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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A friend and I recently discussed the merits of what is commonly known as the “international” approach to the study of the Vietnam War. We both welcomed the growing willingness of historians to conduct research in archives located outside the United States. We also agreed that the exploitation of collections in Europe, China and Vietnam will help to correct some of the analytical problems associated with the “American-centric” scholarship on the war. However, my friend took issue with my suggestion that those scholars who continue to depend mainly or exclusively on American sources were showing a curmudgeonly reluctance to change with the times. In fact, he observed, not all of the many problems in Vietnam War history are susceptible to multiarchival solutions. Those who proclaim international history to be “the one and only worthy approach” are “off base,” he admonished me. “It depends on the topic.”

My friend was right, of course. Understanding the origins and outcome of the Vietnam War depends in part on understanding the intervention of the United States in Vietnam. So long as scholars continue to disagree about the causes and consequences of that intervention, questions about American motives, beliefs, and experiences will remain historiographically pertinent. It stands to reason, moreover, that the scholars who seek answers to these questions will continue to rely on U.S. archives and other American sources. There is no reason that such “American-centric” research agendas cannot contribute to the broader internationalization of the study of the war, provided that the scholars who pursue such agendas are willing to seek out the intersections between their work and that of their counterparts working in other languages and archives.

It is from this perspective that Seth Jacob’s America’s Miracle Man in Vietnam: Ngo Dinh...
Diem, Religion, Race and U.S. Intervention in Southeast Asia, 1950-1957 is best evaluated. Jacobs’ title is somewhat misleading; in fact, this is not really a book about Ngo Dinh Diem. Rather, it is a book about American cultural proclivities, and about how these proclivities influenced US decisions on Vietnam during the mid-1950s. The main goal of the book is to explain why US leaders eventually came to embrace Diem as the “miracle man of Southeast Asia.” This does not mean, however, that Diem himself features prominently in the text. Indeed, he is all but absent from key parts of Jacobs’ narrative. (In Chapters Two, Three, and Four, Diem is mentioned only a handful of times, and then only in passing.) The starring roles in Jacobs’ drama go not to Diem or other Vietnamese actors but to Americans and their culturally defined beliefs and assumptions. Given these casting choices, it is not surprising that Jacobs bases his argument almost exclusively on American sources. When seeking to explain U.S. foreign policy decisions by reference to American culture, historians naturally depend on sources in which American cultural currents are most readily discernible. For Jacobs, these sources include not only the government documents held in U.S. archives but also American novels, popular magazine articles, films, and even Broadway musicals. Such an “American-centric” methodology is entirely consistent with Jacobs’ argument, and the argument itself is entirely plausible. But is it persuasive? Were U.S. decisions on Vietnam really determined by culture? The answer hinges on Jacobs’ ability to establish causal linkages between particular cultural phenomena and particular U.S. policy decisions.

Unlike many of the other historians who have sought to explain foreign policies by reference to culture, Jacobs is commendably clear in identifying the two cultural causes he believes shaped U.S. policy on Vietnam: religious chauvinism and racism. For Jacobs, America in the 1950s was in the midst of its “Third Great Awakening,” a period in which church membership soared and Christian religious piety flourished. American Catholicism thrived even more than other denominations, according to Jacobs, because Catholic leaders such as Francis Cardinal Spellman found that they could capitalize on the popular association of their faith with ardent anticommunism. Against such a backdrop, Jacobs concludes, Diem’s identity as a Catholic made him all but irresistible to American leaders such as John Foster Dulles. Somewhat paradoxically, Jacobs argues that American policymakers’ affinity for Diem was further reinforced by their racist notions about “childlike” Asian people. Normally, of course, one might expect racial bias to undermine interracial Christian solidarity; but in Diem’s case, Jacobs asserts, the two prejudices worked together. It was precisely because Americans viewed Vietnam as a nation of dangerously immature and backwards Asians that they preferred to have a Christian at its helm. Jacobs’ argument thus boils down to an admirably simple proposition: American policymakers decided to back Diem’s government after 1954 because they were racist and because he was Catholic.
In my view, there are three significant problems with this argument. The first of these has to do with a failure to address the possibility that American decisions might have been influenced by Vietnamese actors. More specifically, Jacobs dismisses the possibility that Diem himself might have played a role in securing U.S. support for his government—or indeed that Diem might have exercised any independence at all in his dealings with Washington. Jacobs is not the first scholar to discount Diem’s agency in this way, but his is the most blatant recent example of this practice. When Diem was in power, his Communist critics referred to his government as My-Diem, or “America-Diem,” an epithet which derided him as an American puppet. In the decades following Diem’s death in 1963, the puppet thesis mostly lost its currency among historians—and for good reasons. The circumstances surrounding Diem’s death hardly seemed compatible with the idea that he was a puppet of the United States, since Washington had backed his ouster. The puppet thesis was further undermined by the release of extensive documentary evidence showing that Diem rejected American advice early and often after he attained power. Recent scholarship by Philip Catton, Jessica Chapman, and others has confirmed that Diem, whatever his other failings may have been, was no American stooge.¹ Yet Jacobs still insists on deploying the puppet caricature: “From the beginning, Diem’s government was an American creation … Those Vietnamese who disparaged the Diem regime as ‘My-Diem’—‘American-Diem’[sic]—were more insightful than they could have known” (26).

