National Assembly. It was natural to assume, in the absence of a presidential disavowal, that she spoke for the government.*³⁸

Americans, the foremost defenders of 'freedom', could not support a regime that appeared overtly and proudly authoritarian. By the end of the month, American public opinion was almost unanimously against the Diem regime, and worse, it opposed U.S. support of the Diem regime. This was most clear in a full-page advertisement in the *New York Times* on 27 June, in which 12 American clergymen opposed the U.S. involvement in Vietnam; they wrote:

We protest:

1. Our country's military aid to those who denied him religious freedom...
2. The loss of American lives and billions of dollars to bolster a regime universally regarded as unjust, undemocratic, and unstable.
3. *The fiction that this is "fighting for freedom."*³⁹ (my italics)

This view was reiterated in *Time* magazine, which argued that 'The weekly death and injury of American soldiers and the expenditure of more than \$1,000,000 a day for Vietnam justify much greater pressure for...reforms by president Ngo Dinh Diem.'⁴⁰ Americans refused to believe that their generosity towards South Vietnam did not amount to any leverage in negotiations with Diem. They were also beginning to believe that Diem was incapable of rallying the popular support that was needed for the war against Communism. After all, almost all the news dispatches out of Saigon estimated that Buddhists constituted 70, even 80 to 90, percent of the Vietnamese population.⁴¹ The lack of faith in the Diem regime was encouraged by the American media, such as the *New York Times* which speculated that 'the crisis is worth about 15 major battlefield victories to the Communists.'⁴² *Time* magazine, as well, explained that 'Buddhist discontent could cause passive resistance to government programs in the rural provinces where political unity is the key to victory in the war against the Communist Viet Cong.'⁴³ Reporter Halberstam even went as far as to conclude that 'the United States backed the wrong man...'⁴⁴ These opinions put forth by reporters influenced public opinion significantly.

The accuracy of these media assertions, however, have been disputed, which only serves to prove the effectiveness and influence of the media on public opinion. As clarified in General Victor Krulak's (U.S. Marine Corps) report,

*The religious aspect of the issue has a narrower base than public reports might suggest...There is a tendency to classify all non-Christians as Buddhists. In fact, many are simple ancestor worshippers in the Chinese tradition, while other major religions are also represented in the country--including Confucianists, Taoists and Moslems.*⁴⁵

This was confirmed by a major study of Buddhism in Vietnam, which concluded that only 30 percent of South Vietnamese were practising Buddhists.⁴⁶ The myth of the gravity of the Buddhist Crisis was also a point of contention; a CIA investigation in June 1963 concluded that there had been 'no formal suppression of religious freedom in South Vietnam, but the government has successfully curbed the political influence of some religious groups, particularly the minority sects.'⁴⁷ The war effort was also reported to be successful, even with the onslaught of the Buddhist Crisis, with Krulak's report asserting: 'Military operations are more effective; rural economic progress is manifest; US/Vietnamese coordination is heartening; and the morale of US military forces is classic...'⁴⁸ These reports significantly differed from those in the U.S. media, and media assertions of Buddhist repression and Diem's widespread unpopularity proved heavily to influence public opinion. A *New York Times* editorial on 17 June, for example, is indicative of this. The editorial reflects the writer's impression that Buddhists constituted that majority in Vietnam, and hints at the need to overthrow Diem:

*It is time that Mr. Diem realised that he cannot discriminate against a majority of the people of South Vietnam and win his war against the Communists. If he cannot genuinely represent a majority then he is not the man to be President.*⁴⁹ (My underline)

It is obvious that the Buddhist Crisis had, rightly or wrongly, captured the attention of Americans.

