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During and immediately following the Geneva Conference of 1954, the United States began an ambitious nation building effort below the 17th parallel in Vietnam. For this project, the United States selected Ngo Dinh Diem, a devout Catholic, as the leader. A relatively unknown figure, Diem did have nationalist credentials, was an ardent anti-communist, and made the short list of acceptable candidates. Diem went on to lead, with enormous American backing, the effort to create the new “South Vietnam” from the beginning in 1954 until his assassination in 1963, longer than any of the many subsequent Saigon rulers. During those years, Diem provoked criticism for his brutality, authoritarianism, obstinacy, and persecution of Buddhists. His tenure was an unmitigated failure for the United States and, yet, officials underwrote his despotism year after year with an increasing volume of military and economic aid. So, exactly why did U.S. policy makers chose and remain in steadfast support of Ngo Dinh Diem to lead the experiment in nation building in Vietnam? This is the question Seth Jacobs’ America’s Miracle Man in Vietnam attempts to answer.

The argument centers on the two intertwined themes of race and religion. On the former, American officials crafted policy toward Asia through a racist lens. The argument here is fairly conventional, and fashionable. American officials viewed the people of Southeast Asia as incapable of self-rule, too delicate for the rigors of combating communism, and, importantly, as malleable. More specifically, they viewed Buddhism (the dominant faith of Vietnam) as weak, pacifist, anti-western, and open to the influence of Marxist ideas (48-51). This persistent racist (and paternalist) view of the capabilities of Asians led many to accept that America and America only was best suited for the needed tutelage.

These racist ideas were inextricably bound to religion, according to Jacobs, as the United States witnessed a religious renaissance during the 1950s. In an interesting and important element of the author’s over-all argument, he portrays 1950s America as the age of a profound re-discovery of religion complete with “drive-in” churches and “Dial-A-Prayer” hotlines. Religious themes blanketed movies, popular music, television and literature, both fiction and nonfiction. Sales of the Bible reached record heights during the decade. This revival was not limited to just one or two denominations; Protestants, Jews, and Catholics

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all experienced the upsurge. Church membership increased to 69 percent in 1959, up from 49 percent in 1940 (63-64). This upsurge in national piety substantially informed and influenced the nation's foreign policy as well.

Having laid out this course, Jacobs then weaves together these two themes to demonstrate the religious fervor that gripped those crafting U.S. foreign policy to argue that this missionary zeal led to the selection of Christian clients to carry out those policy objectives. Because the Cold War was something of a "holy war," policymakers gravitated toward the Catholic Ngo Dinh Diem (60). Officials preferred Christianity over Buddhism, Confucianism, Hinduism, or some such thing because they viewed the former as more vigorous, more reliable. Because it was a monotheistic faith, average Americans also more readily identified with the plight of its adherents. Stories of the hundreds of thousands of refugees making their way into southern Vietnam in what was termed Passage to Freedom in 1954-1955, dramatized by Tom Dooley's shocking if embellished tales of suffering, brought this notion home to many Americans.

When considered in this way, the efforts of the American Friends of Vietnam (AFV) to promote their choice of Ngo Dinh Diem for the experiment in southern Vietnam could only lead to one result. Also called the Vietnam Lobby, the AFV was an advocacy group made up of well-placed figures such as Senator Mike Mansfield, Joseph P. Kennedy, Archbishop Francis Cardinal Spellman, Edward Lansdale, Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas and General John “Iron Mike” O’Daniel. The group combined the paternalism and racism then prevalent in its promotion of U.S. support for Ngo Dinh Diem. The group carried out a massive, and, according to the author, on the whole successful, propaganda campaign on behalf of their chosen candidate.

Jacobs offers up just two real alternatives as candidates for the job and rivals to Diem. They were Phan Huy Quat, a former defense minister and acceptable anti-communist, and General Nguyen Van Hinh, chief of staff of the Vietnamese National Army (VNA), both judged to be able leaders by some Americans and Vietnamese. The latter was never really considered and was almost immediately unceremoniously spirited out of the country to Paris to get him out of the way of Diem’s rise to power. Washington's refusal of him is here attributed to the work of the highly influential Senator Mansfield (D-Mon.) who suggested the United States “consider an immediate suspension of all aid to Vietnam” if a government could not be formed around Diem (179). On the rejection of the former, Senator Mansfield again over-rode serious reservations at the highest levels to quash opposition to Diem’s supremacy (184-185). Religious sects such as the Cao Dai and Hoa Hoa were, not surprisingly, never given serious consideration as legitimate and useful actors.

