



“Science and the Cold War: A Roundtable” (roundtable discussion), *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (Winter 2000).

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Author’s Response by **Jefferson P. Marquis**, RAND Corporation  
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Reading the insightful commentaries by Gregg Herken and Walter A. McDougall reminded me of the curious role that the “public intellectual” has played in American political life since World War II: at times, proud partner, with government and industry, in building a new and improved world order, and at other times, professional retainer to the powers-that-be, with only a modest influence over the making of policy. In the case of U.S. nation building policy in Vietnam, American social scientists often combined hubris with ineffectualness. Nevertheless, as I hope to make clear in my responses to three important questions raised by Herken and McDougall, the intellectual contribution of social scientists to the “Other War” in Vietnam is a worthy topic of analysis-not so much for its effect on the Indochina conflict as for what it tells us about the history of American ideas on reshaping “underdeveloped” and violence-prone regions of the globe.

*Where did American social scientists get their “Other War” notions?*

On the one hand, the nation building and counterinsurgency prescriptions of U.S. social scientists during the Vietnam War reflected historical trends in Western intellectual life and culture dating back at least to the 18th century. In the American context, Louis Hartz, Bernard Bailyn, and Gordon Woods have described the ascendancy of what I have called liberal-nationalist ideas (such as individualistic competition, federalism, and political pluralism) during and after the Revolution. In addition, J.G.A. Pocock and Christopher Lasch, among others, have revealed the existence of a dissenting strain of political theory running through U.S. history since the time of the anti-Federalists (what I have dubbed conservative-populism), which extols the virtues of tradition, communal cooperation, and “small” government. Finally, Robert Wiebe, Samuel Hayes, Gabriel Kolko et al. have depicted the shift of intellectual focus at the turn of the 20th century among a significant portion of the American elite away from classical liberal ideas in favor of bureaucratic-authoritarian principles, such as technical expertise, large-scale organization and centralized control.

On the other hand, these generalized political philosophies manifested themselves in particular ways during the nation building debates of the 1950s and ‘60s. Furthermore, as Irene Gendzier has argued, the salience of particular viewpoints varied in response to changing international conditions (especially, the growth of Communist-supported insurgencies in the “Third World”) as well as events in the U.S. (such as the civil rights movement, urban riots, and student protests). Until the mid-1960s, the pioneers of American political-economic development (a.k.a. modernization theory)-social scientists at elite universities, “think tanks,” and foundations with close ties to the federal government, such as W.W. Rostow, Max Millikan, Gabriel Almond, James Coleman, and Lucian Pye-stuck pretty much to the liberal-nationalist line, which also formed the doctrinal core of the nation building effort in Vietnam. Although not much reflected in the writings of eminent social scientists, the conservative-populist perspective had an impact on Vietnam pacification through the advice proffered by “rice roots” nation builders (former intelligence agents, anti-guerrilla fighters and development practitioners), who viewed the village, rather than the national capital, as the focal point of the “Other War”. The bureaucratic-authoritarian dimension of the “Other War” stemmed, in large part, from a lack of faith among certain establishment intellectuals in an easy transition to democracy and capitalist prosperity in the Third World. Beginning in the late 1950s, “neo-conservatives,” like Zbigniew Brzezinski and Samuel Huntington, expressed concern that excessive “political mobilization” might lead to an unraveling of weak authoritarian regimes friendly to the U.S. Furthermore, they worried that the Leninist model of development was eclipsing the Jeffersonian-Madisonian model in popularity among impatient “Third World” elites seeking to increase their authority and jump-start their economies.

*What impact did scientific recommendations on Vietnamese nation building have on the views and policies of U.S. decision makers?*

Although this is an important question that deserves further study, it is one that is difficult to tackle in a systematic way. To use the example of the RAND Corporation with which I am familiar, one can sometimes (although not always) identify the names and positions of individuals who received a particular briefing on a Vietnam policy issue. And in many cases, one can determine the offices to which Vietnam-related reports were sent. Only rarely, however, can one clearly establish whether RAND proposals had an impact on a decision maker’s thinking or contributed to a change in policy. In part, this can be attributed to a lack of available records. In part, it reflects the “fuzziness” of the ideational transfer process. Indeed, although most government-supported scientists are in the business they are in because they believe they can affect policy, they often harbor doubts about whether their reports are actually getting read by people with the influence and desire to implement their recommendations. It’s not always possible to tell.