As public opinion swung against the Diem government, Washington intensified its pressure on Diem to placate the Buddhists. The Kennedy administration was beginning to recognise the precarious position of the GVN abroad and within Vietnam. It was estimated that a large percentage of the military were Buddhists, and this percentage within the military had the potential to rise up and overthrow the government it was expected to protect.⁵⁰ The Buddhist Crisis was also gaining international attention, as illustrated by Cambodian Prince Norodom Sihanouk and Ceylonese Prime Minister Sirimavo Bandaranaike, who wrote letters to Kennedy, expressing their concern for the 'suffering of Buddhists in South Viet-nam' and

implored Washington ‘to intercede with the full force of your moral prestige and that of your country’.⁵¹ Understanding that they were now innately associated with the Buddhist Crisis, Washington once again threatened to publicly disassociate itself ‘from [the] whole affair’.⁵² While threats of disassociation had been made before, the self-immolation marked the breaking point of the Kennedy administration’s patience with Diem’s obstinacy. Specifically, Rusk warned, ‘If Diem does not take prompt and effective steps to re-establish Buddhist confidence in him we will have to re-examine our entire relationship with his regime.’⁵³ With this, Washington gave Diem another chance to rectify the situation that, in their opinion, had got out of hand unnecessarily.

Negotiations, however, failed once more, giving rise to more Buddhist demonstrations and self-immolations. Initially, Diem reopened negotiations with the Buddhist leaders, and on the 16th, a Joint Communiqué was issued, setting out the terms of agreement but allocating no responsibility for the 8 May incident.⁵⁴ Yet, rioting broke out in Saigon the next day, and police once again suppressed it with brutal force, killing one demonstrator and injuring several.⁵⁵ The Buddhist Crisis continued to plummet, and by early August, three more Buddhists—in their teens and twenties—burnt themselves to death, and a young girl tried unsuccessfully to cut off her arm ‘as a humble offering to Buddha while our religion is in danger’, all of which were reported in the U.S. media.⁵⁶

At this stage, the Buddhist Crisis was already accumulating a barrage of criticism towards Diem’s government, only to be further complicated by Madame Nhu once again. Madame Nhu had taken to writing letters to the American media, rousing the passions of the American public. To the *New York Times*, she declared, ‘I would beat such provocateurs 10 times more if they wore monks’ robes...and...I would clap hands at seeing another monk barbecue show, for one cannot be responsible for the madness of others.’⁵⁷ These statements reignited the American public’s call for their government to cease support of the Diem regime. As an editorial articulates,

*It is precisely because this country is allied with South Vietnam in the latter’s anti-Communist struggle that we condemn Mrs. Nhu’s callous and self-defeating desire to apply the scourge to those who legitimately protest injustices in Saigon.*⁵⁸

Americans did not want to be, in any way, accountable for the subjugation of the Buddhists in South Vietnam.

Already struggling to deal with the proliferation of public opinion condemning the Diem regime and Diem's disregard for the Kennedy administration's advice, the attacks on pagodas all over South Vietnam on 21 August finally exhausted the patience of Washington. Diem explained his actions by asserting that the Buddhist pagodas were infiltrated by the Viet Cong and that they were using the pagodas as places to stash weapons.⁵⁹ In all, nearly 2000 pagodas were raided, more than 1400 Buddhists arrested, and several hundred killed.⁶⁰ Diem then announced that the country was under martial law, and ordered the troops to shoot-to-kill anyone — including both Americans and Vietnamese — 'found in the streets during the curfew who refused to halt or fled'.⁶¹ Complete press censorship was imposed as well, thus effectively cut off communications between Saigon and Washington.⁶² The *New York Times* drew particular attention to this, with an emboldened caption on the front-page stating: 'The following dispatch was transmitted from Saigon before censorship was imposed by the Vietnamese regime.'⁶³ *Time* magazine also reported that 'telephone service in the homes and offices of *all* U.S. military and embassy personnel was cut off.' (my italics)⁶⁴ This clearly signalled to the U.S. that they were now directly affected by Diem's actions.

The international media was also becoming more vocal, resonating the American media's criticism of Washington's inactions for nearly two years, 'although the Saigon regime was becoming increasingly incapable of arousing the war-weary population to greater efforts.'⁶⁵ Washington's concern for international condemnation is indicated in a government memorandum devoted to reporting the widespread condemnation of U.S. support of the Diem regime in the various newspapers around the world. Reportedly, Burma's English language *Guardian* called on the U.S. to give the regime an ultimatum; North Korea described South Vietnam's events as a result of 'ruthless suppression of the people by the U.S. imperialists and their stooges.'⁶⁶ The *Times of India*, *London Times*, *The Scotsman* and *Die Welt* (Hamburg), all called on Washington to let the Diem regime fall, and to 'establish contact with the non-communist opposition.'⁶⁷ The *Ceylon Observer*, most articulately accused the U.S. of being 'committed, to the cynical view that it matters not whom it hires to engage the enemy in the outlying marshes if they will help to keep Fortress America safe.'⁶⁸ Others, such as the Philippine and Cambodian governments, hoped that other Asian nations would join them in breaking diplomatic relations with Saigon; and even the Catholic *Avvanire d'Italia* of Bologna said that between the Diem Government and the Buddhists it would have to declare flatly for the Buddhists.⁶⁹ International criticism had not only denounced the GVN, but Washington as well, thus placing the Kennedy administration under tremendous pressure.

