SAVING AFGHANISTAN: CLINGING TO A CORRUPT AND INEFFECTIVE HEAD OF STATE

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the turbulent events that preceded and followed the 1963 U.S.-orchestrated assassination of South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem and compares that entire affair to the present-day political situation in Kabul, Afghanistan. First, this thesis provides a general overview of Ngo Dinh Diem’s personal history, his policies as president and the security and political catastrophe that emerged in South Vietnam after his assassination. Next, this thesis will provide an overall historical background of Afghan President Hamid Karzai that includes the contemporary conditions on the ground. Thirdly, this thesis will compare and contrast the personal histories of Diem and Karzai, their policies, leadership style, and effectiveness. Comparisons will then be drawn between the two men, their countries, and the American involvement in both the Vietnam and Afghanistan wars. There will then be a discussion about what can be learned from Ngo Dinh Diem’s presidency and what lessons can be applied to Karzai and Afghanistan today. To present a well-rounded perspective on the aforementioned subjects, this thesis relies on a range of news articles, opinion pieces, books, and personal interviews.
This thesis finds that the political situation surrounding Ngo Dinh Diem leading up to his coup parallels President Karzai closely enough that important distinctions can be made and lessons can be learned. Last, this thesis finds that the U.S. got rid of Diem without a true consideration of post-coup South Vietnam and therefore caused itself even more problems because of the subsequent political instability. From this finding, a conclusion is drawn that even though the media has portrayed Hamid Karzai as corrupt and ineffective, the United States government should support him for the remainder of his term based on the fact that there is no clear leader worth replacing him with, and removing him would most likely cause more instability based on what we can learn from South Vietnam in the 1960s.
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CHAPTER 1

THE RECURRING THEME: CAN WE AVOID IT?

The United States of America finds itself, periodically, in a position to influence the change of the political balance of power in a foreign country. Sometimes this situation is created because a strategic decision has been made to use its military power to insert the U.S. into a dominant position within another country. This was the case in both Vietnam and Afghanistan. Although the two conflicts are separated by forty years, it is perhaps instructive to reflect on some of the similarities and differences between them in order to talk about the strategic approach to nation building. What were some of the dynamics in one situation, for instance, that caused the U.S. to support the removal of an established regime and not in another? Is there, perhaps, something that the U.S. has learned about its involvement in such conflicts? Perhaps the lesson learned is the need for stability as quickly and enduringly as possible.

That appears, on first consideration, to be an almost self-evident fact. However, the very nature of overthrow and re-establishment of a political entity by a foreign military makes for a great deal of chaos. And it is a temptation to want to force a solution with the same military power by which the overthrow was brought about. The most direct route to establishing stability is through indigenous leadership. Removing the standing regime, whether imposed or elected, is immediately destructive to stability. To impose a second regime change through military action has an even
deeper destructive action, because it provides further evidence that only the occupying power has answers. That, in turn, places the burden on occupying forces of having to provide solutions that, in actuality, only local leaders and resources can provide.

The worldview of the American political leadership at the time of the Vietnam War was decidedly shaped by the fear of worldwide spread of communism. This provided the motivation for America’s interest in maintaining Vietnam as a divided state. Loss of territory to the political leadership of the communist North Vietnam was seen as another step in the on-going process of world domination.

As the forces from North Vietnam moved to consolidate their country, following the defeat of the French colonial powers, the U.S. decided it was in its interest to preserve the separate and newly established indigenous political and military forces in the south. A key in that support was the attempt to keep in power the political forces of Ngo Dinh Diem. Early in the aggression by the U.S., the decision was made that the stability of the country would be best served by cooperating with Diem. As the conflict evolved, neither the military success nor the political stability changed. Eventually, American forces supported a coup that would remove Diem and establish a strong military leadership in his stead. The fact that Diem was assassinated in the process may not have been anticipated but was incidental. The U.S. interests in this case are the dynamics that were set in motion by the change of regime, why replacing Diem was attractive, and what resulted from the overthrow and assassination.
Subsequently, the political and economic processes were thrown into chaos, followed by the military leadership. The result of the process was a greater dependency of the South Vietnamese forces on those of the Americans.

War is a context impossible for forming a new government. In Vietnam, there was no history of an established indigenous government, no habit of self-government, no sound and diverse economic system. While chaos and conflict may be the birthplace of creativity, it is stability that is the needed context for structuring change.

Forty years after the conflict in Vietnam, the U.S. military invaded Afghanistan. This time, the motivating factor was the threat of worldwide terrorism, not the spread of communism. Afghanistan was militarily and politically controlled by the Taliban, who in turn provided a haven for Osama bin Laden and al Qaeda who used terrorist acts against other arabs and western nations. It was the attack on the Pentagon and the destruction of the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001 in New York City that precipitated U.S. invasion of Afghanistan.

In the immediate aftermath of the attack on the U.S., there was almost unanimous assent to an attack on the forces currently ruling Afghanistan. That meant that there would have to be an entirely new political structure following the invasion. While the tribal structure seemed to have been the most basic organization for government, military, and economic purposes, it could not bring about the stability needed for a forceful and effective national government that was needed to deny the Taliban a future dominant position in Afghanistan. In other words, to build a nation,
stability had to be assured. The U.S. proceeded on three assumptions: (1) A military had to be developed that was controlled by a central government, was paid by a central government, and swore allegiance to a central government; (2) the economic life of the country had to be bolstered, employment increased, and the infrastructure of the country modernized; (3) a strong central government would be organized with a constitution, elective representatives, and the beginnings of law.

In short, stability was needed that was indigenous and had a central purpose of nation building. Until that stability was operational, a strong leader was necessary and it was important that the leader have the support of the occupying forces.

Every four years, the U.S. holds a formal challenge to a sitting president. At least every eight years, a new president is elected. The U.S. has had presidents die in office and injured while in office. The one element that provides the platform for challenging and changing governments is the stability that prevails in the structures. The U.S. has a civilian controlled military. A long-standing constitution provides for the rule of law. A successful economy is structured with a large degree of integrity and trust. The U.S. further has checks and balances within the whole structure of the culture. Government balances the excesses of business and industry.

Citizens of the United States of America enjoy a more stable government than many other nations in the world. This stability comes from the system of checks and balances as well as a military that respects its civilian superiors. All U.S. citizens are afforded some degree of stability. There are, however, different definitions of stability.
There are some types of stability that all American citizens enjoy as a whole. There are some types of stability, like financial, that only some enjoy. Generally, America, since the creation of the Constitution, has enjoyed relative physical security and stability. While crime exists everywhere, in the U.S. and elsewhere, Americans feel secure that there are no roving bands traveling around the country with machetes trying to hack down entire ethnic populations. Americans do not suffer constant anxiety over whether a car bomb is going to blow up, or expect that the federal government will systematically round up its own citizens for the sole purpose of murder. Americans do not carry these fears around because of the many protections afforded from our state and federal governments. If your neighbor injures you, the justice system is there. If the government injures you, then you are still protected by the U.S. justice system. Very few countries in the world enjoy the kind of freedoms and the kind of protections available in the U.S. U.S. citizens can petition, protest, and even insult the government with the expectation of making it back home at the end of the day unscathed. The difference between the U.S. Constitution and others is the respect afforded it from the citizens, the elected government officials, and the military personnel. In contrast, other constitutions often lack support from at least one of those critical pillars.

The federal government is vital to the nation’s stability. On a micro-level and for better or for worse, each of us have different experiences in the home and in everyday life (i.e. some people experience domestic violence that is never reported and others do not). But at a macro-level across the country, American citizens enjoy a
justice system that is like no other in the world. A large portion of the stability that the U.S. enjoys comes from the accountability to which everyone is held. Although many people in America do not respect the federal government, stability would not be possible without it as a buffer. At the top of an ideal stability triangle, the citizens of a democratic nation would reign with the federal government and military side by side beneath. However, at the top of a realistic triangle reins the military, with the citizens and the government adjacent from each other on the next level below. Many people in this country wish that our stability came from the military and the civilian population sharing a level, side by side with the federal government noticeably lacking from the pyramid altogether. If that were the case, what would happen and what always has happened, is that with nothing to check its power, the military would naturally take charge. Because our nation cannot be run by an unaccountable military regime, the federal government steps in to provide its citizens with protections. These protections are so vital to our stability that the federal government acts as a political buffer between the military and the citizenry, affording peace and justice to society.

Stability—specifically political stability—is created when there is a democratically elected government whose authority the military both respects and adheres to. Political stability, for the most part, is the hardest type of stability to achieve. Soft power is a prelude to governmental stability, which in turn is a prelude to peace. A strong leader and strong government can make or break the stability of its nation. Take ancient Rome for an example. Many factors lead to the eventual fall of
Rome, but one can point to a single event that truly began the beginning of the end: the assassination of the Roman Emperor Alexander Severus. Alexander Severus’ demise signaled the beginning of the chaotic period known as the “crisis of the third century.”

His departure brought the Roman Empire to a near collapse with nearly fifty years of civil wars, foreign invasions, and the collapse of the monetary economy. Why is this assassination any different from the other numerous assassinations of Roman Emperors? The reason is that prior to this, there had always been a power vacuum where someone would take the reins and hold on. The death of Alexander initiated a fifty-year period in which upwards of twenty-five claimants to the title of Emperor, mostly prominent Roman Army generals, assumed imperial power over all or part of the Empire. Had there been overall stability after any of the countless assassinated Emperors before? Yes, but this shows you the devastating effect of what happens when you do not have a strong political leader lined up to take over.

While the U.S. may not be a perfect paragon of democracy, with its internal wrangling and political gridlock, it is still one of the most stable political systems in the world. One realizes that one’s nation is great when the biggest threat to its political stability (i.e., democracy) does not come from people flying planes into buildings but is when elections are rigged, votes are not counted, or counted too often, or when people are simply prevented from voting. Even with these political snafus, America can and should be a model for the world. A federal system came rather easily for most of the Founders and the first U.S. citizens. These people were used to a central power
(monarchy) being in command. Most of the Founders were not opposed to a strong, central government. On the contrary, the emergence of a central government was anticipated and expected to answer to those who vote. It is not that the Founders rejected a central government, it is that if there were to be one, that central government was to do the citizens’ bidding (rather than vice versa).

Although America may seem to have a war-like culture, restraint and civility seem to be the greater virtues. In the U.S., there is a sad history of presidential assassinations and assassination attempts. But with each such violently abrupt change in leadership, the U.S. government has remained stable. Take Abraham Lincoln for example. He did not have Jefferson Davis—the President of the Confederacy—tried and executed. Instead, he knew the value of healing the country. Lincoln knew all too well that a violent end to Davis could ignite even more hatred towards the North and result in further bloodshed. When a southerner assassinated Lincoln, the North did not decide to start wiping suspected southern insurgents off the map. Instead, a peaceful—albeit grievous—transition took place when Vice President Andrew Johnson took control. One-hundred years later, John F. Kennedy was assassinated just weeks after he supported the ultimately fatal ouster of South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem (which is ironic in this context). Once again, there was a steadfast process in place where the vice president would smoothly take over. It is that smooth transition of effective leadership that South Vietnam lacked from before Diem’s assassination until the end of the war when the communists took control.
As was the case in Vietnam, Afghanistan currently lacks effective leadership to replace President Hamid Karzai. However, unlike Vietnam, Afghanistan has the potential to experience a smooth transition of power. Even the Soviets understood the importance of political stability and how it ultimately triumphs over all. When the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in 1979 to support the communist government in Kabul, they assumed—as the U.S. did in Vietnam—that one of the two most sophisticated militaries on earth, coupled with billions of dollars in aid, could fend off a few insurgents armed with AK-47s. What the Soviets learned was that the biggest and best bombs in the world meant nothing if the government that was being supported could not provide political stability. What the Soviets got right was peacefully replacing an ineffective socialist leader in Kabul in 1986 with someone better. They replaced the leadership smoothly in order to avoid the potential power vacuum that coups often create.

The Soviets did everything in Afghanistan that America did not do in Vietnam: replacing someone whom they believed was obstructing a favorable outcome in Afghanistan peacefully with someone well-known that the Soviets and Afghan government could fully get behind. Babrak Karmal was a communist Afghan nationalist who was president of Afghanistan from the 1979 Soviet invasion until Mohammad Najibullah replaced him in 1986. Karmal’s reign was followed by a smooth transition of power, despite the time being one of the most volatile periods of the Soviet-Afghan conflict. The Soviets asked Kamal to step down instead of killing
him off in a coup. The Soviets thought that he was impeding success in Afghanistan. Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev said, “The main reason that there is no national consolidation so far is that comrade Karmal is hoping to continue sitting in Kabul with our help.”¹ The Soviet leadership had been urging Karmal to broaden the popular base of his government by bringing in non-communist personages. Finally, Karmal’s patrons forced him out of power in favor of intelligence minister Mohammad Najibullah. Under pressure, Karmal reluctantly resigned from both of his official positions as General Secretary of the PDPA (People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan) and then the presidency successively in May and November 1986.² A Committee for State Security (KGB) general reflected on Soviet involvement in the war, “Afghanistan is our Vietnam . . . we simply began by backing a friendly regime; sometimes using desperate measures and now we are bogged down in a war we cannot win and cannot abandon.”³⁴


The failure of Karmal to stabilize the country caused the Soviet leaders to remove him and exile him to Moscow because of “heart problems.” Although the Soviet military left Afghanistan in 1989 at the hands of a unified effort to remove them and against all odds, the Soviet-supported communist government held out another four years despite a unified and determined insurgency bent on toppling it. The Soviets achieved some success at political stability in Afghanistan but they eventually lost physical stability and both are needed for ultimate stability.

Physical stability, an absence of an insurgent or domestic/foreign terrorist threat, is relatively easier to achieve than political stability. Just as in the Soviet case in Afghanistan, America can and has beaten the Taliban in every battle since the American-Afghan conflict started. Despite America’s military strength, overall progress on the ground is difficult to gain because political stability is still so remote. A vicious cycle has taken hold in Afghanistan where a lack of political stability is impeding Afghan military objectives and achievements. The insurgency will never cease as long as political stability has not been achieved. At the same time, political stability will be extremely difficult to achieve so long as there is a self-sustaining insurgency (as in the Soviets’ experience in Afghanistan).

