

America's Miracle Man in Vietnam Roundtable Review



Reviewed Work:

Seth Jacobs. *America's Miracle Man in Vietnam: Ngo Dinh Diem, Religion, Race, and U.S. Intervention in Southeast Asia.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004. ISBN 0-8223-3429-1 (cloth); 0-8223-3440-2.

Roundtable Editor: Thomas Maddux

Reviewers: James Carter, Andrew Johns, Edward Miller, Joseph G. Morgan.

Stable URL: <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/roundtables/PDF/AmericasMiracleMan-Morgan.pdf>

Your use of this H-Diplo roundtable review indicates your acceptance of the H-Diplo and H-Net copyright policies, and terms of condition and use.

The following is a plain language summary of these policies:

You may redistribute and reprint this work under the following conditions:

- Attribution:** You must include full and accurate attribution to the author(s), web location, date of publication, H-Diplo, and H-Net: Humanities and Social Sciences Online.
 - Nonprofit and education purposes only.** You may not use this work for commercial purposes.
 - For any reuse or distribution, you must make clear to others the license terms of this work.
 - Any of these conditions may be waived if you obtain permission from the copyright holder. For such queries, contact the H-Diplo editorial staff at h-diplo@h-net.msu.edu.
-

H-Diplo is an international discussion network dedicated to the study of diplomatic and international history (including the history of foreign relations). For more information regarding H-Diplo, please visit <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/>.

For further information about our parent organization, H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online, please visit <http://www.h-net.org/>.

Copyright © 2007 by H-Diplo, a part of H-Net. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For other uses contact the H-Diplo editorial staff at h-diplo@h-net.msu.edu.

12 June 2007

Review by Joseph G. Morgan, Iona College

In *America's Miracle Man in Vietnam*, Seth Jacobs examines the assumptions that led to America's willingness to back the government of Ngo Dinh Diem in the 1950s. Jacobs agrees with many historians that the virulent anticommunist sentiments that gripped U.S. official circles and American public opinion in the early Cold War played a major role in leading to the decision to support the militantly anticommunist Diem. He nevertheless claims that the religious and racial prejudices of American policymakers, religious leaders, journalists, and even filmmakers and playwrights helped lay the groundwork for the Eisenhower administration's willingness to commit the country's resources to the survival of the Diem regime. "America's experiment with Diem," Jacobs argues, "rested on an ideological tripod" of anticommunism, religion, and race (19).

The opening chapters of Jacobs' book outline Diem's successful efforts to create a network of influential supporters in the United States in the context of the religious and cultural milieu that predisposed a number of American citizens to back Diem's campaign for high office. Diem's record as an anticommunist and anti-French nationalist, Jacobs notes, presented Americans with an opportunity to remain "true to the frequently conflicting American creeds of anticommunism and anticolonialism" (33). His Catholicism was also seen as an asset at a time when the United States "experienced a remarkable surge of religious interest inextricably bound up with the "anxieties and imperatives of the cold war" (61). Diem's American adherents believed that the Vietnamese leader's religious faith would make him impervious to any blandishments offered by the communists. They also tolerated Diem's autocratic behavior and authoritarian policies because many of them regarded Asia as "an ignorant, heathen place, peopled, figuratively and literally, by children" (96).

Joseph G. Morgan is an Associate Professor of History at Iona College. He obtained his B.A. in History at Iona College, 1975; M.A. in History at Manhattan College, 1981; and Ph.D. in History at Georgetown University in 1993. His publications include *The Vietnam Lobby: The American Friends of Vietnam, 1955-1975* (University of North Carolina Press, 1997); "Wesley Fishel and Vietnam: 'A Special Kind of Friend.'" In David L. Anderson, ed. *The Human Tradition in America Since 1945* (Scholarly Resources Press, 2003); and "A Change of Course: American Catholics, Anticommunism, and the Vietnam War," in *U.S. Catholic Historian*, Fall 2004. Professor Morgan's current research is on a study of Dr. Wesley Fishel's career as a government adviser and academic expert about Vietnam.

