

= Nguy?n Ng?c Th? =

Nguy?n Ng?c Th? ( 26 May 1908 ? 1976 ) was a Vietnamese politician who was the first Prime Minister of South Vietnam , serving from November 1963 to late January 1964 . Th? was appointed to head a civilian cabinet by the military junta of General D??ng V?n Minh , which came to power after overthrowing and assassinating Ngô ?nh Di?m , the nation 's first president . Th? 's rule was marked by a period of confusion and weak government , as the Military Revolutionary Council ( MRC ) and the civilian cabinet vied for power . Th? lost his job and retired from politics when Minh 's junta was deposed in a January 1964 coup by General Nguy?n Khánh .

The son of a wealthy Mekong Delta landowner , Th? rose through the ranks as a low @-@ profile provincial chief under French colonial rule , and he was briefly imprisoned by Imperial Japan when they invaded and deposed the French during World War II . During this time he met Minh for the first time as they shared a cell . Following World War II , he became the Interior Minister in the French @-@ backed State of Vietnam , an associated state in the French Union . After the establishment of the Republic of Vietnam following the partition , Th? was sent to Japan as ambassador and secured war reparations . Recalled to Vietnam within a year , he helped to dismantle the private armies of the Hòa H?o religious sect in the mid @-@ 1950s . Tho led the political efforts to weaken the Hòa H?o leadership . While Minh led the military effort , Th? tried to buy off Hòa H?o leaders . One commander , Ba C?t , was personally hostile to Th? , whose father had confiscated the land of Ba C?t 's family decades earlier . The stand @-@ off could not be ended peacefully in this case , and Ba C?t was captured and executed .

This success earned Th? the vice presidential slot in December 1956 to widen the popular appeal of Di?m 's nepotistic and sectarian regime . It was reasoned that Th? 's southern heritage would broaden the regime 's political appeal ? Di?m 's family was from central Vietnam and most administrators were not from South Vietnam . Th? was not allowed to take part in policy decisions and had little meaningful power , as Di?m 's brothers , Nhu and C?n , commanded their own private armies and secret police , and ruled arbitrarily . Th? oversaw South Vietnam 's failed land reform policy , and was accused of lacking vigour in implementing the program as he was himself a large landowner . He was noted for his faithful support of Di?m during the Buddhist crisis that ended the rule of the Ngô family . Despite nominally being a Buddhist , Th? defended the regime 's pro @-@ Roman Catholic policies and its violent actions against the Buddhist majority .

Th? turned against Di?m and played a passive role in the coup . Upon the formation of the new government , he struggled to keep the nation under control as the MRC and civilian cabinet often gave contradictory orders . Media freedom and political debate were increased , but this backfired as Saigon became engulfed in infighting , and Th? had a series of newspapers shut down after they used the new @-@ found freedom to attack him . During that time , South Vietnam 's military situation deteriorated as the consequences of Di?m 's falsification of military statistics and the misguided policies that resulted were exposed . Minh and Th? had a plan to try to end the war by winning over non @-@ communist members of the insurgency , believing that they constituted the majority of the opposition and could be coaxed away , weakening the communists . As part of this policy , which the U.S. opposed , the government chose to take a low @-@ key military approach in an attempt to portray themselves to the Vietnamese public as peacemakers . However , they were deposed in Khánh 's U.S.-backed coup before they could pursue their strategy .

= = Early career = =

The son of a wealthy southern landowner , Th? was born in the province of Long Xuyên in the Mekong Delta . He began his bureaucratic career in 1930 , serving the French colonial authorities as a low @-@ profile provincial chief . During World War II , Th? rose to become the first secretary of the Resident Superior of Annam , the French governor of the central region of Vietnam . During this time , he crossed paths with Ngô ?nh Di?m , a former Interior Minister under the French regime in the 1930s . The French thought that Di?m was working with Imperial Japan and tried to have him arrested , but Th? tipped off Di?m and the Kempeitai , resulting in their escape .

