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Introduction by Edward Miller

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Introduction by Edward Miller, Dartmouth College

In 1965, as American ground troops poured into South Vietnam and U.S. warplanes rained bombs on North Vietnam, the journalist Robert Shaplen published a book that examined America's involvement in Indochina since the end of World War II. Entitled *The Lost Revolution*, Shaplen's volume never garnered the attention or acclaim bestowed on other 'classic' works of Vietnam War journalism by David Halberstam, Neil Sheehan, and Francis Fitzgerald.¹ Nevertheless, *The Lost Revolution* made several enduring contributions to American thinking about the war. The book's lengthy subtitle captured one of its key themes: *The Story of Twenty Years of Neglected Opportunities in Vietnam and of America's Failure to Foster Democracy There*. While Shaplen touched on several different "neglected opportunities," he highlighted two in particular. First, he lamented that U.S. leaders did not seek a Titoist accommodation with Vietnamese communist leader Hồ Chí Minh during the mid-1940s, when Hồ sought American recognition and support for his fledgling Vietnamese state, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV). Second, Shaplen argued that Washington could have strengthened anti-Communist Vietnamese nationalism via more consistent support for democracy, especially in its dealings with the Bảo Đại-led Associated State of Vietnam (established in 1949) and Ngô Đình Diệm's Republic of Vietnam (RVN) (established in 1955).

More than five decades after Shaplen's book appeared, the debate about missed American opportunities in Vietnam has not abated. But what about missed *Vietnamese* opportunities? In *Vietnam's Lost Revolution*, historian Geoffrey Stewart uses a slightly transposed version of Shaplen's old title, but takes a rather different approach to his topic. Instead of arguing what the United States could (or should) have done differently in Vietnam, Stewart is more interested in Vietnamese actors and institutions. In particular, he focuses on South Vietnam during the Diệm era (1954-1963) and especially on a South Vietnamese state agency known as the Special Commissariat for Civic Action. While Americans are not absent from the book, they appear mainly as supporting characters, and the starring roles are played by Diệm and other South Vietnamese elites. For Stewart, the Vietnamese Revolution was Diệm's to lose—and lose it he did.

According to Stewart, the Civic Action Commission was the main institutional pillar on which Diệm's nation building agenda for South Vietnam rested. Established in 1955 as a propaganda organ, Civic Action evolved into a nationwide agency that trained and deployed teams of government cadres to conduct economic development and social welfare activities in South Vietnamese villages and hamlets. In addition, Civic Action was a key part of the Diệm government's plans to indoctrinate South Vietnamese with its official ideology of Personalism, a rather amorphous form of communitarianism which Diệm and his brother Ngô Đình Nhu borrowed from European Catholic philosophers.

All four of the reviewers participating in this roundtable agree that Stewart's book is a noteworthy and valuable addition to the recent 'South Vietnamese turn' in Vietnam War historiography.² Jessica Chapman is the most fulsome in her admiration, describing *Vietnam's Lost Revolution* as "by far the most enlightening book I have read on Diệm's pursuit of a positive nation-building program in South Vietnam." Philip Catton finds Stewart's approach generally "comprehensive and convincing," and Jessica Elkind concludes that the book "offers a fresh perspective on South Vietnamese nation-building efforts," even if its main findings about Diệm and his shortcomings are broadly similar to other recent work on the topic. For Van Nguyen-Marshall, the book is "meticulously researched" and a welcome addition to the growing scholarship on South Vietnam's republican era. Since all of the reviewers are prominent contributors to that scholarship, this is high praise indeed.

¹ Robert Shaplen, *The Lost Revolution; the story of twenty years of neglected opportunities in Vietnam and of America's failure to foster democracy there* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965); David Halberstam, *The best and the brightest* (New York: Random House, 1972); Neil Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 1988); Francis Fitzgerald, *Fire in the Lake: the Vietnamese and the Americans in Vietnam* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1972).

² Andrew Preston, "Rethinking the Vietnam War: Orthodoxy and Revisionism," *International Politics Reviews* 1:1 (2013): 1, 37-39.

