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Cha Tam church, where Ngo Dinh Diem (South Vietnam's President in 1963) and Ngo Dinh Nhu (Diem's brother) were arrested by South Vietnamese generals during a military coup in November of 1963. Photo by Bùi Thụy Đào Nguyên. License: [CC BY 3.0](#)

The key plotting group consisted of three South Vietnamese generals "[who only fully confide among themselves](#)." The triumvirate consulted with Allied Generals only "as need arises." (The link takes you to a September 17, 1963 CIA report from Saigon to Washington.)

Led by [General Duong Van Minh](#), the generals "[would under no condition](#) go along with Nhu [Diem's brother] should he make any step toward the North or even toward neutralization a la Laos." In other words, Minh's approach was consistent with U.S. interests (to resist the Viet Cong and to avoid South Vietnam joining Communist North Vietnam).

On November 1st, an hour or so before he was assassinated in a military coup, President Diem talked with Henry Cabot Lodge (America's ambassador to South Vietnam). Reading the [transcript of their telephone conversation](#), one gets the sense that Cabot Lodge didn't know what was about to happen. A written discussion which the Ambassador had with President Kennedy a few days later, however, tells a [different story](#).

The Kennedy Administration had given up on Diem. Recognizing that he and his brother were in serious political trouble, Diem told General Minh he would surrender power in exchange for safe passage out of the country for himself and his brother Nhu. (Madame Nhu, at the time, was in the States.)

When Minh agreed, Diem disclosed his location. He and his brother were at the Saint Francis Xavier Church in Cholon, a suburb of Saigon. (Diem and his brother were Catholics.)

An M-113 armored personnel carrier was dispatched to the church under the command of Captain Nhung, General Minh's bodyguard. By all accounts, after the brothers were inside the vehicle, General Minh raised two fingers, signaling to Captain Nhung that Diem and Nhu should be killed. Nhung reportedly took care of that job himself when he riddled both brothers with bullets.

The day after Diem's assassination, a "[Draft Circular Telegram](#) on Internal Guidance on Change of Regimes in South Vietnam" attempted to distinguish the coup in South Vietnam from normal U.S. government policy against such actions. This "Guidance" resulted from a meeting between President Kennedy and his key advisors. A [memo summarizing that meeting](#) ends with these words:

We should try to confine press speculation crediting the U.S. with bringing off the coup. Our line should be that the aid pressures which we used against Diem were not for the purpose of overthrowing him, but for the purpose of putting pressure on him to come to terms in order to ensure the success of the war against the Viet Cong. (See page 3 of "Memorandum of Conference with the President," dated November 2, 1963 at 9:15 AM).

Three days after the Diem assassination, President Kennedy dictated a memo in which he [expressed regret](#) about actions he and his Administration had taken in August. With sadness in his voice, he said:

I feel that we must bear a good deal of responsibility, in part beginning with our cable of early August, in which we suggested the coup. In my judgment that wire was badly drafted, it should never have been sent on a Saturday...I was shocked by the death of Diem Ngo. He was an extraordinary character. While he became increasingly difficult in the last months, nevertheless over a 10-year period he held his country together.

Eighteen days later President Kennedy was also dead—killed by a different assassin's bullet.

See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/DEATH-OF-A-PRESIDENT-Pentagon-Papers>

See Learning Tasks for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicActivities/DEATH-OF-A-PRESIDENT-Pentagon-Papers>

Media Stream



General Duong Van Minh

Photo of the general, online courtesy Vietnamese-language website.

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