In March 1945 , Japan , which had invaded and occupied French Indochina in 1941 during World War II , decided to take direct control and overthrew the French colonial regime . Th? was thrown into a crowded cell with several other prisoners that had no light or toilet and filled with their own excrement . One of his cellmates was D??ng V?n Minh , then a junior officer in the French military forces with whom he would work over the next two decades . Th? was released first and lobbied to have Minh released as well and the pair remained close friends .

Following World War II , Th? became Interior Minister in the French @-@ backed State of Vietnam under former Emperor B?o ??i . Following the withdrawal of France from Indochina after the Battle of ?i?n Biên Ph? , Vietnam was partitioned into a communist north and anti @-@ communist south . Following the proclamation of the Republic of Vietnam ? commonly known as South Vietnam ? by President Ngô ?inh Di?m , who had dethroned B?o ??i in a fraudulent referendum , Th? was appointed the inaugural ambassador to Japan . Despite spending most of his time in Tokyo confined to his bed by a fractured hip , Th? secured reparations from Japan for its imperial occupation of Vietnam during World War II .

In 1956 , Di?m recalled him to Saigon to help deal with the Hòa H?o , a religious sect equipped with a private army . The Hòa H?o was effectively an autonomous entity in the Mekong Delta , as its private army enforced a parallel administration and refused to integrate into the Saigon administration . While the Army of the Republic of Vietnam ( ARVN ) General D??ng V?n Minh led the military effort against the Hòa H?o , Th? helped to weaken the sect by buying off its warlords .

However , one Hòa H?o commander , Ba C?t , continued to fight , having had a personal history of bad blood with Th? 's own family . The orphaned , illiterate C?t 's adopted father 's rice paddies were confiscated by Th? 's father , which purportedly imbued C?t with a permanent hatred towards the landowning class . C?t was eventually surrounded and sought to make a peace deal so he sent a message to Th? asking for negotiations so that his men could be integrated into mainstream society and the nation 's armed forces . Th? agreed to meet Ba C?t alone in the jungle , and despite fears the meeting was a Hòa H?o trap , he was not ambushed . However , C?t began asking for additional concessions and the meeting ended in a stalemate . C?t was captured on 13 April 1956 and guillotined after a brief trial and his remaining forces were defeated in battle .

During this period , Th? was the Secretary of State for the National Economy . In November , Di?m appointed Th? as vice president in an effort to widen the regime 's popular appeal . The appointment was endorsed by the National Assembly in December 1956 , in accordance with the constitution . The move was widely seen as an attempt to use Th? 's Mekong Delta roots to increase the government 's popular appeal among southern peasants , because Di?m 's regime was dominated by family members , Catholics from central Vietnam .

= = Di?m era = =

Despite the importance of his title , Th? rarely appeared with Di?m in public and was a figurehead with little influence . The real power lay with Di?m 's younger brothers , Nhu and C?n , who commanded private armies and secret police , as well as giving orders directly to ARVN generals . Nhu reportedly once ordered a bodyguard to slap Th? because he felt Th? had shown him a lack of respect . Di?m held Th? in contempt and did not allow him to take part in major policy decisions , despite theoretically being the second most powerful man in the country . Th? had a rapport with the military officers , having befriended Minh years earlier . He was regarded as a genial and affable administrator with a reputation for making compromises .

Th? was charged with overseeing South Vietnam 's land reform program , because the minister of agrarian reform , Nguy?n V?n Thoi , answered to him . As both men were wealthy landowners , they had little incentive for the program to succeed . The U.S. embassy received angry criticism of Thoi 's lack of enthusiasm towards implementing the policy , stating , " he is most certainly not interested in land distribution which would divest him of much of his property " .

