



**Joseph G. Morgan.** *The Vietnam Lobby: The American Friends of Vietnam, 1955-1975.* Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1997. xviii + 229 pp. \$39.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8078-2322-4.



**Reviewed by** Fabian Hilfrich

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Although the literature on the Vietnam War is exceptionally vast and although the topic continues to exert a powerful grip on the imagination of both academic and lay audiences, there has so far been a remarkable lack of monographs dealing with American citizen groups supportive of the war effort. Where the focus concerns supporters of the war, it is still mainly directed toward the successive administrations themselves. Grassroots groups that have received attention are those that opposed the Vietnam War, although even here, few monographs are devoted exclusively to single-issue (i.e. Vietnam) groups like the Vietnam Day Committee or the National Coordinating Committee to End the War in Vietnam.[1] Joseph P. Morgan's work on the American Friends of Vietnam (AFV) represents the first effort to fill the particular historiographical gap concerning single-issue pro-Vietnam citizen groups.

With the AFV, Morgan has chosen the first private group devoted to supporting the government of South Vietnam and to propagating its cause in the United States. The group was founded in late 1955 by individuals who had already been in-

involved in generating support for Ngo Dinh Diem five years before and who were now worried that the U.S. government was considering dropping Diem. This was a distinct possibility in 1954 and early 1955, but by the time the AFV was actually organized, the Eisenhower administration had already firmly committed itself again to the South Vietnamese ruler. The AFV never functioned as a lobby in the traditional sense, trying to influence lawmakers and specific legislation, but rather was, in the words of Johnson White House official Chester Cooper, "a people-to-people program," designed to arouse public interest in or administration concern for South Vietnam through conferences, speeches, letters to the editor and the like. [2] To be sure, the AFV did try to and succeed in attracting prominent politicians, but it usually refrained from direct political action because, in Morgan's words, it was worried about its tax-exempt status (p. 67).

Morgan's book covers the entire history of the AFV, from the early efforts of its most important members on behalf of Diem before the group founding, to its definitive demise in 1975 after the

fall of Saigon. Following the account, one can roughly distinguish two phases in the group's activities, the first of which coincides with the period up to Diem's assassination in 1963. In this phase, the AFV had extraordinarily close and personal ties to the South Vietnamese government, so close in fact, that one of the group's executive members, Harold L. Oram, simultaneously served as Diem's public relations representative in the United States. In these years, the group's regular activities were complemented by various developmental projects inside South Vietnam, and it is fair to say that the AFV was probably of greater value to Diem than to the U.S. government. The South Vietnamese ruler repeatedly published congratulatory messages from the AFV, portraying them as a symbol of broad-based *American* support (pp. 32, 67). After Diem's assassination, the AFV lost its close contacts to the successive South Vietnamese regimes and focused more intensely on generating support for the U.S. administrations' policies.

Morgan correctly characterizes his work on the AFV as mirroring not only the fate of South Vietnam, but also the predicaments of successive American administrations. The AFV shared the administrations' outlook on the necessity and possibility of containing communism in Southeast Asia by installing friendly regimes, but it also arrived at the same impasse when trying to make these regimes more responsive to the people. By analyzing the group's membership, one could even go a step further than Morgan and assert that the AFV also embodied the dilemmas of post-World War II anti-communist liberalism. It was liberals with a long history of opposing both Nazi and communist totalitarianism that founded the AFV. Prominent founding members were Joseph Buttinger, an Austrian socialist who had fled his home country after German annexation in 1938, and Leo Cherne, chairman of the International Rescue Committee, which had helped refugees from Nazi and communist persecution alike. In its early years, the AFV managed to attract liberal

scholars like Frank Trager and Wesley Fishel, influential Congressmen Mike Mansfield and John F. Kennedy and even the head of the American Socialist Party, Norman Thomas. When Diem became more controversial in the late 1950s and when America decided to bear the brunt of the fighting in 1965, some members resigned while others engaged in acrimonious disputes, reflecting the fraying of the liberal anti-communist consensus that also befell other groups like the Democratic Party, the Americans for Democratic Action and the Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy in the 1960s. Morgan's observation that the group had to rely on funding from more conservative groups after 1966 (pp. 130-31) shows that, at the height of the debate on the war, conservatives and those liberals committed to the war formed an uneasy alliance, just as President Johnson progressively received more backing from Republicans than from members of his own party.[3]

