

 **Article REVIEW**

Jessica M. Chapman. “Staging Democracy: South Vietnam’s 1955 Referendum to Depose Bao Dai.” *Diplomatic History* 30:4 (September 2006): 671-703.

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Published by H-Diplo on 24 May 2007

In her outstanding article on the 1955 referendum in the southern regroupment zone of Vietnam, Jessica Chapman has joined a growing number of scholars in demonstrating how original perspectives remain to be articulated when historians of the Vietnam wars draw on Vietnamese in addition to American (or other) sources. Taking as her focus the seemingly exhausted issue of the October election that preceded Ngo Dinh Diem’s proclamation of the Republic of Vietnam (R.V.N.), Chapman has managed to substantially broaden our understanding of this important event by situating it within the context of southern Vietnamese politics – rather than merely U.S. diplomatic history – following the Geneva accords.

The democratic nature of the referendum process was, by nearly all accounts, a sham. Vietnamese below the seventeenth parallel were asked to choose in a hastily organized vote whether to, in essence, retain Bao Dai as emperor and reject democracy or, in the words of the ballot, to depose Bao Dai and “recognize Ngo Dinh Diem as Chief of State of Vietnam with the duty to organize a democratic government.” (696) Given Bao Dai’s obvious unpopularity and the massive propaganda campaign waged against him, this was basically no choice at all. The U.S. diplomat G. Frederick Reinhardt reasonably criticized the referendum as a “travesty on democratic procedures” that could not be considered “a truly democratic election,” pointing to the fact that, for example, “[v]oters who wished to depose Bao Dai without voting for Diem had no way of registering such a vote.”¹

As has often been alluded to vaguely but Chapman shows in detail, the weeks before the referendum featured numerous pronouncements from Diem supporters, posters, and articles in the southern Vietnamese press that depicted Bao Dai – then residing in France and without access to the Vietnamese channels of public communication – as “a womanizer, a drunk, a glutton, and a slob.” (684) Not only that, he was a traitor, having collaborated in France’s efforts to recolonize Vietnam and, in a gesture implied to herald the enslavement of the Vietnamese, maintained “ongoing contact with the Viet Cong.” (690) In the words of one Vietnamese editorialist, the emperor was not a national hero but “a dung beetle who sold his country for personal glory.” (684) To the extent that Confucian ideals performed a role in how Vietnamese voted – and Chapman is careful not to be too reductionistic here by overstating Confucianism’s role – these moral and political failures on the part of Bao Dai would have presumably been sufficient to have implicitly revoked the supposed “mandate of heaven” upon which the Vietnamese royalty relied.

¹ “Despatch from the Ambassador in Vietnam (Reinhardt) to the Department of State,” November 29, 1955, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1955-1957*, Volume I: Vietnam (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1985), 592-593.

In contrast to the debauched image of Bao Dai that characterized the period before the referendum, Diem was represented, in the language of several typical campaign slogans, as “the savior of the people,” a leader not only in “build[ing] a society of welfare and justice” but in spearheading the “struggle against colonialists.” (684) To buttress this notion, the Bao Dai-appointed prime minister appropriated the rhetoric of democracy, viewing the referendum, Chapman argues, as an effort to “invest ... his rise to power [as chief of state] with an air of legality and legitimacy.” (678) It has generally been assumed by historians of U.S. foreign relations that Diem’s talk of democracy was intended for American consumption. Chapman takes issue with this view, drawing on the Vietnamese documentary record to illustrate the extent to which he “disseminated [democratic] ideas broadly among the population below the 17th parallel,” using the referendum as “an opportunity to initiate a widespread drive to educate South Vietnamese citizens about the virtues of democracy and the malignancy of the old feudalistic imperial system.” (691)

The author’s work in this area is perhaps her article’s greatest contribution, demonstrating the extent to which Diem exploited popular notions of self-determination not only to please his American sponsors but to marshal support among the southern Vietnamese populace. If there is one criticism that I feel must be made about Chapman’s work, however, it is her willingness, after a nuanced and persuasive presentation of the evidence, to conclude that Diem’s “campaign rhetoric ... demonstrates that the prime minister himself believed in the virtues of democracy, at least on an abstract level.” (702) While the inclusion of the last clause (“abstract level”) lends the statement a degree of ambiguity, I do not think the rich evidence she uncovered unequivocally supports Chapman’s assertion.

