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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Introduction by Thomas Maddux, California State University, Northridge

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
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 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 dannish. 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. 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

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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 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

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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.6 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, 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.

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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.2

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. 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

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.

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 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

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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 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.

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.

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 anti-communist 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.”

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. 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. 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. 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. 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.

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. 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

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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.
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. Jacob’s 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...
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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
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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. 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.


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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 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 staggering 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.
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).

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, 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 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 anticomunist 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 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.


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


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.” 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.

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One of the advantages to conducting a roundtable like this long past a monograph’s publication date is that the author will have achieved some distance, temporal and emotional, from his or her work. Ideally at least, he or she will be more receptive to criticism than might have been the case in the heady days after the book left the bindery. I am sure that if James Carter, Andrew Johns, Edward Miller, and Joseph G. Morgan had offered their thoughtful and incisive assessments of America’s Miracle Man in late 2004 my response would have been defensive and even cranky. At a remove of nearly three years, and with another book on Ngo Dinh Diem published in the interval, I find myself frequently nodding in chagrined agreement as I read my colleagues’ reviews.

To begin with the most embarrassing—because they are so manifestly accurate—criticisms: Morgan is correct to point out that Francis Cardinal Spellman and Representative Clement Zablocki were absent from the pivotal 7 May 1953 luncheon where Diem made the acquaintance of Senator Mike Mansfield. I stand by my characterization of that meeting as “one of the most fateful encounters of the postwar era” (43)—Mansfield was, after all, instrumental in keeping Diem in office during the subsequent Battle for Saigon—but Spellman and Zablocki did not attend. Miller is likewise on target in his observation that Bao Dai was no longer Vietnam’s emperor in 1954, having presented the imperial sword and sash to representatives of the Viet Minh almost a decade earlier and formally abdicated; when he

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returned to power in 1949 at Paris’s behest, it was as “chief of state,” even though Washington officials and the American media still referred to him as “emperor.” I’ll confess another mortifying gaffe, unnoticed by the reviewers but caught by one of my graduate students: in my list of nonwhite television stars of the 1950s, I lumped “Ricky Ricardo” together with Ossie Davis and Sidney Poitier (104). Davis and Poitier were, of course, real people, while Ricky Ricardo was a fictional character on the *I Love Lucy* Show. My apologies to Desi Arnaz.²

Johns raises a more profound and troubling issue. Characteristically, he does so in the gentlest way, at the end of a generous review, when he notes that “the reader can be forgiven for asking where Diem is.” Miller is more strident on this point. Indeed, it forms the gravamen of his commentary. Diem, he declares, “is all but absent from key parts of Jacobs’ narrative.” Miller objects to my “casting choices,” which do not allow “Vietnamese actors” to enjoy top billing. Even Diem is permitted to play “only a bit part” while the “starring roles” in the “drama” go to Mansfield, Spellman, Dwight Eisenhower, John Foster Dulles, Thomas Dooley, Joseph Buttinger, and those other Americans who saw in Diem the ideal mix of anticommunism and anticolonialism and who used their influence both to elevate him to South Vietnam’s highest office and keep him there for nine years. (Because I like theatrical terminology, and because I recently reread the *Eumenides* to help my eldest daughter prepare for a class presentation, I’ll press Miller’s simile further and designate J. Lawton Collins the Greek Chorus of my tragedy: prophetic, empathetic, interacting intermittently with the other characters onstage, but ultimately unable to thwart the workings of fate.) I concede the accuracy of Miller’s claim that my approach to the so-called “Diem experiment” is “American-centric.” All of the archives I draw upon are in the United States; every one of my scholarly, journalistic, and pop-culture sources is in English; and I neither speak nor read Vietnamese. If ever a book deserved the label “American-centric,” mine does.

Is this a weakness? It certainly would be if I had set out to write a biography of Diem or an account of Vietnamese political and social movements in the early Cold War era. But I did not undertake any such project. (I am sure Miller will agree that I lack the language skills to do so.) This is a book about American ideology and how it influenced policy decisions, how it condensed a complex, baffling geopolitical challenge into an easily understood formula and thereby enabled statesmen like Eisenhower and Dulles to craft policy in the belief that they knew what they were doing. My subject is not Diem himself but the manner in which he and his country were perceived in the United States. That is why I titled the book *America’s Miracle Man in Vietnam* and why chapter three bears the subtitle “America’s ‘Asia’ at Midcentury.” Note that “Asia” is in quotations: most Asian countries in the Eisenhower years, including Vietnam, were a blank slate experientially for all but a few Americans. Yet, as Harold Isaacs so brilliantly demonstrates in *Scratches on Our Minds*, Americans had a number of “ideas, notions, and images . . . in their heads” about Asia, and these made up the universe within which U.S. government officials weighed options and

