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"Giving a Free Hand to the Assassins":
An Introduction to Marguerite Higgins' Far-Sighted 1965 Book on Vietnam, *Our Vietnam Nightmare*

After an essay on "The Death of Two Catholic Presidents" was first published in *Culture Wars* in May of 2009, a thoughtful letter was sent to the editor Dr. E. Michael Jones concerning my historical and somewhat autobiographical essay, especially about my failure to mention the dishonorable role of an older, fellow West Point graduate by the name Roger Hilsman in the treacherous killing of President Diem and his brother on All Souls' Day 1963. This challenging Letter to the Editor[1] gave me an occasion, with the added encouragement of the Editor, to expand upon my original article, especially so as to honor the book by Marguerite Higgins and her acute cautionary insights. For, she was a woman of great integrity and farsightedness, who died in January 1966 of a disease contracted in Vietnam, and who understood Vietnam and Southeast Asia very well, to include the deeper self-sacrificial character of President Diem himself and his high Mandarin sense of national mission as a Catholic leader of his largely Buddhist country amidst an unmistakably strategic form of Protracted Warfare and Revolutionary Subversion.

It therefore seems fitting, now some three years later, to re-publish in a less informal format, my essentially untouched, but now clarifyingly expanded, response to the original 2009 inquiry and challenge about the influential Roger Hilsman himself, as well as about the other events and deceits which led up to, and grimly followed, the 2 November 1963 assassinations of Vietnam's Catholic President and his brother. For, later in that month, President John F. Kennedy was also assassinated.

It is good that, in the search to discover and discuss the earlier essential facts concerning the murder of President Diem, we also emphatically mention Roger Hilsman. For, he was then the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs who keenly favored and promoted the removal of President Diem and his brother Nhu and who sent ("with approval of the President") an important cable to Saigon, on 24 August 1963. (Some, such as Mr. Thistlewaite, have alleged something that I had not

1 The Letter to the Editor was written by W. James Thistlewaite of Hoboken, New Jersey, and appeared in *Culture Wars* shortly after the May 2009 Issue—and along with my somewhat lengthy Reply to him. Shortly afterwards, moreover, Anthony S. Fraser, the Catholic Editor of the Scottish Journal *APROPOS,* published a fuller version of "The Death of Two Catholic Presidents" in his 2009 APROPOS Issue No.27 (Saint Mary Magdalen, 2009), pages 221-256.

known, namely that Hilsman was Jewish, but they have not made clear to me the implications of that fact or possible bias, or at least not yet. Nor have they even characterized the nature and quality of his Jewish heritage and theistic faith, nor his abiding sense of self-identity.)

Moreover, I would greatly encourage anyone who is "after the truth" to read Marguerite Higgins' candid and trustworthy 1965 book, *Our Vietnam Nightmare*[2], especially Chapters 10 and 11, concerning the 1-2 November 1963 Coup d'État and President Kennedy himself and the early aftermath of the assassinations. Also important in this context is her second chapter, entitled "Machiavelli with Incense," which is an examination of Thich Tri Quang, the most important leader of the politically active, subversive faction of the anti-Diem Buddhist monks. ("And the mystery surrounding his past served him well" (page 32), as she will later also show!)

At the Department of State, another important leader of "the Diem-must-go school" was Hilsman's superior, Averell Harriman, who was then Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs. (The Secretary of State, Dean Rusk, was a little more cautious and understated, or weakly ambiguous and purposively equivocal, about the desirability and wisdom of replacing President Diem.) Harriman's detrimental role in all of the wider strategic theater of Southeast Asia (such as Cambodia and Laos), though not discussed by Higgins, cannot be easily overstated, which is one reason why the Ho Chi Minh Trail was also "affectionately" known as the "Averell Harriman Memorial Highway." His adoptive son, Michael Vincent Forrestal (the born son of the former, and first, Secretary of Defense, James Forrestal), was a Special Assistant and Aide to President John F. Kennedy, thereby giving Averell Harriman additional private and timely access to the White House, when it was thought to be necessary.

