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Hamid Karzai: Afghanistan's Diem

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The mountains of Afghanistan are quickly growing verdant in their similarity to the jungles of Vietnam. The revelation this week in the New York Times that Afghan President Hamid Karzai's brother, Ahmed Karzai, is a "thug", "suspected player in the country's booming illegal opium trade", and "on the CIA payroll", is striking not for its news quotient, but for the fact that it was made by what appear to be White House officials. We are in 1963 all over again.

It was that year that American president John F Kennedy, fresh off his victory in the Cuban missile crisis, began asserting himself more deeply in the Vietnam conflict, which had, until then, been run almost entirely by the US Central Intelligence Agency. The president was intervening because Ngo Dinh Diem, the CIA's man in Saigon, a city he ruled in a country he only tried to rule, had gained a reputation as a gangster, thug, and narcotics dealer both on the ground in Vietnam and in the international press.

Diem had carefully built a network of power from his base of Catholic supporters, French post-colonial arms and narcotics dealers, local criminals, control of the prostitution and bar industry, and through work with a longtime Saigon criminal syndicate known as the Bin Xuyen, originally river pirates, now traders in narcotics, and more importantly, information. His spy network was thorough and terrifying to the local populace. Through this network, Diem, a man who kept a working casino on the top floor of his presidential palace, had gained a firm grip on the security of Saigon.

However, the North Vietnamese had built a successful public relations campaign against Diem for these very reasons. Kennedy felt he had to win over the population of Vietnam, and could never do so with such a known thug in office. This was in direct contradiction to the CIA's perspective. Their chief man in Asia, Edward Lansdale, had personally nurtured Diem's rise to power. He felt that Diem, while dirty, had taken great strides in gaining control of a country that the colonial French had so recently fled.

The dispute became personal: Kennedy asked Lansdale to the White House, and Lansdale fought tooth and nail in a September 1963 National Security meeting for the president to back Diem and to give him moral and political, as well as financial and military, support. Lansdale berated the administration for not having already done so - even going so far as to accuse State Department officials of having tried to kill Diem in 1960.

Ultimately, Kennedy came round to the belief that the United States could better win over Vietnam by replacing Diem. He ordered the American ambassador at the time, Henry Cabot Lodge, not to meet with Diem, and soon American military commanders gave the go-ahead to a coup by Diem's own military leaders.

The new leaders let the network of thugs, criminals, gangsters, and ex-colonialists fall apart, and with it, Saigon's security. The coup led to a never-ending power struggle among South Vietnamese military leaders for control of the various power centers of the old network. Amidst the chaos, the North Vietnamese leadership was able to quickly infiltrate the city.

In the words of the North Vietnamese politburo: "Diem was one of the strongest individuals resisting the people and communism. Everything that could be done in an attempt to crush the revolution was carried out by Diem. Diem was one of the most competent lackeys of the US imperialists ... Among the anti-communists in South Vietnam or exiled in other countries, no one has sufficient political assets and abilities to cause others to obey."

Ho Chi Minh thought Diem was such a powerful figure that he "could scarcely believe the American's could be so stupid" as to have replaced him.

Indeed, Ho Chi Minh's prediction proved true. Under new rule, Saigon fell from bad to worse, forcing the CIA to later re-institute a "strong-man" policy in the city, only to see support for its rule and efficacy undermined by the Tet offensive. In Vietnam, neither the idealist route of dumping thugs nor the cynical route of reinstating them worked. Ultimately, there was no compelling reason to the Vietnamese why the United States should be in Vietnam.

And so it is little surprise, but a well-timed reminder, that also this week, a leading American figure in Afghanistan offered his resignation, stating, "I have lost understanding of and confidence in the strategic purposes of the United States' presence in Afghanistan." Mathew Hoh, the Senior Civilian Representative for the US Government in Zabul province, wrote on September 10 in a four-page resignation letter that "I have doubts and reservations about our current strategy and planned future strategy, but my resignation is based not upon how we are pursuing this war, but why and to what end."

Now President Barack Obama is choosing between strategies in Afghanistan, with the New York Times reporting that his administration has "deep divisions". Yet they seem to be split only between the strategies of cynicism and of false idealism. The White House has already made clear that its decision will involve a troop increase, the question being only how large and deployed in what way.

Throughout the general mass media bonanza that has been covering the decision over Afghanistan, from the fawning entire Nightline episode dedicated to a "day in the life" of Stanley McChrystal, to the most recent New York Times piece about Karzai's allegedly drug-

dealing brother, few have explored why the US remains in Afghanistan at all.

The New York Times article, based on statements of "American officials" indicates only one thing: that the White House has clearly decided to confront the CIA, and Karzai, over Afghan policy, undermining both in one quick news attack. What it has clearly not decided to do is pull out of Afghanistan.

There is an old British diplomatic saying, "The United States will always do the right thing, after it's tried all its other options." Lets hope that 45 years after 1963 we have outgrown this. But it doesn't appear to be the case.