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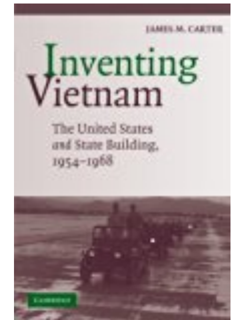

James M. Carter. *Inventing Vietnam: The United States and State Building, 1954-1968.* New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008. viii + 268 pp. $22.99, paper, ISBN 978-0-521-71690-1.

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Even as the Vietnam War recedes in popular memory (today's freshmen were born over a decade and a half after the fall of Saigon), it remains the source of increasingly bitter debate among scholars. A new generation of revisionists recently have challenged the "orthodox" interpretation which holds that nearly every aspect of American and South Vietnamese conduct of the war amounted to a tragic "march of folly." Revisionists have worked to rehabilitate figures such as Ngo Dinh Diem, and some have even suggested Americans and South Vietnamese had defeated the enemy before cowardly politicians undermined their "triumph." Orthodox-oriented historians have struck back in force, insisting that revisionist accounts foster an historical amnesia that facilitates current wars in Iraq and Afghanistan (would that historians had such power!).[1]

James M. Carter enthusiastically launches himself into the midst of these debates. Siding energetically with the orthodox school, Carter assails U.S. nation-building initiatives in South Vietnam as an "unmitigated long-term failure" emanating from "the technological and individual hubris of the American mission" (pp. 8, 89). Echoing his mentor, Robert Buzzanco (Carter paraphrases Mark Twain in describing his relationship with Buzzanco: "he knows everything there is to know and I know the rest"), that no "legitimate" state existed south of the 17th parallel, Carter refuses even to utter the terms "South Vietnam" or "Republic of Vietnam," entities he dismisses as mere "fiction" (pp. vii, 7).

These hardline polemics are a shame. Behind the stark (and often accurate) portrait of malfunction that Carter initially sets out is much nuance--provided courtesy of the author's excellent research and reportage skills. Despite his absolutism, the outline of a more complex picture emerges in which the fate of South Vietnam becomes a tug-of-war between Vietnamese and Americans. Nor can American nation-building initiatives easily be categorized as unadulterated

failures. Often the record proves more gray than black-and-white.

Carter firsts treats the now familiar terrain of early U.S. investments in Southeast Asia. As Cold War tensions stabilized in Europe, Washington policymakers shifted their focus to the Third World. By the mid 1950s, modernizers such as those associated with the Michigan State Group poured into Vietnam. "Saigon became a veritable laboratory for development initiative," explains Carter (p. 56). The Michigan State Group "expanded considerably, and events, despite occasional setbacks, seemed to justify increased efforts," he tells us (p. 73).

Yet Americans remained wildly overconfident of their nation-building skills and willfully ignorant of those they supposedly aimed to help. Carter readily denounces modernizers for the "diminution of Southeast Asians as creators of their own destiny" (p. 37). Yet the South Vietnamese, particularly Ngo Dinh Diem, play a very limited role in Carter's story. While a number of serious scholars armed with Vietnamese language skills have reinterpreted Diem as a significant, complex player, Carter dismisses the RVN president as an "authoritarian" on par with Bao Dai, who "earned the fear and hatred of many Vietnamese" (p. 104).[2] Still, Carter labels Diem a "nationalist" (presumably not a South Vietnamese nationalist), legitimately interested in pursuing a "third way" between a free market and a heavily regulated economy. Diem's nationalism and separate ambitions for his country became the source of increasing stress for his U.S. benefactors--tensions that led to Diem's demise in 1963.

In the early 1960s, frustrations with the pace of modernization initiatives and growing military opposition from the National Liberation Front forced a shift from nation-building initiatives toward a military solution. The non-military side of the equation did not fully disappear. Indeed, Lyndon Johnson, as ardent a believer in the power of modernization as ever existed, continued to press this agenda. Still, the war by 1965 defined everything. Carter breaks his freshest ground in describing "the construction miracle" led by a group of capable U.S. construction firms charged with turning Vietnam into the staging ground for a modern war. Pushing beyond available government and military archives, Carter tracked down records of private companies operating in Vietnam, in particular those of the consortium known as RMK-BRJ (Raymond International, Morrison-Knudsen, Brown, Root, and Jones). This allows Carter to depict the stunning transformation of Vietnam over the course of a few short years into a country capable of hosting over 500,000 American troops.

Brown and Root (a subsidiary of Halliburton Corporation), a key firm involved in the mobilization, became the object of antiwar scorn for its political ties to Lyndon Johnson and supposed corruption. Peace protesters mocked it as "Burn and Loot." Carter makes no references to the controversies over the Vietnam builders--by implication exonerating Brown and Root. The "construction effort," acknowledges Carter, "succeeded on its own terms" (p. 234).

Of course the building campaign and general war effort set in motion upheaval and dislocation across South Vietnam. This and much of what Carter presents is undeniable--and generally well known to historians. Still, the author pulls a great deal of information together and presents it clearly. The book provides a sort of one-stop shopping on nation-building in Vietnam.

Revisionists, of course, will object to Carter's emphatic denunciations of South Vietnam as a dependency, unworthy of any consideration as a nation. Ideally such a claim would be backed by a carefully framed delineation of the parameters defining legitimate statehood. Carter offers nothing of the sort. Many states occupy a nether land between independence and dependence, legitima-

cy and illegitimacy. Where are the thresholds, when does one arrive at critical mass? The Republic of Vietnam had its problems--chronicled in detail by Carter. But it did hold elections, had a functioning court system, generally tolerated independent labor movements and a free press (remarkable for a country at war), and was home to innumerable political parties and religious organizations. Burdened as it was, the RVN, encouraged by Americans, did pass, for instance, significant and radical labor reform (the 1970 Land-to-the-Tiller program)--despite Carter's insistence that after 1968 "policymakers ... had long since stopped talking about the need for land reform (p. 231).

When fine scholars such as Dr. Carter embrace absolutist positions and scholarly warfare they risk appearing to younger audiences, as President Obama once suggested of his elders, as part of the "psychodrama of the baby boom generation--a tale rooted in old grudges and revenge plots hatched on a handful of campuses long ago."[3] Fortunately, Carter has much to offer readers beyond his insistent orthodox positions.

Notes

[1]. For revisionist takes see Keith Taylor, "How I Began to Teach about the Vietnam War," ***Michigan Quarterly Review*** (Fall 2004): 637-647; Philip Catton, ***Diem's Final Failure: Prelude to America's War in Vietnam*** (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2002); and Mark Moyar, ***Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954-1965*** (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006). For the orthodox response see Robert Buzzanco, "Fear and (Self) Loathing in Lubbock: How I Learned to Quit Worrying and Love Vietnam and Iraq," ***Counterpunch***, 16-17 (April 2005), available at http://www.counterpunch.org/buzzanco04162005.html. For a post-revisionist perspective see Edward Miller, "War Stories: The Taylor-Buzzanco Debate and How We Think about the Vietnam War," ***Journal of Vietnamese Studies*** 1 (February 2006): 453-484.

[2]. For a thoughtful reinterpretation of Diem see Edward Miller, "Vision, Power and Agency: The Ascent of Ngo Dinh Diem, 1945-54," ***Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*** 35 (October 2004): 433-458.

[3]. Barack Obama, ***The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream*** (New York: Crown Books, 2006), 45.

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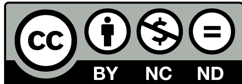

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