That said the following are some preliminary impressions on the political consequences of social science thinking on the “Other War.” First, social scientific analysis tended to receive high-level consideration when its conclusions jibed with pre-existing official views and could be used to reinforce the administration’s case to the public or attack the arguments of Vietnam War critics. One example is Edward Mitchell’s 1967 RAND report on land tenure and rebellion in South Vietnam, which Nixon administration officials, such as Henry Kissinger, reportedly used to justify their opposition to large-scale land reform that might weaken the authority of the Saigon

regime in conservative regions of the country. Another example is Stephen Hosmer’s 1970 RAND study on the implications of “Viet Cong repression,” which was quickly declassified and widely disseminated by the Nixon White House, presumably because it concluded that any political accommodation between the GVN and the NLF was futile.

Second, social scientists seemed to have the most influence on “Other War” policy and implementation when they took a direct role in the nation building process, either at the bottom or at the top. For example, in the mid-1960s, community development specialist Ben Ferguson parlayed his well-known field research in East Pakistan into a USAID-sponsored pilot project in Vietnam’s Dinh Tuong province designed to test his theory on the efficacy of popular democracy through village committees. As a senior national security official in the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, former M.I.T. economic historian W.W. Rostow made his mark on the “Other War” by preaching the cause of nation building throughout the halls of government, most notably at the U.S. Army’s Special Forces school in the spring of 1961, where he declared that “modern societies must be built” and America must be “prepared to help them.”

*How much did the “Other War” in Vietnam matter anyway?*

Obviously, U.S.-inspired pacification and development programs did not prevent the Communist Vietnamese from winning the war. Whether they helped to forestall that victory and/or change the nature of the conflict from a largely southern-based insurgency into a “war of northern aggression” is debatable. My research on the intellectual side of the “Other War” cannot resolve this issue, but other studies by Richard Hunt, Eric Bergerud et al. indicate that the results of pacification were mixed until the end. Although the Saigon government eventually gained control over most of the populated territory of South Vietnam, its authority was largely based on coercion rather than active popular support. Exceptions to this rule, however, could be found in richer parts of the country, such as Long An, where belated land reform efforts did apparently generate genuine approval for the GVN among important segments of the peasantry. Furthermore, although the guerrilla threat was mostly quiescent by 1970, this was attributable more to the attrition suffered by the NLF during the Tet offensive and subsequent allied counteroffensives than it was to pacification per se. Ultimately, pacification was not decisive in Vietnam because the North Vietnamese government and its allies in the South were willing to continue the fight for as long as necessary, and by whatever means was necessary, in order to win, and the United States was not. Thus, contrary to the views of Robert Komer and William Colby, a more coherent pacification policy, established earlier on, probably could not have saved the day for the allies.

So why go to the trouble of analyzing the thinking of social scientists with regard to the “Other War”? Because nation building in Vietnam was not a transitory American impulse; nor was it even primarily a product of the Cold War, although the existence of a Communist “threat” in the form of the Soviet Union and the PRC certainly gave the “Other War” greater prominence and resources than it otherwise would have gotten. Important members of the U.S. foreign policy establishment still subscribe to W.W. Rostow’s maxim, enunciated in his 1957 “Proposal” to the Eisenhower administration, that freedom at home depends on reshaping the rest of the world according to the American way. In fact, the end of the Cold War has restored the allure of nation building (although it is usually called something different), particularly among liberals

embarrassed and demoralized by America’s anti-Communist crusades in Vietnam and elsewhere. Even the U.S. Army, wary since Vietnam of being sucked into political quagmires, has grudgingly accepted its new role as peace enforcer and reconstructor of “failed states.” As during the Vietnam era, however, the renewed emphasis on nation building remains mostly a preoccupation of the national security elite, which prefers to muddle through in an ad hoc fashion (a la Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia, and Kosovo) rather than articulate a clear strategy for winning America’s latest “other wars.”

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