Th? also retained a degree of influence over domestic economic policies , which ran far behind Di?m 's priorities of absolute control over the military and other apparatus through which he maintained his rule . Despite never having been trained in economic matters , Th? had a prominent

hand in the administration of the Commodity Import Program , an American initiative akin to the Marshall Plan , whereby aid was funnelled into the economy through importing licenses rather than money , in order to avoid inflation . However , Th? 's administration of the program led to the vast majority of the imports being consumer goods for the upper classes , rather than capital goods to develop South Vietnam 's economic capacity . Under Th? 's watch , the foreign trade deficit hovered between 150 and 200 % , and the gap between the urban elite and the peasant majority grew . American advisers thought Th? and the Ngô brothers continually went against their counsel because they were either incompetent or simply distrustful and thus did the opposite of what was recommended .

Th? also clashed with Interior Minister Nguy?n H?u Châu over economic strategy . Châu was the married to Madame Nhu 's sister and appointed due to nepotism , but was later expelled from the Ngô family due to his dissent . The Americans claimed Th? , who was trained in public security , " knew more about political control than the ' basic laws of the market place ' " . In mid @-@ 1961 , after a visit by U.S. Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson and pressure from leading American officials , Di?m relieved Th? of his economic duties .

Th? then began to put try to put pressure on the Americans to influence Di?m . During a fact @-@ finding mission by General Maxwell Taylor , the chief of the U.S. military , and Walt Rostow , Th? and Minh complained of Di?m 's autocratic ways and religious favoritism towards his fellow Catholics to the disadvantage of the majority Buddhist populace . In 1962 , he told senior U.S. Embassy official Joseph Mendenhall that Di?m 's military subordinates invented arbitrary and falsely inflated figures of Viet Cong fighters .

= = Role in Buddhist crisis = =

Despite being a Buddhist , Th? had a reputation for heaping praise on Di?m 's Roman Catholic government . On Di?m 's 62nd birthday , Th? paid tribute , saying , " thanks to the Almighty for having given the country a leader whose genius was outweighed only by his virtue " . ( Buddhism is a Dharmic religion which does not recognise a supreme being in a theistic sense . ) Th? later accompanied Di?m to the Roman Catholic Redemptorist Church to pray for the President . Th? had little public following , with American Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Maxwell Taylor calling him " unimpressive " , while prominent State Department official Paul Kattenberg derided Th? as a " nonentity " .

In another project , the village of La Vang in Qu?ng Tr? Province near the border with North Vietnam , was the scene of a female apparition in the late 19th century . Buddhists claimed that the bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara ( also known as Kuanyin ; Vietnamese : Quan Âm ) performed the miracle . Di?m 's brother , Ngô ?ình Th?c , was the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Hu? and the foremost religious figure in South Vietnam 's nepotistic regime . Th?c declared that the apparition was the Virgin Mary , and ordered that a cathedral be built in place of the makeshift Buddhist pagoda that occupied the site . Th? made notable financial donations to the project for political reasons .

In June , as the Buddhist crisis escalated , Di?m appointed Th? to lead a government committee to deal with grievances raised by the Buddhist community following the Hu? Vesak shootings in which eight Buddhists were killed by government forces while protesting a ban on the flying of Buddhist flags . The committee concluded the Vi?t C?ng was responsible for the deaths , despite eyewitness accounts and amateur video showing that the government had fired directly at protesters . The committee 's whitewash caused Buddhist protests to escalate . When de facto First Lady Madame Nhu ( herself a Buddhist convert to Catholicism ) mockingly described the self @-@ immolation of Buddhist monk Thích Qu?ng ??c as a " barbecue " , Th? refused to condemn her remarks , saying they were " personal opinions " .

Th? was part of an Interministerial Committee , a group of government officials that negotiated a Joint Communique with the Buddhists to end the civil disobedience . An agreement was signed , but never implemented . Th? was later criticised by the Nhuses through their English language mouthpiece , the Times of Vietnam , for the deal . Despite the general amnesty granted to arrested Buddhist

activists , on 13 August , Th? gave a press conference during which he vowed to prosecute the Buddhist victims of the Hu? Vesak shootings , and revoking the amnesty and vowing to jail Buddhist demonstrators .