In face of the huge domestic and international opposition to the U.S. involvement in Vietnam, the Kennedy administration began to discuss the engineering of a coup to overthrow Diem. In a government telegram (27 August 1963), the then newly appointed ambassador to Saigon, Henry Cabot Lodge, explained Washington's decision to support a coup:

*No long range foreign policy could be carried out by the U.S. Government without the support of Congress and public opinion [and the] public opinion in the U.S. was much distressed by the treatment of the Buddhists and statements made in connection therewith. These have greatly complicated the job of the Executive branch of the U.S. Government in aiding Vietnam.*⁷⁰

While there were debates and disagreements between the pro-Diem and anti-Diem factions within the Kennedy administration, it was the pagoda raids of 21 August that gave impetus to the anti-Diem faction in their endeavour to overthrow Diem. This was guided by Lodge, a Republican who was clearly opposed to the US support of the Diem regime; by October 1963 Lodge had managed to secure approval from Washington 'not to thwart' a coup.⁷¹ Nonetheless, after the pagoda raids on 21 August, it was quickly recognised that Diem was an obstruction to the U.S. government's wider goal of combating Communism, and as such, he had to be removed. The Kennedy administration first publicly denounced the pagoda raids, and stated that Diem had breached a vow to see through reconciliation with the Buddhists.⁷² On the 24 August, 3 days after the pagoda raids, Undersecretary of State George Ball instructed Lodge to urge Diem to adopt 'dramatic actions' to redress the situation, and 'If, in spite of all of your efforts, Diem remains obdurate and refuses, then *we must face the possibility that Diem himself cannot be preserved.*'⁷³ (My italics) Along with this statement was also the instruction that the Vietnam country team should begin to 'urgently examine all possible alternative leadership and make detailed plans as to how we might bring about Diem's replacement.'⁷⁴ This instruction subsequently led to the downfall of the Diem regime in November.

The story of Buddhist subjugation played well against a background of Cold War rhetoric and the rise of civil rights; the Buddhists were perceived by the anti-Communist Western world as 'fighting for freedom'. Diem's refusal to grant Buddhists equal rights that Catholics enjoyed only served to worsen the crisis with each increasingly dramatic Buddhist demonstration. At the peak of the crisis with the onslaught of self-immolations, Buddhists began actively to engage the Western press, and the sheer media-worthiness of each sacrifice proved irresistible to the news media around the world.

Whether or not media reports of the Buddhist Crisis were accurate, they significantly influenced public opinion, and thus threatened Congressional support for the U.S. war against Communism. In this way, the media influenced the Kennedy administration's decision to support a coup overthrowing Diem.

ENDNOTES

¹ Catton has argued that Diem's overthrow cemented U.S. commitment to South Vietnam, as 'the political turmoil [resulting from Diem's overthrow] derailed the war effort, thus paving the way for the ill-fated Americanisation of the conflict.' Extending this argument, Howard Jones — as the title of his book suggests — examines how Diem's overthrow, together with Kennedy's assassination, prolonged the Vietnam War. — Philip E. Catton, *Diem's Final Failure: Prelude to America's War in Vietnam*, University of Kansas, Kansas, 2002, p. 205; Seth Jacobs, *Cold War Mandarin: Ngo Dinh Diem and the origins of America's war in Vietnam, 1950-1963*, Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham, Md., 2006, pp. 185-189; Howard Jones, *Death of a Generation: How the Assassinations of Diem & JFK Prolonged the War*, OUP, New York, 2003.

