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On September 2, 1945, a large crowd gathered in Hanoi's Ba Đình Square. The people of Vietnam had arrived in the hundreds of thousands to celebrate Vietnamese independence following the defeat of the Japanese in World War II. They had also come to hear their leader, Ho Chi Minh, deliver a speech. The speech began with a simple statement: "All people are created equal; they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights; among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness."<sup>1</sup> This sentiment, Ho Chi Minh went on to explain, was written in 1776, in the United States of America's Declaration of Independence. Yet it applied equally to the Vietnamese people, who had struggled for thousands of years to resist colonization by outside powers, and who also had the "right to live, to be happy and free."<sup>2</sup> In a single speech given in 1945, Ho Chi Minh invoked the American values of liberty and equality in the service of Vietnamese nationalism, a cause that soon placed his country on a collision course with the United States. A quarter century later, as the Vietnam War raged on, South Vietnamese student activists once again applied American values—this time, of free speech and dissent—to strengthen their opposition to US policies in Southeast Asia.

It is this fascinating episode of the Vietnam War that Nguyet Nguyen explores in her compelling article, which examines the experiences of a group of 61 South Vietnamese students who arrived in the United States in 1968, at the height of the antiwar movement. The students were under the sponsorship of the US Agency for International Development (USAID) and were participating in the "Leadership Scholarship Program"—a "joint endeavor between USAID and the [South Vietnamese] government with the aim of training future Vietnamese leaders and public servants in South Vietnam" (549). As part of the program, the students were enrolled in several universities and colleges along the West Coast. There, the American and South Vietnamese governments hoped that they would absorb "American values," learn about "the functioning of a modern, industrialized state," and return home to contribute to the larger project of anticommunist nation building in South Vietnam (550). As Nguyen convincingly illustrates, American foreign policy makers succeeded in imparting core US values to the students—but not in the ways they had planned.

Nguyen's argument is three-pronged. The students, she asserts, did absorb many of the values professed by the United States—among these, free speech, democracy, and civil disobedience. However, their exposure to these values came from witnessing antiwar activism on college campuses. Soon, the students became participants in the movement themselves, applying "those very values to resist both governments [South Vietnamese and American] and undermine the U.S. government's agenda" (551). Furthermore, their participation in the antiwar movement "sharpened the students' concerns about U.S. intervention in their country" and provided an environment that strengthened their preexisting nationalist sentiments and resulted

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<sup>1</sup> Ho Chi Minh, "Declaration of Independence of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam," September 2, 1945.

<sup>2</sup> Ho Chi Minh, "Declaration of Independence."

in their opposition to the war. The students' involvement in the antiwar movement, Nguyen contends in her third and final argument, is "representative of the increasingly global agenda of the 1960s student protests," in which students around the world combined various causes with the global anti-colonial movement (551).

The experiences of the South Vietnamese students in the United States were transformative. Though the students had arrived as representatives of South Vietnam's commitment to anticommunism, by the end of their college experience, some of the students had begun to tacitly endorse the aims of the North Vietnamese. A Communist victory, they reasoned, would end the bloodshed in Vietnam and result in the reunification of their beloved country. This sentiment, of course, was antithetical to the aims of the US and South Vietnamese governments. As Nguyen astutely points out in the conclusion,

foreign policy calculations...are doomed if they neglect the aspirations of the local population and are formulated at an excessively abstract level and in ignorance of the specific case. Agents of foreign policy, dealing with civilizations that are 'other,' cannot always control the outcomes of policies they set in motion (574).

The story of the USAID South Vietnamese students is an apt reminder of this lesson.

The article is divided into three sections tracing the journey of the students from staunch anti-Communists to antiwar activists. The first part examines the history and goals of USAID's Leadership Scholarship Program, and the process through which the students were selected. The program aimed to "promote U.S. policy by instilling a positive image of the United States in participants' minds," further the goal of "Vietnamization," and along the way, replace the influence of the French in South Vietnam (553). The students were selected for the Leadership Program on the basis of four main criteria: high academic achievement, leadership potential, anti-Communist credentials (or at the very least, neutral politics), and loyalty. While the last two traits were never explicitly listed as requirements, applicants needed to possess both in order to gain acceptance. As Nguyen notes, the program was highly competitive—many South Vietnamese parents viewed it as a way for their children to escape the draft and the warzone. While some students were selected for their strong academic achievements and personal commitment to anti-Communism, others had their acceptance paid for by well-connected families. The partnership between the South Vietnamese government and the US was also unequal, and not without its tensions. Though USAID had promised the Saigon government a large amount of control over the selection process, the agency did not hesitate to exert its power over the South Vietnamese government by making unilateral, last-minute decisions.

