Cold War Mandarin

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Ngo Dinh Diem could not have picked a more propitious time to make his first visit to the United States. America's red scare was at its zenith in 1950. Just seven months before Diem deplaned in Washington in late August of that year, former State Department official Alger Hiss was convicted of perjury in a high-profile trial. Hiss, a New Deal establishment figure and adviser at numerous international conferences, had been accused by a repentant former communist of transmitting government documents to the Soviet Union. Since the statute of limitations for espionage had expired, the government prosecuted Hiss for lying before a grand jury about his past communist ties. Hiss's conviction seemed to confirm charges from the Republican Right that communists had infiltrated the government and were working to sabotage America's foreign policy. Secretary of State Dean Acheson lent persuasiveness to those charges when, upon learning of the guilty verdict, he declared to a reporter, "I do not intend to turn my back on Alger Hiss." Acheson defended his pledge of loyalty to his former associate by directing journalists to "the 25th chapter of the Gospel according to St. Matthew beginning with verse 34."!

Two weeks after the jury convicted Hiss, a senator named Joe McCarthy cited Acheson's comment as evidence of the secretary's "apathy to evil." "Today we are engaged in a final, all-out battle between communistic atheism and Christianity," McCarthy blared to the Ohio County Women's Republican Club in Wheeling, West Virginia. "The secretary of state, in
attempting to justify his continued devotion to the man who sold out the Christian world to the atheistic world, referred to Christ's Sermon on the Mount as justification." Such "blasphemy" could be overcome, McCarthy claimed, "only when the whole sorry mess of twisted, warped thinkers are swept from the national scene." It was in this soon-to-be-notorious speech that McCarthy first claimed to have "in my hand" a list of State Department employees who were members of the Communist Party. How many names were on that list was never clear—McCarthy initially said 208, then 57, then 4—but it did not matter. He had tapped into America's postwar anxieties brilliantly. While American anticommunism predated the senator's Wheeling speech, the strain known as McCarthyism came into existence on 9 February 1950.\(^2\)

National Security Paper no. 68, which a leading diplomatic historian calls "the American blueprint for waging the cold war during the next twenty years," was approved by President Harry Truman two months after McCarthy made his charges. Better known as NSC-68, the paper identified external forces rather than domestic subversion as the principal threat to American security; nonetheless, it echoed McCarthy's warnings of an "all-out battle" between good and evil. Truman had ordered the National Security Council to reevaluate U.S. policy toward the communist bloc in light of Moscow's explosion of a nuclear device and the fall of China to Mao Zedong's followers. The NSC responded with a manifesto that accused the Soviet Union of "seek[ing] to impose its absolute authority over the rest of the world." The challenge facing America, NSC-68 contended, was "momentous, involving the fulfillment or destruction not only of this Republic but of civilization itself." NSC-68 recommended that the United States undertake a "rapid and sustained build-up" of its "political, economic, and military strength": conventional and nuclear forces needed to be enlarged, public opinion mobilized and focused, and taxes raised to unheard-of levels to pay for this rearmament program. "[T]he cold war is in fact a real war in which the survival of the free world is at stake," advised NSC-68. Truman accepted this analysis but doubted whether he could persuade a budget-minded Congress to vote the necessary increases in defense spending. Then, as one proponent of NSC-68 recalled, "Korea came along and saved us."\(^3\)

Most significant in preparing the ground for Diem's arrival in America was the outbreak of the Korean War in late June 1950. The communist government of North Korea sent troops in Soviet-made tanks thundering across the 38th parallel in an invasion of America's client state in the south. Washington's response was immediate: Acheson rammed a resolution through the
United Nations Security Council designating the North Koreans as the aggressors and calling for a cessation of hostilities; when this failed to halt the communist advance, Truman ordered U.S. air and naval units into action; three days later, he committed ground forces. Still, the war went badly. By early August, the communists had overrun most of South Korea.

