



Seth Jacobs, ““Our System Demands the Supreme Being’: The U.S. Religious Revival and the ‘Diem Experiment,’ 1954-1955,” *Diplomatic History*, Volume 25, Issue 4 (Fall 2001).

Commentary by **Joseph G. Morgan**, Iona College, jmorgan@iona.edu

Published by H-Diplo on 21 October 2001

In ““Our System Demands the Supreme Being, ”” Seth Jacobs argues that the American decision to back Ngo Dinh Diem needs to be understood within the context of the “religious revival of the 1950s” and the Eisenhower administration’s Cold War policy of “alliance formation.”[1] Although the reasons for the revivalism of the Fifties are unclear, Jacobs writes that it significantly influenced American culture at the time and that this influence was reflected in the rhetoric and attitudes of the Eisenhower administration. He focuses particular attention on the speeches and writings of Dwight D. Eisenhower and John Foster Dulles and concludes that although “Eisenhower’s piety was more strategic than heartfelt, his chief cabinet officer engaged in no such duplicity.”[2] This religious sentiment not only shaped the administration’s public pronouncements, but also its search for allies in the Cold War and this, in turn, played a key role in Washington’s decision to back the Catholic mandarin Ngo Dinh Diem as the most suitable leader for South Vietnam in the mid-Fifties. Jacobs notes that Diem appealed to American citizens and policymakers for many reasons, but asserts that his “trump was his religion.”[3] American leaders regarded Catholics in both America and Vietnam as steadfast allies in the struggle against communism. Moreover, Catholicism was regarded as a religion that had the coherence and dynamism needed to resist communism whereas the “Eastern religions” of Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism were seen as passive and weak faiths that would not rally their followers against the communist threat. “Devout patriots like Eisenhower and Dulles,” Jacobs concludes, “could not risk U.S. security on clients whose religions were described in official documents and in the media as passive and fatalistic.”[4]

Seth Jacobs makes a valuable contribution to the discussion of how religious attitudes and prejudices shaped the decisions of U.S. policymakers. He is particularly effective in addressing the question that Ngo Dinh Diem’s Catholic identity played in the American decision to back his regime. The issue was first raised in Ramparts’ articles in the 1960s and has been addressed more recently and in a sophisticated manner in the works of James T. Fisher, but Jacobs deals with the matter far more directly. [5] He does this by discussing Catholicism’s influence in America and American views of Catholicism’s role in an Asian environment. He dismisses claims that “a Catholic bloc gulled the Eisenhower and the U.S. press into supporting Diem’s regime,” but does believe that policymakers regarded American Catholics as reliable supporters of the struggle against domestic and international communism.[6] Moreover, Jacobs implies that they may have been affected by the Catholic Church’s great influence over American popular culture in the Fifties. The greatest importance of Catholicism, however, rested on the popular and official perception that it represented a more legitimate and coherent religious tradition than that of Buddhism or the Cao Dai or Hoa Hao sects of South Vietnam. This apparent coherence as well as a well-established record of Catholic hostility towards communism made a Catholic like Diem a far more appealing figure to the Americans than his non-Catholic rivals.

In presenting his case, Jacobs makes excellent use of a rich variety of source materials. He not only uses the principal secondary works concerning American foreign policy and cultural life in the Fifties, but also numerous contemporary sources such as government records, private correspondence, and magazine and newspaper articles. He is particularly effective in discussing the religious milieu of the Fifties and the religious attitudes of U.S. leaders, especially Eisenhower and Dulles. He also makes good use of diplomatic correspondence and policy papers in discussing American views of Asian religions, particularly American distrust of Buddhism and the South Vietnamese sects.