The main purpose of Morgan's work, which actually grew out of the author's dissertation, is to probe the AFV's influence and effectiveness as a pressure group. He proceeds from a very solid basis, utilizing the records of the AFV and its most important officers, government archives, as well as extensive interviews in his account. This focus has been well chosen because, since the 1960s, there have been many misconceptions about the AFV's influence. In fact, Morgan is strongest where he meticulously reconstructs the ties of the AFV to both the governments of South Vietnam and the United States. First of all, he succeeds in rebutting the conspiratorial view, first advanced by Robert Scheer in the mid-1960s, that a cabal of private citizens, later members of the AFV, pushed the Eisenhower administration into supporting Diem, thus laying the groundwork for America's ill-fated intervention in Vietnam.[4] Instead, Morgan argues that these individuals and later the AFV simply shared the administration's cold war assumptions about Diem's (and America's) ability to construct a non-communist bulwark in South Vietnam (pp. 12-13). Furthermore, he reveals that

Cardinal Spellman's role in Diem's rise was somewhat less dramatic than has been commonly assumed, although Morgan freely admits that his judgment is not necessarily conclusive since the access to Spellman's personal papers remains restricted (p. 5). Morgan equally rejects the contention that the AFV was founded at the behest of the Eisenhower administration. Although an unnamed American officer in Vietnam suggested such a group to Buttinger, there is apparently no more evidence pointing to official involvement (pp. 24, 154). These three examples also indicate that the author's judgments are very cautious, taking into account all the evidence he could unearth and holding final judgments in abeyance whenever there is a lack of evidence.

In fact, Morgan believes that the AFV was not overly effective as a lobby group, a statement for which the author provides several well-founded reasons. One was the chronic infighting that disabled the group at crucial turning points in the American-Vietnamese relationship. In the early 1960s, for example, the disagreement over Diem's authoritarian rule, which also plagued the Kennedy administration, grew so fierce that the AFV was virtually immobilized. These internal quarrels were complemented by a lack of organizational discipline, a factor that Morgan does not mention specifically, but which emerges from the pages of the book. Unlike other pressure groups, the AFV does not seem to have published many common position papers. Instead, it was the individual members that publicized the group's cause through articles, letters to the editors and participation in conferences. Even some of the most important events in American-Vietnamese relations, such as Diem's assassination or President Johnson's July 1965 decision to dispatch American combat troops, went unmentioned on by the group as a whole. Instead, individual members aired their private opinions, which were sometimes at odds (on the reactions to Diem's death, see pp. 99-101). Finally, the group also suffered from a chronic shortage of funds, which prevent-

ed a smooth and continuous running of the operation.

This last point leads to another crucial moment in the AFV's history, its relationship to the Johnson administration in 1965, which also represented the height of its influence. This episode has been much commented on, but never in such detail as in Morgan's work.[5] Only after the first large-scale demonstrations and teach-ins against the war, administration members like Chester Cooper "discovered" the AFV as a useful tool to counter administration critics. Cooper subsequently arranged for private sponsors to alleviate the AFV's financial troubles. With these funds, the AFV organized a friendly "counter-teach-in" at Michigan State University and published *Vietnam Perspectives*, a magazine open to articles by friendly scholars and journalists. This relative proximity to power was short-lived, however, because, according to Morgan, White House aides including Cooper became convinced that the AFV was too insignificant to generate widespread support for the war (pp. 118-19). The AFV suffered a further setback when, in 1967, the beleaguered Johnson administration decided to found another supportive "citizen group," the Citizens Committee for Peace with Freedom in Vietnam. This group had a much higher profile, including prominent members like former Presidents Truman and Eisenhower. Even AFV officers themselves joined the committee, which one might interpret as an implicit admission of their own powerlessness. After 1965, the AFV's funds quickly dried up again and the organization more or less languished for the rest of the war until, after the fall of Saigon in 1975, the AFV, "like the Vietnamese state it so fervently supported, no longer existed" (p. 152).

The biggest drawback of Morgan's book is its brevity. It covers a period of over twenty years in only 160 pages. Background information on American policy or Vietnamese affairs is sometimes a bit sketchy, and at some points, it seems as if the author was too taken with his subjects'

