November 2, 1963

The last Hours of the Ngo dinh Diem Regime in Vietnam

In order to give the atmosphere surrounding these historical events, I will tell the story from a personal standpoint.

In the morning of November 1st, a group of us, officials at the United States Operations Mission to Vietnam, had been engaged in briefing a visiting delegation headed by Peter Solbert, a former Harvard Law School classmate, who had left the New York law firm of Davis, Polk to take a senior position in the Defense Department. We did not know, as we were briefing Solbert, that the coup which we had been aware might happen, was already starting. Apparently, about 10:30 a.m. the No. 2 of the Vietnamese Navy went to the No. 1, Captain Quinh, and demanded his resignation. The latter refused and was shot three times in the head. These were apparently the first shots of the coup, but they were not the first tactical actions.

Over a period of time, the coup group had arranged for false intelligence reports to be supplied alleging heavy Viet Cong (Communist) concentrations in the traditional VC areas of Binh Duong province, some thirty kilometers to the north of Saigon. They had therefore received permission from the Palace to concentrate forces near Saigon, and on the morning of Nov. 2 had sent a unit outward from Saigon ostensibly to fight the VC, but turned it round again and headed it back to Saigon. The actual coup really began in earnest around lunch time. I had Selbert and Bert Fraleigh of USOM to lunch, and we were blissfully unaware of any thing extraordinary being afoot. After lunch - about 2:15 - Bert and I headed back to USOM and noticed nothing particularly strange. Traffic and circulation in central Saigon was normal for that hour.

On reaching the USOM we noticed that the staff was milling in the halls and talking on the stairs, each trying to get some late word on the strange doings. This was because several people lived or worked in the vicinity of Tan Son Nhut airport, about six miles out of town, and they said that Vietnamese army units had taken over the airport and that there was gunfire at the Camp des Mares. About this time we heard planes overhead and the rattle of anti-aircraft fire. The fire was apparently coming from Navy vessels in the

Saigon River, and one plane was shot down. At about 3 p.m. President Diem's private secretary, Vo Van Hai, called the USOM to talk to Rufus Phillips. Bert Fraleigh took the call in Phillips' absence. Vo Van Hai said nervously (I was listening on another phone):

"Hello, Mr. Fraleigh. How are you today? Do you know what has been going on?" Bert answered: "We know something appears to be going on, but what is it?" Hai then said he wanted to talk to Phillips or the Ambassador. He was told to try the Ambassador's number.

At this time Dick Evans and Bob Dunn returned from a car trip up Tu Do past the Ministry of the Interior. They said there was considerable tommy - gun firing within the Ministry but not on the street. It was not known who was shooting at whom.

Around 5 p.m. there was an apparent lull and Saigon seemed quiet. I drove downtown via Le Van Duyet Street. Traffic was normal. I called the USOM and reported conditions to Solomon Silver, the Acting Director, and then returned to the USOM up Tu Do. In front of Saigon Cathederal there were several truckloads of tough-looking troops waiting, but under whose orders? I stayed in the USOM only long enough to observe that most of the staff were leaving for their homes as usual, then returned to the Cathedral area. Now tanks and armored personnel carriers were lined up along Boulevard Norodom, facing the Presidential Guard barracks down toward the Botanical Garden. Something was about to explode.

During the afternoon, Vietnamese Marines had taken over Radio Vietnam, various police headquarters, and I noticed a few armed civilians in front of the City Hall.

After dinner, I returned again to the office at 8 p.m. where personnel from PSD, Commedia were standing by on radios. Then I drove home along Le Van Duyet, as the Tu Do - Norodom area had been closed off by troops. I called Silver at his home, and we agreed that the office was buttoned up, with the Executive Officer returning to spend the night there.

Around 9 p.m. fighting bagan in earnest around the Presidential Palace, Gia Long, which covers an area of several blocks. This area was, at its nearest point, about 1½ blocks as the crow flies from

my apartment, and about five blocks at its furthest point. Thus the ensuing fighting was often uncomfortably close, or appeared to be! Fighting could also be heard across town on Norodom.

From 9 - 12 the Gia Long fighting was principally mortar fire at first, with increasing machine gun fire as armored personnel carriers and tanks moved closer around the palace. The rebel radio announced that the palace was encircled, and told the Vietnamese population that there would be fighting during the night but that it would be over by morning. At around 10 p.m. a public address system in Gia Long Palace came on with a statement of the President in Vietnamese calling on the troops to stay loyal and saying that help for him was coming from the provinces. This message was repeated for about ½ hour, but as the rebel forces increased the tempo of their fire, the public address system went quiet and was never heard again. At midnight I went to bed, by this time reasonably accustomed to the rattle of machine guns and the crump of mortars.

At 3:15 I was awakened by a much more ominous sound. Looking out of the window I could hear artillery shells rushing through the sky like express trains, obvously missing the Palace and exploding a mile further on. They seemed to be coming from the direction of Cholon, and it was obvious that with a few degrees change in azimuth and a little less elevation they would strike my building. How long this shelling had been going on I did not know. Fortunately it fell off after perhaps a half-hour, but it was distinctly uncomfortable while it lasted. At about 5 a.m. Earl Young came up from the apartment downstairs so as to get a better view. At his good suggestion I hung the microphone of my taperecorder out of the window and recorded the next hour of battle.

As the first light of dawn began to appear the battle increased in tempo. Down the street, in full light of the streetlamps which had remained on (as did all other public utilities), we had seen squads of Vietnamese Marines filter into the area, heavily laden with such equipment as bazookas and 57-mm recoiless rifles in addition to their packs, jungle uniforms and canvas covered helmets. They looked ghostly, sinister and somehow relentless in the wan light.