Likewise, one of the main reasons the American-Vietnamese war became so unmanageable was because political stability was never quite within reach (especially after the assassination of South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem). Despite the best efforts of the U.S., American blood, money, and weapons were not able to gain
the all-essential combination of political and physical stability in Vietnam. Indeed, the South Vietnamese military, alongside the full might of American military strength, was plenty capable of winning almost every single clash, battle, skirmish, engagement, or sortie that they engaged in with the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) and the Viet Minh/Cong. Yet the main reason the U.S. fled South Vietnam in 1973 with its tail between its legs is because the South Vietnamese government failed to strike a deal with the North. Since a deal was not reached, the North did not relent with its insurgency in the South, which led to mass confusion and chaos. This chaos led to political instability. Because there was political instability, the South did not have adequate leadership or organization to fight off the insurgency. Because the insurgency could not be defeated by the South’s military, the South was incapable of buying enough time to stabilize politically, which could have led to a stronger military. With the benefit of hindsight, the definitive moment in the Vietnam War that doomed our chances for future success (stability) was the military coup that toppled Ngo Dinh Diem’s regime. Perhaps even more damning was the subsequent murder of Diem and his brother. Not only did the South Vietnamese military lack someone fit to take over, but they very violently and degradingly got rid of the only glue holding things together. How did it get to this?

On November 2, 1963, South Vietnamese generals stormed the South Vietnamese presidential palace where then-President Ngo Dinh Diem resided. Diem and his brother were taken prisoner and subsequently executed by the generals en route
to a military compound. Although the United States government did not play a direct role in removing the very man they installed, they were fully aware of the coup’s existence and therefore gave the generals their full support. The logic behind this decision by President Kennedy was that the South Vietnamese and American public would not stand for Diem’s “oppressive” ways any longer. The American government saw Diem as an impotent leader, incapable of unifying South Vietnam around a single cause of defeating the Communists. Although Diem was staunchly anti-communist, the Kennedy Administration did not believe Diem and his brother had their entire heart into defeating the communist uprising in the South led by Ho Chi Minh.

Turn the clocks forward to the present day situation where there is a war going on in Afghanistan and most people do not believe enough progress is being made in the country’s stabilization. Many assume that the reason we are not gaining traction in Afghanistan is because the Afghan government, led by Hamid Karzai, is unable to provide basic security to its citizens. It is argued that security cannot be provided to the Afghan people because Karzai is incapable of unifying the Afghan government in Kabul with its citizens in the countryside. There has been talk by American policy makers about removing Karzai and his corruption-filled administration. These talks beg the question: Is the Karzai Administration incapable of providing the people of Afghanistan security from insurgents because Karzai is a weak leader? If that is the case, would removing Karzai from office solve this problem as some have suggested?
The problem with removing President Karzai is that his removal has the potential to cause history to repeat the mistakes America made in Vietnam. It can be claimed that success in the U.S.-Vietnam War was not completely out of reach until after we allowed the removal of South Vietnamese President Diem. Although Diem was seen as corrupt and incompetent, he was the only one who had the guts and capability to hold South Vietnam together. Upon hearing of Diem’s assassination, even Ho Chi Minh exclaimed: “I can scarcely believe that the Americans would be so stupid.” Analogous to the present-day situation in Afghanistan, Karzai is seen as corrupt and incompetent. Again, there is talk about his removal if we cannot gain traction. But does he hold the only key for working with the Taliban, ending the conflict, and thereby stabilizing the country? It may be that Karzai could be the only one strong enough, however corrupt he may be, to negotiate peace and bring stability to Afghanistan. On the opposite end, a case can be made for removing Karzai and removing him sooner rather than later. Then, and only then, will someone more competent and less corrupt be able to stabilize the war-torn nation.

From the Vietnam War to today, history suggests that removing a head of state has often not fared well for American foreign policy. Be it Sadaam Hussein, South Vietnamese President Diem, or democratically elected Iranian Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh, good foreign policy intentions have often been met head-on with blowback. The removal of President Karzai could induce such blowback. Blowback in Afghanistan would consist of the disintegration of the central
government, leading to total chaos among the Afghan National Army, leaving our military as the only barrier between the Afghani Taliban and control of the country. The United States will not commit the extra blood and economic losses required to fill the void of half a million absent Afghan security forces. This blowback would result in the Taliban gaining ground and momentum. That momentum could allow jihadists to gain free range of rural Afghanistan to train and to plan in order to harm Americans on U.S. soil as they did prior to September 11, 2001. Removing Karzai could indeed indirectly result in another 9/11. I cannot imagine any American willing to go back to a situation that could lead to another 9/11.

The principal hypothesis of this thesis is to argue that democratically elected Afghan President Hamid Karzai should not be removed by force or forced to resign for these reasons: (1) Karzai was a respected Pashtun in a majority Pashtun country, with deep tribal, political, and family connections throughout the region (much as President Diem was in South Vietnam); (2) these connections could best be used as leverage during potential negotiations with the Taliban; (3) the governments of the United States and Afghanistan cannot come up with an alternative that would possess these all important connections vital to a connections-based tribal system such as Afghanistan; (4) because we can find no one else with the same connections and experience as a leader, blowback is very likely if Karzai were to be removed (as exemplified by what happened with President Diem in South Vietnam).
In order to validate this hypothesis, I intend to structure the thesis into three principal parts: (1) Critical analysis of relevant Ngo Dinh Diem history; (2) Examination of Hamid Karzai and his administration’s history, followed by critiquing the parallels of Karzai’s current circumstances in Afghanistan and Diem’s historical situation in South Vietnam; (3) Investigation of current opinion on President Karzai followed by the arguments for and against his removal; culmination of all relevant data on Karzai and Diem, contemporary facts and opinions; answer to hypothesis question.

This is not a thesis about repeating the same combat tactical errors in Afghanistan as we did in Vietnam. Rather, this analysis is an attempt to arm the U.S. government with knowledge that could help avoid making the same political and policy judgment errors that were once made in Vietnam.
CHAPTER 2
CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF NGO DINH DIEM

At the core of this thesis is the history leading to Ngo Dinh Diem’s assassination, the subsequent aftermath and how this series of events relates to present-day Afghanistan. Part of the unintended consequences of contriving the overthrow of Diem in 1963 was that it did not help our situation and if anything, made things worse. After Diem’s assassination, the United States became more committed and more determined than ever to stop the spread of Communism in South Vietnam. This hindered not just the U.S. military, but the U.S. Presidency and Legislature for the next ten years.

Georgetown University professor Francis Winters wrote a book in 1999, changing the perception of Diem up until that point. He challenged contemporary opinion about Diem and made him appear more of a scapegoat than corrupt villain. In Winters’ “The Year of the Hare,” he made the claim that the decision to overthrow Diem was taken consciously for moral reasons by President John F. Kennedy’s cabinet, and was essentially a political exploitation by Kennedy who had finally succumbed to American domestic pressure for a regime modification in Saigon despite his own personal affinity for Diem. To understand the events that spun out of control after Diem’s death, one must understand the lead-up to the coup and the coup itself. The Year of the Hare depicts Kennedy as having buckled to the American press—
which was antagonizing the American public by publishing distorted and deceptive information about Diem’s regime—in order to pacify both conservatives and liberals.\(^1\) Unfortunately for Diem, the Kennedy administration was receiving too much of its information about South Vietnamese politics from the American press who in turn had taken an open, favorable position of the Buddhists during their “crises.” Alternatively, it was clear, even as late as July of 1963, that there was no real religious repression, only really a political crusade led by a small group of fanatical Buddhists who were determined to capsize the regime. Kennedy also accepted the skewed news reports of the anti-Diem activists that the Diem government was losing the war against the insurgents and that Diem and his brother Ngo Dinh Nhu were anti-American and were plotting with Hanoi to “kick the U.S. out.”

To understand the American-backed assassination of Ngo Dinh Diem, one must first understand America’s relationship with the man himself. The first question to ask when trying to understand this relationship is: why did the U.S. government initially support Diem and what changed their minds? Answering this question requires background information on the man they called, “Vietnam’s Mandarin.”\(^2\)

In the immediate aftermath of World War II, the thing to do (whether for practical or symbolic purposes) for most countries in the West was to free their


colonies. The Americans were about to grant independence to the Philippines and the British were planning to transfer power to India. The French, on the other hand, were hardly ready to give up their empire in any part of the world. In fact, they were just gearing up for a stand-off with the Viet Minh. The communists were underestimated by just about everyone, which led to a French defeat at Dien Bien Phu and an eventual withdrawal from the region.3

As the French began withdrawing its forces from Vietnam in 1954, an agreement was made in Geneva on July 21, 1954. The Geneva Settlement of 1954 temporarily divided Vietnam along the seventeenth parallel into two zones to which the rival military forces could withdraw and regroup. The partition was supposed to be temporary. After two years, countrywide elections were supposed to be held to decide whether or not to reunify Vietnam. Although the attitude of the U.S. toward the projected national elections was somewhat ambiguous, there is little doubt that policymakers in Washington soon came to view the new Government of Free Vietnam (as it termed itself) in the South as a bedrock in the emerging U.S. strategy for the defense of Southeast Asia from communist aggression and also feared the possibility of a Communist victory in such elections. The Viet Minh reluctantly accepted the settlement after, for differing reasons, receiving pressure from its Communist allies in Russia and China. To the U.S., it appeared that the Communists would clearly win the 1956 election and refused to sign the declaration from the Geneva Conference. As a

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counter to the Geneva Conference of 1954, U.S. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles convinced like-minded nations to pursue a “united action” strategy which resulted in the Manila Pact on September 8, 1954, creating the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO). SEATO had only three Asian members: Pakistan, Thailand and, the Philippines—in addition to the United States, the United Kingdom, France, New Zealand and Australia. Because it would have violated the Geneva agreement—something the U.S. said it would not sign but would also not interfere with—Laos, Cambodia and the newly formed South Vietnam could not and did not join SEATO. Probably the most controversial part of SEATO was that article five in the agreement labeled Laos, Cambodia and South Vietnam as “protocol” countries that would be defended by SEATO entities, thereby legitimizing later U.S. intervention in the Vietnam conflict.

The creation of SEATO aided in the continuation of the Cold War. The non-aligned powers in South and Southeast Asia—India, Burma, Cambodia, and Indonesia—opposed the pact and viewed it as an attempt by the United States to pick up in Vietnam where the French had left off. Most of South and Southeast Asia had just won or received independence from their colonial parents, and were not interested in another Western power’s callous attitude toward their new-found sovereignty, and instead only pursuing their own Cold War doctrine at any cost. This, as one would

imagine, angered many in Southeast Asia, not in the least, the North Vietnamese.

Writing in 1965 with the luxury of retrospect, a critic of U.S. policy observed:

In these two years [1954-1955] can be found the roots of the critical political military situation as it has existed in Vietnam since 1960. In 1954 and 1955 the United States could still have charted a different course. But once it chose the direction it did in 1954 and proceeded in that direction through 1956, it became a captive of its policy and committed to its continuation.⁵

The key to success, in Washington’s eyes, was going to be whether they would be able to find political leadership that could provide a measure of stability and direction and the basis for the rise of a strong and viable non-Communist society in the southern half of Vietnam. Bao Dai, the then-current imperial chief of state, was considered by many in the U.S. to be lacking in competence, too pro-French, and tainted by his imperial past.⁶ What U.S. officials were searching for at this point was someone who would provide strong political leadership, who was anti-communist and a true neo-nationalist.

On June 16, 1954, while the Geneva Conference was still in session, the French government, along with Emperor Bao Dai, announced the appointment of Ngo Dinh Diem as premier of the “state” of Vietnam. According to Bao Dai himself, he appointed Diem a month before the conclusion of the Geneva Conference in the hope

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that his firm anti-Communist credentials would induce the United States to provide assistance to his government after the departure of the French.\textsuperscript{7}

Ngo Dinh Diem was a mixture of monk and mandarin. He came from a prestigious Catholic family from Phu Cam in central Vietnam that had converted to Christianity in the seventeenth century. The Diem family had deep connections with the old imperial court in Hue.

Following in the footsteps of an older brother, Khoi, who had enrolled in the civil service, Diem entered the School of Law and Administration, a French institution for training native bureaucrats. Promoted rapidly after graduation, he became a provincial governor at the age of twenty-five. As provincial governor, he would ride through the countryside on horseback. It was during these rides that he first noticed local Communist agents distributing propaganda. He tried to fight fire with fire by publishing his own pamphlets, eradicating corruption, and improving the conditions of peasants in his area but, as he later recollected, “I was working with advanced ideas in very small dimensions.”\textsuperscript{8}

Diem had been involved in Vietnamese politics prior to World War II and their Pacific war against the Japanese. In 1933, the French advised Bao Dai—just back from France to ascend to the throne—to name Diem his minister of interior. They also appointed him to a commission to examine administrative reforms. Diem prodded the


French to find out exactly how far these reforms would go. After taking this post, he insisted that the French invest real influence in a Vietnamese legislature, but his demands were snubbed. He resigned in protest after only three months, publicly exclaiming that he could not “act against the interests of my country.” The French stripped him of his decorations and titles, and even threatened to arrest him. Summing up the experience, Diem made a prophetic comment at the time: “The communists will defeat us, not by virtue of their strength, but because of our weakness. They will win by default.” His reputation as a nationalist and a good administrator prompted Ho Chi Minh to invite him to join his government in 1945. Diem refused because of the Viet Minh’s terrible acts toward his family and countless others. In August 1950, Diem left Vietnam for the United States where he lived until 1953, frequenting many different seminaries. During his time abroad, Diem spoke out in favor of the Vietnamese nationalist movement to prominent Western officials, including then-Senator John Kennedy and Senator Mike Mansfield. While the Geneva Conference was in session, Diem and his brother Luyen were schmoozing French officials in Paris. On June 18, 1964, the French government, along with Emperor Bao Dai, announced the appointment of Ngo Dinh Diem as premier of the “state” of Vietnam.

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9 Ibid.

10 Ibid., 216.

11 Ibid., 218.
The absurdity of the Geneva Conference had postponed rather than achieved a settlement. Diem rejected the Geneva decisions and refused to cooperate with the U.S. But the North Vietnamese, who had fought to unify Vietnam, would not accept the prospect of a permanent partition. The Communists prepared to renew their struggle, again challenging the policy of containment that had originally brought the United States to Southeast Asia.\textsuperscript{12}

The question must arise as to why the United States would commit so much money and effort into a leader who they were merely going to kill nine years later anyway. This begs the questions: Why would we undertake such a behemoth project with a partner who they viewed as someone less than capable of doing the job? Why were so many prominent Americans convinced that Diem could guide Vietnam to independence away from communist rule? And why did America stick by with Diem for so long? A micro-answer is that he was the best choice they had at the moment and that they were moderately impressed with his ability to govern for the first couple years of his presidency.

Following the Geneva Conference, conscientious Vietnamese nationalists, outside the confines of the Vietminh were not easy to find. Many had been eliminated by the Communists, killed by the French, or had withdrawn from politics to private occupations in Saigon. Some chose political activism in France. Simply put, Ngo Dinh Diem filled a power vacuum.