views. Describing Diem as a "fervent nationalist" and explaining his attraction to American citizens and politicians by "his zealous patriotism" (pp. 1, 15) seems too flattering to a leader who had not participated in the Vietnamese struggle against the French, who had toyed with the idea of assuming a post in the Japanese administration of his country, and who, after his rise to power, proceeded to erect an extremely personalized authoritarian system. To be sure, Morgan does mention Diem's anti-communism as a decisive factor in his attractiveness, but one is nevertheless left to wonder whether there were not other traits heightening the appeal of this particular anti-communist Vietnamese for American audiences. It may (or may not) have been easier for Americans, for example, to relate to the Catholic Diem than to another Buddhist Vietnamese. In any case, a broader discussion of the "Catholic connection" is curiously absent from Morgan's work--although, to put Cardinal Spellman's role in perspective, he implicitly and rightfully dismisses the myth of a Catholic conspiracy. On the other hand, while Morgan mentions the early role of the Catholic Relief Services and the Catholic identity of most refugees from North Vietnam in the 1950s, he never probes the implications of Diem's favoritism toward his co-religionists or the reactions, if any, of AFV members to these religious dimensions.

Although this does not detract from the many sharp and valuable observations Morgan makes, his account (at least in the first chapters) could have benefited from more concurrent analysis, rather than conclusions at the end of each chapter. Such analysis would have strengthened his arguments. Since the main thrust of the book lies in evaluating the AFV's influence with successive administrations, Morgan could have given various examples of when the AFV was not privy to government information. In 1955, the AFV propagandized heavily against all-Vietnamese elections, unaware that the Eisenhower administration had already decided to quietly sabotage these elections (p. 31). In February 1965, AFV members did not

know that Johnson had already decided on a significant enlargement of the air war (p. 109). Morgan could have capitalized more on examples of the tenuous relationship between successive administrations and the AFV. One is similarly surprised that the important allegation of CIA influence on the AFV is only (although very ably) discussed in the conclusion (pp. 154-56).

Finally, although Morgan focuses on the question of AFV influence on American Vietnam policy, this reviewer wishes for more analysis of the views and rhetoric of the AFV in general, and of its most prominent members in particular. For example, when Morgan mentions the organization's magazine *Vietnam Perspectives*, he gives little insight into the articles published there. In fact, the first number contains quite an unusual "statement of policy" that was replaced by a more traditional disclaimer with regards to content; the editors claim "to put before the American public data about the Republic of Vietnam. The sources of this information are factual, frequently documentary. Interpretation of this information will be clearly indicated."<sup>[6]</sup> The first article by Frank Trager, however, contains a highly tendentious interpretation of the 1954 Geneva agreements. This magazine is revealing in any case. Morgan asserts at one point that the AFV defended the Johnson administration's middle course in Vietnam (p. 122). Writing for the August 1966 number of *Vietnam Perspectives*, however, John D. Montgomery mused whether it might be better to take over the South Vietnamese government in order to strengthen it against the enemy.<sup>[7]</sup> This was certainly not an idea the American government could openly entertain, but it is an important "tactical" difference to public administration positions. While Morgan furthermore tells us who opposed and who favored Diem, or that Buttinger was against Johnson's Americanization of the war, it would have been interesting to learn more about individual reasons and arguments advanced within the group and in the public arena. Finally, although the author makes much of the

group's success in soliciting Norman Thomas for membership (p. 25), he only mentions in a footnote the fact of and reasons for Thomas' resignation two years later (p. 180, fn. 13).

Taken together, these complaints about the book do not detract from Morgan's achievements. For the first time, a scholar has focused on a private organization supportive of American Vietnam policies, describing and explaining its very limited effectiveness, and thereby dispelling some of the conspiratorial myths thus far surrounding AFV history. Readers with a deeper interest in America's Vietnam policies will definitely find this book worth their while.

Notes:

[1]. Books on opposition to the Vietnam War generally deal with the entire spectrum of anti-war protest. Another category of studies deals with multi-issue peace or social action groups that have also opposed the Vietnam War. See, for examples, Kirkpatrick Sale, *SDS* (1973); Milton S. Katz, *Ban the Bomb: A History of SANE, the Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy, 1957-1985*. (1986).

[2]. Cooper to Valenti, April 24, 1965, WHCF, ND, Box 215, LBJL, quoted after Tom Wells, *The War Within: America's Battle Over Vietnam* (1994), 34.

[3]. Compare Terry Dietz, *Republicans and Vietnam, 1961-1968* (1986).

[4]. Robert Scheer, *How the United States Got Involved in Vietnam* A Report to the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions (1965).

[5]. See, for examples, Melvin Small, *Johnson, Nixon, and the Doves* (1988), 46-48; Wells, *The War Within*, 34.

[6]. *Vietnam Perspectives* 1.1 (Aug. 1965), 1.

[7]. Montgomery, "How to Stay in Vietnam," *Vietnam Perspectives* 2.1 (August 1966), 31-40.

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