

The 1966 Buddhist Crisis in South Vietnam

In 1966, resistance to the Saigon government almost sparked a South Vietnamese civil war.

By Peter Brush

The end of French colonial rule in Indochina marked the beginning of the American effort to create a separate and strong state in Vietnam. The purpose of this nation building was to thwart Communist expansion. The United States would measure success by the Vietnamese government's ability to incorporate all elements of society into the new state. The Saigon regime repeatedly experienced great difficulty in commanding the allegiance of South Vietnam's Buddhists, and in 1966 a serious clash erupted between Buddhists in central Vietnam and the Saigon government. In 1954, with U.S. support, Ngo Dinh Diem became head of the new nation of South Vietnam. Under Diem, Catholics were appointed to positions of power at all levels of government and generally enjoyed advantages throughout South Vietnamese society. The Buddhists, who constituted a majority of Vietnamese, resented the preferential treatment given to the small Catholic minority. The late 1950s and early 1960s witnessed a growth in Buddhist institutions in the South, both secular and religious. The desire to gain influence in proportion to their numbers led to the emergence of a Buddhist community with a high level of political and social consciousness. Although they did not take part directly, Buddhist opposition to the Saigon regime was partly responsible for the November 2, 1963, coup that overthrew and killed Diem.

After Diem, South Vietnamese elites were unable to formulate a government that could muster any sort of traction. It was not for lack of trying; coup followed coup until mid-1965, when VNAF General Nguyen Cao Ky and ARVN General Nguyen Van Thieu took charge as premier and president, respectively. Ky's support centered on the generals who were in charge of South Vietnam's four military regions, or corps. Due to the special circumstances of the war emergency, these men had political as well as military authority. Corps commanders ruled as virtual warlords and were well positioned to exert influence on the central government in Saigon. The corps commanders supported Ky in his political aspirations. They knew Ky was acceptable to their American patrons, and that he would work to continue to ensure the flow of military assistance from the United States with (they hoped) minimal interference in their regional authority. I Corps, in the northernmost portion of South Vietnam, was farthest from Saigon, and possessed two of the three largest and most important cities in South Vietnam

Premier Ky was convinced that the Buddhist leaders were traitors who wanted to overthrow his government. (In his memoirs he threatened to kill every Buddhist leader before leaving office if they tried to overthrow him.) He welcomed a showdown with them. According to Ky, Lt. Gen. Nguyen Chanh Thi, commander of the I Corps, was a "born intriguer" who had "left-wing inclinations." For siding with the Buddhists, Ky relieved Thi of command on March 10, 1966, precipitating a major political crisis.



General Walt greets Maj. Gen. Hoang Xuan Lam (left) upon the latter's arrival at Da Nang to assume command of I Corps - and fight Communist forces rather than U.S. Marines and the Struggle Movement. (USMC)

General Thi, a devout Buddhist and an effective combat officer, had been popular in I Corps. Thi governed with even more independence than the other corps commanders. He had the support of Buddhists in the area and did nothing to oppose their political goals, which included an end to the fighting and a negotiated settlement with the Communist National Liberation Front. Ky and Thieu regarded him as a threat. U.S. Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge, U.S. Army General William Westmoreland and U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara all supported the Ky-Thieu regime and opposed Thi, whom they considered too soft on communism. The Americans hoped to facilitate Thi's departure from the South Vietnamese political scene by offering him a good living in the United States and an education for his children. Given this formidable opposition, Thi's future in South Vietnam looked bleak. He did, however, have one important ally: Marine Lt. Gen. Lewis Walt, who commanded U.S. forces in I Corps and was senior adviser to South Vietnamese military forces in the region. The ARVN was much more provincial than the U.S. Army, especially the ARVN's regional forces. Walt considered Thi an exceptional military leader who commanded the "deep-rooted" loyalty of his soldiers. This potent combination -- political support from the Buddhists and military support from the ARVN -- allowed Thi to resist American pressure to just fade away. According to the official history of U.S. Marine Corps Vietnam operations in 1966, "The removal of General Thi caused an immediate shock wave throughout I Corps."

