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War and the Politics of Nation Building

Five decades have passed since Ngo Dinh Diem, the first president of South Vietnam, was assassinated in the military coup endorsed by the United States government, yet his political life still inspires the history and memory of the Vietnam conflict. Diem is most frequently seen by both American and postcolonial Vietnamese scholars as a U.S. puppet and his government as an American creation during the Cold War. Diem has also been described as a product of such traditions as Catholicism and Confucianism, representing the Western construct of Orientalism in the process of building an anticommunist regime in the Southeast Asia.

Refuting these arguments, in *Misalliance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and the Fate of South Vietnam*, Dartmouth professor Edward Miller offers a new interpretation of the man and his relationship with the United States through the lens of Vietnamese political culture. Perhaps the author's most brilliant contribution to understanding the U.S.-Diem alliance is a sophisticated analysis of how and why "nation-building ideas and agendas played central roles in the formation, evolution, and eventual undoing of Washington's relationship with Diem" (p. 12). The author asserts that the South Vietnam leader was a modernizer with his own visions of a new nation that diverged from the U.S. designs. Although working within a joint effort to contain communism, the United States and Diem often disagreed, and Miller describes how "the *politics of nation building* [Miller's italics] shaped its entire history, from its creation to its demise" (p. 17). These conflicts, Miller

says, arose not from a clash of civilizations, but from "clashes between different kinds of civilizing missions" (p. 17). His book, in illuminating this evolution from political and moral levels, adds context to U.S. foreign relations and modern Vietnamese history, and distinguishes it from the interplay between the key personalities. The result is an in-depth study examining divergent perceptions and motivations as they affected political ideology, military strategy, the religious crisis, and rural socioeconomic programs. Eventually, this strife contributed not simply to collapsing the fledgling alliance in 1963 but also to changing the course of the war.

The author opens with a survey of Diem's background in politics, including his relationships with the other Vietnamese anticolonialists before and after 1945. Inheriting the sturdy nationalism and Catholic faith of his father, Ngo Dinh Kha, Diem became a strong-willed patriot, struggling for the rights of his fatherland. Opposing French policy, resigning as interior minister under the emperor Bao Dai's French protectorate Nguyen dynasty, idolizing Phan Boi Chau and his knowledge of Confucianism, sympathizing with Prince Cuong De's Committee of National Reconstruction, organizing the National Union Bloc to mobilize all noncommunist nationalist parties, he eventually ignored his family's animosity to the communists and was willing to serve in Ho Chi Minh's government. Diem thus proved that he was "a dedicated defender of the Vietnamese nation" (p. 27). His strong anti-French stance made him a resplendent symbol of revolutionary nationalist certitude as he

dedicated his life to building an independent and anti-communist nation. Miller, by demythologizing the prevailing prejudice against Diem, states that he was “neither plucked from obscurity nor installed in office by the United States in 1954. Rather, he was a prominent and active figure in Indochinese politics who successfully engineered his own appointment as premier of the SVN” (pp. 20- 21). The author notes the popular theories during the 1960s that Diem became the South Vietnamese premier with the backing of U.S. Catholics and Francis Cardinal Spellman, or by secret maneuver of CIA and State of Department officials such as John Foster Dulles, but also “the lack of documentary evidence to support them” (p. 52). For example, Miller argues, declassified State Department records suggest that “Dulles and other senior Eisenhower administration officials were at most only ‘vaguely aware’ of Diem prior to May 1954” (p. 52). Indeed, Diem was selected as the chief of state by Emperor Bao Dai as “the man best suited for the job. [B]ecause of his intransigence and his fanaticism, he could be counted on to resist communism. Yes, he was truly the right man for the situation” (p. 53). During the post-Geneva period Diem, ignoring the U.S. strategy of conciliation and reform, attacked and quelled his rivals without any compromise. He remedied the “political chaos,” ruling the Vietnamese National Army and the other rival religious militia forces, stripping them of power and implementing his state-building program. Miller’s scholarship on this period not only contributes to a new understanding of Diem, but also challenges historians to reconceptualize the history of the Diem-American relationship from the beginning.