² Fisher has argued that 'Diem had a large contingent of admirers as well as critics within the Kennedy administration, making the American role in his overthrow an episode over which, as Robert Kennedy later put it, 'the government split two.' Ross A. Fisher, 'The Kennedy Administration and the Overthrow of Ngo Dinh Diem: What Happened, Why Did It Happen, and Was It a Good Idea?', in Ross A. Fisher, John Norton Moore and Robert F. Turner (eds.), *To Oppose Any Foe: The Legacy of U.S. Intervention in Vietnam*, Carolina Academic Press, Durham, North Carolina, 2006, p. 4; William Conrad Gibbons, *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War: Executive and Legislative Roles and Relationships, Part II: 1961-1964* Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ., 1986; Francis X. Winters, *The Year of the Hare: America in Vietnam, January 25, 1963-February 15, 1964*, University of Georgia Press, Athens and London, 1997.

³ John Prados, *The Hidden History of the Vietnam War* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1995); Ellen J. Hammer, *A Death in November: America in Vietnam, 1963* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1987); Howard Jones, *Death of a Generation: How the Assassinations of Diem & JFK Prolonged the War*, OUP, New York, 2003.

⁴ 1963 was the opportune year in which Buddhists decided to begin actively pressuring the government for their religious freedom. Buddhist subjugation had begun during French colonial rule in the nineteenth century with the open favouritism of Catholic Vietnamese; consequently this ensured a disproportionate concentration of educational attainment and wealth to this favoured religious group. Nonetheless, Vietnamese Buddhism blossomed between 1956 and 1962, with membership of Buddhist associations increasing dramatically. By 1962, the General Association of Buddhists, which represented only six of South Vietnam's sixteen Mahayana sects, claimed to have some 3000 monks, 600 nuns, and 3 million lay members, including 70,000 to 90,000 in youth groups. Thus by 1963 Buddhists came to constitute a sizeable proportion of the Vietnamese population. Nonetheless, the dissolution of colonial rule in the 1950s did not accompany the dissolution of the French-imposed anti-Buddhist laws, such as Decree 10, which was central to the Buddhist Crisis. It was the height of what Topmiller labels 'the Renaissance of Vietnamese Buddhism' that Buddhists unleashed their simmering rage against state discrimination. — Prados, *The Hidden History of the Vietnam War*, pp. 89-90.

⁵ *FRUS of the United States, 1961-1963, Volume III, Vietnam, January-August 1963*, sourced from <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ho/frus/kennedyj/iii/8163.htm>, accessed 4 September 2007 [hereafter *FRUS*]

⁶ Ibid; Robert J. Topmiller, *The Lotus Unleashed: The Buddhist Peace Movement in South Vietnam, 1964-1966*, University Press of Kentucky, Kentucky, 2002, p.2.

⁷ John Helble, 'Telegram From the Consulate at Hue to the Department of State' (9 May 1963), *FRUS, 1961-1963, Volume III, Vietnam, January-August 1963*, sourced from <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ho/frus/kennedyjf/iii/8163.htm>, accessed 4 September 2007.

⁸ Two of the dead were children. – Ibid.

⁹ The discrediting of the GVN was exemplified in the failure of a government-sponsored meeting — to condemn the 'Viet Cong terrorist act evening May 8' — to draw an audience. Comparatively, a meeting organised by Buddhist leaders at Tu Dam Pagoda in Hue on May 10 drew a crowd of five to six thousand Buddhists. – John Helble, 'Telegram From the Consulate at Hue to the Department of State' (2a.m., 10 May 1963), *FRUS, 1961-1963, Volume III, Vietnam, January-August 1963*, sourced from

<http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ho/frus/kennedyjf/iii/8163.htm>, accessed 4 September 2007;

Frederick Nolting, 'Telegram From the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State' (18 May 1963), *FRUS, 1961-1963, Volume III, Vietnam, January-August 1963*, sourced from <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ho/frus/kennedyjf/iii/8163.htm>, accessed 4 September 2007.

¹⁰ John Helble, 'Telegram From the Consulate at Hue to the Department of State' (3p.m., 10 May 1963), *FRUS, 1961-1963, Volume III, Vietnam, January-August 1963*, sourced from <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ho/frus/kennedyjf/iii/8163.htm>, accessed 4 September 2007; Dean Rusk, 'Telegram From the Department of State to the Embassy in Vietnam' (9 May 1963), *FRUS, 1961-1963, Volume III, Vietnam, January-August 1963*, sourced from <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ho/frus/kennedyjf/iii/8163.htm>, accessed 4 September 2007.