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 204.
A macro-answer would have to look at the broader, early Cold War context. There were a number of specific environmental circumstances that had to be in place for Diem to be able to not only seize power initially, but to hold onto it for almost a decade. One such contingency was the international setting at the time, where the countries that emerged from the ashes of World War II switched their focus from the stagnation in Europe to the ostensibly more accommodating fronts in the periphery of the third world. Among the newly emergent nations where the U.S., Soviet Union, and China maneuvered for influence was Vietnam. This was partly because of the country’s material and strategic value, but mainly because of its emblematic connotation as a “domino” whose fall to Communism could not be conceded lest it trigger a chain reaction. Since none of the superpowers wanted to be smeared as a neo-colonialist, all favored to employ military, political, and economic authority over their third-world satellites through a native autocrat, either staunchly Communist or anti-Communist. The degree of indigenous support on which those strongmen could call varied greatly. Sometimes, as in the case of Ho Chi Minh, it was considerable, while in Diem’s context it had to be propagated by interlopers. Rarely did the local governor’s plans correlate wholly with that of his financier. In fact, American journalists labeled Diem as a “puppet who pulled his own strings.”13 But both Communist and anti-Communist superpowers waged their Cold War, to a large extent,

by proxy in areas like the Middle East, Central Africa, South and Central America, and of course, Southeast Asia. This permitted them to diminish their own casualties and solidify the apparition that they had no imperialistic ambitions. Few South Vietnamese were misled by this ploy, and the Diem regime earned the loathed nickname “My-Diem”—(American Diem)—before Diem completed his first year in office.\textsuperscript{14}

Additionally, essential to Diem’s ascension and continuity was the domestic environment in the U.S., where anti-Communist delirium—commonly called McCarthyism—made Diem distinctly alluring to Americans hustling to prevent South Vietnam’s assimilation by the Soviet empire. Diem’s piously anti-Communism stance granted him almost immune to criticism in the American media. Some in the press portrayed Diem as the “Miracle Man” who single-handedly saved twelve million Vietnamese from Communist bondage, and Washington cold warriors—both of liberal and conservative temperament alike—embraced this illusion, either out of genuine conviction or because they recognized that to do otherwise would be political suicide. It was not until the early 1960s, when the U.S. public’s leeriness punctured a hole into the Red Scare fever encapsulating the nation that the U.S. government began casting a more condemning eye on the Diem administration it had helped create in South Vietnam.

Furthermore, conditions within Diem’s own country facilitated the emergence and persistence of his dictatorship. The trauma of two wars, one against the Japanese and the other between the French and Viet Minh, created an extremely volatile situation in Vietnam by the mid-1950s in which numerous groups contended for dominance. Diem’s ability to draw on the United States as an ally proved adequate to support his ascension above his rivals and establish a precarious bulwark, after which he took the factious step of deposing Vietnam’s emperor (Bao Dai) and proclaiming a “republic.” His subsequent reign of terror—as some have called it—subsidized by the U.S., succeeded in killing, jailing, or frightening into submission most opposition, with the exception of a communist guerrilla movement that gained increasing force and popularity as the 1950s gave way to the 1960s. The determination of the North Vietnamese authorities to concentrate on domestic problems in its half of Vietnam during the first five years of Diem’s rule helped Diem solidify his position as absolute master in the South and preside over a regime of apparent order and prosperity. Not until 1960 did Ho Chi Minh authorize the formation of the National Liberation Front (NLF) to provoke a general uprising against the Saigon government. By that point, American policymakers had invested so much credit in their Diem experiment—monetarily and in belief—that they could not jump ship without enduring a repugnant diplomatic loss of face. Their only option, as they perceived it, was to invest more. Despite the general misgivings about Diem’s popularity, the potent Senator Mansfield recommended that if the Diem government collapsed, “the United States should
consider an immediate suspension of all aid to Vietnam . . . except that of a humanitarian nature.”¹⁵ The U.S. State Department interpreted this to mean that all aid should be given to the Diem government to prevent it from falling.

Following the Geneva Conference, reputable Vietnamese nationalists outside the ranks of the Vietminh were hard to come by. Many had been liquidated by the Communists, killed by the French, or had withdrawn from politics to private occupations in Saigon. Some had even moved to France to become activists from afar. Simply put, Ngo Dinh Diem filled a vacuum.

What Were the Options?

“President Diem is the Churchill of the decade . . . in the vanguard of those leaders who stand for freedom.” These words were spoken by then-Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson.¹⁶ Initially, the United States underestimated Diem “because we knew of no one better,” as former Secretary of State Dulles put it.¹⁷ But while they publicly extolled him, U.S. officials were not deluded by their own rhetoric and privately conceded, as Dulles had, that they could find no alternative. When later asked about whether he meant the comparison of Diem and Churchill, Johnson’s response was, “Shit, Diem’s the only boy we got out there.”¹⁸


¹⁷ Ibid., 214.

¹⁸ Ibid.
Before the accolades and then removal by the Kennedy Administration, the Eisenhower team was hardly excited about their new man. Eisenhower’s personal emissary, General J. Lawton Collins, sensed the discontent surrounding the situation and agreed with the French that Diem was “hopeless.” Having sent numerous cables from Saigon to Washington, pleading with President Eisenhower to get rid of Diem and replace him with another South Vietnamese, Collins campaigned more strenuously than anyone for the abandonment of the Diem experiment.\(^{19}\) Donald Heath, Eisenhower’s U.S. ambassador to Vietnam, thought that even though assisting Diem was a gamble, denying him assistance would have a “far greater effect.”\(^{20}\) Dulles argued that the United States had “no choice” except to bolster Diem, “if only to buy time.”\(^{21}\) Dulles said the same thing to the Prime Minister of France, Pierre Mendes, and his successor, Edgar Faure, who called Diem “not only incapable but mad.”\(^{22}\)

With the partition of the country in July 1954, Diem faced numerous challenges to his authority. Therefore, despite America’s initial misgivings about installing Diem as the president, their immediate concerns were laid to rest with what seemed to be a competent South Vietnamese administration, capable of running the domestic affairs of the country. The initial success of Diem’s administration could perhaps be considered

\(^{19}\) Ibid., 220.

\(^{20}\) Ibid.

\(^{21}\) Ibid.

\(^{22}\) Ibid.
illusory with the benefit of reexamination, but in the mid 1950s, the U.S. government was all too eager to promote a stable, non-Communist South Vietnamese government and any success, big or small, looked like behemoth victories.

Additionally, with the help of American advisors, such as (Colonel Edward Lansdale), Diem foiled his own general’s, (Nguyen Van Hinh) planned coup d’état. Diem also succeeded in handling the problem of relocating nearly one million Vietnamese refugees, most of them being Catholics from North Vietnam. The Americans paraded Diem around as a “nationalist alternative” to Communist Ho Chi Minh. Diem was well on his way toward ensuring continued American aid and securing his own position as head of state with these early successes. No other success was as instrumental in securing America’s support as when he triumphantly steered his administration through the “sects crises.”

At the beginning of Diem’s administration, South Vietnam, for the most part, was under the erratic control of the Cao Dai and Hoa Hao sects, each with private armies estimated at fifty thousand men, and the Binh Xuyen sect, which held gambling houses, narcotic rings, nightclubs and brothels and essentially controlled Saigon’s police force. Diem was even able to outsmart these domestic adversaries. When they defied his regime, he bribed several of their leaders to rally around him. One of Diem’s generals, Duong Van Minh, eventually put an end to the infringing sects in early 1956 by capturing the fanatical Hoa Hao guerrilla commander who was then

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23 Ibid., 148.
publicly beheaded. In protest to Diem and his tightened grip on power, the French government began funneling resources and intelligence to the Binh Xuyen. Former Emperor Bao Dai entered the scene and hoped to manipulate some of the factions in Saigon. Diem was written off by many—not just in Vietnam—but around the globe. Influential newspaper columnist Joseph Alsop wrote him off as “virtually impotent.” However, Diem came roaring back as Southeast Asia’s Come-back Kid.

Acknowledging the Binh Xuyen sect as the last real challenge to his authority, Diem decided to meet them head-on in the streets of Saigon with his army after they ignored his order to stay out of the city. Diem sent his forces into the Binh Xuyen strongholds and they replied by shelling his presidential palace. Saigon was officially a warzone. The rival forces fought each other street by street. The two factions lobbed mortar and artillery shells at each other which resulted in twenty thousand people homeless. In the end, Diem’s forces routed the Binh Xuyen despite the destruction to the city. The leader of the Binh Xuyen sect, Bay Vien, was now hiding in Paris. In order to secure his position, Diem held a referendum on October 23, 1955 and received a whopping ninety-nine percent of the vote, which resulted in the removal of Bao Dai and made Diem the president of the new Republic of Vietnam. Diem’s administration held complete control over Saigon and could at last implement some long awaited reforms.

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24 Ibid., 223.
Beginning of the End

It has been said that Kennedy’s decision to overthrow Diem was in line with American public opinion. The support from the public, in the eyes of the Kennedy administration, would lead to his re-election, which he then identified with the American “national interest.”

Francis Winters believes that the question of Vietnam, if Kennedy had lived, must be understood with reference to his overriding concern: getting reelected in 1964. Winters says that Kennedy’s authorization of the coup against Diem in Saigon was part of a strategy to eliminate Vietnam as an issue during his campaign for re-election because Diem and South Vietnam were both politically toxic. He thinks that Kennedy would have withdrawn as soon as possible, maybe in early 1964—a strategy Vice President Johnson either did not understand or did not endorse. On October 31, 1963, just weeks before he was assassinated, Kennedy stated that “... we would expect to withdraw a thousand men from South Vietnam before the end of the year.” This assertion by Kennedy could indicate that not only was he in campaign mode, but that he had a plan to set things right in South Vietnam.

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25 Winters, The Year of the Hare, 193.


27 Winters, The Year of the Hare, 193.

For the first few years of his presidency, it was as if Diem could do no wrong. His approval ratings were both high in America and more importantly, in South Vietnam. Although he was seen as simply “good enough” by U.S. leadership and not supported by the French, Ho Chi Minh or Bao Dai, he was the democratically elected poster child at the epicenter of the ideological wars being fought between the Soviet Union and the United States. It would not take long for the American leadership to get cold feet and privately decide that Diem could do no right.

In its second year of rule, Diem’s government became the direct economic beneficiary of American aid after they dropped the French Union’s franc zone officially. As a result, Diem’s administration gained greater military loyalty because they now controlled the budget to the Vietnamese National Army. Some American leaders speculated that because Diem was no longer losing sleep over whether or not the Army would rebel, he could now implement meaningful reforms. It is interesting to note that, at the time, General J. Lawton Collins mentioned that Diem’s leverage over the Vietnamese National Army budget and appropriations process could backfire if he used this neoteric supremacy to induce a crusade against his opponents.29

If Diem masterfully suppressed the Saigon sects, he likely jumped the gun on suppressing Communism. Instead of riding his administration’s newfound credibility into economic and social reform, he used it to denounce Communism—perhaps at the

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direction of the United States—and went after the individuals and groups in the South he perceived as either Communist or a threat to his presidency. He went about this with numerous methods. He used “emergency powers” and vague definitions of treason to carry out arrests, imprisonments and executions. His witch-hunt for Communists seemed extreme even juxtaposed to the overbearing South Vietnamese constitution. It was not long before much of the world realized they had another police state and family dictatorship. Kinship has always played a prominent role in Vietnamese culture, and loyalty to family members was, unsurprisingly, a core value both North and South of the seventeenth parallel. Diem, however, took family devotion to a new level.

Whatever authority Diem could bring himself to delegate, he placed in the hands of his family. His brother Nhu became head of Diem’s security apparatus which included a secret police that was trained by advisors from Michigan State University. Nhu’s police force terrorized alleged Communists and opponents, rounded up most, and executed many using a newly created military tribunal that delivered a judgment within three days after the accused were cited for “provoking economic disturbances” or “disrupting the security of the state.” It was soon clear that America’s “strongman” did not place much value on Western-style freedoms. Elections were rigged, the press,

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radio, and television were under government control (more so than what they experienced under the French), and the legislature was a rubber-stamp body.\(^{31}\)

Furthermore, by 1960 Diem had alienated major sections of the South Vietnamese constituency, even with their best interest and his best intentions in mind. One example is when he made serious attempts at land reform in the South. Official policies under the former French colonial regime had resulted in much of the land in the rich Mekong Delta being left in the hands of few landlords, many of them absentee owners living in Saigon and charging extremely high rents to their occupants. According to generally accepted statistics, throughout the country, 2.5% of all landowners owned approximately fifty percent of all the cultivable land. Diem wanted to reduce inequalities in land holdings, thereby winning the support of the rural population.\(^{32}\) One attempt in the mid-1950s was more of an agriculture/land redistribution program termed “agroville program” that failed on two counts. First, it did not bring the equal distribution result he had planned and eventually backfired. The reforms were ill conceived and poorly implemented with disastrous results. He essentially sought to rehabilitate refugees and the landless poor by expropriating and redistributing landholdings. His government, however, could only account for 15 percent of the land being redistributed to peasants. Additionally, because most of the land that was taken was given to prominent Catholic refugees from the North, vast

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amounts of peasants working the land found themselves resenting the government for injecting “foreigners” into the area they had called home for generations. Often was the case where peasants were asked to purchase land that had previously been given to them under the Viet Minh’s control. On top of this, the Diem government replaced many village notables in the Mekong Delta with its hand-picked appointees, again Catholic “outsiders,” essentially annulling the two-thousand-year-old Vietnamese tradition of village self-determination. The new foreign village leaders were incapable of suppressing or resolving the antipathy much less inspire confidence and trust among the peasantry.

Another later, failed attempt at land reform laid its origins in, as Diem saw it, logistics and security. The “Strategic Hamlet Program” was one that originated from Diem observing some villages, mainly Catholic, forming their own militias and defending themselves from attempted infiltration by the Viet Minh. Diem had wanted to redeem himself from the discontent that erupted from the agroville program. This time, he reasoned, the government would not displace people, but rather build fortifications around existing villages. Ultimately, many peasants in the South were uprooted and moved into fortified locations, often at gunpoint. While living in the hamlets, villagers were subjected to house searches every day to make sure no Communists were hiding. The villagers saw this as an affront by Diem’s
administration. They were not accustomed to compliance with a central government and it simply added to the mounting distrust.\textsuperscript{33} Additionally, Diem gave Chinese nationalists living in Saigon an ultimatum that won him no friends. During his administration, some three-hundred-thousand Chinese businesspeople and day laborers lived in Saigon and its suburbs—a quarter of its population. Diem told them to commit to becoming a Vietnamese citizen or lose your business and working license. Some complied and became citizens. Others went back to China and still others moved further out into the countryside, temporarily suffocating Saigon’s economy.\textsuperscript{34}

The Diem administration’s attempts at controlling South Vietnam with Northern and Central Vietnamese alienated him from the Southern constituency. The sects he bribed or defeated militarily, as well as the mountainous minorities, abhorred Diem for trying to submit them to a previously unheard of central authority. The Chinese nationalists living in and around Saigon resented Diem for trying to force them into Vietnamese citizenship. The intellectuals in Saigon—who were once his friends—turned their backs on him after he began censoring free speech. Peasants were annoyed with the government’s inability to deliver on its promises of pro-farmer land reforms. More and more, Diem seemed to be isolating himself from the constituency that once welcomed a fresh face who had new ideas.