At a farewell dinner for U.S. ambassador Frederick Nolting in July , Th? called for the Buddhists to be " crushed without pity " . He derisively said that Buddhism was not a religion and further claimed that while anybody could become a Buddhist monk , it took years of training to become a Catholic priest . When the Thai ambassador disagreed , citing his own previous monastic training , Th? taunted him in front of other diplomats .

With the pressure on the Di?m regime increasing during the Buddhist crisis , Nhu and Di?m began to shun their cabinet members because they presented arguments contrary to the thinking of the Ngô family . Many ministers attempted to resign , but Th? was credited with persuading them to stay in office . Finding the situation increasingly intolerable , Th? also considered resigning but the dissident generals urged him to remain . They were worried that mass resignations would arouse suspicion of a coup plot .

= = Prime Minister = =

In private , Th? expressed his displeasure with Di?m 's rule to U.S. officials . He complained of Di?m 's reliance on Nhu in the running of the country , Nhu 's attempt to run a police state through his secret C?n Lao apparatus and the lack of success against the Vi?t C?ng . During the McNamara Taylor mission to South Vietnam , Th? confided his belief that the country was heading in the wrong direction to the American delegation , imploring them to pressure Di?m to reform his policies . He privately revealed his belief that of the thousands of fortified settlements built under Nhu 's Strategic Hamlet Program , fewer than thirty were functional .

Joseph Mendenhall , a senior Vietnam adviser in the US State Department , advocated the removal of Di?m in a military coup and his replacement with Th? . Th? was privately aware that he was the choice of the generals to run the government after the planned overthrow of Di?m . By this time , Di?m and Nhu realized a plot was afoot against them , but did not know that General Tôn Th?t ?ính , a palace favourite was involved . Nhu ordered ?ính and Colonel Lê Quang Tung , the ARVN Special Forces commander , to plan a fake coup against the Ngô family .

One of Nhu 's objectives was to trick dissidents into joining the false uprising so that they could be identified and eliminated . Another objective of the public relations stunt was to give a false impression of the strength of the regime . The first stage of the scheme would involve loyalist soldiers , disguised as insurgents , faking a coup and vandalising the capital . A " revolutionary government " consisting of opposition activists who had not consented to being named in the regime would be announced , while Di?m and Nhu would pretend to be on the run . During the orchestrated chaos of the first coup , the loyalists and Nhu 's underworld contacts would kill the leading plotting generals and their assistants , such as Th? , CIA agent Lucien Conein , and U.S. Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge Jr . A fake " counter @-@ coup " was to follow , whereupon the loyalists would triumphantly re @-@ enter Saigon to restore the Di?m regime . However , the plot failed because ?ính was part of the coup plot and sent the loyalist forces out of the capital to open the door for the rebels .

After the coup on 1 November 1963 , in which Di?m and Nhu were killed the following day , Th? was appointed Prime Minister by Minh 's military junta five days later , on 6 November 1963 . He was the leading civilian in the provisional government overseen by the Military Revolutionary Council ( MRC ) . Minh had earlier promised U.S. officials that the civilians would be above the generals in the hierarchy . In addition , he was minister for finance and the economy . Th? 's appointment was not universally popular , with some leading figures privately lobbying for a clean break from the Di?m era .

= = = Relationship with junta = = =

Th? 's civilian government was plagued by infighting . According to Th? 's assistant , Nguy?n Ng?c

Huy , the presence of Generals Tr?n V?n ?ôn and Tôn Th?t ?ính in both the civilian cabinet and the MRC paralysed the governance process . ?ính and ?ôn were subordinate to Th? in the civilian government , but as members of the MRC they were superior to him . Whenever Th? gave an order in the civilian hierarchy with which the generals disagreed , they would go to the MRC and countermand it .