In their discussions of the book's strengths, the reviewers highlight Stewart's emphasis on the role of community development in the Civic Action program. As Stewart demonstrates, community development was a major focus of the Diệm regime's rural development initiatives during the late 1950s. In calling attention to the connections between Civic Action in South Vietnam and community development programs elsewhere, Stewart seeks to situate South Vietnam within the broader history of development in the twentieth century. By drawing on recent scholarship on the "quest for community" by Daniel Immerwahr and others, Stewart is able to suggest how Diệm and South Vietnam can be understood "in the mainstream of postcolonial history," as Catton puts it.³

Nguyen-Marshall joins the other reviewers in admiring Stewart's efforts to locate Diem and South Vietnam into broader regional and global contexts. Yet she also suggests that Stewart could have strengthened his claims with more detailed comparative analyses with community development programs in other parts of the Global South—a point that Stewart concedes in his response. A more rigorously comparative approach might well have led Stewart to revise his understanding of the relationship between community development and counterinsurgency. In Stewart's telling, the Civic Action Commission abandoned community development practices in favor of counterinsurgency during the early 1960s, as the rise of the "Viet Cong" insurgency prompted the Diem government to launch its Strategic Hamlet Program. But as Immerwahr and other authors have shown, some military strategists (including Edward Lansdale of the CIA) actually viewed community development as a way to *combine* counterinsurgency and development practices. From this perspective, the Strategic Hamlet Program was not an abandonment of community development, but a doubling-down on the concept.⁴

While the reviews are generally positive about *Vietnam's Lost Revolution* and its contributions, the participants see several points at which Stewart might have pushed his analysis further. Chapman, Nguyen-Marshall, and Catton observe that Stewart does not delve into the experiences and identities of the Vietnamese who were recruited to work as Civic Action cadres, except to note that many were migrants who moved from North to South Vietnam during the mid-1950s. What motivated these northern transplants to take on this work? Chapman also remarks that "Stewart gives us little insight into the minds of villagers" whom the cadres were supposed to be serving. Such lacunae are due in part to Stewart's research agenda, and his reliance on official South Vietnamese government documents. While these official sources are invaluable, they offer only fleeting glimpses into local-level interactions.

In addition to asking for more ground-level testimony, Nguyen-Marshall wonders if Stewart might have said more about the fascinating figure of Kiều Công Cung, the head of the Civic Action Commission from 1955 until his death in 1960. While *Vietnam's Lost Revolution* reveals much about the policies and tactics that Cung employed as commissioner, it has less to say about the origins and evolution of his nationalist convictions. As Nguyen-Marshall observes, "there is still significant reluctance in the Vietnam War historiography to trace the genealogy of [South Vietnamese] supporters to the nascent period of Vietnamese nationalism"—that is, to the pre-1954 era.

Perhaps the most provocative question in the reviews is posed by Catton, who asks about the "lost revolution" of the book's title. When and how, exactly, did Diệm lose his revolution? As Catton points out, Stewart suggests several times that the Civic Action program "showed promise" and seemed to be working. Stewart also repeatedly states that the program's shortcomings revolved around its chronic lack of money and manpower. This seems to imply that Civic Action—and by extension, Diệm's nation building agenda more broadly—might have succeeded, if only it had been better resourced. Yet Stewart concludes the book by discussing the "flawed assumptions and ideological contradictions that were manifest in the Diệm regime's revolutionary project"

³ Daniel Immerwahr, *Thinking Small: The United States and the Lure of Community Development* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015); Nick Cullather, *The Hungry World: America's Cold War battle against poverty in Asia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010); Nicole Sackley, "The Village as Cold War Site: Experts, Development and the History of Rural Reconstruction," *Journal of Global History* 6:3 (2011): 481-504.

⁴ Immerwahr, *Thinking Small*, 101-131; Edward Miller, *Misalliance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and the Fate of South Vietnam* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), 239-245.

(234). These last comments appear to suggest that Civic Action may have been “infeasible from the outset,” as Nguyen-Marshall puts it, and thus doomed to fail.