These developments unfold in a chapter devoted to General J. Lawton Collins’ opposition to
Diem; he had judged both of the above candidates as superior to Diem. The point here is to show “policymaker’s remarkable resistance to any challenge of their fundamental racial and religious beliefs” (174). As the American special representative (with the rank of Ambassador), Collins’ mission was clear: provide aid and support for the solidification of Diem’s teetering regime. Instead, he energetically opposed Diem and forwarded his strongly worded recommendations on to Washington. He apparently got so far as to make even Secretary Dulles question U.S. support for the dictator and the administration considered dumping Diem. In the proverbial eleventh hour, however, his efforts were again unspun by Senator Mansfield (201, 205). Collins, himself a Catholic, left Saigon in 1955 having failed in his effort to convince the Eisenhower administration to change its rigid support for Ngo Dinh Diem.

This treatment of opposition to Diem is a bit truncated. Collins was one of a significant number of Americans and Vietnamese who opposed the continuation of Diem’s rule and who voiced clear and stern warnings of the impending doom if his authoritarianism continued. That opposition was quite widespread. Numerous Americans complained routinely of Diem’s obstinacy, of his begging, cajoling, and threatening for increases in military and economic aid, and of his dictatorial tendencies, which they judged might well undo American objectives in Vietnam. If anything, opposition was even greater among the Vietnamese. In 1957, Diem escaped an assassination attempt carried out in the light of day. Insurgents launched hundreds of attacks, bombings, and ambushes. In 1958, 700 regime officials were assassinated. That number climbed to 2,500 by 1960. ¹

The shift away from allowing and listening to critiques of Diem and toward much greater official acceptance of him had come after he militarily routed his political rivals and other opposition in the so-called Battle for Saigon in 1955. Following this event, which ravaged the city and costs hundreds of lives, criticism seemed to melt away. As George McT. Kahin has written, “overnight, in the eyes of most American officials and much of the U.S. press, Diem was metamorphosed from a stubborn, narrow, politically maladroit failure into a wise and clever hero”². Jacobs interprets the Battle for Saigon and subsequent American reversal within the context of the U.S. commitment to religion. This is, on the whole, unconvincing.


In late 1954, many officials looked warily on the project to build a state around Diem. Nationalist though he was, he was also mercurial, stubborn, autocratic, too politically rigid, and excessively clannish. He nevertheless became the chosen instrument of American foreign policy in Vietnam. Grudgingly, Diem’s critics either came around or muted their criticism. Particularly following his triumph in early and mid-1955, he seemed to mute some of the criticism himself by demonstrating that he could in fact use force successfully to retain power. In short order, officials dropped plans to remove him and seek a replacement. Though criticism of him did not go away, it now became muted by changed parameters. Diem was, after all, anti-communist beyond criticism. If he committed some excesses along the way to ensuring the tide of communism did not sweep all of Asia and threaten American interests, these would be tolerated. As some explained at the time, democracy as Americans saw it, appeared alien to the Vietnamese and simply was not applicable in this context.3 A number of similar justifications transformed Diem into a brave and besieged defender of the free world.

The metamorphosis, however, resulted in part from wishful thinking. American prestige and cold war credibility had become linked to Diem. Abandoning him, even under justifiable circumstances, besmirched the nation’s credibility, something Dulles kept in mind when General Collins repeatedly insisted on replacing Diem. While Dulles mulled over the U.S. government’s options in Southeast Asia, he also had to consider Senator Mansfield’s threat to cut off aid for any regime without Diem at its head. The administration did not want a row on Capitol Hill over a limited state building project in Southeast Asia.

To Eisenhower and Dulles the Cold War, credibility, and national prestige were the more important factors. The U.S. government had linked itself firmly to Diem and now recognized the danger in withdrawing support for arguably to only realistic candidate willing to play the right role. Also, Diem’s retention of power required the suppression of native and popular leadership. He was not about to incorporate elements over which he could not exert full control. Further, to broaden his regime also meant broadening the base of opinion regarding America’s role and American aid. Any pretense of building democracy in Vietnam would be (and was) readily shelved if Diem could prove himself. The AFV, was in part, preaching to the choir. At the height of the chaos in Saigon, Secretary of State of Dulles drafted telegrams authorizing Diem’s removal. Those messages were quickly revoked upon word of Diem’s military triumph. Diem survived in a narrow miss. The administration waited for and desired a solution that involved Diem and, following the events of April 1955, that solution came.