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² This slip-up was corrected when *America’s Miracle Man* went into its second printing.
I endeavor to show how American ideas, notions, and images—specifically racist and religious ones—led policymakers to conclude that Diem was the perfect viceroy to prevent South Vietnam’s absorption by the red empire. I also try to explain why these long-implanted biases enabled Washington officials to ignore or reject the accumulating evidence that their policy was not working.

Does such a methodology perpetuate what Miller calls “the puppet thesis”? Do I “discount Diem’s agency” and lay aside the “possibility that American decisions might have been influenced by Vietnamese actors”? This charge is a bit overstated. I give Diem credit for being an effective networker: “[L]ike most politicians, he cultivated the support of influential patrons by seeking out their company and telling them what they wanted to hear” (25). Diem was shrewd enough to understand that American cold warriors came in different stripes and responded to different overtures; thus he emphasized his devoutness when lobbying conservative Catholics like Spellman and played the “third force” card to great effect with liberals like Kennedy, Mansfield, and Buttinger. More important, Diem had the perspicacity to build a power base in the United States. While other anticommunist Vietnamese like Phan Huy Quat, Tran Van Huu, and Nguyen Van Tam conducted their campaigns for the premiership either in their native land or with Bao Dai on the French Riviera, Diem concentrated for the most part on winning over American government officials and influential private citizens. He recognized that Washington, not Paris or Saigon, would have the final say in determining who occupied the Norodom Palace. Granted, I could have devoted more space to this subject—I compensate in my second Diem book—but America’s Miracle Man does not portray Diem as a puppet.

That said, it is true that I consider the “Diem experiment” essentially America-driven and that I would not change a word of the statement Miller finds so offensive: i.e. “From the beginning, Diem’s government was an American creation” (26). This does not mean that I subscribe to a fantasy of American omnipotence or that I view the world beyond the United States as pliable and helpless, its destiny determined by verdicts arrived at in Washington. I simply acknowledge power realities. At the time of Diem’s investiture as South Vietnamese premier, America was the wealthiest and strongest country in history, projecting its influence into every time zone and inhabited latitude. Its economy was the engine of global growth. Its military was mightiest on earth by every index available, except for that of men in arms. The Eisenhower era marked the high tide of American hegemony. By contrast, South Vietnam barely existed in 1954. Created by the Geneva conferees as a temporary political convenience with a two-year expiration date, it lacked almost all of the criteria of nationhood. A bewildering variety of ethnic, religious, economic, and political groups competed for control in Saigon and the provinces. Much of the arable land lay fallow. Transportation and communications systems were in disrepair. French businessmen, consumers, and capital fled the country, plunging it into economic

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free-fall. Once the Geneva-imposed ceasefire took effect, the Vietnamese National Army disintegrated. Politically, economically, and militarily, South Vietnam was about as weak as a nation could get, and the one factor keeping it afloat was Washington’s determination to deny it to the communists. Meanwhile, Ngo Dinh Diem, alone among anticommunist Vietnamese politicians, had worked tirelessly to ingratiate himself with the right people in the United States, telling Americans from Georgetown to Manhattan to East Lansing that only a leader like himself who had not collaborated with either the communists or the French could keep South Vietnam from retreating behind the iron curtain. Given the strategic importance that Eisenhower, Dulles, and other elite statesmen assigned South Vietnam, and in view of that nation’s utter dependence upon America for its existence, I would argue that the least controversial, most self-evident statement in my book is my assertion that “Diem never would have been named premier had he not been Washington’s candidate” (53).

Still, it may be objected, any account of a major policymaking initiative that restricts itself to American sources will inevitably present a skewed picture of the environment in which key decisions were reached. Doesn’t thorough understanding of U.S. foreign policy require language skills and archival research in the country being engaged? Isn’t Johns right to contend that incorporating South Vietnamese perspectives “would only serve to enhance the analysis”? Not necessarily. Diplomatic historians have celebrated the trend toward utilizing multiarchival research to place national policy in a larger regional or global context, but there are pitfalls to such an approach. Fredrik Logevall identifies one in his prizewinning (and multiarchival) analysis of Lyndon Johnson’s Vietnam policy, noting that the historian’s excitement at having discovered new primary sources in a foreign archive may lead him or her to place too great an emphasis on those materials. “An international history of the war . . . that made Washington just one of several major players,” Logevall contends, “would run the danger of distorting history by giving greater influence to some of them than they in fact deserve.”  