In the latter half of *America's Miracle Man in Vietnam*, Jacobs presents three case studies to substantiate his arguments: the exodus of nearly one million, largely Catholic, refugees from northern Vietnam; the mission of General J. Lawton Collins to Vietnam from 1954-1955; and the lionization of Diem by his network of American supporters—the "Vietnam Lobby." When discussing each of these episodes, Jacobs not only reviews the events that took place, but examines the religious and racial assumptions that shaped American responses to these events. He concludes that although developments in Vietnam, especially Collins's disputes with Diem,

12 June 2007

sometimes shook American confidence in the Vietnamese leader, the prejudices of American policymakers and Diem's backers "predisposed them to interpret developments in Vietnam in such a manner as to rule out abandonment of their ill-starred surrogate" (274).

America's Miracle Man in Vietnam is a highly readable book that is accessible to a general readership as well as specialists in diplomatic and cultural history. Its author uses a wide variety of American sources in making his arguments. The manuscript collections of most of the principal figures discussed in the book are cited as well as U.S. government records of the 1950s. Jacobs frequently uses contemporary books, articles, and movies and television programs that reflected American beliefs and prejudices to make his points. His book also reflects a fine knowledge of the principal diplomatic and cultural histories of the Fifties.

The principal merit of *America's Miracle Man in Vietnam* is that it directly addresses the issue of how American religious and racial beliefs and prejudices shaped American policy in Vietnam. The works of James T. Fisher, especially *Dr. America: The Lives of Thomas A. Dooley, 1927-1961*, have devoted considerable attention to the influence of religion in the early stages of America's involvement, but they have focused on Roman Catholicism. Jacobs looks at a broader framework by discussing the importance of Protestant revivalism and the faith of Protestant leaders such as President Dwight D. Eisenhower and Secretary of State John Foster Dulles. Jacobs' study of American racial prejudices in *America's Miracle Man in Vietnam* also complements, to some extent, Mark Philip Bradley's study of earlier American preconceptions of Vietnam in *Imagining Vietnam and America: The Making of Postcolonial Vietnam, 1919-1950* although Bradley, unlike Jacobs, also discusses Vietnamese attitudes towards America.

In his book, Jacobs gives proper attention to a number of the principal figures involved in setting Vietnam policy and to the racial and religious ideas that influenced their approach to Vietnam. The views of some of these individuals, especially those of Eisenhower and Dulles, have been discussed in many other accounts and James Fisher's work has done much to analyze the thoughts of Tom Dooley. Jacobs' coverage of these men reflects familiarity with the literature concerning their views. Moreover, Jacobs provides a good analysis of the preconceptions of other decision-makers, especially Senator Mike Mansfield and General Collins. He also correctly gives attention to the importance of Lieutenant General John W. O'Daniel in setting policy for the American Friends of Vietnam (AFV)—the formal organization for the Vietnam lobby.

There are some matters in the book that needed factual correction or could have been discussed more fully. One concerns an important meeting that Supreme Court Justice William Douglas arranged between Diem and some interested Americans, including Senators Mansfield and John F. Kennedy, in May 1953. The book states that Francis Cardinal Spellman and Representative Clement Zablocki also attended the gathering. Both the cardinal and the Congressman were enthusiastic supporters of Diem, but contemporary records of the event, a State Department

America's Miracle Man in Vietnam Roundtable

12 June 2007

memorandum and letters that Douglas wrote to Diem, do not list either man as a guest. An ecclesiastic did come to the meeting, but this was Bishop D. Hoang Van Doan, the bishop of Bac Ninh in northern Vietnam.¹

Another issue discussed in the book deals with the circumstances of Norman Thomas's departure from the American Friends of Vietnam. Jacobs correctly describes Thomas's concerns about reports of human rights abuses by the Diem regime, but the incident that he focuses on, the threatened execution of Binh Xuyen commandos in the fall of 1957, had more political ramifications than a simple desire to keep Thomas in the AFV. The death sentences excited more AFV members than Thomas because one of the condemned prisoners was not a Binh Xuyen commando, but a Vietnamese Trotskyist—Ho Huu Tuong. Several AFV members, especially Joseph Buttinger, Sol Sanders, and Harold Oram, had been involved in socialist politics since the Thirties and objected strongly to the execution of an anticommunist activist like Tuong. Sanders personally warned Diem of a “dangerous reaction” on the part of the “friends [of] your country” in the event of Tuong's execution.² In the end, Diem commuted the sentences of Tuong and his co-defendants to terms of imprisonment and none of the AFV's socialist members quit the organization. Thomas still expressed uneasiness about Diem's repressive policies, but remained a member of the AFV until early 1958 when the association announced its sponsorship of a conference concerning foreign investment in Vietnam—an event that Thomas regarded as a blatant promotion of capitalism.

