The United States Senate Select Committee on Intelligence concluded that the CIA was not responsible for the deaths of President Ngo Dinh Diem of South Vietnam and his brother Ngo Dinh Nhu on November 2, 1963. This conclusion only reaffirms a point that too few Americans understood—Vietnam’s destiny lies ultimately with its own people.

Ngo Dinh Diem met his death at the hands of his fellow countrymen in a coup d’état planned and executed by the Vietnamese Army to achieve political goals important to the Vietnamese people. The story of the coup against Diem has been told in English by Marguerite Higgins, David Halberstam, and Robert Shaplen. In addition, the very well-documented Pentagon Papers provide additional information on official American policy toward the coup. However, these works have yet to tell the whole story. In particular, none of them reveal just who decided that Diem and Nhu should die and why that decision was taken.

An absolutely accurate account of the November, 1963, coup is difficult to reconstruct because there were so many Vietnamese participants and groups of participants. While the actions and thoughts of American officials are thoroughly presented in the Pentagon Papers, no similar bureaucratic documentation was ever compiled on the Vietnamese side. Coup-makers generally refrain from committing the details of their plot to paper.

In the years since the coup the leading participants have remained discreet about their involvement in order to avoid antagonizing either Buddhists or Catholics. To play up one’s role in the coup would have antagonized the Catholics, while to repudiate aspects of the coup would have drawn Buddhist ire. But since the collapse of Thieu’s regime, I for one no longer worry about the domestic Vietnamese consequences of a more complete discussion of the 1963 coup. My party, the Dai Viets, played an important role in the coup, and party members were privy to the critical events of those few hours.

Since politics in Vietnam is normally split into many factions and groups and the army is not above politics, it was a precondition to the success of any coup that it be unanimously supported by all factions. The 1960 attempted coup against Diem, which was led by Dai Viet and VNQDD (Vietnam Nationalist Party) units in the army, had been frustrated when President Diem and Nhu were able to appeal to Catholic generals to come to their rescue in Saigon. The coup of 1963 was carried out by an alliance of six different factions within the army. All factions agreed that leadership of the coup should be left in the hands of the most senior-ranking officers, in particular General Duong Van Minh.

One group of civilians and military was centered on Dr. Tran Kim Tuyen and Colonel Do Mau of Nhu’s intelligence apparatus. This group had helped Diem come to power but felt that Nhu and his wife had damaged the regime beyond repair. The second group also consisted of civilians and military officers from former Cochin China who had done well under the French but supported Diem against the French in 1954. General Minh belonged to this group as did Diem’s Vice President, Nguyen Ngoc Tho. In the third group were apolitical officers who wanted to end Nhu’s manipulations in the army and saw Nhu’s police raids against the Buddhist pagodas as evidence of the regime’s incompetence. Fourth were officers who had joined with the French and General Minh in 1955 to oppose Diem but had later made peace with Diem and Nhu. These officers had high rank but were held in contempt by Diem and Nhu. They included most of the generals who ruled the country after the coup. In the fifth group were the military cadres of the Dai Viet and VNQDD parties who had never accepted Diem’s rule. These officers had low rank but commanded troop units. Their cohesion made

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an effective coup possible. These junior officers pushed their seniors into the coup, sounded out the different factions, and brought together the alliance that made the coup possible. The sixth group consisted of civilian nationalist leaders who guided the Buddhist struggle movement and created an anti-Diem alliance among the different religious sects and the political parties.

Early in the summer of 1963 the different groups plotted against Diem independently. General Minh brought together his circle and the group of his fellow senior officers who had fought for the French in the 1940's. But gradually Dai Viet officers brough Do Mau's group together with Big Minh's group. Do Mau had protected these young officers from Nhu. Dai Viets knew that General Khiem, who had authority to move troop units, had been a party member, so they brought him into the coup, mindful that he also kept the CIA informed of what he knew. Khiem had saved Diem in the 1960 coup and was therefore trusted implicitly by Diem and Nhu. For that reason the other plotters suspected him until the Dai Viets established the bona fides of his participation. Khiem's access to troop units convinced the senior generals around Minh that a successful coup could be organized.