Page 1 of 4

Thousands of demonstrators took to the streets of Da Nang and other northern cities. They formed an organization called the Military-Civilian Struggle Committee to support Thi and express opposition to the Saigon government. That organization, known as the "Struggle Movement," quickly spread. Some of its supporters took over a radio station in Da Nang and made antigovernment broadcasts. University students in Hue joined the movement. A general strike was called that lasted for a few days. The stakes were raised when the Struggle Movement claimed authority over the armed forces of Quang Nam province, which included Da Nang and its important military facilities. Buddhists in Hue took over the local radio station and joined the Struggle Movement in opposition to the Saigon government. By the end of March the situation had worsened. General Thi slipped back into I Corps where he was met by enthusiastic crowds in both Da Nang and Hue. The movement became anti-American as well as anti-Saigon government, and it increased in influence until most of I Corps was operating independently of central Vietnamese government control. Washington became alarmed. Saigon decided to act. On April 3, Ky

held a news conference in which he proclaimed Da Nang to be in the hands of Communists and vowed to launch an operation to regain control. The following night, Ky dispatched three battalions of South Vietnamese marines (VNMC) to Da Nang on U.S. military aircraft. The Vietnamese marines stayed at the Da Nang airbase and made no attempt to retake control of the city from rebel forces. General Walt was in a difficult position, caught between Vietnamese marines loyal to the Saigon government and Vietnamese army forces that supported the anti-Ky Struggle Movement.

On April 9 the situation became more ominous. Pro-Struggle Movement ARVN Colonel Dam Quang Yeu dispatched a convoy of infantry, armor and artillery from Hoi An toward Da Nang. The commander of the 3rd Marine Division, Maj. Gen. Wood Kyle, ordered the 9th Marine Regiment to block Route 1 in order to stop the convoy. A Marine platoon from Foxrot Company, 2nd Battalion, 9th Marines (2/9th), supported by two Ontos antitank vehicles, stalled a 2 1/2-ton truck on the bridge and took up positions on the northern side. A flight of VNAF attack planes buzzed the U.S. Marine position. His progress blocked, Colonel Yeu aimed his 155mm howitzers at the airfield. Walt dispatched Marine Colonel John R. Chaisson to the bridge site. Chaisson warned Yeu not to proceed any farther. To reinforce this point, a flight of Marine Vought F-8E attack aircraft, loaded with rockets and bombs, circled overhead. Walt further ordered the Marines to aim 155mm and 8-inch guns at the ARVN position.

Yeu told Chaisson that he was a friend of the U.S. Marines but that (according to U.S. *Marines in Vietnam: An Expanding War, 1966*, by Jack Shulimson): "he had come to fight the Saigon government troops who threatened the local people. He had come to lay down his own life if necessary...." The Vietnamese uncased and fused shells for their big guns. Chaisson warned Yeu that his unit faced annihilation if they fired on his Marines, then returned to his waiting helicopter and left. Gradually tension eased. Over the next few days the Da Nang and Hue radio stations returned to government control. The VNMC force returned to Saigon while ARVN forces in I Corps resumed operations against the Viet Cong. General Thi publicly disassociated himself from the Struggle Movement. It was only a lull in the storm, however. Premier Ky feared the Buddhists would take control of the entire central region and declare the territory autonomous. Without telling either President Thieu or the Americans, Ky ordered his chief of staff, General Cao Van Vien, to lead a force back to Da Nang. On May 15, loyal Vietnamese marines and airborne forces flew from Saigon to Da Nang. Landing at dawn, they immediately moved into the city and seized the local ARVN headquarters. American leaders in Washington called General Walt to find out what was happening. According to Ky, Walt was "furious at an assault without warning on what he regarded as his territory." Ky ordered an airplane to fly over the positions of the pro-Buddhist army forces and drop a message threatening them with destruction if they fired on his forces. Walt, in his memoirs, makes no mention of being furious. Rather, he describes having been frantic to find out what was going on, glad that the Viet Cong were quiet, and grateful that American troops had not yet become involved. Again, Walt was caught in the middle. The new I Corps commander, Maj. Gen. Ton That Dinh, had the support of most ARVN forces in the region. Like Walt, Dinh was caught by surprise when Ky's forces