Diem’s rehabilitation lasted only a short while. By 1959, conditions in Vietnam changed dramatically. Unrest in the countryside spread. A plan to pacify the population backfired, alienating many rural Vietnamese. By the following year, a highly organized and widespread insurgency formed itself into the National Front for the Liberation of Vietnam (NLF) to oppose Diem and his American backers. In the cities, too, Vietnamese within and without the government opposed the regime. Several MSU (Michigan State University) advisors became disenchanted with lack of progress and resistance to reform from Saigon. The MAAG (U.S. Military Assistance Advisory Group), USOM (United States Operations Mission), and MSUG (Michigan State University Group) continued to part ways regarding the basic mission in Vietnam. Although both Saigon and the MSU readily agreed to renew their contract in 1957, by 1960, the relationship had soured, culminating in the lapse of the contract in 1962, the removal of MSU, and the rapid militarization of the effort. And, of course, the U.S. backed the removal of Diem the following year.

Looking back from 1957, however, many believed that while there were certainly problems requiring more aid and advice, they had achieved substantial gains in putting together the pieces of a new, “modern” state. The lesson for U.S. policymakers was that Diem could effectively wield power, not simply or necessarily that he was Christian or Catholic. The embarrassingly suppliant state visit to the U.S. prepared for Diem in 1957 was the culmination of an effort to send the message that he was indeed the unrivaled power center in Saigon, the “tough miracle man.” He now had unqualified American support. Opposition to his tyranny only grew more widespread.

In the larger sense, the choice of Diem to lead the experiment in nation building in Vietnam stemmed from this need to create some alternate center of power that would be inclined toward the United States. Very few if any nationalists could be found to do that. In 1961, Vice President Lyndon Johnson traveled to southern Vietnam to assess the U.S.-backed regime. Johnson famously referred to Diem as “the Winston Churchill of Southeast Asia,” a comment that likely stunned everyone except Ngo Dinh Diem. Talking with journalist Stanley Karnow about the comment shortly thereafter, Johnson confided, “Shit man, he’s the only boy we got down there.” Both statements, like many made by the always-colorful Texan, have occasionally been dismissed as excessive. But from Johnson’s, and his government’s perspective, Diem really was the only choice for them. They knew remarkably little of the people, politics, or history of Vietnam. They certainly were not looking to modernize Vietnam in any way consistent with Vietnamese nationalists who had been at that task since at least the immediate post-World War I years. The United States

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came to Vietnam to fight the Cold War and needed a candidate in Saigon who would be reliably anticommunist, be the willing recipient of U.S. aid and advice, and be depended upon to support U.S. Cold War objectives. These imperatives severely limited U.S. options.

On one hand, Diem was chosen by the Americans within this context. On the other hand, he chose the Americans by assiduously cultivating key relationships, placing himself in the right place at the right time, and, in effect, making himself into the indispensable man. Traveling to Japan, the United States, Europe, then back to the U.S., Diem finally found an audience. Key members of that audience had already made the most important decision: to take an interest and get involved in Southeast Asia. Through his own efforts, he shrank an already very limited field of realistic candidates for the position.

The argument that Diem's Christianity is the outstanding factor in his selection by American Cold War policy makers is in the end unconvincing. The general equation is simple enough: U.S. policy makers were Christians + they all viewed the Cold War as a holy war + Diem was a Christian = Diem was chosen. But the equation misses more than it captures. American officials knew little to nothing of what they were actively getting themselves into. To many if not all of them, Vietnam appeared mysterious, even opaque, its people inscrutably, apathetic, and in need of tutelage, yet capable of great resistance and victory over the west (the Viet Minh). They did not possess the required tools, nor did they attempt, a reconciliation of these deep contradictions. Nor did it much matter. They needed a reliably anti-communist strongman who would simultaneously accept a heavy U.S. role in the project. The initial gamble on Diem quickly took on its own inertia, and from an early point, American officials refused to consider alternatives, Collins' close call in 1955 notwithstanding.

As it turned out, even Diem and his family could not be relied upon all the time. Diem himself constantly refused to accommodate his benefactors' urging reforms. His brother and chief political councilor, Ngo Dinh Nhu, later dared to show an independent streak by making overtures to the Communists in Hanoi to potentially arrive at a political solution, unify Vietnam, and leave the U.S. in the lurch, a truly nightmare scenario for the latter. Subsequent leaders in Saigon failed the test of adequately wielding power; they would not or could not maintain stability and/or would not or could not carry out America's Cold War/military objectives. The trick was to find someone who could do both. When Kennedy administration officials allowed the coup against Diem to go ahead in late 1963,

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they likely never imagined they and their successors would one day soon wax nostalgic for Diemist rule. As in subsequent years, U.S. Vietnam policy during the Diem period was often a mishmash of compromises between very few and often very imperfect choices.

Given the many variables and complexities in Vietnam, Southeast Asia, and in the Cold War, if American foreign policy elites seized upon Diem’s religion as useful to them, it was because they understood what it meant: They had found someone who, at least for a time, could and would play by the rules of U.S. Cold War foreign policy.