A topic that the book could have addressed is the patronizing attitudes the Americans held towards Diem himself. Jacobs writes that Diem “retained a privileged status as the Miracle Man,” but at times the Americans referred to South Vietnam's president in the same condescending terms that they applied to his compatriots. This becomes evident in the use of the word “little” when referring to Diem. Even Diem's admirers wrote editorials or articles with titles like “Little Mr. Diem” or the “Biggest Little Man in Asia” or referred to the Vietnamese leader as the “doughty little man from South Vietnam.”³ General Collins, one of Diem's critics, also used this language by stating that he regarded Diem as a “fine little man” despite the bitter disputes that erupted

¹ Letters, William O. Douglas to Ngo Dinh Diem, May 2 and 8, 1953, Box 1716, William O. Douglas Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress; Memorandum of Conversation, May 8, 1953, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1952-1954*, 13: *Indochina*, 553-54; and Edward G. Miller, “Vision, Power, and Agency,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 35:3 (October 2004), 446, n. 41.

² Telegram, Sol Sanders to Diem, 12 September, 1957, Reel 33, Norman Thomas Papers, Manuscript Division, New York Public Library.

³ “Little Mr. Diem,” *The Reporter*, 2 December 1954, 4; O.K. Armstrong, “Biggest Little Man in Asia,” *Reader's Digest* 68 (February 1956): 144-48; and “Diem's Visit,” *America*, 18 May 1957, 218.

12 June 2007

between the two men.⁴ These comments about Diem suggest that Americans saw him not so much as a Cold War partner, but as a bright pupil who could be trusted to carry out American policy in Vietnam.

Diem, however, proved to be a less cooperative protégé than anticipated and this brings up another reason why so many Americans committed themselves to the “Diem experiment”—the belief that Ngo Dinh Diem could create a viable anticommunist state. Jacobs persuasively argues that the anticommunist convictions and religious and racial prejudices of the Americans played a powerful role in predisposing them to back Diem, but their willingness to support him also rested on their belief that he could form a government that could effectively resist communist efforts to control what became South Vietnam. Eisenhower and Dulles came close to replacing Diem after Collins repeatedly told Washington that Diem was not an effective leader and they only gave him their full support after he defeated the Binh Xuyen in May 1955. The Eisenhower administration did not reconsider its adherence to Diem for the remainder of the Fifties, but reports from the U.S. embassy, especially those written by Ambassador Elbridge Durbrow, throughout this period reflected uneasiness over the policies that Diem was pursuing in consolidating his power. By the early Sixties, many of the leaders of the AFV had lost confidence in Diem’s ability to prevent a communist victory in Vietnam and the Kennedy administration reached the same conclusion when Diem clumsily and brutally tried to suppress Buddhist protests in 1963. As Philip Catton notes in *Diem’s Final Failure*, “Diem’s inability to knit together a strong state in South Vietnam precipitated the breakdown of relations between Saigon and Washington.”⁵ The desire for a Vietnamese regime that could effectively block a communist victory seemed to play as strong a role in influencing U.S. policy as the anticommunist, religious, and racial preconceptions of the Americans. If Vietnamese leaders failed to meet this expectation, as Diem found out at the cost of his life, they quickly lost the backing of the United States.

Despite the concerns raised in the above paragraphs, *America’s Miracle Man in Vietnam* provides a thought-provoking, and disturbing, analysis of how religious and racial prejudices have shaped American foreign policy. Moreover, Seth Jacobs has performed a valuable service in presenting new arguments for debating the reasons for America’s fateful commitment to Ngo Dinh Diem.

⁴ Cited in David L. Anderson, *Trapped By Success: The Eisenhower Administration and Vietnam, 1953-1961* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 118.

⁵ Philip E. Catton, *Diem’s Final Failure: Prelude to America’s War in Vietnam* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2002), 3.