Saigon newspapers , which had re @-@ opened following the end of Di?m 's censorship , reported that the junta was paralysed because all twelve generals in the MRC had equal power . Each member of the MRC had the power of veto , enabling them to stonewall policy decisions . The press , which was liberalised following the downfall of Di?m , strongly attacked Th? , accusing his government of being " tools " of the MRC . Th? 's record under Di?m 's presidency was called into question , with allegations circulating in the media that he had supported the repression of the Buddhists by Di?m and Nhu . Th? claimed that he had countenanced Nhu 's brutal Xá L?i Pagoda raid , attempting to prove that he would have resigned were it not for Minh 's pleas to stay . The media further derided Th? for the personal benefits that he gained from the Di?m administration 's land policy . Minh defended Th? 's anti @-@ Di?m credentials by declaring that Th? had taken part in the planning of the coup " from the very outset " and that he enjoyed the " full confidence " of the junta .

At one point in December , Th? could no longer withstand what the free media were publishing about him and called around 100 journalists into his office . An angry Th? shouted at the writers and banged his fist on the table , assailing them for what he regarded as inaccurate , irresponsible and disloyal reporting . Th? claimed the media were lying in saying that he and his civilian cabinet were puppets of the generals , and claimed that one of the journalists was a communist while another was a drug addict . He said that his administration would " take steps to meet the situation " if the media did not behave responsibly . Having already had his Information Minister , General ?? M?u , circulate a list of topics that were not to be reported on , Th? had M?u close down three newspapers for " disloyalty " on the following day .

On 1 January 1964 , a Council of Notables , comprising sixty leading citizens , met for the first time , having been selected by Colonel Ph?m Ng?c Th?o . Its job was to advise the military and civilian wings of the government with a view towards reforming human rights , the constitution and the legal system . Th? publicly stated that he expected a " rational attitude " coupled with " impartial and realistic judgments " and said that it was part of the provisional government 's quest to " clear the way for a permanent regime , which our people are longing for " . The council consisted almost entirely of professionals and academic leaders , with no representatives from the agricultural or labour movements . It soon became engaged in endless debate and never achieved its initial task of drafting a new constitution . Th? later admitted that the Council was unrepresentative of South Vietnamese society and had been a failure . He claimed that the council 's desire to move away from the rubber stamp model of Di?m 's National Assembly had caused it to degenerate into a debating society .

= = = Policies = = =

With the fall of Di?m , various American sanctions that were implemented against South Vietnam in response to the repression of the Buddhist crisis and Nhu 's Special Forces ' Xá L?i Pagoda raids , were lifted . The freeze on U.S. economic aid , the suspension of the Commercial Import Program and various capital works initiatives were lifted . The United States quickly moved to recognise Th? and Minh .

Th? 's government halted Nhu 's Strategic Hamlet Program . Nhu had trumpeted the program as the solution to South Vietnam 's difficulties with Vi?t C?ng insurgents , believing that the mass relocation of peasants into fortified villages would isolate the Viet Cong from their peasant support base . Th? contradicted Nhu 's earlier reports on the success of the program , claiming that only 20 % of the 8 @, @ 600 existing strategic hamlets were under Saigon 's control , with the rest having been taken over by the communists . Those hamlets that were deemed to be tenable were consolidated , while the remainder were dismantled and their inhabitants returned to their ancestral

land .

Th? 's approach to removing Di?m supporters from positions of influence drew criticism from both supporters and opponents of the deposed president . Some felt he was not vigorous enough in removing pro @-@ Di?m elements from authority , whereas others felt that the magnitude of the turnover of public servants was excessive and bordering on vengeance . A number of officials suspected of having engaged in corruption or Di?mist oppression were indiscriminately arrested without charge , most of whom were later released . ?inh and the new national police chief , General Mai H?u Xuân , were given control of the interior ministry . The pair were accused of arresting people en masse , before releasing them in return for bribes and pledges of loyalty . Not all officials under Di?m could automatically be considered pro @-@ Di?m , yet there were calls for further removals of the old guard . The government was criticised for firing large numbers of district and provincial chiefs directly appointed by Di?m , causing a breakdown in law and order during the abrupt transition of power . One high profile and heavily criticised non @-@ removal was that of General ?? Cao Trí , the commander of the ARVN I Corps who gained prominence for his particularly stringent anti @-@ Buddhist crackdown in the central region around Hu? . Trí was simply transferred to the II Corps in the Central Highlands directly south of the I Corps region .