One issue that Jacobs could have discussed more fully was that of the misgivings that some Americans expressed about Diem's Catholicism and the strength of Vietnam's Catholics. He does note that Ambassador J. Lawton Collins raised concerns about the sectarian character of the Diem regime, but others also expressed uneasiness about Diem's Catholicism. At the beginning of Diem's American exile, Ambassador Donald Heath informed Washington that many Vietnamese saw the Catholics as a "precarious minority suspected by many of the majority as being too westernized." The critics of Diem and other Catholics, he wrote, "call them 'men of the mission' meaning that they are of French colonizing Christianity." [7] One of Diem's admirers, Leo Cherne, noted a similar problem after Diem won power in 1954. Cherne told General William J. Donovan that Diem's "ascetic, Roman Catholic background" made his problems of consolidating political control in a predominantly Buddhist country "more acute." "In crude terms," Cherne continued, "the problem is comparable to that which would be experienced by a rigid, devout Roman Catholic, anti-segregationist Yankee opposing Herman Talmadge in Georgia." [8] Other Americans reported that some Vietnamese Catholics distrusted Diem and that the Vietnamese Catholic community itself was divided. A memorandum discussing Vietnamese Catholicism in 1953 reported that the Bishop of Hanoi, Msgr. Trinh Nhu Kue, regarded Diem as "an Annamese nationalist of extreme views" whose intransigence was doing nothing to serve "the best interests of his country or of his Church." [9] A few months later, another bishop, Le Huu Tu, told Ambassador Heath that Diem's "high morality and sincerity were unfortunately accompanied by intellectual arrogance" and that Diem "was too much of an aristocrat and could not carry the masses with him." [10] These divisions persisted after Diem's accession to power and Ambassador Collins told Washington that "it is hard to say" what the extent of Diem's following among the Catholics was. "In any event," he added, "[the] Catholic community is not politically organized and represents less than 10 percent of [the] population." [11] Jacobs would have enriched his discussion of Diem's Catholicism if he indicated whether or not misgivings about this matter were brought to the attention of senior policymakers like Eisenhower and Dulles, and if so, how they were handled.

This criticism, however, does not detract from the valuable contribution that Seth Jacobs has made in raising questions about the extent to which American religious sentiments and prejudices shaped the Eisenhower administration's decision to back the "Diem experiment."

Notes:

1. Seth Jacobs, “‘Our System Demands the Supreme Being’: The U.S. Religious Revival and the `Dien Experiment,’ 1954-1955, *Diplomatic History* vol.25, no. 4 (Fall 2001), 593 and 596.
2. *Ibid.*, 594.
3. *Ibid.*, 599.
4. *Ibid.*, 622.
5. Robert Scheer, “Hang Down Your Head, Tom Dooley,” *Ramparts* (January-February 1965), 18-23; Robert Scheer and Warren Hinckle, “The `Vietnam Lobby,’” *Ramparts* (July 1965), 17-22; James T. Fisher, *Dr. America: The Lives of Thomas A. Dooley, 1927-1961* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997); and James T. Fisher, “The Second Catholic President: Ngo Dinh Diem, John F. Kennedy, and the Vietnam Lobby, 1954-1963,” *U.S. Catholic Historian* (Summer 1997).
6. Jacobs, 620.
7. Telegram, Donald Heath to Dean Acheson, January 24, 1951, 751G.00/1-2451, Record Group (RG) 59, Records of the Department of State, National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) II, College Park, MD.
8. Memo from Leo Cherne to General William J. Donovan, Box 9A, William J. Donovan Papers, U.S. Army Military History Institute, Carlisle Barracks, Carlisle, PA.
9. Telegram, Paul J. Sturm to Department of State, June 12, 1953, 751G.00/6-1253, RG 59, NARA II.
10. Telegram, Heath to John Foster Dulles, November 23, 1953, 751G.00/11-2353, RG 59, NARA II.
11. Telegram, J. Lawton Collins to Dulles, April 5, 1955, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1955-1957, vol. 1: Vietnam* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1985), 227.

Copyright © 2001-2004 by H-Diplo, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For other uses contact the H-Diplo Article Discussion Co-ordinator, George Fujii, gfujii@umail.ucsb.edu.
