America’s Miracle Man in Vietnam Roundtable Review

Reviewed Work:


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If you started to explore the literature on Vietnam in the 1960s, you probably started off with some of the French scholars such as Paul Mus and Jean Lacoutre and especially the French expatriate Bernard Fall whose *Between Two Viet-Nams: A Political and Military Analysis* (1963) provided an excellent introduction. The interpretations that they presented on Ngo Dinh Diem focused on the impossibly difficult challenges that he faced in trying to build a new political order in South Vietnam. Frances FitzGerald’s *Fire in the Lake: The Vietnamese and the Americans in Vietnam* (1972) used the insights of these scholars to offer a culturally oriented assessment that depicted Diem as a reactionary looking to a mandarin past. FitzGerald described the regime that Diem built as an attenuated French colonial regime, and a doomed competitor with Ho Chi Minh’s North Vietnam. Students in the 1970s found FitzGerald’s book to be almost revealed truth whereas students in the 1980s muttered about being subjected to leftist propaganda.

Seth Jacob’s award-winning study does not revisit earlier lines of inquiry on the nature and results of Diem’s efforts to build a state in South Vietnam. Instead, as the reviewers point out, his focus is on the nature of American perceptions about Diem as he lobbied for American support after 1950, and on what shaped the views of American leaders and interested groups that lobbied for Diem in the 1950s. Individuals and groups that have been mentioned before, in studies such as Joseph Morgan’s *The Vietnam Lobby: The American Friends of Vietnam, 1955-1975*, occupy center stage. Jacob’s most original contribution, which the reviewers focus on, is his introduction of religion and race as categories of analysis that played an important role in shaping the evolving American response to Diem.

The reviewers raise the following points:

1.) Jacobs is critical of Diem’s leadership without a close examination of his policies and their impact from 1954 into 1957, although he does address this subject in more depth in his most recent study, *Cold War Mandarin: Ngo Dinh Diem and the Origins of America’s War in Vietnam* (2006). Jacobs notes consistent problems in Diem’s personal approach of “discrimination against non-Catholics, refusal to share power, and easy resort to violence to quell dissent” from 1954 until his assassination in 1963. (4) None of the reviewers challenge this assessment, but Mark Moyar’s *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954-1965* (2006), the focus of a forthcoming H-Diplo Roundtable, advances a different assessment on Diem’s leadership and policies.

2.) Jacobs’ emphasis on the importance of race and religion in shaping the American response to Diem, on Washington’s support for him through his tumultuous start in Saigon and eventual battle with the Binh Xuyen, the Vietnamese “Mafia” based in Cholon, and the religious groups, the Cao Dai and the Hoa Hao, culminating in his triumphal visit to Washington in May 1957 as the “miracle man”
of Vietnam, has stimulated reactions from the reviewers. They recognize the value of this approach and Jacobs’ success in developing the religious context with respect to the religious revival in the 1950s. Jacobs notes Eisenhower’s use of religion in his rhetoric and the centrality of religion for John Foster Dulles. In Chapter 3 Jacobs also fully develops American racial perspectives on Asia and Vietnam through analysis of movies, musicals by Rodgers and Hammerstein, books such as James Michener’s best-sellers and The Quiet American and The Ugly American, and Henry Luce’s pantheon of great Asian leaders which included Diem. While favorably noting Jacob’s emphasis, several reviewers raise questions about the difficulties in establishing causal connections between cultural factors like race and religion and specific policy decisions. Jacobs makes a spirited, reasoned response on this and all issues. “How can I argue that race and religion were the master variables impelling Washington to embrace Diem when one statesman, John Foster Dulles, employed derisive stereotypes of Asians and Buddhism to advocate sticking with the ‘Diem Experiment’ and another, J. Lawton Collins, did the same thing in pleading for Diem’s deposal?,” the author responds, noting the role of human agency in escaping ideological premises, and pointing out that Collins was an exception to the views of most Americans.

3.) A number of the reviewers recognize the value of Jacobs’ cultural orientation, but they prefer to give more weight to more traditional Cold War concerns in shaping the decisions of Eisenhower and Dulles to replace the French in Vietnam after the Geneva Conference, to back Diem as the head of the new government in Saigon, to stick with Diem against the repeated recommendations of their special envoy to Vietnam in 1954-55, J. Lawton Collins, and to support Diem through the end of the decade. The containment policy required a strong leader in Saigon to pull off the nearly impossible feat of undermining the supporters of Ho Chi Minh in South Vietnam as well as preventing the spread of Ho’s communist regime in the North. As Senator Mike Mansfield, a key supporter of Diem, pointed out to Washington several times in the 1954 Saigon crisis, U.S. credibility and prestige was associated with Diem and should not be lost.

4.) The reviewers also question Jacobs somewhat on whether or not Diem was a U.S. puppet as opposed to retaining significant agency vis-à-vis Washington. Diem, for example, launched a lobbying campaign, with Bao Dai in Washington from 1950-53, and in South Vietnam, and continued to exhibit agency with respect to the United States and American officials in Vietnam throughout his regime. Jacobs responds with a cogent defense of his assertion that the Diem regime was an American creation and in the final analysis, Diem depended on American financial, military, and diplomatic support.

—Tom Maddux