Th? and the leading generals in the MRC also had a secret plan to end the communist insurgency , which called itself the National Liberation Front ( NLF ) and claimed to be independent of the communist government of North Vietnam . They claimed that most of them were first and foremost southern nationalists opposed to foreign military intervention and U.S. involvement and support of Di?m . The MRC and Th? thought that an agreement to end the war within South Vietnam was possible . Th? recalled in later years that his government 's plan was to generate support among the Cao ?ài , Hòa H?o and ethnic Cambodian minorities , elements of which were in the NLF and bring them back into the mainstream fold out of the insurgency into a non @-@ communist pro @-@ West political system . He thought that it was possible to sideline the communists as he described them as " still having no dominance and only a minor position " within the NLF . According to Th? , this plan was not a deal with the communists or the NLF as his group saw it as a political attempt to coax back non @-@ communist dissidents and isolate those that were communists .

The government rebuffed American proposals to bomb North Vietnam on the grounds that such actions would cede the moral high ground , which they claimed on the basis of fighting purely for self @-@ defense . For their part , Minh and Th? 's leadership group believed that a more low @-@ key military approach was needed for their political campaign against the insurgency . Minh and Th? explicitly and bluntly turned down the bombing proposal in a 21 January meeting with US officials . Australian historian Anne E. Blair identified this exchange as sealing the regime 's " death warrant " .

She pointed out that when the discussion was reported to Washington , the leading US generals in the U.S. military lobbied Defense Secretary Robert McNamara , claiming that it was no longer feasible to work within the parameters laid out by Saigon and that the U.S. should simply take control of anti @-@ communist military policy , thereby necessitating a coup . The Americans became increasingly concerned with Saigon 's reluctance to intensify the war effort , and bombing rebuff was regarded as a critical point . The government 's plans to win over the NLF were never implemented to any degree before the government was deposed .

= = = Downfall = = =

The provisional government lacked direction in policy and planning , resulting in its quick collapse . The number of rural attacks instigated by the Viet Cong surged in the wake of Di?m 's deposal , due to the displacement of troops into urban areas for the coup . The increasingly free discussion generated from the surfacing of new and accurate data following the coup revealed that the military situation was far worse than what was reported by Di?m . The incidence of Vi?t C?ng attacks continued to increase as it had done during the summer of 1963 , the weapons loss ratio worsened and the rate of Viet Cong defections fell . The units that participated in the coup were returned to the field to guard against a possible major communist offensive in the countryside . The falsification of

military statistics by Diem's officials had led to miscalculations , which manifested themselves in military setbacks after Diem's death . Aside from battlefield setbacks , something that was outside his remit , Thieu was also becoming unpopular in the military establishment . One of the goals of the various anti Diem Minh coup plots at the time was to remove Thieu , and the prime minister's unpopularity helped to distract some of the incumbent officers from the fact that they were the primary target ; at that time , the MRC was moving toward removing Thieu , and Minh was the only senior general to retain confidence in him .

On 29 January , General Nguyen Khanh ousted Minh's MRC in a bloodless pre dawn coup ; although Khanh accused the junta of intending to make a deal with the communists and claimed to have proof , he was actually motivated by personal ambition . After Khanh was deposed a year later , he admitted that the allegations against Minh's group were false . In later years , Khanh , Thieu and Minh's generals all agreed that the coup was strongly encouraged by the Americans and could not have occurred without their backing .

Thieu was apprehended during the coup and put under house arrest while the plotters consolidated their grip on power ; he was then removed from the political scene . The civilian arm of the government was replaced with Khanh appointees , and Thieu left politics , having personally enriched himself during his period in government . His activities after leaving politics are not known . He died in 1976 in Saigon .