

'The Dragon Lady': How Madame Nhu Helped Escalate The Vietnam War

Colby Itkowitz

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Madame Nhu, left, the de facto first lady of South Vietnam, and her daughter Le Thuy leave the Elizabeth Arden beauty salon on Connecticut Avenue in Washington on Oct. 16, 1963. (William Smith/AP)

she makes only brief appearance in the 10-part documentary on the Vietnam War by Ken Burns and Lynn Novick, she played a significant role in the trajectory of the United States' involvement in Vietnam.

Elegant and strong-willed, she was a figure of international intrigue in the early 1960s. Unlike America's first lady, who was demure, classy and media shy, Nhu rarely shied from the spotlight. Both Time and Life magazines featured her on their covers. Jacqueline Kennedy once said Nhu was "*everything Jack found unattractive*" in a woman, according to the documentary.



By 1963, the Viet Cong was not only waging a war against the South, but the Buddhist majority in the South was also rebelling against the Diem regime. When a Buddhist monk lit himself on fire in protest in the middle of the city, Nhu flippantly said he had been "barbecued" with "imported gasoline," and offered to supply more fuel for other Buddhists and would stand by "and clap."

In an act that shocked the world, a Buddhist monk set himself on fire in Saigon on June 11, 1963, to protest the pro-Catholic Diem regime. (Malcolm Browne/AP)

During a public relations tour of the United States, Vietnam's de facto first lady, Madame Nhu, spoke at the National Press Club in Washington. Inside, she taunted and belittled the Kennedy administration, accusing the White House of treason for economic sanctions against South Vietnam. Protesters gathered outside met by a smaller faction of her fans from the American Nazi Party holding signs that read, "Madame Nhu, we like you." And "JFK salutes red Tito, shuns Madame Nhu."

It was the fall of 1963, and by then the North Vietnamese communists had been carrying out guerrilla attacks against the South for several years. The United States had already started spraying the chemical Agent Orange in rural areas where guerrillas were thought to be hiding out. The first U.S. soldiers had been killed by the Viet Cong.

Nhu, born Tran Le Xuan, was married to the brother of President Ngo Dinh Diem, a bachelor, and so he entrusted her with all the duties of a first lady. Though

Later, she claimed her words were inspired by a conversation her children had overheard between two Americans in a Saigon snack bar. "*I am only a victim of American advice,*" she said. Americans dubbed her "Dragon Lady," and President John F. Kennedy was said to have called her a "*goddamn bitch.*" Because of the Buddhist uprising, and Diem's poor handling of it, the Kennedy administration was losing trust in Diem's ability to lead such a fractured nation. And Nhu only added to that anxiety.

Nhu irritated the U.S. government by questioning American motives. She referred in one speech to "false brothers" who didn't understand Diem's positions, a not-so-veiled reference to the Kennedy White House. She also alleged the U.S. Embassy in Saigon had "*threatened and blackmailed*" the Vietnamese government in an effort "*to shut me up,*" to which a State Department spokesman responded, "*We don't wish to comment on Madame Nhu's utterances, especially in view of the fact that she does not have any official position in the Vietnamese administration.*"

During her 1963 U.S. speaking tour, she accused the United States of being soft on communism and presented herself as the victim. She complained that the Kennedy White House, which did not acknowledge her visit, could have shown her "more courtesy." She made several high-profile appearances, including an interview on NBC's "Meet the Press." She said America wasn't as anti-communist as Vietnam and had given in to liberalism, which in her view meant they were, "not red yet, but they are pink."

The Washington Post described her during her visit as "petite, quick-witted" and remarked on her "long, sharpened red fingernails detracting somewhat from her posture of defenselessness." Meanwhile, while Nhu traveled the United States, the Kennedy administration urged the Diem government to make significant changes in how it was running South Vietnam. Eventually, a frustrated Kennedy heeded the advice of State Department officials and let it be known that **he did not want to start a coup, but wouldn't stop one either.**

Nhu was in Los Angeles with her daughter when dissident generals launched an attack against the South Vietnamese government on Nov. 1, 1963. Nhu's husband and President Diem were both killed. Nhu blamed the United States. "*The deaths were murders,*" she said, "*either with the official or unofficial blessings of the American Government.*"

When she left her L.A. hotel, reporters asked her whether she felt defeated. She responded defiantly: "*Never! Never! Never!*" In a news conference on Nov. 2, 1963, she said those who carried out "such a cruel injustice," should have to "pay for it."

Less than three weeks later, Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas. Among the many conspiracy theories around his death is that Nhu had him killed in retaliation. She did send a condolence letter to Jacqueline Kennedy with this cutting line: "*I sympathize the more for I understand that that ordeal might seem to you even more unbearable because of your habitually well-sheltered life.*"

Nhu could not safely return to Vietnam, so she lived out the rest of her days in exile as a widow in a 15-room villa outside Rome. Nhu kept a low profile, "living in seclusion and silence," The Post wrote, and only granting interviews for a hefty price.

In 1986, her parents, retired Vietnamese diplomats living in the United States — they'd disowned her over her treatment of the Buddhist monks — **were found murdered in their home, and their son was charged in their deaths(?).**

Before Nhu's own death in April 2011, an academic named Monique Brinson Demery tracked her down in Rome and began a correspondence that she'd later publish in the book, "Finding the Dragon Lady." Appearing on "The Daily Show" in 2013 to promote it, Demery told Jon Stewart that it took a very long time to convince Nhu that she wasn't a secret government agent.

When Demery asked Nhu if she had any regrets, Nhu simply said she could have been more humble.