This, I submit, is the trap into which Miller and other young historians—Jessica Chapman and Philip Catton come most readily to mind—have fallen: in their zeal to revise the record by incorporating South Vietnamese voices, they have lost sight of the fact that Washington ultimately held the purse strings and the whip hand. Miller makes a valuable contribution to Vietnam War scholarship by documenting how Diem mobilized support among non-communist Vietnamese in the early 1950s, and I admit that I was surprised to learn about such episodes as the Unity Congress and subsequent National Congress (or “October Congress”); even so, the suggestion that these tactics were more decisive than American pressure in compelling Bao Dai to offer the premiership to Diem is preposterous. Does Miller honestly believe that Diem would have become premier if the Eisenhower administration had opposed his appointment and


insisted that Bao Dai designate someone else? Or, to construe Miller’s position less extravagantly, does he think that Washington did not care much about what happened to South Vietnam after the French left, and that the Americans would have accepted whomever Bao Dai appointed, regardless of that candidate’s apparent ability or willingness to battle the communists? The first assumption is, of course, counterfactual and impossible to disprove, but I consider it highly dubious; the second is demonstrably false even for those of us who only labor in American archives.

Diem owed his elevation to high office to the United States. He moreover depended upon Washington to sustain him in that office, as became blindingly obvious in 1963 when the Kennedy administration withdrew its support and Diem’s government collapsed. To state these facts does not disempower Diem or reduce him to a “caricature.” It simply recognizes that he, like any other historical actor, operated under certain constraints, and that one of these was his neocolonial relationship with the United States, a relationship he resented—he often snubbed American advice in order to prove his independence—but one that he was never able to throw off.

Apart from the question of how much countervailing power Diem possessed in his role as America’s South Vietnamese strongman, the reviewers raise other important issues. Johns and Carter correctly note that my use of race as a category of analysis is not original. I don’t know that I would go as far as Carter in labeling this approach “fashionable,” but I am certainly not the first scholar to explore how racist beliefs rationalized and justified U.S. policy toward Vietnam. I do believe, however, that America’s Miracle Man contributes to the salutary inclination among diplomatic historians to problematize simplistic notions of American anti-Asiatic racism. There was more subtlety to Washington’s “Asia” than an unrelieved parade of TV and cinematic Orientalia—power-hungry despots, sensuous dragon ladies, helpless heathens, comical loyal servants, Confucius-quoting detectives, and the like—and policymakers never viewed Asia in monolithic terms. They may have mouthed the domino theory’s rhetoric of interchangeability, but they did not believe that one Asian nation was much the same as any other. Rather, conceptualization of Asia in the White House, State Department, Pentagon, and CIA was complex, positing a hierarchy of “good” Asian states, like South Vietnam, which had a fighting chance to escape communism’s clutches, and “bad” ones, like Laos, which might be doomed no matter what measures the United States took. In addition, while Eisenhower and the men who advised him unquestionably understood Asia in terms of stereotypical images, these images were neither static nor all-inclusive. American impressions of Asian countries changed over time, most dramatically in 1949, when communist victory in the Chinese Civil War demolished Pearl Buck-ish visions of a Christianizing and democratizing China and transformed America’s erstwhile enemy Japan into a gallant outpost of freedom. Although I think my book unpacks policymakers’ ethnocentrism in interesting and sometimes

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innovative ways, I do not claim to be a pioneer on this front. “Race” is decidedly the more conventional half of my thesis. If anyone is still reading America’s Miracle Man five years from now—if professors are still assigning it to their students—it will be because of what the book has to say about religion.