¹¹ The Buddhists also urged Diem to repeal a French-imposed law, Decree 10, which labelled Buddhism as an "association" rather than a religion, and thus, Buddhists were required to obtain official permission to conduct any public activities. Blatantly discriminatory, Decree 10 also provided that 'a special status shall be prescribed...for Catholic and Protestant missions'. 'Manifesto of Vietnamese Buddhist Clergy and Faithful' (10 May 1963), *FRUS, 1961-1963, Volume III, Vietnam, January-August 1963*, sourced from <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ho/frus/kennedyjf/iii/8163.htm>, accessed 4 September 2007; *FRUS, 1961-1963, Volume III, Vietnam, January-August 1963*.

¹² In response to the manifesto, Diem stated that both Catholics and Buddhists were guilty of the 'disorderly use' of religious flags, and the national flag *must* be given supremacy. William Trueheart, 'Telegram from the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State' (30 May 1963), *FRUS, 1961-1963, Volume III, Vietnam, January-August 1963*, sourced from <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ho/frus/kennedyjf/iii/8163.htm>, accessed 4 September 2007; Nolting, 'Telegram From the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State' (18 May 1963).

¹³ Nolting, 'Telegram From the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State' (18 May 1963); Jacobs, *Cold War Mandarin*, p. 144.

¹⁴ Nolting, 'Telegram From the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State' (18 May 1963).

¹⁵ William Trueheart, 'Telegram from the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State' (31 May 1963), *FRUS, 1961-1963, Volume III, Vietnam, January-August 1963*, sourced from <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ho/frus/kennedyjf/iii/8163.htm>, accessed 4 September 2007.

¹⁶ When National Security Council staffer Michael V. Forrestal brought him a report on the Buddhist demonstrations in Hue, Kennedy actually asked, 'Who are these people?' John F. Kennedy cited in Seth Jacobs, *Cold War Mandarin: Ngo Dinh Diem and the origins of America's war in Vietnam, 1950-1963*, Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham, Md., 2006, p. 144.

¹⁷ On 10 May, for example, banners hoisted by a crowd of five to six thousand Buddhists at Tu Dam Pagoda read in English: 'kill us, ready to sacrifice blood, Buddhists and Catholics equal. Cancel Decree Number 10, request stop of arrests and kidnapping; a Buddhist flag will never go down'. Helble, 'Telegram From the Consulate at Hue to the Department of State' (3p.m., 10 May 1963).

¹⁸ William Trueheart, 'Telegram from the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State' (3 June 1963), *FRUS, 1961-1963, Volume III, Vietnam, January-August 1963*, sourced from <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ho/frus/kennedyjf/iii/8163.htm>, accessed 4 September 2007; William Trueheart, 'Telegram from the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State' (4 June 1963), *FRUS, 1961-1963, Volume III, Vietnam, January-August 1963*, sourced from <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ho/frus/kennedyjf/iii/8163.htm>, accessed 4 September 2007.

¹⁹ John Helble, 'Telegram from the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State' (2p.m., 3 June 1963), *FRUS, 1961-1963, Volume III, Vietnam, January-August 1963*, sourced from <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ho/frus/kennedyjf/iii/8163.htm>, accessed 4 September 2007.

²⁰ Trueheart, 'Telegram from the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State' (4 June 1963).

²¹ 'Current Intelligence Memorandum Prepared in the Office of Current Intelligence, Central Intelligence Agency' (3 June 1963), *FRUS, 1961-1963, Volume III, Vietnam, January-August 1963*, sourced from <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ho/frus/kennedyjf/iii/8163.htm>, accessed 4 September 2007.

²² William Trueheart, 'Telegram from the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State' (1p.m, 6 June 1963), *FRUS, 1961-1963, Volume III, Vietnam, January-August 1963*, sourced from <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ho/frus/kennedyjf/iii/8163.htm>, accessed 4 September 2007.

