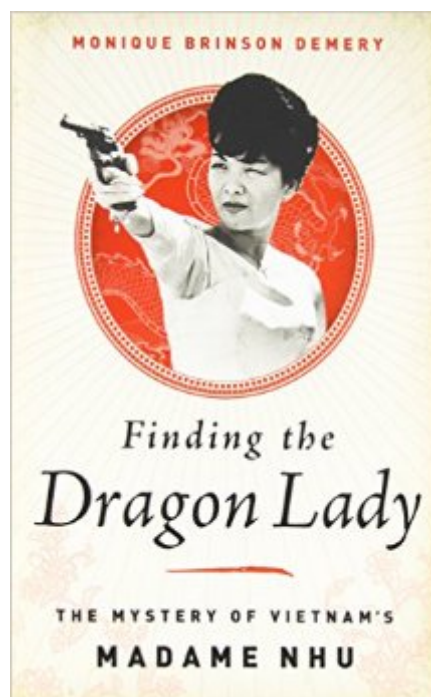


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Finding The Dragon Lady: The Mystery Of Vietnam's Madame Nhu



Synopsis

In November 1963, the president of South Vietnam and his brother were brutally executed in a coup that was sanctioned and supported by the American government. President Kennedy later explained to his close friend Paul H. Fay that the reason the United States made the fateful decision to get rid of the Ngo's was in no small part because of South Vietnam's first lady, Madame Nhu. "That goddamn bitch," Fay remembers President Kennedy saying, "She's responsible ... that bitch stuck her nose in and boiled up the whole situation down there." The coup marked the collapse of the Diem government and became the US entry point for a decade-long conflict in Vietnam. Kennedy's death and the atrocities of the ensuing war eclipsed the memory of Madame Nhu—with her daunting mixture of fierceness and beauty. But at the time, to David Halberstam, she was "the beautiful but diabolic sex dictatress" and Malcolm Browne called her "the most dangerous enemy a man can have." By 1987, the once-glamorous celebrity had retreated into exile and seclusion, and remained there until young American Monique Demery tracked her down in Paris thirty years later. Finding the Dragon Lady is Demery's story of her improbable relationship with Madame Nhu, and—having ultimately been entrusted with Madame Nhu's unpublished memoirs and her diary from the years leading up to the coup—the first full history of the Dragon Lady herself, a woman who was feared and fantasized over in her time, and who singlehandedly frustrated the government of one of the world's superpowers.

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Customer Reviews

Women in politics. They are often reduced to the clothes they are wearing and the hairstyle they rock. In a predominantly male driven aspect of society the female is usually merely the wife of, daughter of or mistress of a man in power. Not enough women take center stage in government and when they do they are scrutinized and criticized far harsher than their male counterparts. Madame Nhu was only the sister in law of the man in charge and yet she and her family exerted the strongest influence on him and the country. She was known for her lack of diplomacy. She refused to stay quiet and called a duck a duck if indeed it quacked and walked like said duck. She put many policies into place that took women back 20 steps into the last century. Her so called morality laws outlawed abortion, divorce, adultery, contraceptives, dance halls, beauty pageants and she was often called out for being a hypocrite. Madame Nhu was adamant and very vocal about the fact that the Americans brought about the downfall of her family and in doing so also the country. "My family has been treacherously killed with either official or unofficial blessing of the American government, I can predict to you now that the story is only at its beginning." Of course that statement, which implies better the devil you know than the devil you don't, was to be eerily predictive. The US thought they could control the outcome in North Vietnam via South Vietnam by removing Diệm. Instead the removal of Diệm and Nhu was the start of even greater instability in South Vietnam. Demery makes an interesting point about the influence certain foreign press members had in South Vietnam.

I had thought everything that could be written on the Vietnam War had been written. The existence of this book proves me wrong. While it is not a landmark work like Karnow's Vietnam or Halberstam's The Best and the Brightest, it is nonetheless original, interesting, and worth reading for those interested in Vietnam. I was curious if this book would get me to sympathize with Madame Nhu. The answer is not really. As a girl and a middle child at that, Madame Nhu did not receive the best child care, despite being born into an upper class family. Her parents dumped her on the grandparents, the grandparents pawned her off on the servants, and the servants dumped little Madame Nhu on the gardeners who were convicts forced to do yard work on the family estate. It's worth pausing and imagining leaving your children with people forced to do community service projects on the highway. When she was a toddler, she nearly died from an infection that was a direct result of neglect. So Madame Nhu had a rough childhood. But most people with bad formative years don't encourage monks to self-immolate themselves or watch happily while those same monks clubbed in the head by soldiers. Madame Nhu married well (by well I mean prestige and connections; personally her husband was cold towards her and fooled around). Her husband began

as a librarian, but went on to found the Personalist Labor Party. This party would be the base of support for his brother Diem, who would go on to become Prime Minister and later President. Among her husbands other siblings was the first Vietnamese Archbishop and a provincial chief. The author's thesis is that Madame Nhu, the Dragon Lady, was more than a beautiful and cruel cartoon character. Demery lays out important instances where she helped prop up the regime.

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