Diem considered himself both a sword and a shield against real threats to the political system of South Vietnam. The chief factors of this system— independence, national interest, and moral duty—were to be merged to create democratic institutions and civil life in the heart of nation. Intimately connected with Catholic and Confucian traditions, Diem and his family were participants rather than observers; therefore he, characteristically, brought his own twist to the terms, transforming the emotional power of religion into a distinct political doctrine, according to Miller. However, differing from most students of the conflict, Miller pioneers a new account of Diem’s nationalism. In Miller’s eyes, Diem was neither traditional theoretician nor reactionary colonial mandarin. Diem was a shrewd politician and a proponent of “democratic” rule on his own terms. His new direction for the nation, according to Miller, was “an ambitious attempt to synthesize certain contemporary ideas

and discourse about Catholic Christianity, Confucianism, and Vietnamese national identity” (p. 21).

Miller’s use of Vietnamese culture to explain Diem’s religio-political thoughts shows how his understanding of democracy derived from indigenous Vietnamese democratic tradition rather than from Western theories. Melding the “moral norms” of the Confucian social philosophy with the doctrine of personalism of the Catholic philosopher Emmanuel Mounier, including self-improvement, communitarism, and humanism, Diem believed “democracy is primarily a state of mind, a way of living that respects the human person, both with regard to ourselves and with regard to others.” Instead of connecting democratic reform to civil liberties, Miller argues, Diem demonstrated it as “a process of collective social improvement” (p. 139). The leader of the First Republic attempted to modernize and connect these principles to the contemporary nation-building program, saying, “we are not going back to a sterile copy of the mandarin past but we are going to adapt the best of our heritage to the modern situation” (p. 138). Still, Diem’s worldview clashed with the Americans’. As Miller concludes, “Diem sought to define democracy as a social ethos based on a certain sense of moral duty. This definition was a far cry from the standard meaning of democracy favored by postwar American theorists, most of whom thought of democracy as a form of political pluralism” (p. 137).

This divergence roiled the U.S.-Vietnamese alliance as it attempted to implement one of the most important nation-building agendas: socioeconomic development in the South Vietnamese countryside. The keystone of the rural transformation was to solve overpopulation through resettlement. This solution, the author states, was to redistribute people rather than land. Miller explores how by moving the rural poor, whom Diem considered a “real proletariat,” to new communities in previously unpopulated areas, Diem aimed not only to “provide land to the landless but also to advance his broader economic, security, and ideological objectives” (p.160). Nationwide, Diem promoted self-sufficiency in “a distinctly Diemist version of community development” in order to “mobilize the active participation and contribution of the people to the public projects of the government” (p.164). Although Diem succeeded with rural projects such as the Cai San settlement in the Mekong Delta, U.S. officials and experts deplored his tactics. For the Americans, the central part of land reform is to provide land for the landless, creating conditions and opportunity for the new settlers to design and carry out their own local improvement projects, rather than exploiting

their labor for the sake of government.

Miller masterfully analyzes the primary contradiction in the two American nation-building theories: high modernism that focused on large-scale technical and scientific progress and low modernism that promoted social revolution via small-scale, groups, and communities. Neither school was suitable in South Vietnam because the United States could not Westernize the Vietnamese way of life. For example, Diem's younger brother Nhu declared that industrialization and other economic change would be carried out in South Vietnam only after "we irrevocably depart from the traditional society as far as our thinking, our organization and our technique are concerned" (p. 237). For land development, despite agreeing with the Americans that his government ought to provide land and material aid to settlers, Diem remained consistent in his belief that "these material benefits were less important than the ethos of mutual obligation and 'self-sufficiency' and he continued pursuing his rural development without American assistance" (p. 177). Miller points out that the divide in the alliance over agrarian reform program pushed relations between Washington and Saigon toward a new nadir.