²³ William Trueheart, 'Telegram from the Embassy in Vietnam (Trueheart) to the Department of State (Hilsman)' (1a.m, 9 June 1963), *FRUS, 1961-1963, Volume III, Vietnam, January-August 1963*, sourced from <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ho/frus/kennedyjf/iii/8163.htm>, accessed 4 September 2007.

²⁴ 'Resolution issued by the Central Committee of the Women's Solidarity Movement of Vietnam' cited in 'Telegram from the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State' (8 June 1963), *FRUS, 1961-1963, Volume III, Vietnam, January-August 1963*, sourced from <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ho/frus/kennedyjf/iii/8163.htm>, accessed 4 September 2007.

²⁵ Trueheart, 'Telegram from the Embassy in Vietnam (Trueheart) to the Department of State (Hilsman)' (1a.m, 9 June 1963).

²⁶ Dean Rusk, 'Telegram from the Department of State to the Embassy in Vietnam' (12.55p.m, 8 June 1963), *FRUS, 1961-1963, Volume III, Vietnam, January-August 1963*, sourced from <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ho/frus/kennedyjf/iii/8163.htm>, accessed 4 September 2007.

²⁷ Trueheart, 'Telegram from the Embassy in Vietnam (Trueheart) to the Department of State (Hilsman)' (1a.m, 9 June 1963).

²⁸ David Halberstam, *The Making of a Quagmire* (New York: Random House), p. 211; Jacobs, *Cold War Mandarin*, pp.147-149.

²⁹ William Trueheart, 'Telegram from the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State' (noon, 11 June 1963), *FRUS, 1961-1963, Volume III, Vietnam, January-August 1963*, sourced from <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ho/frus/kennedyjf/iii/8163.htm>, accessed 4 September 2007.

³⁰ Jacobs, *Cold War Mandarin*, p. 147.

³¹ Halberstam, *The Making of a Quagmire*, p. 211.

³² John F. Kennedy quoted by Henry Cabot Lodge, 'Oral history interview with Henry Cabot Lodge, August 4, 1965', *FRUS, 1961-1963, Volume III, Vietnam, January-August 1963*, sourced from <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ho/frus/kennedyjf/iii/8163.htm>, accessed 4 September 2007.

³³ Marguerite Higgins, *Our Vietnam Nightmare*, Harper and Row, New York, 1965, pp.2-3.

³⁴ George Ball, 'Telegram from the Department of State to the Embassy in Vietnam' (8.52p.m., 1 July 1963), *FRUS, 1961-1963, Volume IV, Vietnam, January-August 1963*, sourced from <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ho/frus/kennedyjf/iv/8202.htm>, accessed 4 September 2007; Topmiller, *The Lotus Unleashed*, 3.

³⁵ Madame Ngo Dinh Nhu, 'Madame Nhu's Response to Thich Quang Duc' (video), sourced from http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d_PWM9gWR5E, accessed 13 September 2007.

³⁶ Diem even endorsed it on a radio address, proposing that 'a number of people got intoxicated and caused an undeserved death that made me very sorry.' Ngo Dinh Diem, quoted by David Halberstam, 'Diem Asks Peace in Religion Crisis', *New York Times*, 12 July 1963, p. 3; "Trial by Fire", *Time*, 21 June 1963, sourced from <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,874895,00.html>, accessed 9 October 2007.

³⁷ Even Higgins conceded that the "barbecue" statement was "barbaric", and articulated the thoughts of Americans exposed to Madame Nhu's insensitivity:

Anyone capable of so insensitive and callous a remark surely qualified as the villainess in a scenario of torture, persecution, and worse.

Higgins, *Our Vietnam Nightmare*, pp. 59-60.

³⁸ Jacobs, *Cold War Mandarin*, p. 149.

³⁹ These concerns were not unfounded. In their advertisement, the clergymen substantiated their concerns by quoting Senator Mansfield's report of his visit to South Vietnam earlier that year. Mansfield had written:

All of the current difficulties existed in 1955, along with hope and energy to meet them. *But it is 7 years later and \$2 billion of U.S. aid later. Yet, substantially the same difficulties remain if, indeed, they have not been compounded...* (italics in advertisement)

'We, Too, Protest' (Full-page advertisement), *New York Times*, 27 June 1963, p. 21.