After the military and police raids of 21 August 1963, which were conducted by the Diem Regime against some twelve politically subversive Buddhist pagodas, especially in Saigon (the Xa Loi Pagoda) and in Hué (the Dieu De Pagoda and the Tu Dam Pagoda of Thich Tri Quang), the Kennedy Administration suddenly and effectively adopted a policy of **overt political warfare** against the Diem regime – and soon added **overt economic warfare**, as well. The 21 August 1963 raids had provided a pretext for a new "course correction," and proved to be a turning point in American policy toward

2 Marguerite Higgins, *Our Vietnam Nightmare* (New York: Harper&Row, Publishers, 1965). An extended Subtitle-Explanatory note on the book's cover said: "The story of U.S. involvement in the Vietnamese tragedy, with thoughts on future policy." When Marguerite Higgins died in January of 1966, she was only forty-five years of age. She was born in Hong Kong and her mother was French, and, in addition to her extensive and intensive travels throughout Asia, she had made some ten visits to Vietnam, some of a longer duration. When she died she was survived by two children and her husband General William Hall. As far as I can determine, Marguerite Higgins was not herself a Roman Catholic, but she was a just woman and conscientiously fair, and she respected the moral standards and sincere pieties of Catholics, as in the case of President Diem himself. Further page-references to *Our Vietnam Nightmare* will be within the text, in parentheses.

Diem. Let us try to understand this matter of moment a little more.

The well-organized and strategic subversive actions of a minority faction of militant Buddhist monks, such as those of Thich Tri Quang (from Hué's Tu Dam Pagoda) were underestimated and largely ignored by the progressive "New Frontiersmen of the Kennedy Administration," as these Liberal Idealists were then called, many of whom also had open sympathies for the concurrent Civil Rights Movement (and attendant Civil Disobedience Movement) in the United States. Thus it was easier for the predominantly Liberal members of the Kennedy Administration to demand President Diem's progressive, even humiliating, conciliation with these subversive Buddhists, and to look upon the militant monks, not as an externally directed, well-organized propaganda operation, but merely as an unjustly persecuted minority. (Of some 4,700 Buddhist pagodas in South Vietnam, only twelve had been assaulted by night on 21 August, but this small proportion was not kept in mind nor presented by the Press – nor was the fact revealed that arms and ammunition and further evidences of their being, in effect, a special-operations and political-warfare headquarters were also found inside these specially targeted pagodas). The New Frontiersmen of the Progressive Kennedy Administration did not want America's liberal image to be tarnished.

As Marguerite Higgins later admitted in her 1965 book:

> It is clear that Thich Tri Quang understood the forces at play in the world at that time far better than I did. For even when I left Vietnam that summer [of 1963] I did not share Thich Tri Quang's conviction that the United States would take his side in the battle against Diem. But I was wrong. (35)

The presidentially approved telegram (as later verified by a White House aide, Michael Forrestal, and also by Richard Helms, himself the Deputy Head of C.I.A) was anomalously sent out on Saturday by Hilsman and Harriman from Washington D.C.; and it arrived at the Saigon Embassy on that Saturday night, 24 August 1963. The former Ambassador, Frederick Nolting, had already departed from Saigon on 16 August, five days before the raids on the pagodas; and the newly appointed Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge (himself designedly a rival Republican, not a J.F. Kennedy-Democrat) had only just arrived on 21 August, the same day as those night raids on the politically subversive pagodas in Saigon and in Hué.

This 24 August 1963 telegram, itself almost an explicit incitement to a coup d'état or to a revolt of the generals, was further exacerbated by Voice of America broadcasts which were beamed into and received in Saigon even before Ambassador Lodge was himself to meet President Diem for the first time, namely on Monday morning 26 August. (The Director of the United States Information Agency –

USIA-USIS – hence of the provocative Voice of America, was Edward R. Murrow.) This Department-of-State and Voice-of-America combination was clearly a campaign of political warfare, as strategist James Burnham also immediately and clearly understood.