\textsuperscript{33} Winters, \textit{The Year of the Hare}, 160-61.

\textsuperscript{34} Karnow, \textit{Vietnam: A History}, 231.
Despite Diem’s disconnect with the rest of South Vietnam, the United States was willing to look past the discontent in the South if it meant not only preventing Communists from gaining ground, but also if it meant that the American public still approved of his actions. The straws that broke the camel’s back and that eventually led to Diem’s demise, was the dual insult of perpetual family corruption and cronyism combined with the perceived alienation of Buddhists in favor of his fellow Catholics.

In an unfortunate case of irony, Diem was indirectly brought down not by Communists or by the three attempted military coups that preceded the final one, but by non-Communist forces who resented the Diem’s corrupt family and suppression of religion. These were the sparks that created a crisis that would lead to a go-ahead nod from the Central Intelligence Agency and then his assassination at the hands of his own generals.

**Family Ties**

You cannot speak of the Diem government without mentioning his family—who helped run the country. The problem for Diem, was that the Vietnamese and Americans knew it all to well. Although making a democratic government a family affair may sound harmless, the corruption and cronyism that comes along with that is inseparable. Diem had help from his family up and down the coast of South Vietnam. In South Vietnam, and at one time throughout most of Vietnam, the sun never set on Ngo family influence. Diem’s government had become a narrow oligarchy composed of his brothers and other relatives. The brothers rivaled each other for power and
influence and operated through separate factions that resembled traditional Vietnamese secret societies. Nhu, for example, ran the Can Lao Nhan Vi Dang, or Personalist Labor Party, whose members, many of them Catholics, held key posts in the government bureaucracy. His undercover police were directed by Dr. Tran Kim Tuyen, a Northern Catholic who also directed an intelligence network with the guidance of CIA advisers. But Nhu’s men could not intrude into Central Vietnam, the fiefdom of brother Can, a virtual warlord. The two brothers competed through their business agents for the rice trade and American aid contracts. Nephews, cousins, and in-laws, granted special licenses because of family connections, underwrote the Nho clan with money as well. Diem’s brother Thuc, the bishop, had a hand in making investments on behalf of the Catholic Church. As much as they squabbled among themselves, however, the brothers stuck together under pressure, and Diem’s refusal to delegate power beyond his kinship circle limited his personal appeal.35

Ngo Dinh Kha, Diem’s father, was a Catholic Mandarin from the Imperial city of Hue. The Ngo clan was almost wiped out when a Buddhist mob raided his family’s village, herded over one hundred of them into a church, and burned it down.36 Kha, who was abroad at the time, survived to have nine children. Although monetarily poor, Diem’s father joined the court of Emperor Than Thai around 1901. Here, Kha rose quickly in the ranks of the mandarinate, becoming minister of the rites, grand

35 Ibid., 235.
36 Ibid., 142.
chamberlain, and keeper of the eunuchs. From then on, the Ngos were a prominent, affluent, Central Vietnamese family. Kha made it a priority to educate his children and was successful in doing so. Kha also ran a private school around Hue that ironically taught the original Viet Minh leader Vo Nguyen Giap.\textsuperscript{37} One of Diem’s brothers, Ngo Dinh Khoi, was an influential nationalist in Central Vietnam. He was a provincial governor before he and his son were buried alive by Ho Chi Minh after the August Revolution in 1945. Diem never forgave Ho.\textsuperscript{38}

Diem’s younger brother, Ngo Dinh Can, was not just his confidant but was also another important member of his government. Can—who along with his brothers would later be executed—was put in charge of Central Vietnam. It is said that he ran Central Vietnam as a virtual dictator. Based out of the East-Central city of Hue, Can operated private armies and the secret police that controlled the Central region.

The salient Ngo family lineage hardly stopped at Can. As the senior member of the Ngo family, Diem’s brother Ngo Dinh Thuc was the preeminent inside the family. Thuc was the Catholic Archbishop of Hue, and extremely influential in Central Vietnam.

As you can see, Diem’s family ties to the region ran long and deep. If he needed something done, he could count on his family to get it done for him. In such a volatile time and place, it was essential for Diem to have a set of semi-strongmen he

\textsuperscript{37} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., 215.
could trust. Above all, however, there were two “strong-people” who emerged as the most vital, yet controversial, to Diem’s authority: His brother Ngo Dinh Nhu and his wife, “Madam Ngu.”

The Nhu’s

As Diem’s attempted reforms made things worse, he turned more and more to his brother Nhu. The American government caught on to the fact that Nhu was part of Diem’s problems. In 1960, Elbridge Durbrow, then the American ambassador in Saigon, warned Diem that Nhu and his wife were damaging the government’s reputation and tactfully suggested that they be sent abroad. Diem dismissed the criticism of his brother as “Communist propaganda.” Durbrow then sent a cable to Washington stating that “. . . we may well be forced, in the not too distant future, to undertake the difficult task of identifying and supporting alternative leadership.”

Diem had family surrounding him on every side. At that time, Vietnam was a place where no one except family could be trusted. Diem and Nhu had little left of the power they once held; even Nhu’s chief lieutenant in carrying out the strategic hamlet program was a secret Communist operative. Years later, it was discovered that Colonel Pham Ngoc Thao had deliberately propelled the program ahead at breakneck speed in order to estrange South Vietnam’s peasants and drive them into the arms of

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While the South Vietnamese could not take any more of Nhu’s backroom deals and secret police, the United States could not take any more of his wife—Madam Nhu. Ngo Dinh Nhu’s shenanigans as his brother’s right-hand man blemished the Saigon government’s credibility, but its reputation was tarnished more aggressively by Madame Nhu who soared into notoriety as her husband’s influence heightened. Madame Nhu fiercely reproached the United States during the first three years of the 1960s, alleging on more than one occasion that Americans were plotting with Vietnamese dissidents to topple Diem. Although a fierce anti-Communist, she was a constant thorn in the side of the United States, and they thought of her as a fly at a picnic. She would publicly claim things and accuse the U.S. of treating Vietnamese as “lackeys and prostitutes.” She even stated on television that although she hated the United States, “. . . I still love receiving their money.” While she made no friends at the White House or the State Department, she made even fewer friends in her own country. She promoted an edict abolishing divorce and making adultery a crime, and, in the name of protecting Vietnam’s “traditional virtue,” she banned abortions, contraceptives, beauty contests, and boxing matches. She closed Saigon’s nightclubs and ballrooms, asserting that “dancing with death is enough,” but she allowed cafes to remain open—on condition that bar girls, most of whom were prostitutes, wear conservative white tunics. The permissive Vietnamese scorned her sanctimonious

41 Ibid., 257.

42 Winters, The Year of the Hare, 27.
decrees, especially since her own siblings were scarcely models of rectitude. Her playboy brother, Khiem, used his lofty connections to extort money from wealthy merchants. Her stringent divorce law had also been designed to prevent her sister, Le Chi, who had a French lover, from breaking with her husband, whose enormous riches would have then been denied to the family. Even with all of this, the final straw must have been her exacerbation of the Buddhist crises after the immolations started. Again, she went on television and nationally claimed that the self-immolations were a “barbeque,” and told one interviewer, “Let them burn and we shall clap our hands.” This was not the message that Washington wanted Diem’s government to convey to a majority Buddhist country, and certainly not the images and statements that they wanted seen and heard in an American democracy that was in the midst of a presidential re-election campaign. In the end, the Ngo family demise came from a reaction by the U.S. government to a perceived Vietnamese crises that they thought was spilling over onto American soil—The Buddhist Crises.  

The Buddhist Crises

The most serious challenge to Diem’s authority came in the spring and summer of 1963 by religious malcontents. Before now, it was clear that Diem favored the Catholics over the Buddhists. Now, his administration was on the verge of downright Buddhist oppression. The movement—led by Buddhist monks and nuns—drew its

strength not from the abstractions of Communist ideology, which could only be
antithetical to Buddhism, but from the wave of social discontent silently sweeping the
population. If the people in South Vietnam were looking for some divine indication
that Diem had forfeited his mandate to rule the country, a clear sign appeared on May
7, 1963, when his brother, Archbishop Ngo Dinh Thuc, forbade the display of Buddhist
flags in Hue to commemorate the 2,527th anniversary of the birth of Buddha and
banned the general festivities as well. In contrast, in the previous week, he had
permitted Catholics of Hue to display white papal banners to mark silver jubilee of his
own ordination as a Catholic priest. On May 8, when several thousand Buddhists
assembled in Hue to celebrate Buddha’s birth, the deputy chief of the province, Major
Dang Xi, a Catholic, invoked the old government decree to prohibit flying the Buddhist
flags without prior permission. The local radio station was to broadcast a speech by
the much-respected bonze, Thich Quang Duc, as a part of the celebrations. A crowd
of three-thousand congregated outside the radio station to listen to the bonze’s speech.
Suddenly, the radio station canceled the speech on grounds that it had not been
submitted to the censors. In order to deal with the crowd, the station director called for
help from Major Dang Xi, who promptly sent five armored cars. The commander
ordered the crowd to disperse; however, tear gas and bullets were unleashed upon the
crowd before they had notice or time to flee. Nine people died during the incident.

44 Ellen J. Hammer, A Death in November: America in Vietnam, 1963 (New

45 Jacobs, Cold War Mandarin, 142.
Instead of holding the commander responsible, the Diem government blamed it all—including the loss of lives—on the Viet Cong.\textsuperscript{46}

To protest the government’s actions, the Buddhists launched a series of self-immolations, beginning on June 11, 1963, with Thich Quang Duc sitting in the middle of a busy intersection in Saigon as his fellow monks and nuns doused him in gas and set him on fire in full view of the public, and most importantly, the media. The press and television coverage of the event brought the magnitude of the government’s injustice and callousness, as well as the sacrifices of the Buddhist Bonzes to an international audience. The monks made sure that the American media reporters and cameramen were present on the scene to record and later broadcast the self-immolations. For the rest of the summer, Buddhist demonstrations persisted. Diem and Nhu proclaimed martial law in response. Nhu’s Special Forces attacked temples across South Vietnam, battling protestors that turned into rioters and arresting more than 4,000. Even Madame Nhu’s father, Vu Van Mau, who was also ambassador to the United States, resigned from his position and toured the country deploring the Diem regime’s repressive measures against the Buddhist majority.\textsuperscript{47}

The events of the summer of 1963 led to major changes in U.S. policy toward the Diem government. On the day following Nhu’s temple raids, Henry Cabot Lodge, Jr., arrived in Saigon as the new U.S. ambassador replacing the pro-Diem Frederick

\textsuperscript{46} Ibid., 143.

\textsuperscript{47} Karnow, Vietnam: A History, 286.
Nolting. Lodge’s report two days later to Washington formed the basis of a new policy that would culminate nine weeks later with the end of the Diem regime. The State Department, in what was to become one of the most controversial and crucial decisions of the Kennedy administration, authorized Lodge to proceed with a coup if his efforts to secure the removal of Nhu and his wife from the Diem administration failed.

During extensive meetings, Lodge attempted to convince Diem of the political benefit of distancing himself from his controversial brother, Nhu and his vitriolic-tongued wife, Madame Nhu. Diem refused. Through the local CIA operative, Lucien Conien, Lodge remained in contact with anti-Diem generals who were contemplating a coup.

On November 1, 1963, both Diem and his brother Nhu, lay dead in a van. Now at the helm, General Nguyen Van Thieu—who oversaw the coup—would not hold on to power long, resulting in the constant succession of South Vietnamese presidents that eventually spiraled out of control and only ended with the U.S. fleeing the country and the North Vietnamese knocking on the presidential palace’s doors in 1975.
CHAPTER 3
HISTORICAL EXAMINATION OF HAMID KARZAI AND HIS ADMINISTRATION

Studying the political situation that led to Ngo Dinh Diem’s assassination is as essential today in our fight against the insurgency in Afghanistan as it was in Vietnam. The parallels of the Vietnam and Afghan conflicts are striking. Even more astounding are the similarities between the Ngos and the Karzais. In order to avoid a revolving door of ineffective heads of state in Afghanistan, we must take a closer look at their current president, Hamid Karzai, including his background and his relationship with the United States. Examining this comparison to Ngo Dinh Diem and his administration and understanding what went wrong in South Vietnam can avert a political catastrophe in Kabul today. Avoiding a political catastrophe in Kabul is essential for political stability in not only Afghanistan but the entire region. Political instability attracts physical instability which attracts terrorists that want to do America harm.

When the United Nations assembled a meeting of Afghan factions to choose Afghanistan’s post-Taliban president in Bonn, Germany, in December 2001, there was, in actuality, only one man in contention. Everyone knew the new interim head of state had to be a Pashtun—the largest ethnic group in Afghanistan that had ruled the country for 250 years. There were only two Pashtun leaders who had returned from Pakistan to
confront the Taliban after 9/11, and one of them, Abdul Haq, had been captured and executed by the embattled regime two months earlier. That left only Hamid Karzai.¹

**Hamid Karzai**

Hamid Karzai was born on December 24, 1957 in Kandahar. He was the fourth of eight children born to Abdul Ahad Karzai and his wife, Durko. His father had been chief of the Popalzai tribe, a former deputy speaker of parliament, and immensely respected for his honesty and wisdom by all the southern Pashtun tribes. Subsequently, all the children except two, Hamid and his younger half-brother, Ahmed Wali, emigrated and settled in the United States, a dreadful example of the Afghan migration after the Soviet invasion. Hamid Karzai went to primary school in his native city of Kandahar and then attended high school in Kabul. It was a typical childhood for a member of the Pashtun elite—a constant flow of high-profile visitors for his father arriving at their Kandahar home, long summer holidays in the hot city, picnics beside lakes, and at mountain resorts outside Kabul.²

Hamid’s father supported King Zahir Shah, who attempted to set up a constitutional monarchy in the late 1960s but refused to yield power to a partially elected parliament. The king’s stubbornness led to him be overthrown by his own cousin, Mohammed Daud, in 1973. Just prior to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in

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1979, Karzai gained admission to Himachal Pradesh University in northern India, where he studied political science. As millions of Afghans fled to Pakistan and Iran, an anti-Soviet resistance began to organize, and Karzai wished to join these guerrilla fighters. His father urged him to finish his studies first. The Karzai family fled to Pakistan and settled in Quetta in order to be close to Kandahar. Hamid Karzai completed his degree in India and arrived in Peshawar in 1983 determined to help the Mujahedins. General Zia ul-Haq, the leader of the Pakistani military regime, allowed only seven exiled Afghan political parties to operate from Peshawar and receive aid from the Central Intelligence Agency. All seven were religion-based, as Zia forbade Afghan nationalist, democratic, or secular left-wing parties to operate from Pakistan. He insisted that the parties speak of the war as a jihad and not as a national liberation movement. The Pakistani Inter-services Intelligence (ISI) used money and arms from the CIA as bribes to keep the Mujahedin’s parties in line—even as it channeled the greatest proportion of the aid to the most extreme groups. Rather than throw in his lot with the fundamentalist parties in General Zia’s favor, Karzai joined the National Liberation Front of Afghanistan, led by the spiritual leader Sibghatullah Mujaddedi. Karzai’s charm, wit, easygoing manner, command of languages, and ability to seek compromise rather than confrontation with his Mujahedin partners won him many friends in Peshawar. He became the spokesman and then foreign policy adviser for Mujaddedi.  