In the author’s response to these comments, Stewart agrees with many of the reviewers’ points but also discusses what he describes as “the limitations imposed by the availability of sources.” He was especially frustrated by a lack of materials that might have allowed him to access the experiences and motives of individual Civic Action cadres; he was also stymied in his efforts to understand how the cadres were perceived and received by rural residents. (On this last point: Stewart mentions the work of David Elliott and David Hunt on the role of local actors in the insurgency in the Mekong Delta. However, he does not discuss whether or how the RAND Corporation interviews with former insurgents that Elliott and Hunt used might have shed light on the interactions of Civic Action cadres with ordinary Vietnamese.⁵) Stewart also replies to Catton’s question as to when and how Diem’s revolution was lost—though his answer hardly settles the issue. On the one hand, he declares that he wanted “to avoid a deterministic narrative that contends that Civic Action’s failure was a foregone conclusion.” Yet he also declares that the RVN simply “did not have the financial or technical resources” required for success. He also asserts that it was unrealistic for Diem and Nhu to have supposed that Personalism “would resonate with the peasantry.”

Such ambiguity notwithstanding, *Vietnam’s Lost Revolution* is clearly an important and original contribution to the growing scholarship on Ngô Đình Diệm and South Vietnam’s “First Republic.” Stewart’s book is required reading for all scholars interested in studying the Vietnam War as both a Vietnamese and a transnational conflict. It is also a valuable contribution to the ongoing efforts to examine how the war was shaped by the interplay among decolonization, development, and the Cold War.

Participants:

Goffrey C. Stewart is an Assistant Professor of history at the University of Western Ontario. His research explores the United States in the World and exploring the intersection of decolonization with the Cold War. He teaches courses on the history of international relations, the Global Cold War and the Vietnam War and is currently working on a project that examines the International Commission on Supervision and Control in Vietnam during the first two years of its existence (1954-1956).

Edward Miller is Associate Professor of History at Dartmouth College. He is the author of *Misalliance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and the Fate of South Vietnam* (Harvard, 2013) and *The Vietnam War: A Documentary History* (Wiley, 2016). He is currently researching a transnational history of counterinsurgency in the Mekong Delta during the Vietnam War.

Philip E. Catton received his Ph.D. from Ohio University and is a professor of history at Stephen F. Austin State University. He is the author of *Diem’s Final Failure: Prelude to America’s War in Vietnam* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002). He is currently researching the refugee movement from North to South Vietnam in 1954-1955.

Jessica Chapman obtained her Ph.D. from the University of California, Santa Barbara and is now associate professor of history at Williams College. She is the author of *Cauldron of Resistance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and 1950s Southern Vietnam* (Cornell University Press, 2013). Her two current book projects include a volume on the Cold War and decolonization and an international history of Kenyan runners.

Jessica Elkind earned her Ph.D. from the University of California, Los Angeles and is associate professor of history at San Francisco State University. Her book *Aid Under Fire: Nation Building and the Vietnam War* (University Press of Kentucky, 2016) examines the role of American aid workers in implementing nation-building programs and development efforts in South Vietnam

⁵ David Hunt, *Vietnam’s Southern Revolution: From Peasant Insurrection to Total War* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2008); David Elliott, *The Vietnamese War: Revolution and Social Change in the Mekong Delta, 1930-1975*, 2 vols. (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 2003).

between 1955 and 1965. She is currently working on a book project that explores U.S. aid and intervention in Cambodia during the 1970s.

Van Nguyen-Marshall is an Associate Professor in the Department of History at Trent University in Ontario, Canada. Her research focuses on modern Vietnam, particularly civil society during the French colonial era and the Second Indochina War. Some of her publications include, "Appeasing the Spirits along the 'Highway of Horror': Civic Life in Wartime South Vietnam," *War and Society* (forthcoming); "Student Activism in Time of War Youth in the Republic of Vietnam, 1960s-1970s," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 10:2 (Spring 2015): 43-81; "Human Rights in Wartime Vietnam: Unique Perspectives from Duong Thu Huong's Novel Without a Name," in Lily Cho and Susan Henders, eds., *Human Rights and the Arts: Essays on Global Asia* (Lexington Books, 2014): 55-69; Van Nguyen-Marshall, Lisa B. Welch Drummond and Danièle Bélanger, eds., *The Reinvention of Distinction: Modernity and the Middle Class in Urban Vietnam* (Springer-Singapore National University Press, 2012); *In Search of Moral Authority: The Discourse on Poverty, Poor Relief, and Charity in French Colonial Vietnam* (Peter Lang, 2008).