Once the students arrived in the United States, their "transformation from being recipients of U.S. largesse in South Vietnam to opponents of the very system they were supposed to serve" was soon underway (558). As Nguyen points out, the students arrived on campus during one of the most divisive years in American history. The Tet Offensive had exposed the lies of US government officials, further galvanizing the antiwar movement, and the assassination of civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr. sparked widespread demonstrations across the nation's college campuses. The students were struck by the antiwar activism of their peers—as one individual put it, "everyone was demonstrating and acting, and they were not even Vietnamese...That was why I felt I needed to do something, too" (559). For many of the program's participants, engaging with the antiwar movement resulted in a political awakening. Though the students had been sent to the US as part of an overtly political mission, most admitted that they had not spent much time considering the questions of 'how' and 'why' their nation was at war prior to arriving in the US. Their involvement with the antiwar movement resulted in a deeper understanding of their country's history and an increased commitment to their preexisting nationalist sentiments (as Nguyen points out, the students had come of age during the post-colonial, highly nationalistic era of Vietnam's history).

On college campuses, students were free to speak their minds and explore new ideas without fear of repercussion. While the government in Saigon had given them a small taste of this freedom, the climate on

US college campuses was far more tolerant. As the students developed their political awareness, they explored various ways of conveying their new ideas to the public. While some individuals founded student organizations such as the Vietnamese Students for Peace (VSP), others channeled their energies into the publication of student bulletins such as *Hướng Di*. The underlying message of the VSP and *Hướng Di* was clear: Vietnam would have peace only if the United States left the country alone. The students' political transformation was complete—though they had arrived in the US as representatives of an anti-Communist government, their experiences on college campuses had transformed them into antiwar activists who opposed US involvement in Vietnam and the repressive government in Saigon.

In the third and final section of the article, Nguyen chronicles the various ways the students boldly engaged in activism (despite the risk of repercussions from both the US and South Vietnamese governments). Their participation in the antiwar movement started small. Students signed petitions, attended talks and peace walks, and organized and spoke at demonstrations (563). However, by 1972, the students had begun to participate in larger symbolic acts of resistance to the war and the Nguyễn Văn Thiệu regime. Inspired by the civil disobedience tactics of the Civil Rights Movement, the activists organized several sit ins and 'take-overs,' most notably at the Saigon Consulate, the unofficial Saigon Mission to the United Nations in New York, and the South Vietnamese Consulate in San Francisco. As one student put it, "we wanted to show that the Saigon government is repressive...[and] most willing to invite American police to use force against us just as it has been willing to ask the American military to destroy our people and our country" (564). Though the protesters anticipated being charged with "criminal trespassing" for their acts of civil disobedience, the irony of their message was clear: the US was the true criminal for "occupying [Vietnam], raping our women, killing our men, bombing our children, [and] making millions of our people into refugees" (564).

The most extreme act of protest came in July 1972, when a South Vietnamese student named Nguyễn Thái Bình hijacked a Pan American Airlines flight en route from Manila to Saigon and demanded that the pilot land the plane in Hanoi. Bình's attempt to gain publicity for the faltering antiwar movement ultimately cost him his life. His plan failed when the pilot refused to change course, landed the plane in Saigon, tackled him to the ground, and ordered a former FBI agent on board to shoot "the son of a bitch" (570). Bình left behind a complicated legacy. While some activists in Saigon viewed him as an antiwar symbol, students stationed in the US (both activists and those who had remained politically neutral) feared that Bình had single-handedly tarnished their reputations.

As USAID students gained prominence in the antiwar movement, they began to attract the notice of antiwar icons, including Jane Fonda, Anthony Russo, and Carol Feraci, who supported the students' demands. However, the students were also aware that their increased visibility meant the possibility of greater repercussions from the US and South Vietnamese governments. In addition to having their scholarships revoked, President Thieu personally vowed to "beat to death" anyone who protested the war or called for peace (566). Despite these threats, the activists remained committed to their cause. Their courage, Nguyen argues, was inspired largely by the awareness "that they were part of a transnational, trans-continental movement" (567).

Correspondence with South Vietnamese students in France and Saigon reminded the US-based activists that they were not alone. For its part, the US government was unsure of how to handle the situation. When the South Vietnamese government called for USAID to terminate the scholarships, the agency was faced with a dilemma. On the one hand, assenting to the request would put an end to unwanted publicity against the war, but it would also mean punishing students for expressing their political views (thereby denying the activists the free speech guaranteed by the US constitution). On the other hand, if the US government allowed the South Vietnamese students to remain in the country, it might appear to be an acknowledgement of the repressive nature of the South Vietnamese regime (568). In the end, the US government granted the students permission to stay in the country indefinitely.