Jacobs’ determination to see Diem as a creature of American policy is most obviously apparent in his account of Diem’s elevation to the South Vietnamese premiership in the spring of 1954. Diem was appointed to the post by the former Vietnamese emperor Bao Dai. Jacobs is certain that Secretary Dulles engineered this appointment on Diem’s behalf—so certain, in fact, that he does not feel it necessary to provide any evidence to back up his claim. It is “unduly equivocal,” Jacobs complains, for historians to get hung up on “the absence of a ‘smoking gun’ linking the Eisenhower administration to Bao Dai’s decision. Jacobs candidly acknowledges that the part played by Dulles in the appointment is “difficult to determine”; yet somehow he is convinced that the Secretary’s role “was certainly important and possibly decisive.” Jacobs is unperturbed by the fact that the U.S. memorandum of a key meeting between Dulles and Bao Dai makes no mention of Diem. This omission is unimportant, Jacobs avers, because “there may have been other contacts between the secretary and the emperor [sic] through clandestine channels” (52-56). Jacobs thus uses conjecture and innuendo to reduce Diem to playing only a bit part in his own rise to power.

Contrary to what Jacobs suggests, there is actually a great deal of evidence which shows that it was Diem, not the Americans, who engineered his own appointment in 1954. As I have shown elsewhere, Diem began lobbying Bao Dai for the premiership in the spring of 1953, a full year before the alleged American conspiracy on his behalf is supposed to have been hatched. These lobbying efforts bore fruit as early as October 1953, when Diem met with Bao Dai in France to discuss his possible appointment. Moreover, Diem coordinated his appeals to the ex-emperor with a political campaign mounted by his brother Ngo Dinh Nhu, who had remained behind in Indochina during Diem’s exile and who was building support for Diem among anti-Communist nationalist groups.²

Of course, that Jacobs errs in discounting Diem’s agency in his elevation to the premiership does not necessarily invalidate the main argument advanced in America’s Miracle Man. Again, Jacobs’ main contention is that the Eisenhower administration’s decision to render strong support to Diem was determined by racial and religious bias. It is still possible that such a causal link existed, even if the Americans did not put Diem into power in the first place. But it is here that the second problem with Jacobs’ argument appears: the evidence he provides shows that American culture worked against Diem at least as frequently as it worked in his favor. At the same time that some officials were invoking race and religion to argue for stronger American backing for Diem, other Americans were deploying the same concepts to make a case for abandoning the Vietnamese leader.