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3 Hazrat Saheb, “Professor Sibghatullah Al-Mojaddedi,”
Once the Soviet forces withdrew from Afghanistan and the communist President Mohammed Najibullah stepped down, a race to fill the power vacuum in Kabul commenced between that Pashtun forces of the South and the Tajiks of the North. The Tajik forces won, and the capital fell into the hands of non-Pashtuns for the first time in three hundred years (other than for a brief moment in 1929 when Amir Habibullah Ghazi, a Tajik, ruled Afghanistan). As part of a complex agreement between the Mujahedin in which they agreed to a rotating presidency, Mujaddedi became the president for the first four months of what was now the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, and Karzai became deputy foreign minister. The new nation of Afghanistan quickly broke out into civil war among half a dozen factions. Order did not emerge, unfortunately, until the arrival of the Taliban. Even to Karzai, the Taliban appeared to be fresh new face on what had become widespread panic in the country.

As he mentioned to Pakistani journalist Ahmed Rashid in 2001:

Like so many Mujahedin I believed in the Taliban when they first appeared in 1994 and promised to end warlordism, establish law and order, and then call a Loya Jirga (Pashto for “grand assembly”) to decide who should rule Afghanistan. The first Taliban I met told me that the jihad had become a disgrace and the civil war was destroying the country. After the Taliban captured Kandahar, I gave them fifty thousand dollars to help them out, and then handed them a cache of weapons I had hidden near Kandahar. I met Mullah Omar several times and he offered to appoint me as their envoy to the UN. They were good


people initially, but the tragedy was that very soon after they were taken over by the ISI and became a proxy. When the Taliban captured Ghazni, I began to receive reports about foreigners in their ranks who were encouraging them to shut down girls’ schools. I realized what was happening when I called into the Pakistan Foreign Office to discuss the modalities for my becoming the Taliban envoy at the UN. Can you imagine? Pakistan was setting up the Taliban diplomatic corps. I refused and walked out. Later the Taliban were to come under the influence of al Qaeda. That is when I began to organize against them. In 1998, I warned the Americans and the British many, many times that Osama bin Laden was now playing a leadership role within the Taliban, but who was listening? Nobody.\(^5\)

While the Taliban was busy annexing large swaths of the country and cozying up next to al Qaeda, Karzai, Ahmed Shah Masud (the leader of the Northern Alliance), and other Afghans were openly critical of an American policy that offered no support to the anti-Taliban resistance, left the Taliban in place, and put no real pressure on the Taliban’s main sponsors: Pakistan and Saudi Arabia.\(^6\)

In 1994, Karzai had joined his father in Quetta where both men watched remorsefully as their country was taken over by al Qaeda. They understood that the key to saving Afghanistan would be to undermine the Taliban’s grip on the Pashtun belt. At clandestine meetings in Quetta, the younger Karzai began to build an underground opposition among his own tribe and elders from other tribes. The Taliban swiftly reacted. In 1999, assassins shot Abdul Ahad Karzai dead in broad daylight as


he came out of a Quetta, Pakistan mosque—a move that created revulsion among the Popalzai and other Pashtun tribes. Hamid Karzai was both shattered and energized by his father’s assassination, leading him to take a daring step. Assembling a three hundred-vehicle convoy of family members, mourners, and tribal chiefs in exile, he defied Pakistani and Taliban authorities and drove with his father’s body from Quetta to the family graveyard outside Kandahar. This move made the Taliban grimace, but they dared not intervene, fearing civil war could re-erupt.7

This single act of defiance redefined Hamid Karzai as a brave leader, equal to any in Afghanistan. The Popalzai tribal council chose him as their new chief, even though he had several older brothers living in the United States. Mullah Omar, the Taliban’s leader, was furious with Karzai and began to plot his assassination.

Throughout 2001 and up until September 11, Karzai held a series of meetings with opposition leaders and former Mujahedeen opposed to the Taliban. He and a small group toured the world in hopes of alerting the West that Osama bin Laden was making key decisions for the Taliban and that al Qaeda was fully embedded in the Taliban government. Their alerts fell on deaf ears. That is, of course, until the events of September 11.8


Post 9/11 Karzai

Just after 9/11, CIA and U.S. Special Forces teams quietly brought Karzai from his exile in Pakistan back to Afghanistan under the cover of night. Karzai was able to rally villages to fight the Taliban.\(^9\)

Karzai stepped onto the world stage in January 2002 at an international donors’ conference in Tokyo. There, he managed to attract pledges of more than $4 billion to help rebuild Afghanistan. Karzai then embarked on a tour of world capitals.\(^10\)

The well-educated and Westernized Karzai was a celebrated choice to lead Afghanistan by foreign governments. He also quickly built up considerable support at home, partly a tribute to his diplomatic skills, but also because many ordinary Afghans were disillusioned with the return to warlord-rule. Correspondents said that as a royalist Pashtun from the South, Karzai was accepted in a way few ethnic minority leaders from the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance would be. They also said that his record as an anti-Soviet combatant served him well with former Mujahedeen followers.\(^11\)

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A gradual, yet uneven process of political stabilization occurred in the first five years following the fall of the Taliban. Through a messy but mostly peaceful process, a Kabul-based provisional government won recognition from most power centers, though its authority outside Kabul remained fragile. The first-ever election of an Afghan head of state took place in September 2004, and Interim President Hamid Karzai was elected to a full five-year term. Parliamentary and provincial elections took place a year later. On December 19, 2005, the 351 newly-elected male and female members of the upper and lower houses of the National Assembly held a ceremonial opening session. The Wolesi Jirga (House of the People), the lower house, was tasked with the job of drawing the local district boundaries, which would allow district council elections to proceed in 2006.\(^{12}\)

The political reconstruction process began on November 28, 2001, when twenty-eight representatives from the Northern Alliance, the Peshawar parties, monarchist circles around King Zahir (who had just returned from his nearly thirty year exile in Italy), and other exiles gathered in Bonn, Germany to decide Afghanistan’s political future. The meeting was led by United Nation’s special envoy Lakhdar Brahimi, who had already spent four years fruitlessly trying to broker an Afghan peace. Many of the details had been hammered out in earlier meetings, including a November

\(^{12}\) Ibid., 5.
meeting in New York of the “group of six plus two,” consisting of the country’s six neighbors plus the United States and Russia.\textsuperscript{13}

Longtime Jamiat-i-Islami, Burhanuddin Rabbani, the country’s then-nominal president, resisted giving up the post. However, in a crucial first step toward ethnic reconciliation, his fellow Tajik leaders threw their support behind Karzai. Karzai was tribal leader of the Populzai, the large Pashtun tribe, which gave the country its first kings in the eighteenth century. Karzai had parted company with the Taliban early in its rule and helped organize Pashtun support against the regime at the time of the U.S. intervention. On December 5, 2001 the Bonn Agreement was signed, providing for a six-month interim government. Karzai was sworn in as chairman on December 22, 2001, assisted by five vice chairmen and twenty-nine ministers, many of them Tajiks from the North.\textsuperscript{14}

On June 2, 2002, a loya jirga convened in Kabul, with 1,450 delegates chosen from all 362 administrative districts. Women held a guaranteed 160 seats; twenty-five more were allocated for nomads and one-hundred for refugees living in Iran and Pakistan. The jirga voted Karzai interim president for a two-year term over nominal opposition once his two main contenders for head of state, King Zahir—ceremonially dubbed “Father of the Nation” instead—and Rabbani withdrew. In one motion, the country effectively repudiated both the two-hundred-fifty-year-old monarchy and the


\textsuperscript{14} Katzman, \textit{Afghanistan}, 5.
movement of political Islam begun by Rabbani and his colleagues nearly forty years before. Karzai’s new cabinet, endorsed by the jirga, was ethnically balanced. The president proceeded to name a thirty-five-member constitutional commission, (including six women) who presented a document for consideration by another loya jirga that convened in December 2003. On January 4, 2004, more than 500 delegates approved the constitution, formally proclaiming Afghanistan an Islamic republic that guaranteed freedom of religion and provided no government role for mullahs or ulemas (religious leaders). Karzai and his American backers were off to a good start.15

However, after the new Afghan constitution was in place and Karzai was elected president in 2004, his relationship with the U.S. became unstable. He began to routinely berate Americans for civilian casualties. The evidence of corruption in Karzai’s government and family only exacerbated tensions with the United States.16

Additionally, President Karzai’s half-brother, Ahmed Wali Karzai, ran Kandahar, in the words of Bob Woodward, like an “Afghan version of New York City’s infamous Boss Tweed.”17 Ahmed Wali had been on the U.S. and CIA payrolls for years, even prior to the events of September 11, 2001. He belonged to the CIA’s small network of paid agents and informants inside Afghanistan. When Senator

15 Ibid., 11.


Lindsey Graham and then-Senator Joe Biden visited President Karzai in Kabul in 2008, Graham referenced the corruption in Afghanistan stating, “Mr. President, you can’t come to Afghanistan without hearing about your brother.”18 The U.S. government was actually paying Ahmed Wali money through his half-brother the president.19

Ahmed Wali was highly influential and corrupt. He was the landlord of some CIA and U.S. military facilities in Kandahar, meaning that he was getting hefty rent payments from American taxpayers from properties that he neither owned nor controlled. Ahmed Wali’s government-sponsored tenants included the Kandahar Strike Force, a paramilitary group of Afghans the CIA used to attack suspected insurgents. There was also evidence that Ahmed Wali profited from the opium trade.20 Among senior U.S. policymakers, there was a constant debate: should the U.S. be in bed with someone so corrupt? The American government’s argument was standard:

... he gets results, provides intelligence and support for important counterterrorist operations. It was necessary to employ some thugs if the U.S. was going to have a role in the land of thugs. Cutting him off might break Ahmed Wali’s control of the city, and Kandahar might be lost entirely. Lose Kandahar and we possibly lose the war.21

The CIA had no misconceptions about Ahmed Wali. He was not the type of agent who could be controlled by anyone, he did what he wanted. He was not going to

18 Ibid., 68.
19 Ibid., 66.
20 Ibid.
21 Ibid.
be pressured by U.S. government officials or the CIA, despite the money he received from them. Ahmed Wali manipulated everyone, using them to his advantage—the United States, the drug dealers, the Taliban—even his brother if he found it necessary.

Reports about the corruption of Ahmed Wali Karzai intensified in June 2006. ABC, the American television network, quoted U.S. Army files taken from the Bagram base describing how Ahmed Wali had received money from drug lords. He retorted simply, “They want to give my brother a bad name.”

Corruption alone was creating enormous misgivings among world leaders and making President Karzai unpopular. As William Byrd of the World Bank said in 2007, “If nothing is done about corruption, Afghanistan’s development prospects will be severely threatened and undermined . . . corruption is profoundly inimical to state building.”

Unfortunately, aid continued to be wasted. In 2008, the World Bank estimated that up to 30 percent of all aid was squandered by the recipients.

President Karzai and the government in Kabul shared the blame for failing to impede the drug trade in Afghanistan that continued to thrive as late as 2008. The UN and the embassies of major Western countries collected evidence that President Karzai continued to tolerate suspected drug traffickers because they were either his political

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24 Rashid, Descent into Chaos, 399.
allies, close friends, or because their removal from power would be detrimental to him. The drug trade in Afghanistan became a complicated web of tribal loyalties, politics, and links to both the Taliban and the new government. One element could not be removed without affecting the others. There was also a blurring of lines by powerful figures of those who trafficked in drugs and those who protected the traffickers. One of the main reasons for the U.S. government’s impatience with Karzai is his weakness or unwillingness to target major drug traffickers.25

Early in 2006, violence in Afghanistan had elevated higher than it had been since 9/11. In part, this was due to the United States being distracted with Iraq, however, according to a UN survey, the increase in violence was also due in part to tribal, factional, and drug-related rivalries.26 As president, Hamid Karzai has a responsibility to attempt to stop the violence and corruption in Afghanistan. However, it appears he is rejecting the government institutions the UN and others were attempting to build, which would help bring stability to the fledging country. But instead of helping his country by putting an end to the violence and corruption and utilizing the tools the UN has given him to build a stable government, Karzai has resorted to tribal methods. These traditional tactics of governing are backwards and


ultimately lead to more violence and fear among the people of Afghanistan. To
President Karzai, good governance is a projection of powerful tribal personalities—not
the building of stable institutions.

As is obvious from the history of Hamid Karzai and his country, there are
interesting parallels that seem to fly in the face of preventing another American-led
catastrophe in an Asian country literally on the other side of the world.
CHAPTER 4

ALL TOO DIFFERENT OR ONE AND THE SAME: A COMPARISON

History may not repeat itself, but it does have a tendency to rhyme.
   -Mark Twain

America always does the right thing—after they’ve tried everything else.
   -Winston Churchill

Doing what’s right isn’t the problem—it is knowing what’s right.
   -Lyndon B. Johnson

Introduction

When *New York Times* reporter Helen Thomas saw General David Petraeus at a Georgetown restaurant in Washington, D.C., she said to him, “What the hell are you doing in Afghanistan? This is Vietnam all over again—what’s your exit strategy?”¹ If we unravel the mysteries of the political situation in South Vietnam that led up to Ngo Dinh Diem’s assassination, it may prevent us from repeating its mistakes.

