America’s Miracle Man in Vietnam Roundtable Review

Reviewed Work:


Roundtable Editor: Thomas Maddux
Reviewers: James Carter, Andrew Johns, Edward Miller, Joseph G. Morgan.

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The literature on the Vietnam conflict remains one of the most dynamic fields in the history of U.S. foreign relations. This scholarly engagement derives from several sources: the relevance of the war to contemporary American policy—the overdone Vietnam-Iraq analogies notwithstanding; the consistently high level of popularity of courses on Vietnam on university campuses; and, most importantly, the conflict’s continuing influence on U.S. history and contemporary politics, diplomacy, and culture. While a substantial amount of recent scholarship focuses on the Nixon administration—predictable to an extent, given the release of documents and the imminent publication of additional Nixon-era Foreign Relations of the United States volumes on administration policy by the U.S. State Department Office of the Historian—a notable resurgence in historical attention to pre-escalation U.S. involvement in Southeast Asia has also occurred. Scholars such as Mark Lawrence, Kathryn Statler, and Jessica Chapman have recently returned our attention to the pre-Tonkin Gulf period and have refined and expanded our understanding of issues such as the transition from French to American involvement and the installation of Ngo Dinh Diem as the leader of South Vietnam.

Seth Jacobs has made a major contribution to the literature on the period between the Indochina wars in his study of the American role in Diem’s rise to power in South Vietnam.

1. The relationship between the Vietnam conflict and the U.S. involvement in Iraq since 2003 has been the subject of widespread attention, not only in the press but also from historians. Robert K. Brigham, Is Iraq Another Vietnam? (New York: PublicAffairs Press, 2006), does an excellent job analyzing both the similarities and differences between the two conflicts.

In an elegantly written and sophisticated narrative, Jacobs weaves together U.S. culture, domestic politics, and foreign policy considerations to craft a compelling and thought-provoking argument. The central premise of *America’s Miracle Man in Vietnam* is that the relationship between the United States and Diem must be understood within the context of 1950s racial perceptions and religious revivalism that informed the assumptions and Weltanschauung of U.S. policymakers. President Dwight D. Eisenhower and Secretary of State John Foster Dulles believed that Diem’s Catholicism and non-“Oriental” qualities made him uniquely qualified to lead the fight against communism in Southeast Asia. As a result of these ideological factors, Jacobs suggests, the Eisenhower administration supported Diem rather than considering alternative candidates to lead South Vietnam, most of whom possessed stronger leadership credentials and enjoyed a higher level of Vietnamese popular support.

What sets Jacobs’ study apart from other examinations of this period is that he goes beyond traditional hard power explanations of American support for Diem—most notably his virulent anticommunism, a critical consideration given the Cold War context of U.S. involvement—and incorporates cultural analysis as the core of his explanatory framework. This approach, which Jacobs claims, “historicizes a connection between domestic culture and foreign policy,” allows the author to consider events from a unique perspective. (17) Jacobs utilizes a wide array of books, films, magazines, and newspapers—many of which have been overlooked by scholars—that place national and international issues in religious perspectives to buttress his argument. For Jacobs, these sources are valuable because “[i]deas matter,” and such literary and cultural artifacts help to explain why events unfolded as they did in the context of the mid-1950s. (5) More generally, the book contributes to the growing sophistication of culture as an interpretive tool in assessing the history of U.S. foreign relations generally, and the Vietnam conflict specifically.3

The argument laid out in the book also reinforces the notion of the critical importance of domestic factors in U.S. foreign policy. Jacobs’ description of the pressure brought to bear on the administration in support of Diem from multiple domestic channels—including influential members of Congress like Senator Mike Mansfield (D-MT), coreligionists such as Francis Cardinal Spellman, and Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas—reminds us of the influence of the nexus of foreign policy and domestic politics in the American system that observers since Alexis De Tocqueville have recognized. On a related note, Jacobs looks at the ideological currents that pervaded the United States in the 1950s, arguing that

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Eisenhower, Dulles, and the rest of the U.S. foreign policy elite “brought themselves to Vietnam—their ethnocentrism and parochialism, political arrogance and cultural blindness.” (263) Jacobs contends that the ideological assumptions U.S. policymakers made facilitated American activities in Vietnam “by making them seem logical and necessary” while “blinding policymakers to their consequences.” (7) The problem rested in the fact that “much of America’s ideological scaffolding in the fifties ... bore little relation to actual conditions in Southeast Asia and proved catastrophic as a guide to action.” (9)

Jacobs locates critical support for Diem in the religious renaissance that swept across the United States in the 1950s and, as he contends, fundamentally influenced the creation and implementation of administration policy in Southeast Asia. This upsurge in overt religiosity found traction with the good vs. evil dynamic of the Cold War—which Jacobs cogently notes was only the most recent and most explicit iteration of that idea in U.S. history. (60-87) The “third Great Awakening” affected more than just American culture and society; it permeated government at the highest levels. John Foster Dulles’ piety is legendary, and Secretary of Agriculture Ezra Taft Benson was a member of the leadership of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (and one of the most outspoken anticommunist conservatives in the country). And even for Eisenhower, the author suggests, religion—not democracy or capitalism—was the strongest weapon against communism.4 Yet this religious fervor “trump[ed] evidence and common sense,” and led directly to the untenable partnership between Washington and Diem. (11) The intersection of religion and foreign relations, while never a major focus of previous scholarship, is complex and fascinating as Jacobs details it, and deserves further scrutiny by historians.5