⁴⁰ Max Frankel, "Vietnam's 'Untidy' War", *New York Times*, 3 July 1963, p. 8.

⁴¹ David Halberstam, 'Religious Dispute Stirs South Vietnam: Buddhist Struggle Poses Major Threat to Diem Rule and the War Effort Against the Vietcong', *New York Times*, 16 June 1963, IV, p. 6; Homer Bigart, 'War Against Reds Dominated News', *New York Times*, 22 August 1963, p. 3; Higgins, *Our Vietnam Nightmare*, p. 4; Jacobs, *Cold War Mandarin*, p. 185.

⁴² Halberstam, 'Religious Dispute Stirs South Vietnam', *New York Times*.

⁴³ "Trial by Fire", *Time*, 21 June 1963, sourced from

<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,874895,00.html>, accessed 9 October 2007.

⁴⁴ Halberstam, 'Religious Dispute Stirs South Vietnam', *New York Times*.

⁴⁵ Ambassador Frederick Nolting also observed on a trip to the countryside with Diem, 'I was...impressed...by the vast difference between what is actually happening in this country and the reflection of it in the outside world.' The CIA memorandum read: 'The vast majority of South Vietnam's population of 14 million is nominally Buddhist, even though only a small proportion have been considered active practitioners...' 'Report by the Joint Chiefs of Staff's Special Assistant for Counterinsurgency and Special Activities (Krulak)' (1963), *FRUS, 1961-1963, Volume III, Vietnam, January-August 1963*, sourced from <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ho/frus/kennedyj/iii/8163.htm>, accessed 4 September 2007; 'Current Intelligence Memorandum Prepared in the Office of Current Intelligence, Central Intelligence Agency' (3 June 1963); Frederick Nolting, 'Telegram From the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State' (4p.m., 17 May 1963), *FRUS, 1961-1963, Volume III, Vietnam, January-August 1963*, sourced from <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ho/frus/kennedyj/iii/8163.htm>, accessed 4 September 2007.

⁴⁶ This study was completed in 1965, and also affirmed that the remaining 70 percent of the population consisted mostly of ancestor worshippers and a minority of Catholics. Dodd, 'Speech to the United States Senate and Information Introduced Into the Record with the Speech' (23 February 1965), cited in *To Oppose Any Foe: The Legacy of U.S. Intervention in Vietnam*.

⁴⁷ A United Nations fact-finding team also concluded that Diem had not oppressed the Buddhists at all, and that the allegations of systematic repression of Buddhists were unsubstantiated 'hearsay'. 'Current Intelligence Memorandum Prepared in the Office of

Current Intelligence, Central Intelligence Agency' (3 June 1963); Fisher, "The Kennedy Administration and the Overthrow of Ngo Dinh Diem...", p. 24.

⁴⁸ 'Report by the Joint Chiefs of Staff's Special Assistant for Counterinsurgency and Special Activities (Krulak)' (1963).

⁴⁹ 'Diem and the Buddhists' (editorial), *New York Times*, 17 June 1963, p. 24.

⁵⁰ Following Quang Duc's self-immolation, the Kennedy administration had received information that Buddhist Lieutenant Colonel Do Khac Mai (South Vietnamese Air Force) and other senior officials 'could not understand why Americans stood by and lost golden opportunity to rectify situation in Vietnam, by which he clearly meant overthrow of government.' – Halberstam, 'Religious Dispute Stirs South Vietnam', *New York Times*; Bigart, 'War Against Reds Dominated News', *New York Times*; Higgins, *Our Vietnam Nightmare*, p. 4; William Trueheart, 'Telegram from the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State' (5p.m., 11 June 1963), *FRUS, 1961-1963, Volume III, Vietnam, January-August 1963*, sourced from

<http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ho/frus/kennedyjf/iii/8163.htm>, accessed 4 September 2007.

⁵¹ Norodom Sihanouk, 'Telegram from Prince Sihanouk to President Kennedy' (14 June 1963), *FRUS, 1961-1963, Volume III, Vietnam, January-August 1963*, sourced from <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ho/frus/kennedyjf/iii/8163.htm>, accessed 4 September 2007; *FRUS, 1961-1963, Volume III, Vietnam, January-August 1963*, sourced from <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ho/frus/kennedyjf/iii/8163.htm>, accessed 4 September 2007.