General Ton That Dinh, the commander of the Saigon region, was persuaded to join the coup by General Tran Van Don of Minh's group (as has been reported), but also by his mother, who was a Buddhist nun, and by Do Mau, who hired fortune tellers to tell Dinh that Diem and Nhu had had abandoned by fate. With Dinh's cooperation a street battle for control of Saigon was avoided.

Working together, the different factions achieved a quick and practically bloodless overthrow of Diem’s regime. On October 29, 1963, Do Mau falsely reported to Nhu that the Viet Cong were building up their forces around Saigon, and in order to counter such a threat Dinh ordered the Special Forces, the troops most loyal to Diem and Nhu, out of the city. Then on the afternoon of November 1 those few senior officers who had refused to join the coup group were arrested and coup units deployed around Saigon, moving in on the radio station and the presidential palace.

At first Nhu believed that these troop movements were part of a phony coup that he had been planning in order to smoke out any disloyal officers. When he realized that they were part of a genuine coup against the regime, it was too late for him and for his brother. Diem and Nhu then tried by radio to contact unit commanders in every part of the country, seeking rescue. An attempt to mobilize the mass citizen organizations and the paramilitary youth organization to defend them failed.

Late in the afternoon of November 1, when he was convinced that no units remained loyal, Nhu proposed his last plan. The two brothers would leave Saigon by different routes, one going to the second army corps in the highlands and the other to the fourth army corps in the Mekong Delta. Nhu still believed that on the spot the brothers could mobilize these two corps commanders and their troops to defend the regime. Diem, who had always had Nhu by his side since assuming power in 1954, was frightened by the thought that he would be separated from his brother in this most difficult moment. He replied: "We have always been together during these last years. How could we be separated in this critical hour?"

Nhu explained: "We will have a greater chance of success if we take different ways. Moreover, they will not dare to kill one of us if we are captured as long as the other remains free."

But Diem was unconvinced. Nhu concluded sadly: "If such is your will, we will go together."

They left the Gia Long Palace at about 7:00 P.M. A number of accounts assert that they left through a secret tunnel linked to the sewer system of the city. However, according to my friend Major Nguyen Thanh Luong, an officer formerly in charge of the maintenance of the Gia Long Palace, the so-called secret tunnel leads only to a disguised door opening on a rear courtyard inside the palace walls. In fact, Diem and Nhu left the palace at street level by a small gate on Le Thanh Ton Street and got into a small Citroën. At that moment the palace was not yet completely surrounded by coup units led by Colonel, later President, Thieu, and it was dark enough to allow the two brothers to get into their car quickly without being seen. The car itself was unpretentious enough that it could drive unnoticed through Saigon.

The driver of the car happened to be a member of the Dai Viet Party. He had been drafted into the army, had risen to the rank of captain in the armor corps, but was detached to serve in Nhu's youth organization. And unbeknownst to Nhu, he was still loyal to the Dai Viets. That day Cao Xuan Vy, chief of Nhu's youth organization, had asked this man to take his personal car to the side of the Gia Long Palace and wait. The young officer then drove Diem and Nhu to the home of the Chinese merchant Ma Tuyen in Cho Lon. There he was ordered to help Vy find trucks disguised as merchant vehicles in order to take the brothers to the highlands or down to the Mekong Delta.

Such trucks could not be found. Moreover, while staying at May Tuyen's house, Diem and Nhu finally
became convinced that neither corps commander could be mobilized on their behalf. Therefore early in the morning of November 2 they decided to surrender. Their first phone call to the victorious generals did not reveal their location. The brothers then went to a Catholic Church close by Ma Tuyen’s home to pray before calling the generals a second time to surrender and reveal their location.

The brothers were killed in the armored personnel carrier bringing them from the church back to the Joint General Staff headquarters near the Saigon airport. The commander of the detachment that had been sent to pick up the brothers was another member of the Dai Viet Party, Major Duong Hieu Nghia. Thanks to him, the Dai Viet knew exactly how the murders occurred.

It is surprising, but nonetheless true, that prior to the coup no decision had been made by the coup generals as to the fate of Diem and Nhu. Nhu was almost unanimously hated, and his assassination was one of the alternatives presented by Minh in his meeting with an American representative on October 5. Diem, on the other hand, enjoyed respect among most of the plotters, who also knew that his murder would alienate the Americans on whom they would have to rely in the future.