The fact that Diem’s Catholicism was such a selling point among American policymakers is curious given the reluctance of the American electorate to consider seriously a Catholic presidential candidate until 1960. What made the Catholic Diem attractive, Jacobs suggests, was the religion’s image as an ardently anti-communist faith, which stood in stark contrast to the American view of Buddhism. The shift in opinion in Washington against Diem occurred, ironically, under the watch of the South Vietnamese premier’s co-religionist, John F. Kennedy as the religious fervor of the 1950s waned during the following

4. To illustrate this point, Eisenhower presided over the first national prayer breakfast, and during his administration “under God” was added to the Pledge of Allegiance and “In God We Trust” was added to dollar bills. Indeed, in December 1952, Eisenhower asserted, “our form of government has no sense unless it is founded in a deeply felt religious faith.” Quoted in Time, 10 May 2007.

decade. Unlike Diem, who used his religion to his advantage in dealing with the United States, Kennedy faced real constraints due to his Catholicism and actively de-emphasized his faith throughout his public life. As Jacobs points out, Kennedy “went to great lengths to quell any suspicions that his judgment was colored by religious affiliation.” (270) To be sure this change in attitude surprised Diem, but the South Vietnamese leader could be forgiven for assuming that he could count on Kennedy’s support on the basis of the latter’s religion and the experience Diem had during the previous administration.

The assumptions that pervaded popular culture and the personal beliefs of U.S. policymakers were not limited to religious belief; racism also played a significant role. Eisenhower and Dulles, according to Jacobs, viewed Asians as incapable of self-rule, and considered Buddhism to be weak, anti-western, and vulnerable to Marxist influence. (48-51) Small wonder, then, that Diem’s lack of connection with his own society was actually a major factor in the administration’s decision to support him as the leader of South Vietnam. This paternalistic view of the Vietnamese people pervaded the administration’s policy in Asia and elsewhere, and this racial component of U.S. foreign policy has been recognized in numerous studies. Jacobs makes clear that “statesmen like Dulles were so fiercely anticommunist precisely because they were so religious,” and they supported Diem based on their racially-motivated assumption that the Vietnamese, “being childlike and primitive, required authoritarian government if they were to be kept out of the communist bloc.” (18)

One of the strongest aspects of the book is Jacob’s discussion of the multiple realistic alternatives to Diem within the context of U.S. domestic realities. According to the documentary record of Eisenhower administration deliberations, several candidates—including foreign affairs minister Tran Van Do and General Nguyen Van Hinh—possessed “irreproachably anticommunist” credentials and had greater political experience than Diem. (4) Indeed, as late as the Battle for Saigon, the Department of State was preparing former defense minister Phan Huy Quat as a replacement for Diem. (206-208) Particularly intriguing is the chapter on U.S. envoy General J. Lawton Collins, whose opposition to Diem nearly toppled the recently-appointed premier. Collins almost convinced Eisenhower to jettison Diem in favor of General Hinh, but his efforts were thwarted by Senator Mansfield. (201, 205) Jacobs identifies Mansfield’s consistent and vehement opposition to replacing Diem as crucial in maintaining U.S. support for the regime. The senator went so far at one point as to assert that the United States “consider an immediate suspension of all aid to Vietnam” if a viable government could not be formed around Diem. (179, 184-185). Jacobs contends that this chain of events demonstrates a “remarkable resistance to any challenge

of [the administration’s] fundamental racial and religious beliefs,” and further demonstrates the influence of domestic politics on U.S. foreign policy. (174)

As strong and convincing as the book's argument is, there are a few questions that need to be addressed. Curiously, given the focus of the book, the reader can be forgiven for asking where Diem is. Jacobs suggests that Diem understood American sentiments and used them to his advantage, supporting the idea of the pericentric nature of the Cold War which Tony Smith cogently identified in 2000. (265-266) But for the most part, this is an American-centric argument, with little Vietnamese context. Of course, not every book needs to take an international approach, but incorporating Diem's perspective would only serve to enhance the analysis. Nevertheless, Jacobs makes clear that the United States played a decisive role in placing and sustaining Diem in power, so perhaps the focus on the Eisenhower administration is understandable.

In addition, when Jacobs claims that Eisenhower, Dulles, and Mansfield “did what they did, in short, because of who they were: culturally conditioned personalities largely incapable of seeing possibilities outside the dominant ideological framework,” it comes across as rigid and deterministic. (274) One of the drawbacks of utilizing cultural factors to frame an argument is that this kind of analysis can be imprecise given the challenges of demonstrating causation. Jacobs, to his credit, recognizes the evidentiary problem he faces in using this type of analytical framework, noting that it “is impossible to connect attitudes precisely to deeds.” (13) These are minor quibbles; the weight of the evidence Jacobs presents in support of his thesis is convincing. America’s Miracle Man in Vietnam should be mandatory reading for scholars seeking to understand how the flawed Diem came to and remained in power, and should underscore the effectiveness of cultural analytical approaches in the field of U.S. foreign relations.