For millions of Americans, the ominous scenario laid out in NSC-68 now seemed credible. Truman had little difficulty convincing Congress to quadruple U.S. defense spending, reintroduce selective service, and speed up development of the hydrogen bomb. Significantly, in his first address to the nation after North Korea's attack, Truman announced, "I have . . . directed acceleration in the furnishing of military assistance to the forces of France . . . in Indochina." The president assumed a connection between the struggles in Korea and Vietnam; he considered them both manifestations of the Kremlin's drive to dominate Asia. Whereas previously Washington had been loath to support France's attempt to reclaim its Indochinese colonies, the summer of 1950 saw anticommunism trump anticolonialism in U.S. foreign policy.4

It was against this backdrop of onrushing events that Diem arrived in the United States. Under different circumstances, his visit would have excited little notice; if Washington's elite had paid any attention to him, they would have regarded him as a curiosity. He hardly cut a commanding figure. As the journalist Robert Shaplen recalls, Diem was "a short, broadly built fellow, with a round face and a shock of black hair, who walked and moved jerkily, as if on strings." Diem did not compensate for these idiosyncrasies with a dynamic personality. Quite the contrary: almost every characterization of him stresses his lack of what may be termed "political" skills. Notoriously longwinded, he turned every social encounter into an occasion for one of his marathon monologues, which, one acquaintance remembers, had the effect of "inducing a state of profound, indeed vertiginous, boredom in almost everyone." Other Americans who dealt with Diem found him "utterly without warmth," "humorless, egotistical, . . . neurotically suspicious," "stubborn, self-righteous, and a complete stranger to compromise."5

None of this augured well for Diem's political future, either in the United States or his native country. Yet four years after Diem first set foot on American soil the administration of Dwight Eisenhower would compel Vietnamese emperor Bao Dai to install this man as prime minister of the "State of Vietnam," with "full civil and military powers"—more authority than Bao Dai had ever granted to any of his premiers. Diem's rise derived in equal parts from the exigencies of the moment in Washington and strengths within his own character that more than offset his defects. While Diem was fortunate
to come to the United States at a time when Americans were receptive to the message he bore, his ascent to dictatorship was in great measure his own accomplishment.⁶

Reporter Bernard Fall noted in the 1960s that “[i]t is, to say the least, remarkable that Ngo Dinh Diem has thus far escaped the attentions of a biographer.” A few authors have attempted book-length accounts of Diem’s life since Fall made that observation, but these mostly fit into the categories of hagiography and hatchet job. No “definitive” treatment has emerged, possibly because it is difficult to separate fact from myth when dealing with Diem’s early years. Still, it seems clear that his pre-1950 résumé indicated an odd blend of cunning, piety, and nerve.⁷

Diem often boasted that he descended from one of the great families of Vietnam, a clan of mandarins so revered that people believed it brought good luck if they buried their dead near the Ngo family tombs. Most historians reject such stories, insisting that Diem’s forebears were of lowly birth and that no one before his father ever attained mandarinal rank. Less controversial was Diem’s claim that the Ngos were among the first Vietnamese to embrace Catholicism. Portuguese missionaries converted Diem’s ancestors a century before the French colonial presence, thereby conferring on them both a symbolic and a literal cross, since the Catholic Church was pointedly unwelcome in Vietnam. Emperor Minh Mang inaugurated a policy of persecution of Catholics in the 1830s. In 1848 and 1851, Emperor Tu Duc issued edicts impelling Catholics to convert or face execution. As France tightened its hold over Vietnam in the 1880s, anti-Catholic violence grew worse; Catholicism was identified with the foreign oppressor, and Catholic Vietnamese held to their faith at a ghastly price. The Ngo clan was almost wiped out when a Buddhist mob raided their village, herded over one hundred of them into a church, and burned it down.

One of the few family members to survive was Ngo Dinh Kha, who was studying in Malaya when the massacre occurred. Kha returned to Vietnam upon learning that his parents, brothers, and sisters had been murdered. He was so devastated by the tragedy that he gave up plans of becoming a priest and vowed to raise a family of his own. His first wife died childless, but the second bore him nine children—six boys and three girls. Diem, the third boy, was born on 3 January 1901 near the imperial capital of Hue. Kha joined the court of Emperor Than Thai and rose quickly in the ranks of the mandarinate, becoming minister of the rites, grand chamberlain, and keeper of the
eunuchs. Formal portraits show that Kha adopted the attributes of traditional mandarins: black turban, two-inch fingernails, nine-button silken robes. Yet his devotion to the Catholic Church remained unshaken. Every morning he took his family to mass, and he encouraged his sons to study for the priesthood.

