

Kennedy's Involvement

Diem was an elitist with little understanding of the needs and problems of the Vietnamese people. By 1957, guerrilla fighters had mobilized in opposition to Diem. The rebellion grew without significant support from Ho Chi Minh. But by 1959 that was not the case, and they were being secretly supported by Hanoi. By December of 1960 the National Liberation Front had been founded and been label the Vietcong.

Kennedy inherited the problems from Eisenhower. Kennedy was completely on board with preventing the spread of communism. In Kennedy's mind a compromise with Ho Chi Minh would be like the appeasement of Hitler at Munich. The humiliations of his first year in office, Bay of Pigs and Berlin wall, convinced him that he couldn't give up any more to communism.

Military aid was not the only way to success, and Diem lacked support in his country. He was French educated and Catholic; completely opposite the people of his country who were Buddhist. He insisted that Buddhist obey catholic rules and laws. Serious opposition developed as a result. He began imprisoning people who criticized his government and filled government positions with his family members. The aid coming from the U.S. that was meant for economic reforms in S. Vietnam went into the pockets

of corrupt officials and Diem. In an attempt to keep the peasants from turning towards the communist groups and the Vietcong, he

seized land from peasants and placed them on government-run farms.

The Kennedy administration pressured Diem to make political and economic reforms but with no success. Diem only became more tyrannical and isolated. In the spring of 1963, South Vietnam erupted when Buddhist demonstrated against the Diem regime. Government officials fired into crowds, and sparked protests and on June 11, monk Thich Quang Duc set himself on fire in the middle of a busy Saigon street. The following day every major newspaper showed the images of the self-immolations. Diem denied religious persecution, and blamed the Vietcong. But Kennedy knew otherwise, and he saw it was time to remove Diem from power.

U.S. officials told military leaders in Vietnam that they would not object to an overthrow of Diem. In November 1963, military leaders staged a coup, and they seized control. As Diem tried to flee, he was assassinated. The news of the coup brought joy to the streets.

Robert McNamara had a large impact on Kennedy's Vietnam policy. As Secretary of Defense, he was a Republican with a very strong business background, and was also one of Kennedy's closest advisors. He applied his business knowledge, and managed to cut costs while modernizing the armed forces. He changed the way of thinking in Washington and the Pentagon away from one of dependence on nuclear weapons to one of more of a "flexible response" to military crisis.