In a little over two months President Diem and his brother, Nhu, would be dead. They were found to have been shot numerous times in the back, and in the back of the head – and their hands were tied behind their backs.

It was indeed a difficult thing, even with the help of loyal allies, for President Diem to govern Vietnam while in office for nine years (1954-1963) and concurrently fighting a protracted war against a revolutionary and determined Communist Enemy. In addition to such criminal collectives as the Binh Xuyen (with their piratical and nearly intractable drug-trafficking activities), there were also the Hoa Hao and Cao Dai syncretic religious (and political) sects, for example, which were run by acknowledged warlords who effectively constituted "states within a state," making the sustained governance of Vietnam even more difficult.

A trenchant passage from Graham Greene's own far-sighted 1955 novel on Vietnam, entitled *The Quiet American*, will give the flavor and convey the difficulty of this added political factor of largely independent and dubiously loyal religious sects. Greene begins his own Chapter 2 with the following, deftly acerbic passage:

> At least once a year the Caodaists hold a festival at the Holy See in Tanyin, which lies eighty kilometers to the north-west of Saigon [near the Cambodian border], to celebrate such and such a year of Liberation, or of Conquest, or even a Buddhist Confucian or Christian festival. Caodaism, the invention of a Cochin civil servant, was a synthesis of the three religions. The Holy See was at Tanyin. A Pope and female cardinals. Prophecy by planchette. Saint Victor Hugo. Christ and Buddha looking down from the roof of the Cathedral on a Walt Disney fantasia of the East, dragons and snakes in technicolour. Newcomers were always delighted with the description. <u>How could one explain the dreariness of the whole business</u>: the private army of twenty-five thousand men, armed with mortars made out of the exhaust-pipes of old cars, <u>allies of the French who turned neutral at the moment of danger</u>? [my emphasis added]

What loyalty and honor could be reasonably expected from this quarter? How was President Diem to deal with these potent New Feudalities? And likewise with the resentful Colonial French themselves, and even some of the French Military and their vengeful Intelligence Apparatus who were bitterly against "the Nationalist Diem"and wanted to punish him (and even to betray him and his loyal Catholic followers to the Communists, as they later, in part, shamefully did)? And what of the Americans themselves – those "Short-Range Crusaders" – and of their domestic, as well as external

pressures?

In this context, Graham Greene's memorable 1955 depiction of "the quiet American" (in the guise of the politically innocent Pyle) shows him to be very short-sighted in his quixotic zeal to establish a "back channel" to a purported "Third Force," thereby causing much more trouble than before in Vietnam, not only for the French and the Vietnamese, but also for the Americans themselves. So, too, was it the case with what the Kennedy Administration inflicted, though most of them were, as it appears, far less innocent than Pyle.

Moreover, Graham Greene's depiction of his other memorable and more mature character, Fowler (the seasoned foreign correspondent) **could not** have – and **would not** have – said of the Kennedy Administration (*e.g.*, Roger Hilsman, Averell Harriman, Walt Rostow, George Ball, Bobby Kennedy, Dean Rusk, Richard Helms, McGeorge Bundy, Mike Forrestal – the special White House Aide –, nor even of President John Kennedy himself) what he had sincerely said of the innocent, young Pyle: "I never knew a man who had better motives for all the trouble he caused." Certainly, Roger Hilsman's motives and actions were much more cynical and culpable and dishonorable, as we shall further come to see.

