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Reviewed for H-Diplo by **James M. Carter, Drew University** (at <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/reviews/PDF/AR228.pdf>)

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/reviews/PDF/AR228-Response.pdf>

Author's Response by **Matt Masur, Saint Anselm College**

I would like to begin by thanking H-Diplo for reviewing my article and for providing a forum for this response.

In his review of my article, "Exhibiting Signs of Resistance," James Carter challenges most of my conclusions about South Vietnam's attempt to use propaganda, specifically an exhibit at the Smithsonian, to establish legitimacy in the late 1950s. His critique reflects a common fault line in Vietnam War historiography. Many orthodox historians of the Vietnam War have noted South Vietnam's endemic flaws: its dependence on the United States, its lack of popular support, its autocratic and corrupt officials. Carter himself takes the orthodox position further than most historians. Refusing to acknowledge that South Vietnam constituted a state in any meaningful way, he refers to "southern Vietnam" or the "southern regime" rather than South Vietnam or the Republic of Vietnam in order to draw attention to the constructed or fabricated nature of the political entity.

In recent years, international historians using materials from both American and Vietnamese archives have adopted a more nuanced view of the South Vietnamese government. Rather than dismiss South Vietnam out of hand, they have explored the role of South Vietnamese officials like Ngo Dinh Diem in the nation-building process. While they tend to agree with the orthodox position that Diem's efforts failed to build a viable state or establish the legitimacy of his regime, they reach this conclusion by asking different questions and using different sources. In my article, I use this approach to argue that that Ngo Dinh Diem launched a propaganda campaign in a failed effort to

manipulate American public opinion. Carter interprets the evidence differently, in the process overlooking some important parts of my argument.

For example, he finds fault with my statement that “In the struggle for national legitimacy, the perceptions of people outside Vietnam could be almost as important as the attitudes of the Vietnamese themselves.” In this statement I was referring to an important problem, widely discussed in the literature, relating to the South Vietnam: its need to establish legitimacy both at home and abroad.

Yet Carter finds that “this conclusive statement requires further discussion and evidence.” This is a remarkable assertion, for my entire article is devoted to analyzing the evidence that South Vietnamese officials carefully considered the need to establish their international legitimacy. It examines how they discussed the need to win support from Americans, how they planned and constructed their overseas propaganda campaign, and how various Vietnamese groups and individuals participated in the Smithsonian exhibit.

Carter also questions my assertion that “Vietnamese officials believed that a reservoir of good will would help keep American financial support flowing into South Vietnam.” As he puts it, “The documentary record indicates that there is not a single Vietnamese official who said this and Masur provides no footnote for this statement.”

A more careful reader might notice that I address this very point two pages later:

An official at the Vietnamese Embassy in Washington believed that bringing these messages to an American audience could lead Americans to admire Vietnamese culture and thus put pressure on Congress and the President to provide greater “material and spiritual support” for Diem’s government.

This sentence includes a citation (footnote 34) for a document from National Archives II in Ho Chi Minh City. This source, plus others found in Vietnamese archives and cited in my article, indicate quite clearly that Vietnamese officials appreciated the importance of public diplomacy and of crafting an image for foreign consumption that enhanced the international standing of their regime.

Carter’s other criticisms likewise reveal a confused or hasty reading of my article. Carter notes, for example, that the exhibit focused on South Vietnam, “as opposed to highlighting Vietnam as a whole and, thus [sic] Northern Vietnam also.” Yet, in the next paragraph he makes the opposite point, saying that exhibit “appears not to have highlighted a specific, independent southern state, but rather all of Vietnam.” Like the regime in North Vietnam, Diem’s government wanted to show that it was the rightful representative of the Vietnamese people—those above and below the seventeenth parallel. This is hardly a controversial conclusion on my part, and it is well documented in Vietnamese sources.

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Similarly, Carter mistakenly contends that the Smithsonian exhibit argued for the longevity of the Republic of Vietnam and implied that Diem's regime "had been around for awhile." As I explain, the exhibit opened exactly five years after Diem had announced the creation of the Republic of Vietnam. In fact, the opening was chosen specifically to highlight this anniversary. The exhibit *did* point to the longevity of Vietnamese civilization, and tried to portray Diem and the Republic of Vietnam as the rightful continuation of this history. The very point of the exhibit, as I write in the article, was simple: "Even if the current regime [the Republic of Vietnam] had only been in existence for five years, it was heir to 4,500 years of civilization" (304).

Carter wonders how the South Vietnamese could describe themselves as continuing Vietnam's long tradition of resistance to foreign domination. I explain this strategy in some detail in the article. The Smithsonian exhibit "described resistance to Chinese rule as a fundamental characteristic of Vietnamese history" (305). Thus, the South Vietnamese argued that

[i]t was easy to see Communist control of North Vietnam as a continuation of centuries of Chinese imperial designs in Vietnam, especially because the People's Republic of China provided material support for North Vietnam. If resistance to China was indeed an essential part of Vietnamese history, then South Vietnam was the legitimate Vietnamese nation, at least in historic terms. The North Vietnamese, by contrast, were betraying Vietnam's past by collaborating with the Chinese (306).

As I hope these examples show, many of Carter's concerns are addressed in the article itself. Rather than bore H-Diplo readers with further lengthy excerpts, I'll return to our underlying disagreements. Carter's review reinforces the false dichotomy that Diem was either an inconsequential failure, as Carter would argue, or an unrecognized success, as Mark Moyar has claimed. Both positions obscure a more nuanced understanding of the complex relationship between the United States and South Vietnam.

Moreover, Carter seems intent on rejecting the notion that the Vietnamese themselves—especially Ngo Dinh Diem—played any role in this project. Viewing them as mere pawns in American hands, he denies them any agency in attempting to shape their own destiny. This position defies both common sense and the historical record. As a result, Carter's review simply perpetuates the historiographical oversight that my article was meant to address.

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