The issue of belief is always a tricky one for the historian, as it can frequently be impossible to differentiate what an individual truly believes from what he or she says. Yet I am reminded here of stories about self-described champions of free speech who remain outspoken in their defense of this ideal until, lo and behold, they suddenly find themselves on the receiving end of an uncharitable exposition. In the case of Diem, the fact that the referendum process was so nakedly self-serving and risk-free raises questions about whether his sponsorship of the vote should be interpreted as a demonstration of his democratic commitment. After all, as Chapman notes, Diem saw the 1955 referendum as a means of negating the 1956 nationwide elections called for in the Geneva accords – which he almost certainly would have lost – and his rule was marked by widespread repression and a consistent denial of democratic rights, as the author does not hesitate to acknowledge.

Of course, the fact that Diem drew on the rhetoric of democracy had significant, long-term implications for R.V.N. politics, legitimizing an ideal against which Diem and future leaders could be criticized. But this is different from ascribing to Diem a genuine belief in the “virtues of democracy.” It is equally or, I would argue, even more plausible that Diem simply extolled the virtues of democratic choice in 1955 because, like U.S. policymakers commenting on the appearance of democracy in a later R.V.N. election, to do so entailed no threat to his immediate political objectives; indeed, the rhetoric strengthened his position, making him appear a populist

responsive to segments of the Vietnamese people.² Yet it must be remembered that Diem had, in the months preceding the referendum, essentially “ensure[d] his own victory,” having arrested “pro-Bao Dai elements and [kept] extremists in line through force” (678), created a “culture of fear” through mass repression (701), and undertaken a wide-ranging propaganda campaign.³ Embracing an engineered election one is certain to win – much like defending favorable speech – is hardly an affirmation of one’s principled belief in an ideal.

This is, however, but one criticism of an otherwise excellent article. Mining sources in both Vietnam and the United States, Jessica Chapman has succeeded in enriching our collective understanding of one of the most important events of the Ngo Dinh Diem era. Her article should be required reading for all historians of modern Vietnam and of U.S.-Vietnamese relations.

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Commissioned for H-Diplo by Edwin Martini, Western Michigan University

² With respect to the R.V.N. leadership’s exclusion of Duong Van Minh and Au Truong Thanh from the 1967 presidential ballot, the State Department recognized that there were clear pragmatic benefits accompanying the latter’s inclusion. (Au Truong Thanh was the only candidate who advocated a ceasefire and negotiated settlement to end the war.) “We believe there are definite advantages ... to allowing [the] Thanh candidacy to stand and to let him campaign freely on peace issues,” Dean Rusk observed. “This would constitute important evidence to the world that the voters had a real choice in these elections, without entailing real risk of his winning.” Telegram from Dean Rusk to Ellsworth Bunker, Subject: Au Truong Thanh, July 8, 1967; Papers of Lyndon Baines Johnson, President, 1963-1969; National Security File; Country File – Vietnam; Box 65; Folder: Elections, 1 G (1), 6/1/67 – 8/12/67 (1 of 2); Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, Austin, Texas.

³ This is to say nothing of the mechanics of the referendum itself, which was by no means impartial. Voters, for example, were to visibly discard the half of the ballot they did not choose; given that each half was bordered by a different color – green for the retention of Bao Dai, red for the recognition of Diem’s rule – it would not have been difficult for officials to quickly ascertain a voter’s choice. The potential implications of this lack of secrecy were likely not lost on many Vietnamese voters. It is thus for good reason that Chapman concluded that “[c]orruption and intimidation must have played a significant role” in Diem’s overwhelming victory. (697)