arrived. Dinh sought asylum at U.S. Marine headquarters in order to avoid arrest. Later that morning two VNAF aircraft strafed ARVN units near U.S. Marine positions north of Da Nang. Fearing bloodshed, Walt asked the South Vietnamese government to withdraw its forces from Da Nang. On May 16, Ky rejected that request and replaced Dinh with another general, Huynh Van Cao, a Catholic, as I Corps commander. On May 17, General Cao flew to Hue to visit an ARVN division headquarters. A hostile crowd broke into the division compound as Cao prepared to depart for Da Nang. As the helicopter lifted off the ground, an ARVN lieutenant hit it with two pistol rounds. In response, the U.S. Army door gunner fired a burst that killed the ARVN lieutenant and wounded two ARVN soldiers. Struggle Movement supporters condemned the Americans for this interference in Vietnamese internal affairs.

Page 2 of 4



Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge visits the U.S. Marine compound at Da Nang on September 13, 1965, accompanied by Maj. Gen. Lewis Walt, then commander of the III Marine Amphibious Force. (USMC)

Not only was Ky unwilling to withdraw his troops, he seemed to welcome this confrontation with the Americans. According to his memoirs, Ky told his local commanders in Da Nang to aim their biggest guns at the Marine base. If the Americans took action against the threatening Vietnamese aircraft, the commanders were to "destroy the Marine base. That is an order." Ky then describes in considerable detail how he flew to Da Nang and reprimanded General Walt for interfering in affairs that were none of his concern. Better at displaying flamboyance and arrogance than at conducting diplomacy, Ky was fond of sporting silk scarves and a pearl-handled revolver. His alleged dressing down of Walt, however, is not mentioned in the latter's memoirs or in the Marine Corps history of events in Vietnam.

On May 18, Vietnamese marines moved to cross a bridge over the Da Nang River that connected the city with the Tiensha Peninsula. They were fired on by ARVN troops associated with the Struggle Movement positioned on the other side. The dissidents sent a message to General Cao, stating that they had wired the bridge with demolition charges. If the Vietnamese marines crossed, they said, the bridge would be destroyed. Cao relayed this message to Walt. Since this bridge was essential to U.S. Marine Corps operations, Walt again dispatched Colonel Chaisson to prevent hostilities between the Vietnamese military factions.

Chaisson convinced the Vietnamese marines to pull back, allowing a company of U.S. Marines to occupy its former position on the west side of the bridge. Chaisson then tried to get permission from the Struggle Movement

commander to position U.S. Marines on the east side, but permission was denied. Chaisson ordered the Marines into the ARVN positions anyway. The Americans sat down in the middle of the rebels and made no attempt to dislodge them. Walt arrived at the scene. He and Colonel Chaisson walked together across the bridge to the east side. A Vietnamese warrant officer told them to stop, threatening to blow up the bridge. Not only had the Vietnamese engineers rigged the bridge for demolition; they also had similarly rigged a nearby ammunition dump containing 6,000 tons of munitions.

The Vietnamese had two heavy machine guns pointed at the U.S. Marines. They fired at the Americans, who dived for cover. The situation was very tense. According to Chaisson, while Walt spoke to the Vietnamese warrant officer and "really gave him hell," the Americans were secretly cutting the demolition lead wires. The Vietnamese officer was not intimidated; rather, he told Walt, "General, we will die together," and brought his raised hand down to his side. At that signal, another Vietnamese engineering officer pushed down the plunger on the detonator. According to Walt: "There was no doubt he expected the bridge to blow on his signal. I shall never forget the expression on his face when his signal did not blow up the bridge and us with it." By then, U.S. Marines had secured the ends of the bridge. Demolition charges were removed from both the bridge and ammunition dump by the Vietnamese engineers who had placed them there. The second bridge incident was over, but the crisis continued.

