

# H-Net Reviews

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Jessica M. Chapman. *Cauldron of Resistance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and 1950s Southern Vietnam*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013. xi + 276 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8014-5061-7.

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Commissioned by Margaret Sankey

Of all the actors in the Republic of Vietnam's troubled, short history, few captivate scholars as much as Ngo Dinh Diem. In *Cauldron of Resistance: Ngo Dinh Diem, The United States, and 1950s Southern Vietnam*, Jessica M. Chapman analyzes Diem in the context of the South Vietnam he ruled. *Cauldron of Resistance* offers the most holistic account of the political landscape of southern Vietnam between the decline of French colonial rule and Diem's efforts to create a unified South Vietnam under his leadership. Earlier studies of Ngo Dinh Diem, like Philip E. Catton's *Diem's Final Failure: Prelude to America's War in Vietnam* (2002) and Seth Jacob's *America's Miracle Man in Vietnam: Ngo Dinh Diem, Religion, Race, and U.S. Intervention in Southeast Asia* (2005), focused on the confluence of popular culture and high politics of America's relationship with Diem. Chapman furthers the study of Diem by examining him from a Vietnamese perspective. Rather, through the use of Vietnamese records, the author addresses the three domestic organizations that posed the biggest threat to Diem's authority and revolutionary visions. The author argues that the Cao Dai, Hoa Hao, and Binh Xuyen organizations directly influenced the decisions and directions taken by Diem.

Comprised of seven chapters, plus an introduction and conclusion, *Cauldron of Resistance* emerges from Chapman's prodigious archival research in Vietnam. The author uses these sources to advance four main arguments. One, the Cao Dai, Hoa Hao, and Binh Xuyen were major players in southern Vietnam's political sphere and not the simplistic feudal sects depicted by contemporary American observers. Two, these three "politico-religious" organizations forced Diem to create his government in reaction to their influence. Three, the United States too readily accepted the authoritarianism of Diem as the solution to the chaos in South Vietnam. Four, Chapman uncovers a South Vietnam in which the Cao Dai, Hoa Hao, and Binh Xuyen exercised such extensive political power that Diem's efforts to destroy them ultimately dictated the then prime minister's actions that

eventually brought him into direct confrontation with Hanoi.

A major contribution of *Cauldron of Resistance* to the historiography is the treatment of southern Vietnam's politico-religious groups. Emerging from the melange of cultures prevalent in southern Vietnam, the Cao Dai, Hoa Hao, and Binh Xuyen were representative of society below the 17th parallel. During the period of French rule, these three politico-religious organizations embraced anticolonialism and expanded their political influence. By the Second World War, the Cao Dai, Hoa Hao, and Binh Xuyen all enjoyed considerable public support. Confrontations between these groups, however, thwarted their abilities to dominate southern Vietnamese politics and even their own zones of control. Chapman notes that with the end of French rule, "politico-religious power was vast, but tenuous" (p. 38). As argued by Chapman, the politico-religious organizations actively sought American backing. Realizing their futures rested with American support, the Cao Dai, Hoa Hao, and Binh Xuyen increasingly distanced themselves from French colonialism and adopted anticommunist ideology. This marked a significant shift as these groups had fought alongside French forces against the Viet Minh and relied heavily on the French military for financial support and legitimacy.

A key part of *Cauldron of Resistance* is the role of the United States in legitimizing Ngo Dinh Diem's rule over that of the Cao Dai, Hoa Hao, and Binh Xuyen. As argued by Chapman, American officials quickly dismissed other contenders in favor of Diem. Aided at home by his brother Ngo Dinh Nhu's inroads into the anticommunist side of South Vietnamese politics, Diem courted American policymakers in the United States. His ability to speak English and travel to the United States made him familiar to American officials and thus set Diem apart from his South Vietnamese counterparts. America's decision to support Diem occurred despite words of caution from French and other South Vietnamese officials.

Chapman notes, “Even the bishop of Phat Diem province, a northern Catholic stronghold, advised Heath that Ngo Dinh Diem lacked popular appeal and was unsuited for leadership” (p. 73). Most strikingly, the U.S. government favored Diem despite their own reservations over the South Vietnamese politicians leadership qualities. Nevertheless, the lack of a better alternative in the eyes of American officials wedded the United States to Diem.

For Chapman, Diem’s persecution of his rivals drove them into the arms of Hanoi. Diem’s tactics mirrored those of the Viet Minh, a connection not missed by the Cao Dai, Hoa Hao, and Binh Xuyen. Treated as enemies of the state, these politico-religious organizations abandoned efforts to win U.S. backing and sought a new means of challenging Diem’s power. Although not communist themselves, the Cao Dai, Hoa Hao, and Binh Xuyen perceived the communists as “a vehicle rather than an obstacle to reclaiming their power, avenging their organizations, and protecting themselves and their

interests” and thus sided with the Hanoi-backed insurgency of the south (p. 198)—an impressive feat considering these three politico-religious organizations had once allied themselves with the French because of oppressive tactics used by the Viet Minh. This reversal in alignment made the Cao Dai, Hoa Hao, and Binh Xuyen appear unpredictable in the eyes of American policymakers. Its vision clouded by an anticommunist worldview, the United States ignored local politics and cemented American support for the comparably more predictable, anticommunist, yet less democratic Diem.

Skilfully argued, *Cauldron of Resistance* marks an impressive advancement in the study of Ngo Dinh Diem and the Republic of Vietnam. All readers will find Chapman’s work informative. Historians in particular will appreciate the author’s recreation of the political landscape of southern Vietnam during the formative years of Diem’s rise to power. All libraries are incomplete without this book.

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