What did we learn from Vietnam? We learned that despite technological superiority, a non-developed nation cannot be bombed into submission. Former Special Representative to Afghanistan and Pakistan, Richard Holbrooke, reminded us that, “guerrillas win in a stalemate” and that “history should not be forgotten.”² We have also learned that politics can be the enemy of strategy. We have learned—or should have learned—from Vietnam that you cannot engage in war and try to win it

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² Ibid., 97.
haphazardly. America was not fully engaged in the Vietnam War and it began to show in the late 1960s as the military was not leveling with President Lyndon B. Johnson and the president was not leveling with the American people. The United States military carried a World War II mentality with it into Vietnam. The Joint Chiefs of Staff did not take losing a war into consideration. They had, after all, just won a major war on multiple fronts and came out the other side as the reigning champ of the world. This is why no one could imagine that a tiny, third-world, Asian country could or would put up fierce resistance against the world’s most advanced military. By the time the U.S. public recognized the losses that were mounting, the military had made up its mind that defeat was no longer an option. Without clear objectives for winning, the U.S. military started using “body counts” as a way of measuring success. Often, these measurements were extremely inflated. The military began to tell the civilian leadership what it wanted to hear. The reputation of the Joint Chiefs had suffered dramatically after their gutless performance during the Vietnam War, when they failed to give honest guidance to President Johnson as documented by Army Brigadier General H.R. McMaster’s 1997 book, Dereliction of Duty.³

There are similarities between the administration of Barack Obama’s handling Afghanistan and that of Lyndon B. Johnson and Richard Nixon’s with Vietnam. Special Representative Holbrooke, for instance, saw Vice President Joe Biden emerging as this administration’s George Ball, the Deputy Secretary of State who had

³ Ibid., 258.
opposed the Vietnam escalation.\textsuperscript{4} Biden and his team had advocated for a smaller buildup of troops—as opposed to the 40,000 that were sent under Obama’s watch—with an emphasis on counterterrorism as opposed to counterinsurgency. Obama requesting 40,000 more troops was reminiscent of the June 7, 1965 request by General William Westmoreland for 41,000 more troops in Vietnam. In Robert McNamara’s 1995 book, \textit{Retrospect}, McNamara called Westmoreland’s request a “bombshell” that “meant a dramatic and open-ended expansion of American military involvement. “Of the thousands of cables I received during my seven years in DOD, this one disturbed me most,” said McNamara.\textsuperscript{5}

Even Obama’s State Department sees similarities with Vietnam. Hillary Clinton’s deputy at the State Department, Jim Steinberg, had privately told her he was worried they were on the path to another Vietnam. There was an “open-endedness” to the mission, and he worried that had General Stanley McChrystal stayed, he would be back again asking for more troops.\textsuperscript{6}

What the American people and its government should be asking in regards to Afghanistan is: Have we ever been in this situation before, and if so, what can we learn from that experience? The overall theme of my comparisons is nothing new, as this is hardly the first thesis to wonder whether there are any lessons from Vietnam that can

\textsuperscript{4} Ibid., 170.

\textsuperscript{5} Ibid., 195.

\textsuperscript{6} Ibid., 200.
be applied to our situation in Afghanistan today. The difference here is that my comparison has yet to be considered at any real depth, which simply adds to the lessons we can learn from the Vietnam War. Again, I am not comparing military or logistical strategies, as this has been done already. Much has been written on “what if” and “if only” we had done this or that in Vietnam and we could have prevailed. For example: “If only” Lyndon Johnson had moved more aggressively into Vietnam in 1965 and took the war to the enemy which would have cut off its supply routes into South Vietnam, then the North Vietnamese might have backed off. “What if” Congress had not cut off funding for the war? “If only” we had supported the South Vietnamese with more money and weapons when we were finally having success with the new counterinsurgency strategy in 1971 then Vietnam might still be divided like Korea is today. These rhetorical scenarios have no room in this thesis because they cannot help our contemporary Afghan situation. There are too many differences in tactics and country history to make such comparisons between Vietnam in the 1950s and 1960s with twenty-first century Afghanistan. What is similar is the political situations and how they could effect the larger contemporary picture. I am creating my own “what if” scenario in Vietnam so that we can avoid a “what if” scenario for Afghanistan in the future.

What I am doing is comparing the political situations and their presidents in each other’s respected capitals, and attempting to argue that all other comparisons are secondary—if you do not have a stable government, all the firepower and logistical
support in the world cannot help. Despite a string of recent election successes, some experts blame a faltering central government for the spike in attacks. “As with most insurgencies, the critical precondition [to the Afghan insurgency] is the collapse of governance,” says Afghanistan expert Seth G. Jones. Jones and other experts point to the many Afghans who lack basic services, the government’s difficulty setting up its police forces, and the lack of international forces to assist with security.⁷

Although there are many similarities, there are too many differences between the American Vietnam War and the American Afghan War to draw definitive comparisons. One could ask whether the situations are so different that comparison would be impossible. When I interviewed former U.S. Senator, Vietnam War Veteran and current Georgetown University School of Foreign Service professor Chuck Hagel about it, he said, “It is not really a comparable situation. After World War II and into the 1960s, you had two juggernaut countries with the rest of the world behind us, emerging from the ashes of war. We felt invincible and assumed wrongly that we could do anything we wanted because we were rich and powerful and there was no one to stand in our way. Today, you have many countries with nukes and very powerful economies—the world paradigm has completely changed since the end of the Cold War.”⁸

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⁸ Chuck Hegel, interview by author, Washington, DC, February 8, 2011.
What we can and should learn from our Vietnam experience is not simple—particularly when applied to a dissimilar country—with an exceptionally different geography, culture, and history, in a different era. Vietnam was a misguided proxy war against worldwide communism—nothing there genuinely endangered the United States. However, the threats to the U.S. from Afghanistan are quite real, as the murder of thousands of Americans on September 11, 2001 was indeed planned there. The U.S. and the rest of the world are all perfectly aware of why we invaded Afghanistan in November of 2001. There was no manufactured “Gulf of Tonkin rationale.” This time there was no mistake, and this time we had the support of coalition partners—a minimum of forty-one countries backing our decision—the kind of support we lacked in the conflict with Vietnam.\(^9\)

When looking at our adversaries, even they cannot be outright compared in a similar light. Unlike the relatively popular Viet Cong, the Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan are widely despised. The Viet Cong gained the respect and trust of much of the rural South Vietnamese population by promising a reversal to just about everything Diem implemented. It was easy for them to recruit from the local population to fight against the government. Like the Viet Cong, the Taliban were initially supported by the majority of the rural Afghan population because the new organization promised to end corruption and bring stability and justice to Afghanistan. In the beginning, they

succeeded for the most part. But the Taliban’s subsequent female repression, opposition to entertainment, technology, and other religions, turned off not just Afghans but the entire world. In the late 1990s and 2000, the Taliban began banning foreign aid workers (sometimes jailing and killing them) that brought sanctions from the United Nations. What perhaps turned Asians off the most was when, at the direction of bin Laden, the Taliban dynamited the two Buddhas of Bamiyan, which were two sixth century monumental statues of standing Buddhas carved into the side of a cliff in the Bamyan Valley in the Hazarajat region of central Afghanistan. The destruction of these beautiful works of art, which had stood for sixteen hundred years, became a symbol of oppression and a rallying point for the freedom of religious expression. Despite the fact that most Afghans are now Muslim, they had embraced their past and many were appalled by the destruction. Much of the West and almost all of East Asia condemned such an affront on Buddhism. These acts have proved to make recruiting difficult for the Taliban and seem to have to go outside of their own country for support. The Taliban, then and now, has to recruit new members through religious ideology, usually from madrassas (Islamic seminaries) in Pakistan.

Additionally, Russia and China have economic and security interests in helping the U.S. stabilize the situation in Afghanistan. There are plenty of gas pipeline and

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mining opportunities to go around for everyone. Contrarily, at the time of the time of the Vietnam War, the Soviet Union and China had no interest in seeing the U.S. escape the predicament we had gotten ourselves into.¹¹

But again, do not mistake the Taliban of today for the [North Vietnamese Army/ Viet Cong] of yesterday. Today’s Taliban is poorly organized. It is more just a name of an umbrella under which is a loose collection of factions with the same ideology just barely held together by their leader, Mullah Omar. The Taliban’s lack of organization, in addition to their lack of combat troops and supplies make them a weaker foe than the Viet Cong. When Washington and Saigon finally settled on an effective counter-insurgency strategy to take control of the countryside from the Viet Cong, Hanoi, being united and organized, sent in multiple divisions of battle-ready troops.¹²

Likewise, compare the respected leaders of our opposition. In Vietnam, we were up against military minds that could rally around the central leadership of Ho Chi Minh. The North Vietnamese Army (NVA) were highly determined. They were fueled by nationalistic ideology as well as contempt toward Saigon and the West—for not allowing Vietnam reunification after defeating the French. In Ho, the NVA had a leader who had not only studied at European universities, but also physically represented Vietnam after World War II. This was the era before unmanned drones,


¹² Ibid., 287.
so Ho could therefore walk freely among his people and encourage the fight against the “invaders and their puppet government in the South.”\textsuperscript{13}

Alternatively, as stated before, there is not one united front against NATO and the Afghan government in Kabul. Mullah Mohammad Omar, the infamous one-eyed Pashtun who, with the group’s leadership council based in Quetta, Pakistan, is not the only loosely organized opposition our military faces. Afghanistan has the Taliban “led” by Omar, but it also has a whole galaxy of deadly insurgents fighting the effort to build a stable central government. These insurgent groups, some of which are still leftovers from the factionalized Mujahedeen who fought the Russians (like the former Mujahedeen commander Hekmatyar with Hizb-e-Islami and Jalauddine Haqqani with his deadly network out of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas), work with the Taliban, work with terrorist organizations (such as al Qaeda), work alone, and sometimes compete against one another for control. While Ho Chi Minh was charismatic, well-traveled, educated, and multi-lingual, the dispassionate Omar attends a religious madrassa near his home in Kandahar and is thought to have never left the borders of Afghanistan and Pakistan.\textsuperscript{14}


\textsuperscript{14} Ahmed Rashid, \textit{Descent into Chaos: The United States and the Failure of Nation Building in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Central Asia} (New York: Viking, 2008), 23.
Similarities Between Two Very Different Heads of State

To be clear: there is no precise parallel to draw between Vietnam and Afghanistan. Every war is different. Then again, the current president of Afghanistan—Hamid Karzai—and the former president of South Vietnam—Ngo Dinh Diem—have too many close parallels to ignore. Therefore, looking at Diem’s demise and studying the subsequent quagmire that persisted until the communists took over, contains key evidence that could prevent a catastrophe in Kabul today. The conflict in Vietnam was a complex one, where Americans were outsiders, our allies were corrupt, and our adversaries were merciless. Everywhere we went was enemy territory. And today the U.S. has once again found itself fighting against a mutiny in a rural country with a weak government. Once again, Americans are outsiders. Once again, our enemy blends in with the local population. Once again, the enemy finds refuge in a neighboring country (in the case of Vietnam, Cambodia, in the case of Afghanistan, Pakistan). Once again, the danger of being perceived as an occupying force by a war-weary population remains perilous. Our enemies in Vietnam, just as the current insurgency in Afghanistan, had seen decades of combat on their own turf prior to our engaging them. Where North Vietnam received aid from China and the Soviet Union,

the Taliban and other insurgent groups are known to receive aid from Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) agency.\textsuperscript{16}

Additionally, both Vietnam and Afghanistan have been victims and/or beneficiaries of proxy wars convened by the United States and the former Soviet Union. At the height of the Cold War, in the beginning of President John F. Kennedy’s term, he preferred to deflect nuclear or conventional war with the Soviet Union away from the streets of Europe and fight communism on the periphery. These periphery states were easier targets and could be fought with economic and military assistance. America dumped billions of dollars and half a million men into South Vietnam in hopes of preventing a communist takeover. Impeding our efforts were the efforts by the Soviet Union, who, instead of confronting us outright on the battlefield of Europe or Vietnam, confronted us with billions of dollars of aid to North Vietnam.

Likewise, after the Soviets invaded Afghanistan in order to support the communist central government, President Ronald Reagan and the U.S. Congress dumped economic and military aid to the opposition movement. The U.S. did not want to confront the Soviets on the battlefield directly, so they dumped money and weapons onto the Pakistani ISI, who dispersed it to the Mujahedeen, who used it against the Soviet occupation. Military and economic aid to Afghanistan was not unique to the

Soviet invasion, however. In fact, Afghanistan was used as a Cold War proxy even before the emergence of the Mujahedeen in the 1980s. The Soviets and the U.S. had turned Afghanistan into a client state. Between 1956 and 1978, Afghanistan received some $533 million in economic aid from U.S. and $2.5 billion from the Soviets in both economic and military aid. As a client state, it was dependent on foreign aid for up to forty percent of its budget.  

In both wars, the oppositions started out as fringe movements that became something more. Indeed, in the beginning of the Taliban movement, their religious ideology merged with Pashtun nationalism. Likewise, in the 1960s and 1970s, communists and Vietnamese nationalists—who wanted to see the U.S. out of their country—merged.

Furthermore, one aspect of these two countries that has and is similarly impeding the progress towards making solidarity and stabilization a part of everyday life is the opposition to a central government. Undeveloped countries with a poor rural population tend not to trust a federal government, especially when it is new. This is because no matter how you try and sell a central government—even a democratically elected government—to a skeptical rural population, they will perceive it as a typical, disconnected monarchy trying to impose its will on people it knows nothing about.

Monarchies have taken advantage of rural populations for millennia and they would

17 Rashid, *Descent into Chaos*, 8.

not distinguish a new central government as anything better. The Vietnamese were well aware of Ngo Dinh Diem’s predecessor, Bao Dai, who ruled from 1926-1955. But they were also tolerant of his reign for they knew all too well that his dominion stopped at the village gate. Unfortunately for Diem, he either did not understand this concept or he did not care. His strategic hamlet project is but one example of villagers rejecting his reforms, even if they were well-intended.

Likewise, one of Hamid Karzai’s predecessors, Mohammed Daoud Khan, ironically lost much of his credibility when he teamed up with the Soviets and set off on a reform campaign that resulted in new schools, roads, and utilities. Many of the conservative Muslims in rural Afghanistan felt that Daoud was overstepping his boundaries—especially by building schools for educating girls and some of the secularism he began to display. Afghans have been noted since the dawn of recorded history for their independence and dislike for externally-imposed authority. Generally speaking, during those periods when Afghanistan has been stable and at peace, the national government allowed a wide degree of local autonomy in decision-making.

Additionally, both Karzai and Diem had predecessors who were reluctant to give up their Chief of State status. In 1955, when Bao Dai refused to cede what little power he had in Vietnam to Ngo Dinh Diem, Diem simply held a popular referendum, which pitted himself against Bao Dai as leader of South Vietnam. Diem won ninety-eight percent of the popular vote. Bao Dai, who was living in Paris at the time,

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19 Ibid., 127.
decided not to challenge the referendum. Likewise, just after the U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan in November of 2001, Kabul was looking towards political reconstruction. At a representative meeting regarding the status of Afghanistan in Bonn, Germany, in December 2001, the then-nominal president Burhanuddin Rabbani resisted giving up his post. Only after a vital first step towards ethnic reconciliation—where his fellow Tajik (minority) leaders threw their support behind Karzai—did Rabbani submit and move aside.