This problem is most glaringly apparent in Jacobs’ discussion of events leading up to the climactic Battle of Saigon in the spring of 1955 (Chapter Five). The hero of this part of the book is J. Lawton Collins, who served as Eisenhower’s special envoy to South Vietnam during 1954-1955. As Jacobs shows, Collins concluded in the months after his arrival that Diem was unworthy of further American support and ought to be removed from power. Jacobs further demonstrates that Collins overcame the arguments of pro-Diem U.S. officials and successfully (if only briefly) persuaded Eisenhower to withdraw American support from the South Vietnamese leader in April 1955. For Jacobs, therefore, Collins is the shining exception that proves the rule of “the power of ideological mind-lock, of policymakers’ remarkable resistance to any challenge of their fundamental racial and religious beliefs” (174). But Collins was anything but immune to such beliefs. On the contrary, the envoy was at least as racist as his pro-Diem colleagues were, and he readily deployed racist cant when making the case against continued support for Diem. As Jacobs acknowledges, Collins displayed “an ignorance of and derogative attitude toward the Vietnamese” that was “typical of the generation of American policymakers” who led the United States into Vietnam (173). Collins also “felt no qualms about westerners taking

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charge of South Vietnam's government and dictating terms to its chief of state” (181), nor did he hesitate to invoke “long-standing American notions about Asian immaturity” when explaining Vietnamese resistance to his advice (195). The contradiction between Jacobs' argument and his evidence is most clearly laid bare in his account of an argument between Collins and Dulles. When Dulles made “an explicitly racist appeal” for keeping Diem, Collins responded “by using Dulles's own racist preconceptions to shore up the case for [Diem's] removal” (200). If racism was used to support both of two opposite policy choices, how can it be that racism was the motive for one and not the other?

My last complaint about America's Miracle Man has to do with the chronological scope of the book. Viewed from one angle, Jacobs' decision to end his account in 1957 is understandable. After all, Diem's state visit to the United States in May of that year—during which he was hailed by Eisenhower as a hero, invited to address a joint session of Congress, and given a ticker tape parade on Broadway—was undoubtedly the high point of his long relationship with Washington. Since Jacobs is concerned with the origins of the United States-Diem alliance, halting the narrative at such an effusive moment makes a certain amount of sense. However, this decision also allows Jacobs to escape having to account for the subsequent decline of relations between the United States and Diem governments. Ultimately, of course, Eisenhower's 1955 decision to provide strong U.S. backing for Diem would be undone in 1963 by John Kennedy. If we accept Jacobs' contention that Eisenhower's choice was more or less foreordained by racism and religious bigotry, Kennedy's appears to be rather difficult to explain. Are we really to believe that American leaders were less racist in 1963 than their predecessors had been in 1955? That Henry Cabot Lodge, the notoriously imperious U.S. ambassador who spearheaded the American efforts to oust Diem in 1963, had somehow transcended the “ideological mindlock” of race and religion that had gripped Dulles? And how do we square the supposedly irresistible appeal of Diem's Catholicism in 1955 with Kennedy's ability to set religious solidarity aside and endorse the removal of his fellow Catholic in 1963? In his conclusion, Jacobs briefly discusses the events surrounding Diem's fall, but his treatment of this period is far from persuasive. For example, he explains Kennedy's acquiescence in the coup against Diem with the declaration that "America ... had cast off much of the fervent religiosity of the 1950s” (270)—an assertion that seems far too convenient, if not disingenuous, given the staggeringly heavy casual weight ascribed to religion in the preceding pages.

None of these criticisms are offered by way of suggesting that American ideas about race and religion did not affect American policy in Vietnam during the Diem years. On the contrary, there is plenty of evidence in this book and others that such ideas did influence American assumptions and actions. However, this influence was neither as decisive nor as unambiguous as Jacobs makes it out to be. As discursive constructions, ideas about race
and religion are invariably unstable, contested, and susceptible to redefinition. If it is not true that such ideas can be anything that people want them to be, it seems indisputable that they can be different things to different people. American thinking about race and religion in the 1950s was neither monolithic nor internally consistent during the 1950s, and Americans could and did arrive at varying conclusions about Vietnam and Ngo Dinh Diem, depending on the particular set of ideological lenses through which they viewed the country and the man. Moreover, Diem himself profoundly affected the decisions that Washington made about him and his government, both by his words and by his deeds. Race and religion did indeed figure in America’s dealings with the “Miracle Man of Southeast Asia,” but their impact was far more contingent and qualified than this book allows.