The Eisenhower Administration, the Third World, and the Globalization of the Cold War Roundtable Review Response from Kathryn Statler and Andrew Johns

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6 March 2007
Response from Kathryn Statler and Andrew Johns

Andy and I are most appreciative of the insightful and thought-provoking reviews that Kenton Clymer, Brian Etheridge, Mary Ann Heiss, and Christopher Tudda provided on *The Eisenhower Administration, the Third World, and the Globalization of the Cold War*. As we were putting together the volume, which derived from a 2003 conference held at the University of San Diego, we hoped to provide a systematic assessment of what we considered to be an overlooked but vital issue facing the Eisenhower administration at a critical point in the Cold War: how could the administration create policies that would persuade so-called Third World countries to side with the United States and its allies against the communists? As all four reviewers conclude, the essays in the volume demonstrate that although possibilities existed to entice Third World nationalists into the American camp, the tragedy was that Eisenhower and Dulles rarely took advantage of such opportunities. As Clymer and Tudda note, Eisenhower administration officials were “insufficiently attuned to the force and vitality of nationalism sweeping the Third World” and “inflamed Third World peoples by ultimately siding with the Europeans.” The result, according to Etheridge and Heiss, was that American policies tended to “engender resentment toward the United States and contribute to the global rise of anti-Americanism,” which ultimately led to “a colossal failure to win the allegiance of peoples in Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East.”

Since the individual authors have the opportunity to respond to the reviews of their essays, I will confine my remarks to a couple of points Clymer and Tudda raised regarding my essay. First, the essay is in fact a brief overview of a much larger project that will be published this April by the University Press of Kentucky. So let me take the easy way out by saying see *Replacing France: The Origins of American Intervention in Vietnam* for more detail on historiographical debates, Diem’s attempts to distance himself from the United States, and American “neocolonialist” behavior in South Vietnam. Still, I feel obliged to address some of Clymer and Tudda’s remarks here. Both mention the apparent contradiction in the essay: on the one hand I emphasize Diem’s agency in trying to achieve a South Vietnamese foreign policy independent of the United States, and, on the other hand, I also stress the increasing American presence in all aspects of South Vietnamese society. My point is that the more the United States attempted to control South Vietnam militarily, politically, economically, and culturally, the more determined Diem became to resist U.S. influence and to follow his own path. Diem, more than anyone, recognized the dangers of becoming a western puppet, but ultimately he proved no match for the American nation-building machine, as witnessed by his assassination in 1963.

Tudda also asserts that “strangely absent from the entire chapter is the constant military threat from North Vietnam.” But the military threat from North Vietnam was, in many respects, absent. The North Vietnamese first put most of their energy into the diplomatic arena, trying to pressure France and the other 1954 Geneva Conference signatories into holding the 1956 elections. When these attempts failed, Hanoi built up its propaganda campaigns against the United States and South Vietnam. Although assassinations and
bombings, presumably on the part of communists or communist sympathizers, began to increase from 1957 to 1959, the military threat from North Vietnam did not become an issue until the very end of Eisenhower's presidency. Rather, Diem (and his American advisers) spent most of their time scrambling to deal with one internal crisis after another as they used the South Vietnamese armed forces to combat non-communist threats—the Cao Dai, Hoa Hao and Binh Xuyen, various French-backed generals, and political figures dissatisfied with Diem's rule.

Finally, with respect to my assessment of American actions in South Vietnam as neocolonial, I am the first to admit the term is messy, but I haven't been able to come up with a better one to describe American actions from 1954 to 1961. American neocolonialism goes far beyond a transition from berets to helmets. Granted, as Tudda notes, the helmet protects better than the beret, but why did it have to be American styled, as did the uniforms, insignia, military training, currency, government, constitution, education, public administration, police, and banking, to name some of the many areas where Americans attempted to mold and build on an American model. And what Tudda does not mention is that this neocolonial behavior did not take place in a vacuum—it was specifically directed against the French to prove not only that the Americans could do a better job of protecting South Vietnam from the communists but also that American methods of modernization, and, let's face it, "civilizing" South Vietnam were far superior to French ones. In their determination to be better than the French, Americans on the ground in South Vietnam became just like them.

In closing, we would like to thank the contributors, who made the volume possible, and the reviewers, who have provided such excellent feedback. Our sincere hope is that the essays contained in The Eisenhower Administration, the Third World, and the Globalization of the Cold War will lead to further research on the U.S. response to rising nationalism as the forces of Cold War and decolonization collided in the 1950s. We also look forward to seeing more scholarship on the reception of American policies by nationalist leaders and their publics.