Page 3 of 4

By late May, Struggle Movement forces still held several strongpoints in Da Nang. These antigovernment forces were well armed and willing to use their machine guns and other automatic weapons against government troops from time to time. On May 21, General Walt learned the Saigon regime had decided to use its air force to destroy the resistance forces. Walt was alarmed, fearful that aircraft bombing and strafing in Da Nang would cause civilian casualties, including Americans (there were more than 1,000 U.S. civilians in Da Nang at the time). Walt told the Vietnamese corps commander (the fourth since the crisis had begun) of his concerns. He got no help there; the commander, afraid of being killed by his own men, moved into Walt's headquarters to ensure his personal safety, claiming he had no control over the air forces. Walt talked with the VNAF commander at Da Nang with no greater effect. Walt next received information that VNAF attack planes were taking off from Da Nang with full loads of rockets and bombs. Since discussion was yielding no results, Walt ordered the commander of the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing to arm four jet fighters with air-to-air ordnance.

Struggle Movement machine gun teams operating near U.S. Marine positions opened fire on ARVN troops. In response, two VNAF planes attacked with rockets. Three rockets fell short of the Struggle Movement positions and landed in the Marine area, wounding eight U.S. Marines. The Marines launched two jets with instructions to orbit over the Vietnamese aircraft and shoot them down when Walt gave the order. Walt then told the VNAF commander he would destroy his planes if one rocket, one bomb or one round landed in Da Nang.

Next, Walt got a telephone call from Washington, relaying a complaint from Saigon that the U.S. Marines were interfering in Vietnamese internal affairs. After Walt explained the situation, he was told to use his best judgment. The Vietnamese then launched

four more aircraft to orbit above the Marine jets. The VNAF commander told Walt that if his planes fired on the Vietnamese planes, they would be shot down. Walt launched two more jets with instructions to take positions over the second tier of Vietnamese airplanes sandwiched over Da Nang. This standoff continued for two hours, and then the Vietnamese planes returned to base. The Struggle Movement was not making any more progress on the ground than the VNAF was making in the air. About 150 Vietnamese on both sides were killed in the fighting; another 700 were wounded. Twenty-three Americans, including 18 Marines, were wounded. General Thi, whose dismissal had initiated the crisis, met with General Westmoreland on May 24. On May 27, Thi met with Ky at Chu Lai, and they agreed that the most helpful thing would be for Thi to leave I Corps for good. Before leaving, Thi tried to convince General Cao to return to I Corps headquarters. Cao feared for the safety of his family, and asked Westmoreland for asylum in the United States, where he said he would like "to become an American citizen, to join the Marines or Army, to fight against the Communists..." Later in the year, Thi went into exile in the United States. The Saigon government then appointed a new I Corps commander — Maj. Gen. Hoang Xuan Lam — who turned his attention to fighting the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong instead of the U.S. Marines and antigovernment forces. The Struggle Movement in Da Nang collapsed, although it continued in Hue. On May 26, a large crowd attended the funeral of the Vietnamese officer who was killed after firing at General Cao's helicopter. Afterward, the crowd burned down the U.S. Information Services Library. Over the next few days, three Buddhists doused their robes with gasoline and set themselves on fire. Tri Quang, the Buddhist leader, went on a hunger strike to protest American support for the Saigon regime and interference in Vietnamese affairs. After threats were received, the ARVN 1st Division dispatched guards to protect the U.S. Consulate in Hue. The guards fled when a mob stormed the mission, which was set on fire with barrels of gasoline. In response, and with the assistance of the Americans, Ky sent Vietnamese airborne and marine battalions to the military base at Phu Bai. By June 19, all of Hue was under government control. U.S. Ambassador Lodge publicly praised the Ky regime for putting down the Struggle Movement, calling it "a solid political victory." According to influential Cornell University scholar George Kahin, the lesson South Vietnamese critics of the Saigon government learned was that the dominance of Generals Ky and Thieu could not be contested as long as they had the support of the United States. After June 1966, the only challenge Ky and Thieu had to face was from Hanoi and the Viet Cong.

Page 4 of 4