Although the differences between the past American-Vietnamese War and the contemporary American-Afghan war are immense, the similarities between the two men who we installed to rule the countries are profound. After intense research on both men, the parallels between the two seem to be traced back to their births. When one of these men—Ngo Dinh Diem—failed to fit the White House’s preferred mold after many trials and tribulations, we removed him forcefully without a clear strongman to take his place and things only continued to go downhill from there. One thing we can learn from the disaster in Vietnam is that you better have a great backup plan once you have realized you have backed the wrong horse.

As we saw in Chapters 2 and 3, both Diem and Karzai came from a prominent lineage with deep ties to the government. Their families both originated in the central


part of their countries, and had such deep roots planted in the surrounding communities that the possibilities of backroom deals were endless. While some may have come to believe that backroom dealing equal corruption, the Ngos and Karzais knew all too well that is how you get things done in a tribal atmosphere, such as in Vietnam and Afghanistan. While Afghanistan is more ethnically diverse than Vietnam, they are both tribal societies that tend to distrust people from outside their tribe. The insurgency in Afghanistan today is being fought primarily in the South and East of the country, and it is almost exclusively a Pashtun phenomenon. The Pashtun are the largest tribal society on earth. There are approximately thirty million Pashtuns, divided almost equally into southern Afghanistan and northern Pakistan by the Durand Line. As a result, they are the largest ethnic group on earth without their own country. The highly segmentary (tribal) nature of the Pashtuns, bodes well for Hamid Karzai and his family’s ability to get things done, or as others would call it, corruption. You see, the first president of Afghanistan under the new constitution, Hamid Karzai, is a Durrani Pashtun of the Popalzai tribe. Therefore, what makes Karzai’s connections so unique is based on the fact that the Durranis have dominated much of the political life in Afghanistan for the last 300 years, and a Durrani king or other leader has held power in Kabul for almost all of that time. The monarchy has always descended in the Durrani line, often changing hands between the Popalzai and the Mohammadzai tribes.
The last king of Afghanistan, Zahir Shah, passed away in 2007. The monarchy was abolished by the new constitution approved by the Loya Jirga in 2004.²²

Likewise, Ngo Dinh Diem’s family’s roots went back centuries in central Vietnam. His father, Ngo Dinh Kha, was a prominent public figure, just like Karzai’s father, and worked as a counselor to the Emperor of Vietnam during French colonization.

Karzai and Diem, both multi-lingual and educated in multiple countries, fled their respective countries at one point in fear for their safety: Diem’s self-imposed exile to Europe and the United States and Karzai leaving to study in India when the Soviets invaded Afghanistan. Although both nationalists, neither men directly fought in combat for their country’s freedom. Although he wanted to join the Mujahedeen to fight the Russians, Karzai went to India. Diem hated everything about the French, yet he did not join the Viet Minh in their fight against the French occupiers because he was vehemently anti-communist as well. Diem ended up speaking out against both the French and the communists which almost got him killed by both parties.

Both Diem and Karzai knew their opposition well. They both knew and still know the intimate intricacies of their enemy’s organization. Ho Chi Minh initially asked Diem to join his government in Hanoi after World War II. Ho recognized the virtues in Diem. Eager to extend the base of his support, Ho reached out to anti-

communist nationalists; he especially wanted to attract Vietnam’s Catholic minority, and understood that the presence of a prominent Catholic in his first coalition cabinet would go a long way toward accomplishing this goal. He offered Diem the post of minister of the interior, the same job he had held under Bao Dai. However, Diem refused because he not only had been a prisoner under Ho, but Ho had murdered Diem’s brother and nephew.\(^{23}\)

On the contrary, Karzai initially supported and worked with the Taliban, having given them money and a massive cache of weapons. He too knows his enemy well. It is because he knows them that he was, and is, able to distinguish between the many moderate Talibs, whose Afghan patriotism is as important as their faith, and those “silent ones I did not recognize”—the foreign terrorists.\(^{24}\) Furthermore, both Diem and Karzai won a presidential election surrounded in controversy and plagued by corruption. While Diem won his election with ninety-five percent of the popular vote, Karzai’s much more modest victory was likewise seen as anything but legitimate.

**Contemporary Opinion on Hamid Karzai**

There is mixed opinion on Hamid Karzai, his administration, his late family, and the United States’ relationship with all of the above. My inclination in 2009 was to agree with *USA Today* writer DeWayne Wickham who said:


If Karzai thinks he can continue to vacillate between being a loyal ally and contemptuous patron while the cost America pays to keep the Taliban from overrunning his government grows, he is badly mistaken. If he thinks the U.S. will back him at any cost, he is not a good student of history. While he might be a critical partner, Hamid Karzai is not irreplaceable, as Ngo Dinh Diem discovered much too late.  

Indeed, sitting in my *Vietnam History* class at Georgetown University in the fall of 2009, I could not stop thinking about Karzai’s situation as we discussed Ngo Dinh Diem and his U.S.-orchestrated overthrow. My first reaction to the reports of Karzai’s corruption and incompetence was to wonder how he could not live in constant fear—considering what we did to one of our last partners who got in the way of his own progress. After further research and a good discussion about Francis Winters’ *Year of the Hare*, it eventually seemed that in order for history not to repeat itself politically, we had to keep Karzai around—and he knew it. After all, what is worse than an incompetent, corrupt head of state? An even more incompetent replacement.

Sometimes I believe that Hamid Karzai represents the infamous Donald Rumsfeld quote, “You go to war with the Army you have, not the Army you wish you had.” If we did not have the Army we wanted, I always wonder why we did not wait until we had the one we wanted. Along the same lines—but to a grossly less callous extent—it seems we went into Afghanistan, not with the leader we wish we had, but with the leader we had at the moment. At first glance, this notion does not seem to be

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25 DeWayne Wickham, “Hamid Karzai Is Not Irreplaceable”
(accessed September 18, 2011).
as detrimental as using unfit equipment to fight a war, especially considering the urgency for payback for 9/11. In the short-run, installing the best leader you have at the time is less deadly than fighting a war with the equipment you have at the time. In the long run, it remains to be seen how deadly the decision to install Karzai really was.

Chuck Hagel told me in an interview:

In 2001, the best guy we had at the time was Karzai—he knew the terrain, he knew the enemy and we thought we could trust him. . . . After 3,000 Americans died from terrorism and the public demanded a response, we were hardly sitting around saying, 'Yeah so he knows how to fight the Taliban, but what kind of office management skills will he bring to the table?'

He concluded by telling me, “Again, I think he was the best guy for the job then—is he still ten years later?—you tell me.” Likewise, one of Vice President Biden’s National Security Advisers told me while I was interning at the White House that you have to look at the timeline of our relationship with Karzai, “Our relationship with him [Karzai] has evolved—what was best for us at the time may not be what is best for us now.” When I asked him whether things would get worse in Afghanistan if Karzai were removed—even though the corruption in well-known—he told me that things would get worse, corruption and all. Biden’s National Security Director continued in an almost sympathetic tone, stating:

26 Hagel, author interview.

27 Hagel, author interview.

Yes he has had to deal with corruption, but most democracies do. You have to look at Karzai’s situation and put it into context. We have to look at what we want Afghanistan to be and what it already is. Karzai was dealt a difficult hand, more difficult than Diem. Both sides—the U.S. and Karzai—have had to adapt. He [Karzai] has an incredible rubrics cube to put together with the North, South, and East—not to mention the neighbors [referring to Iran, Pakistan, and the former Soviet republics]. It is not clear anyone else could have won this balancing act of trying to centralize the government. Then you have the tribal politics—something he is actually good at. What we see as corruption, they see as having done for years. The president of the Bank of Kabul, for instance, has somehow managed to be missing billions of dollars—unfortunately, this president is the brother of the vice president of Afghanistan who in turn is essential to that balancing act. We do indeed have an enormous amount of leverage on Karzai, but we have to be smart with that leverage. We of course need him to succeed and he needs us to succeed. It is a tough-love relationship. Part of Karzai’s problems, and in turn our problems, were caused by us. In 2003, he testified before Congress just prior to our invasion of Iraq. He told us that we must do what we must in Iraq, but to please not forget about Afghanistan. Well guess what? We forgot about Afghanistan.29

There is an old adage: you get what you put in. This adage could be the crux of our problem in Afghanistan. The U.S. government inserted both Diem and Karzai into power. The situation in Afghanistan is partly due to our having placed Karzai where he is and then losing credibility when we did not adequately address the issue of his perceived rigged re-election. Derek Harvey, General David Petraeus’ intelligence adviser says that there were missed opportunities coming from the Karzai re-election fraud in August of 2009. Karzai had largely gone un-challenged by the U.S. afterward, and his victory was sealed when his opponent dropped out of the runoff election. “We are so dependent upon Karzai,” Harvey said. “His weakness becomes a strength. And

29 National Security Advisor, interview.
sometimes you have to break china to make real progress. There was a real
opportunity to shift the dynamic there on the ground. It would’ve been costly and
painful in the near-term.” By not holding him accountable after the election:

What we’ve done is make Karzai even stronger in the process. He’s a very
strong president in a weak system, and we’ve assumed for too long that he’s a
weak leader in a weak system and we don’t have any other choice. That is
wrong. He’s a strong leader, tactical in orientation, with poor management
skills. . . . The outcome of the elections is we made him stronger and
contributed to his tendencies that we don’t want to contribute to . . . he’s
already getting everything he wants.  

Vietnam expert and Georgetown School of Foreign Service professor Pamela
Sodhy thinks that the main similarity between Diem and Karzai is the fact that neither
were the initial choice to legitimately represent their country. “No one respects a
puppet,” she told me in an interview.  She says that it is difficult to say what would
have happened if Diem had lived on as president, stating that, “. . . things could have
likely gotten even worse with him there. . . . We will never know whether Ho Chi
Minh would have relented any less with Diem still in the picture.” Professor Sodhy
also points out that Ho Chi Minh was on the warpath in 1956 with ambushes and
assassinations already underway by 1958. When I asked her what we can apply to
Afghanistan as a lesson from Diem, she said, “You have to focus on what is certain,
not on what might happen. What is certain is that the U.S. needs to re-think what

30 Woodward, Obama’s Wars, 347.

power is and not interfere with Karzai’s removal because we are indeed certain that we cannot predict the future—it could be better or it could get far worse.”

Professor Sodhy made the point that Diem could have died any other way while in office and we probably would have had the same outcome in Vietnam. Another Georgetown School of Foreign Service professor and Afghan expert, Paula Newberg, agrees. Newburg approached my thesis inquiry by saying, “If Diem had resigned, would the effects in Vietnam be different? It is surely the case that were Karzai to die of violent causes rather than resign, the effects in Afghanistan—including his reputation, for starters—would be quite different than if her were to resign.”

Professors Sodhy and Newberg had reposited my hypothesis back to me in a way I had yet to consider. Pondering the differences between resigning and being assassinated would deviate from my original focus on whether history is capable of repeating itself, but would make another great thesis topic nonetheless.

There are still others who believe that nothing would change in Afghanistan regardless of how Karzai were to leave the office of president. Leslie Gelb, President Emeritus and Board Senior Fellow, told me, “Not much would change in Kabul whether we are talking about Karzai staying on as president, him resigning or him meeting the same demise as Diem.”

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For and Against Hamid Karzai’s Removal

There is much to be said for having a strong leader on your team. Strong leaders such as John Kennedy, Abraham Lincoln, Winston Churchill, Golda Mier, and Margaret Thatcher usually come to my mind. If you have leaders such as these, consider yourself lucky. Leadership, especially during uncertain times, is extremely underrated. Sometimes, however, you have to proceed with what you have and cross your fingers, hold your nose, or do whatever you must to succeed. I like to analogize this to playing ‘fantasy football.’ In fantasy football, you are lucky to have strong leaders on your team like Super Bowl champs Drew Brees and Tom Brady, and you usually do well against the competition. Again, if you have these types on your team, consider yourself lucky. The people you are playing against—who have to start a mediocre talent like Redskins’ quarterback Rex Grossman—have to hope for the best and are more often than not in bad shape. Sometimes you get great leadership from mediocre quarterbacks, often you get nothing. What makes them mediocre is the fact that they are unproven. The only thing consistent about middle of the road fantasy football players is their inconsistency—you never know what you will get with them. If you have Drew Brees or Tom Brady on your team, you are almost guaranteed success.

The same applies to political leadership. Hamid Karzai is a mediocre talent. According to many of the people I interviewed, you ‘start’ the best person you have at the time, just like fantasy football. Hamid Karzai is the Rex Grossman of the political
world. Grossman, the Washington Redskins’ first string quarterback at the beginning of the 2011 season, had more turnovers than touchdowns through the first part of that season but still managed a winning record. The Redskins replaced Grossman with second string quarterback John Beck who has “led” the ’Skins to four consecutive losses. Many fans immediately began to miss Grossman. Although Grossman’s gameplay was ugly and enthused nobody, he got the job done at the beginning of the season. Grossman was replaced by Beck after the Redskins ownership caved to public opinion. John Beck was unproven and it showed. To appease the ownership, the Redskins coaching staff replaced Grossman with Beck who turned out to be worse.

Indeed, Karzai is a mediocre talent. His “turnovers” consist of mismanagement which results in bad publicity for everyone. I understand the calls for Karzai’s replacement.\footnote{James Glanz and Richard A. Oppel, Jr., “U.N. Officials Say American Offered Plan to Replace Karzai,” \url{http://www.nytimes.com/2009/12/17/world/asia/17galbraith.html?scp=1&sq=hamid+k arzai+replace&st=nyt} (accessed June 5, 2011).} For starters, the corruption involved in his administration is bad for the United States, his financiers—he is squabbling millions of American tax dollars.\footnote{Rachelle Marshall, “Are We Nearing the End of the Tunnel in Afghanistan?” \textit{The Washington Report on Middle East Affairs}, 30, (6): 10 \url{http://wrmea.com/redesign/archives/371-washington-report-archives-2011-2015/2011-august/10645-are-we-nearing-the-end-of-the-tunnel-in-afghanistan} (accessed November 9, 2011).} Also, his incompetence seems to be delaying our ability to leave Afghanistan. Security has not been established, nor has economic activity gotten to the point that there can be a secure, self-sustaining economy. The longer Afghanistan goes without trading goods,
the longer we have to finance them. The longer Afghanistan goes without security, the longer our military has to remain there. To top it all, Karzai has made it a hobby to bash the United States and its military.\footnote{Ray Rivera, “Afghan President Says his Country Would Back Pakistan in a Clash with U.S.” \url{http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/24/world/asia/karzai-says-afghanistan-would-back-pakistan-in-a-conflict-with-us.html?scp=1&sq=kazai%20pakistan%20war%20united%20states&st=cse} (accessed July 14, 2011).} He justifiably condemns our killing of innocent civilians—as he should—but he takes it to the extreme and sometimes seems to forget that we are not the enemy. Recently, he promised to side with Pakistan if it were ever to go to war with the United States.\footnote{“Western Aims in Afghanistan: Played for Fools: Hamid Karzai’s Shenanigans Make the Going Even Harder for NATO,” \url{http://www.economist.com/node/15580253} (accessed November 9, 2011).} Looking at these circumstances, almost anybody at first glance could see the justification behind removing Karzai. If you realize you have been backing the wrong horse—just like in fantasy football—it only makes sense to back a different horse. If there is no better horse, however, you better back the one you have—and strong. At this very moment in Afghanistan, there is no other horse or quarterback to be found.