In her excellent 1965 book, *Our Vietnam Nightmare*, Marguerite Higgins – an important contemporary witness – says the following about the 24 August 1963 State Department cable from Roger Hilsman:

> The substance of the cable was that the U.S. embassy was to make an effort to persuade Diem to fire his brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu, release the Buddhist rebels, end press censorship, and restore other democratic liberties suspended under martial law. And if, as the cable anticipated, Diem would not do these things, then the embassy was to contact the Vietnamese generals and tell them that the United States would no longer stand in the way of a revolt. The leash thus would no longer hamper the would-be revolters. "Rocking the boat" was no longer a U.S. taboo. (193-194)

Moreover, says Maggie Higgins:

> The United States rushed into instant and almost total condemnation of Diem. Shortly after his arrival (August 22), Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge seemed to personally and publicly place the U.S. embassy on the side of the Buddhists. Lodge seems to have called on the Buddhists even before presenting his credentials to Ngo Dinh Diem [on 26 August] .... Accidental or not, Lodge's much photographed session with the Buddhist monks was universally viewed in Saigon and the rest of the world as showing where America's sympathies lay. (185, 186)

(As part of the Protestant elite of Boston, Henry Cabot Lodge himself was known to have little sympathy with the traditional Catholic Faith or its culture, and perhaps especially so in Asia.)

But, with respect to President Kennedy, who had intended to keep his own political rival, Lodge, in harness or effectively "encysted" in Vietnam, Marguerite Higgins then adds:

> According to McGeorge Bundy, White House assistant for national security affairs, President Kennedy went along with this policy of pressures against Diem because he was persuaded that the "Vietnamese ship of state could not weather the storm without changing course" .... **President Kennedy contributed mightily to the political warfare against Diem** in a statement of early September [1963] (made during a television interview) in which he called for "change of policy and personnel." The key points of this statement were based on a briefing paper prepared for him by Assistant Secretary of State Hilsman. President Kennedy claimed among other things that Ngo Dinh Diem had "gotten out of touch with the people" .... The statement was a bombshell on both sides of the Pacific. (202—my emphasis added)

Earlier, Higgins had herself already significantly emphasized that

> At the time [the summer and fall of 1963], some policy makers in Washington explained this was necessary not just to safeguard America's image with Buddhist Asians but also <u>to detach a Catholic American President from the "taint" of what a fellow Catholic had done</u>. (186 – my emphasis added)

Furthermore, after her many cumulative interviews in Vietnam and the United States, Marguerite Higgins reluctantly but firmly came to conclude that

> In its private signals to the Vietnamese generals and in its public declarations and acts of political and economic warfare, the United States effectively opened the floodgates to revolt.
>
> Would there have been any way [in the autumn of 1963] to turn back the flood?
>
> Robert Kennedy says that his brother had second thoughts about the August 24 cable .... If so, President Kennedy was ill-advised to make his public demand [in September 1963] for "changes in policy and personnel" and to institute aid cuts [to the Diem regime].
>
> It is possible that President Kennedy might have diverted the momentum of revolt if sometime before November 1 he had made a strong declaration of confidence in Diem, emphasizing that it superceded his televised declaration of no confidence in September. Also, economic aid would have had to be fully restored. Neither of these things was President Kennedy willing to do. (211)

To add to this dishonor, moreover,

> In Washington the [2 November 1963] murder of Diem and Nhu brought not a single public expression of regret on the part of the U.S. government. In Saigon the embassy's silence on this score was equally conspicuous. (220)

After arriving late from a party on that Saturday night, 2 November 1963, and in response to an imploring request from Madame Nhu in Los Angeles concerning her endangered children (who were still in Vietnam), Marguerite Higgins made a personal telephone call to the private number of Roger

Hilsman, who was himself a West Point Graduate of the Class of 1943 and a former member of General William Donovan's Office of Strategic Services (O.S.S.) in World War II, serving especially in Burma:

> It was 2 A.M. I roused Assistant Secretary Hilsman out of a sound sleep.
> "Congratulations, Roger," I said. "How does it feel to have blood on your hands?"
>
> "Oh, come on now, Maggie," said Roger. "Revolutions are rough. People get hurt." (225)

A callous and flippant cynicism reveals itself here, indeed. (When speaking of Trich Tri Quang, Maggie Higgins had earlier reported: "When I asked him about the ethics of sending people off to fiery deaths [to manipulated suicides by self-immolation] for political purposes he merely shrugged his shoulders and said that 'in a revolution many things must be done'.")