The decision to kill the brothers was made as a consequence of their flight from the Gia Long Palace on the night of November 1. When the coup troops entered the palace and found the brothers had fled, the generals knew they had chosen to escape in an attempt to raise support in the country against the coup. Some generals were acutely sensitive to the danger of Diem and Nhu being able to rally Catholic and other dissatisfied forces to challenge the authority of the new government.

A number of generals and officers in the coup group were essentially apolitical and did not focus on such a possibility; they had no particular reason to have Diem killed. Those generals who had been politically opposed to Diem in 1955, particularly those who were not in line for supreme political leadership, were very conscious that Diem could not be allowed to live as a focal point for opposition. However, none of these generals had the courage to say openly what he had in mind. Had a formal meeting of the coup group been held to decide on the fate of Diem and Nhu, there would have been no majority to authorize an execution.

Because he was going to be the leader of the new government, General Minh was, naturally, the most concerned by this potential threat and felt some pressure to resolve the problem quickly. Knowing well the habits and psychology of his colleagues, Minh did not call for a formal meeting of the coup group but proceeded early on the morning of November 2 to consult with high-ranking officers singly or in very small groups. Minh knew that gaining acquiescence to the execution of Nhu would be easy but that getting similar approval for the murder of Diem would require maneuvering.

As he made the rounds of the officers, those without political aspirations gave him carte blanche to deal with Diem and Nhu, without having any precise idea of what was intended. Some politically involved officers spoke frankly and told Minh that Diem could be killed as well. Other political officers, accurately guessing Minh’s real intention, left the decision up to Minh, secure in the thought that they could achieve their desire without assuming formal responsibility.

Thus the decision to execute Diem and Nhu was made by Big Minh after he had assured himself that he would not be disavowed by his colleagues after the fact. Although faced with the necessity of giving a precise order for the execution, he did not want to bear the public responsibility for killing Diem—especially because Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge had phoned the generals after the start of the coup to insist that Diem be allowed to live.

Before consulting with his fellow officers Minh had called one of his most trusted aides, Captain Nhuyen Van Nhung, and had told him: “I will give you publicly an order to go and fetch Diem and Nhu. At that moment look at my hand. If you see only one finger raised, you will kill Nhu only, but if you see two fingers raised, you will kill both.”

After Diem and Nhu had called from the church in Cholon to tell the generals where they were, General Mai Huu Xuan was ordered to organize a convoy to bring the brothers back to the Joint General Staff compound. Minh ordered Captain Nhung to join the convoy. At that moment Major Duong Hieu Nghia noted that Minh discreetly raised two fingers of his right hand up to the level of his belt. When the convoy arrived at the church, President Diem’s aide was told to give the brothers’ suitcase to General Xuan and to go home on his own. Then Diem and Nhu walked over to the armored personnel carrier where Major Nghia and Captain Nhung stood facing them. The two brothers expected to be treated with greater honor and thought they would at least be driven in a comfortable civilian car. They were astonished to see only military vehicles in the convoy. Nhu asked: “Where is the car for us?” Major Nghia showed them the armored personnel carrier and answered: “Here it is.” Nhu angrily retorted: “You use such a vehicle to drive the President?” Nghia answered coldly, “There is no more President,” adding: “We soldiers of the armored corps always use this kind of vehicle; it is perhaps time for you to taste it once to know how it is.” Nhu calmed down. “How do we get in?” Nghia showed the two brothers the hole in the back of the vehicle and said: “Bend your head and climb up through this hole, just as we do.”

When the two brothers were in the vehicle, its back door was closed, and Nghia went to his jeep at the head of the convoy while Captain Nhung and his aides climbed upon the personnel carrier and got down into its body through the top opening. The convoy began to move. The two brothers wanted to stand up, probably so as to be seen from the outside. To keep them quiet and seated, Nhung and his men tied their hands behind their backs. Nhu protested, but Diem calmed him with some words. From this moment Nhu kept silent. Diem did not stop praying. They were shot while the convoy was on Hong Thap Thu Street between its intersections with Cao Thang and Le Van Duyet Street. The soldiers in the vehicle, who hated Nhu, stabbed his corpse many times.