The family fell on hard times in 1907 when the French, irritated by Than Thai's complaints about their exploitation of his country, deposed him on pretext of insanity and replaced him with a more tractable sovereign. Kha resigned in protest, retiring to the countryside to farm a few acres of riceland. He managed to provide Diem and his brothers with an education, despite having little money. At age fifteen, Diem followed in the footsteps of his older brother Ngo Dinh Thuc and entered a monastery, but he left after a few months. According to Thuc, who ultimately rose to the rank of archbishop, "the Church was too worldly for him." Diem then took competitive examinations for the equivalent of a high school diploma at the French lycée at Hue and achieved such a high score that the French offered him a scholarship in Paris. He rejected the offer, enrolling instead at Hanoi's School of Public Administration and Law, where he compiled a stellar record. He also experienced the only romantic relationship of his life when he fell in love with the daughter of one of his teachers. She broke off the affair to join a convent. He remained celibate from then on.8

After graduating at the top of his class in 1921, Diem went into government service. Although he entered the imperial bureaucracy as a mandarin of the lowliest grade, promotion came swiftly. His first appointment was at the royal library at Hue. Within a year, he had become administrative supervisor of a district of seventy villages. At age twenty-five, he ascended from district to province chief, and the number of villages under his supervision grew to three hundred.

Diem's advance was facilitated by Nguyen Huu Bai, the Catholic head of the council of ministers in Hue, whose daughter married Diem's brother Ngo Dinh Khoi before Diem began working in the imperial administration. Family ties and shared religious affiliation caused Bai to take an interest in Diem, and he became the young man's patron. This was a piece of good luck, for Bai was one of the top Vietnamese power brokers, having served his colonial masters loyally for years and earned a measure of backstairs influence in Paris. He managed to get Khoi promoted to provincial governor, but devoted more attention to Diem, whose patriotism appealed to him. Bai was a late-blooming nationalist; in the 1920s and early 1930s, he had become critical
of French reluctance to grant Vietnam true autonomy, and he worked with Diem to loosen colonial restrictions on many aspects of Vietnamese life.

The French found Diem industrious but were irritated by his repeated requests that villages be given more self-government. Diem, for his part, resented the colonialists' inattention to his demands. He contemplated resigning but, as he remembered years later, village elders persuaded him to stay on. "They told me of their confidence in me," Diem recalled, "and predicted that I would someday lead my country." Diem found another cause for remaining at his post. While riding around the countryside near Hue, he became one of the first Vietnamese officials to recognize how widespread the communist resistance movement was. In 1925 he exposed some of the earliest communist cells in Quang Tri, a province sixty miles north of Hue. Four years later, when the communists staged demonstrations throughout Vietnam, Diem rounded up the leaders of the movement in his administrative area and filed a report with the colonial government detailing communist maneuvers. The French rewarded Diem, promoting him to governor of the province of Phan-Thiet, where he continued to root out communists. In 1930 and 1931 the Communist Party fomented the first peasant revolts in central Vietnam, and Diem helped the French put them down.9

Eventually, Emperor Bao Dai learned of this talented and seemingly inexhaustible public servant. Bao Dai, still in his teens, was not yet the dissolute caricature he would become in the 1940s; he fancied himself a liberal reformer and had dreams of establishing a modern constitutional monarchy. Diem struck him as the perfect candidate for minister of the interior. Nguyen Huu Bai concurred with the emperor's judgment, and pressed the French to give Diem another promotion. The French agreed. In May 1933 Diem—only thirty-two years old—assumed control of the most important ministry in Bao Dai's cabinet. He seemed on the cusp of an extraordinary political career.

Yet that career quickly self-destructed. One of Diem's first assignments was to head a commission examining possible administrative reforms. He submitted a list of suggestions, none of which the French would consider. Disgusted, Diem resigned, having served less than three months at his post. The French stripped him of decorations, kept him under surveillance, and even threatened him with arrest. Diem was not intimidated. As he told a reporter three decades later, "I was convinced that the people must be alerted to the need for wholesale reforms and... must strive for them energetically—even violently."10

These Jacobinic statements notwithstanding, Diem did not plunge into anticolonial activism after leaving the imperial court. Instead, he withdrew