For the sake of argument, let us assume that the Afghan president is ineffective and corrupt. Even if the allegations are all true, there is an overriding reason to support him: there is no alternative. A foreign power cannot hope to run a successful counterinsurgency campaign without a local ally who has at least a modicum of mass appeal. In Afghanistan, that means a major figure from the country’s dominant ethnic
group, the Pashtuns, and one who is willing to make common cause with the United States. Karzai is the most popular and most credible politician who fits that description. Despite his many flaws, no one satisfies the criteria better than he does. Again, his deep roots in Kandahar—the heart of the Taliban movement—gives him the luxury of knowing the Taliban and the country in general very well. And he is the country’s elected president—re-elected in a process that was, after some controversy, endorsed by the United Nations and other international institutions. Although there was serious fraud in the balloting, few observers believe that his opponent, Abdullah Abdullah, a member of the minority Tajik community, would have won if the contest had been more fair. Additionally, unfortunately for the northern communities, the presidency must almost certainly remain in the hands of the Pashtun. As was mentioned before, the insurgency is almost completely a Pashtun phenomenon. Therefore the Pashtun, the largest ethnic group in Afghanistan by far, remain less skeptical of the central government since “one of their own” is president of the country. The non-Taliban Pashtun certainly would not support Kabul lying completely in the hands of a minority from the North. The only northerner I can see who would be able to not only effectively fight off the Taliban but is also considered a revered national hero is the late Mujahedeen leader, Ahmed Shah Masood. Masood, a Tajik, was from the Panshir Valley North of Kabul. He led a resistance group against the Soviet Union that fought off at least six major armored assaults by Soviet forces. He tried unsuccessfully to form a coalition government and then fought the Taliban
takeover. Unfortunately for Afghanistan and for us, he was murdered by al Qaeda terrorists on September 9, 2001.\textsuperscript{38}

One of the bigger differences between the Taliban and the North Vietnamese is that it seems the Taliban and the splintered insurgent groups are less likely to talk about peace. The intentions of the Taliban are now obvious after the murder of former Afghan President Burhanuddin Rabbani who headed an Afghan government panel trying to launch negotiations with the Taliban. He was killed inside his Kabul home by a suicide bomber in the fall of 2011. The Taliban may not be interested in talking with the Western-supported government, but it is worth betting that Karzai is the only one they would consider talking to if they did. With Karzai out of the picture, the Taliban would surely consider whoever took his place to be even weaker and prime for the picking. Again, assuming that there is a centralized leadership within the Taliban—which there is not—the Taliban would be more likely to work with Karzai because of his historical and prominent status as the head of state and within the Pashtun community. The Taliban, however, do not seem to be in any serious position to negotiate and will continue to weaken the fragile Afghan government. There have already been numerous assassination attempts made on Karzai’s life, with one just

recently uncovered. \textsuperscript{39} North Vietnam—specifically Ho Chi Minh—was already in negotiations with Ngo Dinh Diem when he was assassinated by the United States. There are sources that even point to their signing a peace treaty just before his murder. \textsuperscript{40} Ho Chi Minh understood that Diem was a nationalist and really wanted the United States out of Vietnam as much as he wanted to avoid a communist takeover in the South. The two shared an ardent aspiration for independence. Diem was the only one Ho and the Viet Cong considered negotiating with. \textsuperscript{41} The Kennedy Administration managed to step on its own feet by interfering with those peace talks. The sad irony in Vietnam is that everyone wanted the same thing: the United States to leave Southeast Asia. The North wanted us out, the South wanted us out, the Buddhists wanted us out, and most importantly, the Kennedy Administration wanted out. Because of the lack of communication between the United States and all other parties, we managed to prolong the war. As Francis Winters said in \textit{Year of the Hare}:

> The unsuspected irony was that both the instigators of the coup, Kennedy himself and the activist monks, who set out to topple Diem, unknowingly shared the common resolve to get the Americans out of Vietnam. Heightening the irony is the reality that Diem sought exactly the same goal and was indeed actively negotiating to bring about the expulsion of the U.S. presence. But none of the three parties deemed


any of the others worthy of candid communication. For both the Buddhists and Kennedy, the successful coup was a Pyrrhic victory, eliminating the only person in South Vietnam able to carry out their wishes without a war. The coup postponed for a full decade the inevitable retreat of the Americans, carrying with them their haunting sorrows. For Diem, the coup was his final liberation from the task of liberating his land from foreigners.42

Even though the source of the South Vietnamese insurgency began as a result of Diem’s repressive policies, the southern insurgents along with the North recognized a fundamental and substantive change in those policies—he just did not live long enough to carry them out.43

The U.S. government cannot choose its support for Karzai based on the American public’s reaction to media headlines. There is a lot of bad press on Karzai. However, the public reading these headlines do not usually consider the alternative. It may be good politics to criticize or even suggest a regime change in Afghanistan based on the constant flow of bad news, but what we can learn from Diem and the Vietnam War is that it will hurt us in the end. Unfortunately in a democracy such as ours, we normally have to choose between good short-term politics and good long-term policy—the trick is picking both. Supporting Karzai with all his ineffectiveness and corruption is most likely bad politically for President Obama. I am not saying supporting Karzai will keep Obama from getting re-elected—the U.S. economy will decide that. What I am saying is that current U.S. frustration with Karzai will mean

42 Winters, The Year of the Hare, 165.

nothing in twenty-five years when history shows that keeping him as president of Afghanistan was the best route for stability, based on his ability to communicate with the enemy, and the fact that there is currently no better alternative.

We’ve seen this before. Look at the Kennedy administration debasing Diem because of the American public’s reactions to the Buddhist crisis and Diem’s subsequent assassination. Kennedy thought this move would win him re-election, and it may have had he lived long enough to see 1964. Kennedy identified the national interest with his re-election, which is probably why he favored the near-term political victory to the future arcane stability of Vietnam.\textsuperscript{44} He may have given Diem’s assassination a second thought had he known he would be identified as the producer of the embarrassing merry-go-round of eight Saigon governments between 1963 and 1965, especially since he explicitly acknowledged his own sense of responsibility for the fortunes of the first post-Diem regime.\textsuperscript{45} Frederick Nolting Jr., ambassador to South Vietnam from 1961 to 1963, said in 1968 that the dilemma in Vietnam started with the “fatal error” of 1963 when “the United States undermined President Ngo Dinh Diem.”\textsuperscript{46} Additionally, former Senator Thomas Dodd of Connecticut thought that our true misery in Vietnam was a direct result of undermining the Diem regime based on serious misinformation given to the American public about Buddhist persecutions.

\textsuperscript{44} Winters, \textit{The Year of the Hare}, 193.

\textsuperscript{45} Ibid.

“We were told that the Diem Government was guilty of such brutal religious persecution that innocent Buddhist monks had been driven to commit suicide in protest,” Dodd said in a letter to the UN in 1968. He went on to write, “Now it turns out that the persecution was either nonexistent or vastly exaggerated and that the agitation was essentially political.”

It appears the real failure of the Kennedy Administration and its chances of getting things right in Vietnam came with their inability or unwillingness to communicate to Diem, Ho Chi Minh, and the opposition protest movement in South Vietnam. Another “if-then” statement could read: If Kennedy had only communicated with Diem better and tried to improve his relationship with him, then the subsequent political chaos that ensued after Diem’s assassination may have been avoided.

It also appears that our best prospects for success in Afghanistan are likewise going to come from Obama and Karzai’s communicating effectively and working on their personal relationship. Both Karzai and Obama seem to be in a dangerous state of denial about the degree to which they need each other, instead making divergent plans for how to wind down the war that cannot be accomplished without the other’s help. Throughout Afghan history, an ever-present concern for political and physical survival has been an extremely important part of Afghan rulers’ psyches. No recent ruler has died peacefully in his bed. U.S. diplomats of an earlier generation understood the

implications of this: that building trust required more than just money and guns. In a
prescient 1972 report, riled months before the last Afghan king, Mohammed Zahir
Shah, was deposed in a coup, U.S. Ambassador Robert Neumann wrote, “For the King
and leadership group, survival is the first objective with all other goals considered
secondary. The result is an excessively cautious governing style which invariably seeks
to balance off external and internal forces perceived as threatening the regime’s
power.” The same could be said of Karzai today. Handling a wary president
preoccupied with keeping his own head requires a personal touch—something that
President Obama, for all his renewed commitment to the fight, sorely lacks. Obama
arrived in office with a laundry list of issues he wanted Karzai to address, including:
nepotism and corruption in the Afghan government, lack of good governance, and the
country’s proliferating drug trade. But with the exception of Vice President Biden, who
knows Karzai well, none of his top White House advisors had any recent experience
with Afghanistan or knew any of the players there well. Karzai probably felt deeply
insecure at the beginning of Obama’s administration as he knew nobody in
Washington, and nobody was making the effort to get to know him. Even as Obama
committed far more resources to Afghanistan in his first two years in office than
President George W. Bush did over eight years in his two terms, Karzai has probably
kept a skeptical eye on Obama. If Karzai is indeed an ardent student of history, he

probably began to fear for his political survival with the dawning of a new administration, eager to turn the situation around in Afghanistan. But despite what the Obama administration may think about the acute failings of the man, getting rid of Karzai is simply not an option.

I believe Karzai’s critique of U.S. military tactics and his attempts to talk to the Taliban resonate with many Afghans, in part because they reflect the facts on the ground. Karzai has never put forth a coherent vision for his country. He has allowed corruption to eat away at the gains made by development agencies, elevated his own family, and miserably failed to build a government capable of delivering services and justice to the Afghan people. Eager to absolve himself of these failings—of which he is perfectly aware—he probably believes that if he could bring the war to an end by making a peace agreement with the Taliban, Afghans and the international community would forgive his past sins.

In the end, we must realize that until a national hero emerges in Afghanistan who is also a competent statesman, Karzai must finish his second term. In Vietnam, there was no one else available after the coup with the quality of leadership essential for brokering a peace with the North, pacifying the citizens in the South, and escorting Americans out, all at the same time. It is a tell-tale sign you are doing something wrong when your enemies are shocked that you wiped out what they finally admit was the only obstacle between them and victory. Upon learning of Diem’s dismissal and
then death, Ho Chi Minh reportedly said, “I can scarcely believe the Americans would be so stupid.”

The North Vietnamese Politburo was more explicit, predicting:

The consequences of the November 1 coup d’état will be contrary to the calculations of the U.S. imperialists . . . Diem was one of the strongest individuals resisting the Communism. Everything that could be done in an attempt to crush the revolution was carried out by Diem. Diem was one of the most competent lackeys of the U.S. imperialists . . . Among the anti-Communists in South Vietnam or exiled in other countries, no one has sufficient political assets and abilities to cause others to obey. Therefore, the lackey administration cannot be stabilized. The coup d’état on November 1, 1963 will not be the last.

These are sage words from an old enemy. I can just picture the Taliban standing awkwardly in front of the television they once banned everyone else from owning. Their eyes are glued to the screen and their jaws are touching the floor in reaction to the news they are witnessing unfolding before them. A U.S.-backed coup has just ousted Afghan President Hamid Karzai. The Talibs huddled around the TV go from a sense of shock, to bewilderment, to disbelief, to jubilation—for they realize that victory is even closer than they could have gotten on their own. They understand that whoever is reinstalled to take Karzai’s place will not last long. With all of Karzai’s flaws, he is the best Afghanistan has to fight the insurgency and the Taliban know it.

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50 Moyar, 287-90.
CHAPTER 5

FINAL THOUGHTS

Our limited review of the American military conflicts in both Vietnam and Afghanistan is concluded. We have noted in our review some of the contrasts and some of the similarities between the two. We were particularly interested in the strategic actions of the politicians and military leaders regarding the establishment of indigenous leadership. We found that in Vietnam, the overthrow of one local leader and his replacement with another political leader was the strategy followed. In Afghanistan, a different strategy has been followed. Here, a political leader whose effectiveness has frequently been questioned has been supported and upheld by both American military and local politicians. Mr. Karzai acknowledged, when questioned about his popularity, “Well, I have been in government for seven years. It is natural that I would not be as popular (now) as I was seven years ago.”

There has been much sharp opinion about the corruption within President Karzai’s administration, suspicion about embezzlement and drug trading. The development of a strong central government has fallen short, as has the building of an effective military or local law enforcement.


Nevertheless, Mr. Karzai remains the politician with the greatest apparent political power. He has showed wisdom in his dealings with the United States. According to a member of Vice President Biden’s National Security staff, Mr. Karzai reminded American politicians and military leaders not to forget Afghanistan as they drew up their plans to invade Iraq. This was an important point because that was apparently what happened. The development of all the structures to support stable and effective government was neglected while America fought in Iraq. Infrastructure did not get built, schools and hospitals were neglected or not built and unemployment remained high as economics were overlooked.

It is no easy and simple comparison between the situation found by American forces in Vietnam and the situation in Afghanistan. In Vietnam, America was motivated to prevent further spread of worldwide communism. Within Vietnam there were two governments that had arisen as a result of long colonial dominance by France. The northern part of the country was led by a government that resulted from a break from foreign dominance and the establishment of indigenous leadership. The government of the south resulted from local politicians and military personnel filling the void left when the colonial government was withdrawn. The war that the Americans stepped into was, it seems, a civil war.

The south did not have a healthy economy nor a well-led military that had a clear mandate or certain mission. In addition, the Diem regime proved corrupt and indecisive. The change from one government to another would necessitate a coup by
the military. The change took place but, without the stability necessary and in the midst of war, effectively establishing a new direction, building an economy and managing a military without the vision that the government of the north enjoyed, nation building could not take place. Dependency on a foreign military could not stand.

In contrast, Afghanistan was largely governed by a tribal form of government that was based on local interests, local political power and private armies. This was a subsistence form of government that emerged from years of foreign invasion and dominance. Although the country of Afghanistan has limited to no infrastructure and no organized economy or adequate schools or an effective national government, the tribal system helped maintain a loose structure that functioned on a basis of relationships and alliances between tribes and tribal leaders.

In conclusion, it seems that circumstances dictated different strategies in Vietnam and Afghanistan. Although the realities of stability and infrastructure were essentially the same, South Vietnam did have a functioning military that could promise the possibility of stability and security if one leader was changed for another. By the time Afghanistan came along, it seems that America had learned that replacing one leader with another is destabilizing in itself and that nation building requires strong, consistent leadership that tops the displacement of a recognized but ineffective leader.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