After 6 a.m. they moved out of their reserve position and were apparently committed to the final attack. Before they left, however,

a Vietnamese civilian rushed across the wide boulevard to them carrying an armfull of long loaves of bread baked in the French manner. This was the first portent of the popular jubilation that was to follow two hours later.

At about 6:45 a.m. we heard our first human voices during the entire fight, as the firing died down and shouts and cheers and the blowing of whistles took its place. Earl Young and I seized cameras and descended to the streets. We walked the two bloocks to the battle scene and saw troops entering the palace grounds through a hole which had been blasted in the wall. We followed them. Carrying our cameras we were taken for journalists and were greeted with smiles and handclasps by the weary little Marines. Inside the Palace gardens and to our left there were some 50 defenders stretched out on the ground under guard. I saw no wounded or dead in this group. We went ahead to the Palace which the victorious Marines were already looting. There was little or no wanton destruction and no attempt to carry off valuable vases or paintings. Furniture was not destroyed. The troops were opening cabinets and drawers trying to find some souvenir or small article of value. I saw one soldier go off with a doll which must have belonged to one of Ngo Ding Nhu's children. President Diem's bedroom was typically bachelor on appearance, full of papers, documents, magazines etc. I did not join in the universal souvenir collection except to the extent of the Presidential walking-stick, a new English shooting stick. (Since presented to oppositionist politician Bui Diem as a historical memento.)

After looking through the rooms of the palace and taking pictures outside (it was too dark to photograph inside without a flash,) I went out the front entrance of the Palace where I met USOM's Nate Bush coming in in his Bermuda shorts. At a crossing in the direction of the Cathedral but still contiguous to the Palace grounds I saw the first dead body covered with a tarpaulin and with the small feet with their green canvas jungle boots sticking out at the bottom. Was he a defender ar an attacker? The constrast between the jubilation of the Marines and those civilians who were beginning to flood into the area and the small, young figure forever still under the anonymous green cover was very poignant. One could not help being appauled that this young man had lost his life in a political struggle which

may have meant nothing important to him but for which he had lost everything he had.

We crossed the Palace area again, pausing briefly in the common room where telephones were off their hooks, tape recorders quiet. The guard barracks had the usual evidences of their former occupants - magazines, a belt with brass buckle, a calendar, shoes. Outside were their bicycles and motorbikes. I saw one Vietnamese civilian quietly drive off a new motorbike. We went on to where the fighting had been most severe, where an armored personnel carrier had been pierced by a bazooka or tank shell and had exploded. Here three of four more bodies lay. From one projected what appeared to be a piece of raw meat. This man had apparently either been burned in the explosion, or as a bystander said, had been a flame-thrower who had been killed when his own apparatus had been set afire. Large trees were shredded by fire. Evidently cannon or 50-calibre rounds had blown right through trees two feet thick or more. A large pool of blood had collected on the sidewalk. Down the street a strong stocky man in pants and undershirt was kneeling on the sidewalk, his arms tied behind him with wire. Two Marines were quarreling, one determined to execute the man on the spot, the other insisting he be turned over to the rebel authorities as a prisoner. Finally the less vengeful soldier won, and the man was led off. He was said to be an officer of the Secret Police. As he awaited his fate, I admired the stolidity of the man, but one sensed that he could have presided with equal calm over the killing of others. Apparently he had removed his uniform and tried to escape, but had been recognized.

Returning to the Palace we found ourselves on a street lined with tanks and armored personel carriers. Nearby a building was burning and ammunition was exploding inside. Suddenly all the troops decided to celebrate. Turning their guns into the tops of trees and the sky, they opened up with everything from rifles to 50-calibre machine guns. From ten feet away the din was deafening.

Meanwhile everyone was wondering where was the President and his brother. There had been no sign of them in the rooms we examined. Rumors flew fast. Some said they had escaped. Others said they had surrendered and had been taken to the command post of Gen Duong van Minh where they had asked for protection. But no one knew.

By now the troops had begun to seal off the area. The crossings were jammed with military vehicles. As "newsmen" we could still go where we liked, but the initial liberation moment wasover, and a new era in Vietnem had come. We walked back to the main circle of Le Loi and Nguyen Hue where I live. Already the people were streaming into the streets, all smiling and some singing and capering. Soon a truck full of shouting youngsters came by waving palm fronds. Then an army truck with a loudspeaker handing out leaflets. People scrambled for the leaflets, showered the troops with bread, flowers, bottles of soft drinks. After an hour a young crowd rushed into the National Assembly building, emerged with sheafs of paper which they threw into the street. On Gialong the crowd sacked the offices of the Times Vietnam, Ngo dinh Nhu's news mouthpiece operated by a dubious American couple who had consistently attacked American policy. (The acting Editor, Ann Gregory, took refuge in the American Embassy.) The Portail book store on Tu Do which had become a personal business of Ngo dinh Thus, the President's clerical brother, was sacked, many of its books thrown into the street and burned. Down by the waterfront the statue of the legendary Trung sisters, who led a patriotic revolt against Chinese rule in about the 13th century, was half torn down. This was no criticism of the national heroes, but the statues were duplicates in the image of Mme. Ngo dinh Nhu, with her hair-do and features. Since she was in the United States, "her" statues were destroyed. Had she been in Saigon her fate would have been cruel and swift. Still, the mood of the people was mainly joy and gratitude to the aray. Saigon was more animated that I have seen it since 1956. Overnight there was a new spirit in the air, and a police state had become, for the moment at least, an open society.

O. Williams