



# Finding the Dragon Lady: The Mystery of Vietnam's Madame Nhu

*Monique Brinson Demery*

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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 “Red” 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Demery’s story of her improbable relationship with Madame Nhu, and—having ultimately been entrusted with Madame Nhu’s unpublished memoirs and her diary from the years leading up to the coup—the first full history of the Dragon Lady herself, a woman who was feared and fantasized over in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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