

the History of the reunification palace

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On the morning of April 30, 1975, Saigon’s Independence Palace was under siege. As the last of the in-country American personnel scrambled evacuate the country, South Vietnam was preparing itself for the inevitable advance of the NVA army. That morning, two NVA tanks would smash through the gates of the Independence, marking the start of what is commonly referred to as the Fall of Saigon. The presence of Western media outlets in Saigon as it fell to the north transformed the event into a subject of global speculation, as well as a part of popular history. Today, the palace has become Vietnam’s most famous tourist destinations alongside the War Remnant’s Museum, often memorialized as the site of America’s loss and Vietnam’s success in the Vietnam War.[[1]](#footnote-1) Although it was just making its entrance into the sphere of popular history in 1975, Saigon’s newly named Reunification Palace had already been developing a well-documented history as the site of Vietnam’s most famous political struggles. For this reason, the Reunification Palace has in many ways become a representation of Vietnam’s efforts to secure its own national and political identity.

One of the Reunification Palace’s first experiences as such a historical site began shortly after World War II, as Vietnam was attempting to secure its independence from France, who taken over Vietnam in 1861.[[2]](#footnote-2) Despite their near eight decades of colonial rule, the end of the war was accompanied by multiple setbacks in the French attempt to retain power in Vietnam. The spring of 1945 saw a rise in the number of revolutionary people’s committees formed by that began to emphasize the political ideologies of the Indochina Communist Party, despite having affirmed their loyalty to the French provisional government. [[3]](#footnote-3)As these groups continued to bolster their influence on the politics of South Vietnam, the French colonial machine lost the support of Japan, who interned the French colonial forces in May of 1945.[[4]](#footnote-4) To make matters worse, Vietnam was in the midst of a debilitating famine, which would not subside until June of that year.[[5]](#footnote-5) Having disarmed the French militaries in Vietnam, Japan opened the path for Vietnam to secure its independence, which Ho Chi Minh declared in September of that year.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Amidst the social and political turmoil, appendages of ICP continued to make preparations for a Vietnamese independence. In 1954, Emperor Bao Dai sought a path separate from both colonial and communist rule, and declared Ngho Dinh Diem Prime Minister of the Republic of Vietnam.[[7]](#footnote-7) That same year, the then called *Norodom Palace* became the residence of Prime Minister and eventual president Ngho Dinh Diem, who while not a communist leader, became the face of the Republic of Vietnam.[[8]](#footnote-8) It was this republic that successfully inherited a governance of Vietnam that did not involve French colonial rule. The Palace’s association with Diem and his presidency in its early stages made it an edificial representation of a Vietnamese government that offset the rule of France.

Despite its initially positive association with the Diem government, the palace was also capable of representing the darker side of Vietnam’s struggle for a national identity. In 1962, the Norodom Palace was the site of President Diem’s first and unsuccessful assassination attempt. The Palace’s association with the Diem presidency cast the building an increasingly negative light, as Diem became an increasingly unfavorable leader to the Vietnamese people. Shortly after becoming president in 1955, Diem became infamous with his handling of the Vietnamese Sects Crisis that took place that same year. At the time, the Cao Dai and Hoa Hao sects of Vietnam had taken advantage of the failing colonial government, and were attempting to secure political power themselves. In response, Diem employed a divide and conquer military tactic that attempted to diffuse the political volatility of the sects.[[9]](#footnote-9) Having refused to make concessions on the autonomy of the sects, both Sects opted to unite against Diem, and engage in open warfare in the streets of Saigon.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Additionally, Diem began to develop a reputation as a puppet of foreign influence shortly after his mishandling of the Sects crisis. Between the years 1955 and 1961, the United States acted not only as political advisors but also financial supporters to the Diem presidency, having invested or $1 billion in providing South Vietnam with economic and military assistance.[[11]](#footnote-11) Last but certainly not least, the Diem presidency also displayed a notable lack of concern towards the villages, which were traditionally the backbone of Vietnamese society.[[12]](#footnote-12) By 1962. The NLF or *Viet-cong* had already made their intentions clear regarding the Diem presidency. They vowed to overthrow the Diem government and replace it with a democratic coalition, as well as to abolish the “economic monopoly of the U.S. and its henchmen,” amongst other political claims.[[13]](#footnote-13)

That same year, ARVN pilot Nguyen Van Cu attempted to carry out the aspirations of his father Nguyen Van Loc, who’s nationalist Party (the VNQDD, Vietnamese Nationalist Party) wished to assassinate President Diem.[[14]](#footnote-14) On February 27th, the party organized a coup attempt that called on Cu and a member of his squadron to shoot down Diem’s Douglas C-47 aircraft. When their attempt to shoot down the aircraft failed, the two decided to instead attack the Norodom Palace, successfully bombing a number of locations in the palace, including a room in which Diem was located.[[15]](#footnote-15) It was after this event that the Palace became more than just a representation of new Vietnamese government, but also an actual site in which Vietnamese dissenters attempted to dismantle a presidency that had become antithetical to the goals of the Vietnamese public.

The palace’s role in Vietnamese history was demonstrated most famously during the Fall of Saigon which began in the end of April of 1975. From the start of America’s emergency evacuation of all military and political personnel on April 27 to the arrival of the NVA’s army at the palace gates on April 30th, the fall would be televised and replayed before the eyes of the western world.[[16]](#footnote-16)

By the end of 1972, The United States was preparing to retract all of its military and economic interference in Vietnam. Having lost faith in the decade long presidency of Nguyen van Thieu, the United States began a process of gradual evacuation under President Nixon and subsequently President Ford. By April of 1975, the United States deemed South Vietnam incapable of withstanding the advance of the NVA, and carried out a full scale evacuation of American personnel and South Vietnamese refugees. On April 29th the Battle of Saigon was officially underway, as the NVA began its attack on Tan Son Nhut airbase just outside of Saigon.[[17]](#footnote-17)

As the NVA continued its advance on the city, the U.S. scrambled to evacuate the U.S. embassy in downtown Saigon, which was becoming increasingly overrun by Vietnamese refugees and citizens attempting to escape the coming army. By 7:52 that evening, the last of the American helicopters made its departure from the roof of the embassy building, before the eyes of the American Press.[[18]](#footnote-18)

The following day, the armies of the NVA approached the gates of the Independence Palace, and wasted no time in forcing their way onto the grounds, marking Saigon’s official fall to the NVA. Accounts of the Fall of Saigon emphasize a lack of backlash from the South Vietnamese people as tanks and soldiers made their ways through the streets of the city. Expectations of all out political turmoil prophesized by ideologies like the domino theory and containment had not been fulfilled. Coupled with the actual nature of the Fall of Saigon, Vietnamese perspectives on the fall of Saigon have often cast the Fall of Saigon in a more positive light, and treat it more as a liberation from American puppet regimes, as opposed to the collapse of government.

As of the 2009, the Palace itself has portrayed the Fall of Saigon similarly. In the basement of the Palace (which now functions as a museum), curators have constructed an exhibit dedicated to highlighting Vietnam’s battle against “French colonialists” and American imperialists.”[[19]](#footnote-19) A caption beneath a picture of an NVA tank crashing through the gates of the Palace refers to the NVA as a “Liberation army.”[[20]](#footnote-20) It is through these portrayals that South Vietnam and the world as a whole has come to incorporate the palace into Vietnam’s historic struggle against the Western interference.

The Reunification Palace’s extensive history as a site of Vietnamese political reform has made it an image of Vietnam’s aspirations to achieve national self-determination. It has become a testament to some of Vietnam’s most notable struggles with achieving such a goal.

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