⁵² Trueheart, 'Telegram from the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State' (5p.m., 11 June 1963); Dean Rusk, 'Telegram from the Department of State to the Embassy in Vietnam' (11.03p.m., 11 June 1963), *FRUS, 1961-1963, Volume III, Vietnam, January-August 1963*, sourced from <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ho/frus/kennedyjf/iii/8163.htm>, accessed 4 September 2007.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ The failure of the Communiqué discredited the Buddhist leaders in favour of moderate and passive resistance, thus transferring the Buddhist leadership to militant Buddhists who were more concerned with overthrowing the Diem government than reforming it. William Trueheart, 'Telegram from the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State' (4p.m., 16 June 1963), *FRUS, 1961-1963, Volume III, Vietnam, January-August 1963*, sourced from <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ho/frus/kennedyjf/iii/8163.htm>, accessed 4 September 2007; Jacobs, *Cold War Mandarin*, 150.

⁵⁵ 'The Overthrow of Ngo Dinh Diem', *The Pentagon Papers, Volume 2*, Gravel ed. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), sourced from <http://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/pentagon2/pent6.htm>, accessed 16 October 2006.

⁵⁶ 'Suicide Series', *Time*, 23 August 1963, sourced from <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,875098,00.html> access 9 October 2007; Jacobs, *Cold War Mandarin*, 152.

⁵⁷ Madame Ngo Dinh Nhu, 'Mrs. Ngo Defends Stand' (editorial), *New York Times*, 14 August 1963, 32.

⁵⁸ 'Vietnam's War and the Buddhists' (editorial), *New York Times*, 14 August 1963, 32.

⁵⁹ 'Department of State Daily Staff Summary' (21 August 1963), *FRUS, 1961-1963, Volume III, Vietnam, January-August 1963*, sourced from <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ho/frus/kennedyjf/iii/8163.htm>, accessed 4 September 2007;

Fisher, 'The Kennedy Administration and the Overthrow of Ngo Dinh Diem...', p. 32.

⁶⁰ 'Department of State Daily Staff Summary' (21 August 1963); Jacobs, *Cold War Mandarin*, p. 153.

⁶¹ 'Text of Decree by Diem', *New York Times*, 22 August 1963, p. 2; David Halberstam, 'Diem Orders Martial law; More Pagodas are Raided', *New York Times*, 22 August 1963, p.1; United Press International, 'Shoot-to-Kill Order Issued', *New York Times*, 22 August 1963, p. 2.

⁶² David Halberstam, 'Vietnamese Put Under Army Law', *New York Times*, 22 August 1963, p. 2; United Press International, 'Shoot-to-Kill Order Issued', *New York Times*.

⁶³ Halberstam, 'Diem Orders Martial law', *New York Times*.

⁶⁴ 'The Crackdown', *Time*, 30 August 1963, sourced from <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,940704,00.html>, access 9 October 2007.

⁶⁵ Bigart, 'War Against Reds Dominated News', *New York Times*.

⁶⁶ Edward R. Murrow, 'Memorandum from the Director of the United States Information Agency (Murrow) to the President' (28 August 1963), *FRUS, 1961-1963, Volume III, Vietnam, January-August 1963*, sourced from <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ho/frus/kennedyjf/iii/8163.htm>, accessed 4 September 2007.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Henry Cabot Lodge, 'Telegram from the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State' (5p.m., 27 August 1963), *FRUS, 1961-1963, Volume III, Vietnam, January-August 1963*, sourced from <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ho/frus/kennedyjf/iii/8163.htm>, accessed 4 September 2007.

⁷¹ 'Telegram from the Embassy in Vietnam by Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge to the Department of State' (5 October 1963).

⁷² 'U.S. Denounced Vietnam For Drive On Buddhists; Charges Breach of Vow', *New York Times*, 22 August 1963, p. 1.

⁷³ George Ball, 'Telegram from the Department of State to the Embassy in Vietnam' (9.36p.m., 24 August 1963), *FRUS, 1961-1963, Volume III, Vietnam, January-August 1963*, sourced from <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ho/frus/kennedyjf/iii/8163.htm>, accessed 4 September 2007.

⁷⁴ Ibid.