Maintenance of internal security strategy was another preoccupation of Diem and his government. When not confronting attempted military coups in Saigon, Diem focused primarily on counterinsurgency in the rural areas to contain the infiltration and development of communists. Miller offers that the U.S-South Vietnamese military relationship not was totally dominated by the American advisors. For example, Michigan State University Group (MSUG) police experts considered the Republic of Vietnam Civil Guard as a civilian police force. To the contrary, the U.S. Military Advisory Assistance Group (MAAG) conceived it a paramilitary force, functioning as a kind of auxiliary internal army. For Diem, the Guard was "a hybrid force that would combine certain police powers (including surveillance, detention, and counterintelligence duties) with elaborate military capabilities" (p. 192). Complaining that U.S. prescriptions neither fit his vision nor appreciated the unique security situation in South Vietnam, Diem continued seeing the Guard as a core element of counterinsurgency warfare in the rural areas. As an experienced mandarin, Diem knew better than anyone that the rule of countryside had to be combined with political, military, social, and economic resolution. He established the Civic Action program as the basic foundation of communitarianism, self-sufficiency, and community development. However, in reality the Ngo brothers' approach was different from the Ameri-

can formula, particularly in the strategic hamlet program. For the U.S. experts, "the universal appeal of democratic values and practices was the key concept on which the success of the program—and the outcome of the war—would hinge" (p. 242). Conversely, Diem "never embraced liberal notions of democracy as a pluralist contest among rival leaders, groups, or ideas," Miller argues. "Instead, he saw it as a means to enlist the South Vietnamese peoples en masse in the struggle against the RVN's enemies, and as a way to promote his communitarian vision of social transformation." Miller cannot but admit that the strategic hamlet program, even with its shortcomings, "appeared to be part of a remarkable turnaround in the government's fortunes in its war against the NLF," hopefully paving the way for winning the war (p. 244). The Ap Bac failure in January 1963 could not extinguish the Ngos' optimism about the war, even as Nhu ordered the RVN Civic Action Ministry to prepare for the "re-occupation" of North Vietnam. Eventually, the Ngo government wanted to escape U.S. domination by suggesting that South Vietnam "received military equipment and other material aid but did not accept any U.S. advice about its internal affairs" (p. 255).

The fate of the Ngo regime was sealed by the Buddhist Crisis in 1963. Most striking in Miller's explanation for this religious-political crisis is his inclusion of historical background, such as a reform movement known as the Buddhist revival that began during the 1910s and 1920s. The author presents a fascinating but challenging statement that the Diem-era Buddhist movement was "not concerned only ... about discrimination and religious freedom. They also deeply worried about the Diem government's nation-building agenda and especially about the personalist revolution, which they had come to see as a threat to their plans to revitalize Vietnamese Buddhism" (p. 262). In Miller's view, the Vietnamese Buddhists participated in revolution, national liberation, and modernity as a contribution to the nation-building process. Clashes between the Diem government and Buddhist movement culminated in a war against development. Diem, to the last minute of his life, believed that he would solve internal crises "from a position of strength" (p. 310). However, he could never "reestablish order," as he stubbornly responded to the U.S. ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge, because he and Nhu were murdered by their own generals. Miller concludes that "the problems did not derive merely from the Ngo brothers' abstruse and confusing pronouncements about the merits of the personalist revolution. They were also rooted in specific, practical disagreements between the Ngos and the Ameri-

icans over the meaning of key concepts such as democracy, community, security, and social change” (p. 325). Diem and his U.S. counterparts’ shortcomings in this regard, Miller suggests, were “unwillingness to accommodate South Vietnam’s myriad and diverse revolutionary aspirations” (p. 18).

Building the book through a thorough synthesis of

military, political, religious, foreign relation, and social histories, *Misalliance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and the Fate of South Vietnam* succeeds admirably in shedding new light on Diem and his nation-building programs. Future studies of such contentious issues must acknowledge Miller’s persuasive argument that such misapprehensions shaped the rise and fall of the U.S.-Diem alliance and the fate of South Vietnam.

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