Ultimately, Nguyen concludes, the USAID Leadership Scholarship Program achieved partial success. Though the student activists gained prominence in the United States, their numbers were never large. As Nguyen points out, only a third of the 61 students in the 1968 cohort “declared themselves openly antiwar” (573). In fact, as intended, some of the program’s scholars returned to Saigon and accepted positions in the government. Others took non-government jobs in South Vietnam. Only a few remained in the United States to continue protesting the war. Nevertheless, their stories are notable for what they reveal about the USAID program and American efforts at advancing foreign policy objectives. Though the program was marketed as an act of US altruism, in truth, it was “driven by the perceived exigencies of national security—derived from the primary aim of the US government to impose its model on a Southeast Asian nation, which it did not understand, and to render it compliant” (574). In the case of the USAID student activists, the effort backfired. Though the US government succeeded in “imparting core US values” to the students, this victory came at the cost of its own foreign policy objectives (574). Just as Ho Chi Minh had deployed US values to further his case for Vietnamese independence, USAID activists adopted and employed free speech, democracy, and civil disobedience to hold the South Vietnamese and US governments accountable for the war in Vietnam.

Nguyen’s argument is a compelling one, bolstered by her use of a wide range of primary source materials in both the English and Vietnamese languages, including the South Vietnamese student bulletins *Biển Dài* and *Hướng Di*. Particularly impressive is Nguyen’s use of oral history to tell this story. The article incorporates the voices of five former recipients of the Leadership Scholarship, each of whom spoke with Nguyen about their experiences as antiwar activists in the United States. The interviews provide unprecedented insight into a host of topics, including the interview process for the USAID scholarship program and the political pressures placed on the students by both the Saigon government and their own families. Nguyen is to be commended for unraveling the complex internal transformations of the students as they went from politically aloof bystanders to passionate antiwarriors. The interviews permit the reader a glimpse into the thought processes of the students as they underwent their political awakenings.

If there is a criticism to be made of this article, it is merely that the reader is left with a desire to hear from even more recipients of the Leadership Scholarship. As Nguyen herself concedes, only one third of the 1968 cohort of USAID students considered themselves ‘antiwar.’ How did the remaining two thirds of the students perceive the antiwar activism occurring on college campuses? And why did they choose to remain (at least outwardly) loyal to the South Vietnamese government? These are just a few questions to be answered by Nguyen and future scholars.

By recounting the story of the USAID activists, this article joins a growing body of literature devoted to uncovering the South Vietnamese perspective of the Vietnam War. As Heather Stur notes in her book, *Saigon at War: South Vietnam and the Global Sixties*, “until recently, few historians and writers took South Vietnam seriously,” preferring to characterize the government and its people as mere “puppets” of the United States.<sup>3</sup> In part, the lack of attention paid to South Vietnamese perspectives was the result of inaccessible Vietnamese archives in the decades immediately following the war, and the inability of historians to read sources in the Vietnamese language. By uncovering these voices, scholars restore agency to the South Vietnamese government and people and broaden the range of perspectives included in the telling of the Vietnam War. In the process, they complicate conventional narratives of the conflict, permitting a “picture of the Vietnam War that is less clear but more complete.”<sup>4</sup>

Nguyen’s work on the experiences of South Vietnamese students in the United States adds one important layer to a picture that scholars such as Heather Stur, Pierre Asselin, Jessica Chapman, Van Nguyen-Marshall,

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<sup>3</sup> Heather Marie Stur, *Saigon at War: South Vietnam and the Global Sixties* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 12.

<sup>4</sup> Stur, *Saigon at War*, 15.

and Peter Hansen have begun to complicate.<sup>5</sup> She also contributes to the burgeoning scholarship on the international activism of the Vietnam War era, a field marked by the work of scholars such as Judy Tzu-Chun Wu and Jessica M. Frazier, among others.<sup>6</sup> Nguyen's article is a worthy contribution to both bodies of scholarship, and an exciting indication of the ways in which the field will continue to be complicated.

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<sup>5</sup> Pierre Asselin, *Vietnam's American War: A History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Jessica Chapman, *Cauldron of Resistance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and 1950s Southern Vietnam* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013); Van Nguyen-Marshall, "Student Activism in Time of War: Youth in the Republic of Vietnam, 1960s-1970s," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (Spring 2015), 43-81; and Peter Hansen, "Bắc Đệ Cú: Catholic Refugees from the North of Vietnam, and Their Role in the Southern Republic, 1954-1959," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 3 (Fall 2009), 173-211.

<sup>6</sup> Judy Tzu-Chun Wu, *Radicals on the Road: Internationalism, Orientalism, and Feminism During the Vietnam Era* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013) and Jessica M. Frazier, *Women's Antiviet War Diplomacy During the Vietnam War Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017).