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]

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 reinter-