Roger Hilsman showed himself to be a Liberal without Honor. But, I regret to say, he was never disavowed nor repudiated, nor even corrected, by President John Kennedy. (On 6 March 1964, only some five months after the death of President Kennedy, Hilsman unexpectedly chose to resign from his position in the State Department and he went into the academic life, where he also remained a Liberal of sorts.)

The same year that Hilsman resigned, James Burnham published his book, *Suicide of the West: An Essay on the Meaning and Destiny of Liberalism*. In his Chapter 7, Burnham wrote:

> Liberalism confronts an inescapable practical dilemma. Either liberalism must extend the freedoms to those who are not themselves liberals [e.g., "the Buddhist extremist forces dedicated to his – Diem's – subversion"] and even to those whose deliberate purpose is to destroy the liberal society – in effect, that is, [liberalism] must grant a free hand to its assassins; or liberalism must deny its own principles, restrict the freedoms, and practice discrimination .... Surely there would seem to be something fundamentally wrong with a doctrine that can survive in application only by violating its own principles.[3]

As Alexander Solzhenitsyn often observed, especially in his reflections upon the historical phenomenon of Social Democracy (and Liberalism): the Mensheviks always prepare the way for the Bolsheviks, just as, in the French Revolution, the Girondins prepared the way for the Jacobins. Jacobins and Bolsheviks know how to use force and they are not so squeamish about shedding blood. Girondins and Mensheviks thereby give a free hand to – or even hand the weapons over to – their own assassins.

The case of Thich Tri Quang is a good example of how religion – in this case Buddhism – is

3 James Burnham, *Suicide of the West: An Essay on the Meaning and Destiny of Liberalism* (New Rochelle, New York: Arlington House, 1964), p. 140 – my emphasis added.

instrumentalized to serve a revolution. (We may also see it in the Catholic Church today.)

As Marguerite Higgins puts it in her important chapter on “Machiavelli with Incense,”

> Thich Tri Quang had been given political asylum at the American embassy [in Saigon], where he had taken refuge on September 2, 1963, after the Diem regime raided the key pagodas involved in antigovernment agitation. The purpose of the raids was to take the Buddhist out of politics by rounding up the key leaders of the revolt. But the most militant of them all – Thich Tri Quang – escaped and was given political asylum by Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge. Thus the United States saved Thich Tri Quang .... (32).

But, she adds:

> Gratitude is not one of Thich Tri Quang's strong suits. The Americans who had granted him asylum were disconcerted, for example, to find him in the forefront of the anti-American campaign. Soon after his departure from his U.S. asylum, his disciples in Central Vietnam [especially Hué] even went so far as to accuse Americans of persecuting Buddhism. His contempt for America appears complete. A staff member of the Saigon Post reports a conversation in which Thich Tri Quang said: “With the Americans, it is not so interesting any more. They are too easy to outwit ... some of them persist in thinking they can 'reform' me into agreeing with them .... It is useful to smile sometimes and let them think so .... We will use the Americans to help us get rid of Americans ....” (33)

Marguerite Higgins then says:

> It seems strangely unreal, looking back [from the vantage point of 1965] on the summer of 1963, that anybody could have still been in doubt about short-term Buddhist aims.
>
> “What do the Buddhists want?” I wrote at the end of my Vietnam tour. “What they want is Diem's head, and not on a silver platter, but wrapped in an American flag.”
>
> What I most certainly did not foresee was that “Diem's head wrapped in an American flag,” was precisely what the Buddhists would get. (33)

--FINIS--