Religion, I am pleased to note, has received increasing attention from diplomatic historians, although many still consider it disreputable. (The notion that we live in a country where politics and religion do not mix is remarkably impervious to contra-indications, even among scholars.) Andrew Preston’s marvelous recent article arguing for “the enormous potential for religion within the new cultural diplomatic history” signals, I hope, that religion will soon join other broadly accepted interpretive categories like gender and race as tools for explaining what drives U.S. foreign policy. It may even merit its own chapter in the next edition of Michael Hogan and Thomas Paterson’s field-defining historiographical guide. As deployed in America’s Miracle Man, however, it fails to convince Carter, who considers it less important than Diem’s ability to “effectively wield power,” and Miller, who doubts its causal utility. Carter refers specifically to the 1955 Battle for Saigon, in which Diem crushed his Binh Xuyen rivals and persuaded Washington at “the proverbial eleventh hour” to cancel plans for his replacement. The difficulty here seems to arise from Carter thinking I’ve written something that I haven’t. At no point do I contend that Diem’s victory had nothing to do with his continued sponsorship by the Eisenhower administration; in fact, I devote an entire chapter to the Battle for Saigon precisely because of its significance in enabling Diem to stave off dismissal. My argument is that the battle was “irrelevant to America’s goal of containing communism in Southeast Asia” (173). The Binh Xuyen were not communists, after all, and Ho Chi Minh could hardly fail to have been delighted by the spectacle of Diem laying waste to his own capital because of an inability to compromise with powerful anticommunist factions. Likewise, Diem’s persecution of the incontestably anticommunist religious sects Cao Dai and Hoa Hao hamstrung his, and America’s, future attempts to knit together a strong, unified state capable of resisting the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong. Yes, Diem did win the take-no-prisoners shootout that tore Saigon apart in the spring of 1955, but it was an unnecessary, avoidable, and ultimately self-defeating triumph whose significance lay not in what it revealed about Diem’s prestige in South Vietnam but, rather, in how it was refracted through the American press and seized upon by the Eisenhower administration to justify prolonging a disastrous U.S. foreign policy.


Miller's objection is more far-reaching, and I suspect that I will not be able to respond in a manner that will satisfy him. He claims that I fail to “establish causal linkages between particular cultural phenomena and particular U.S. policy decisions.” He points out, correctly, that “ideas about race and religion are invariably unstable, contested, and subject to redefinition,” which presents a serious methodological obstacle for any historian attempting to link cause and effect. 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? I have two replies to this challenge, both, I fear, insufficient. First, as I note in my introduction, ideology is not totalizing and does not prohibit agency. The very internal contradictions that Miller identifies enable some people to negotiate and subvert ideological premises, even though they cannot escape ideology altogether. In fact, I single out Collins as one of those people: “[H]e managed to bend the terms of hegemonic ideological notions about ‘the Orient’ and ‘non-Western faiths’ to argue against America’s investment in Diem” (20). Collins, however, was one of the very few to display such resourcefulness; the vast majority of geopoliticians, press lords, pundits, and academics in Eisenhower’s America thought the way Dulles did. Miller is right to assert that racist and religious ideas “can be different things to different people,” but for the greater part of Diem’s tenure in office they were effectively the same thing to those Americans responsible for crafting Washington’s policy toward Vietnam.

Second, I think that Miller has detected an unavoidable feature of cultural and social history, one that Robert Buzzanco famously lambasted in his “Where’s the Beef?” article and that I am sure will come in for greater denunciation as more and more diplomatic historians take the cultural turn.10 When dealing with ideas, values, feelings, perceptions, predispositions and all of the other factors that are essential to the unfolding of American foreign policy but that nonetheless fall outside the bounds of rationally maximizing economics or balance-of-power strategy, it is not possible to pinpoint causation with the precision that Marxists or structuralists would like. This is just the nature of the beast. It should not lead us to conclude that race, religion, gender, etc. have no causal force (common sense cries out against such an inference), or that they are wholly dependent on the operation of firmer processes like class struggle or the security dilemma. It should inspire us to more explicit formal systematization and greater methodological rigor. The best recent work in diplomatic history applying modes of analysis borrowed from other disciplines and fields—Paul Kramer with race, Robert Dean with gender, Andrew Rotter with religion—acknowledge the internally contradictory nature of their subjects but manage, through inventiveness and sophistication, and often by drawing upon the kind of evidence more conservative scholars find reliable, to show a persuasive correspondence

between cultural constructs and diplomatic events. I attempt to do the same in America’s Miracle Man. Whether I succeed or not depends upon the reader.

A final word before I conclude what has become an awfully long-winded response. I’ve always hoped that my work would generate controversy and inspire strong reactions. Books like that make for the best seminar discussions. They also spend minimal time gathering dust on library shelves. To judge from these spirited reviews, especially Miller’s, I have cause for optimism.

11 Paul A. Kramer, The Blood of Government: Race, Empire, the United States, and the Philippines (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006); Robert Dean, Imperial Brotherhood: Gender and the Cold War (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001); Rotter, Comrades at Odds.