Review by Philip E. Catton, Stephen F. Austin State University

Originally designed in the spring of 1955 to fill a gaping administrative void in the countryside, Civic Action became central to President Ngo Dinh Diem's plans for nation building in South Vietnam, and its cadres served as the vanguard of his revolution, argues Geoffrey Stewart. The Special Commissariat for Civic Action (later the Ministry of Civic Action) aimed at engaging the rural population "in both the physical and ideological construction" (2) of Diem's southern polity; it sought to help build the state from the bottom up by developing the south's economic infrastructure and a spirit of political unity among its inhabitants. By the early 1960s, however, the growing Communist insurgency had overwhelmed its efforts. Civic Action was subordinated to the strategic hamlet program, and the organization was dissolved in the wake of the coup of November 1963. Stewart contends that the rise and fall of Civic Action encapsulates the history of Diem's South Vietnam and his "failure to build an independent nation."

As well as mining more than half-a-dozen archival collections in the United States and Canada, Stewart's study draws extensively on Vietnamese documentary sources; it also puts its Vietnamese protagonists center-stage. As Stewart notes in his introduction, this approach is part of a broader "historiographic shift in the scholarship of the Vietnam War" (4) away from American-centered histories based on American sources—a development described by two other scholars of the conflict as the 'Vietnamization' of Vietnam War historiography.¹ When it comes to the non-Communist side of the Vietnamese story, Ngo Dinh Diem's first Republic of Vietnam has been the focus of much of the new scholarship.² Perhaps the interest should come as no surprise, as historians have sought to understand this seminal period in the evolution of the conflict, one marked by the growth of the insurgency and the deepening of U.S. involvement in Vietnamese affairs.

Like other studies that are part of this new scholarship, *Vietnam's Lost Revolution* takes seriously the Diem government's ideas about nation building; Stewart does not view them as merely a cover for an old-fashioned dictatorship. Like these other works, Stewart's book also regards the regime as a failure. Poor policies were part of the problem, he argues. For example, the government's lukewarm efforts at land reform and the coercive aspects of some of its other programs "served to estrange significant portions of the rural population" (234). Its brutal suppression of real and perceived enemies was particularly counterproductive, he observes. At the same time, Stewart suggests there were obstacles more fundamental to the realization of the regime's plans. Southern villagers showed little interest in making the kind of collective effort and sacrifices which lay at the heart of the government's concept of nation building; in fact, Diem's entire vision was characterized by "flawed assumptions and ideological contradictions" (234).

This interpretation of the Diem government—a regime with real political substance but plagued with problems—indicates a trend in what might be called 'Diem revisionism.' The latter challenges the traditional 'orthodox' view of Diem as the empty-headed autocrat or backward-looking mandarin, but in other respects agrees with long-standing criticisms of his regime and its inability to establish a viable southern state. Stewart's study certainly offers cold comfort to those who believe that Diem's South Vietnam was making substantial progress until the coup of 1963 derailed it.³

Stewart's analysis of the regime's thinking and its broad approach to nation building is comprehensive and convincing. While covering some of the same ground as previous studies, it helps deepen our understanding in several ways. First, his focus on the

¹ Edward Miller and Tuong Vu, "The Vietnam War as a Vietnamese War: Agency and Society in the Study of the Second Indochina War," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 4:3 (Fall 2009), 2.

² For example, see Jessica M. Chapman, *Cauldron of Resistance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and 1950s Southern Vietnam* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013); Edward Miller, *Misalliance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and the Fate of South Vietnam* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013); and Philip E. Catton, *Diem's Final Failure: Prelude to America's War in Vietnam* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002).

³ In particular, see Mark Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954-1965* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

development of Civic Action—from its origins in 1955 as a stop-gap expedient to its emergence in 1956-1957 as an integral part of Diem's Personalist Revolution—offers an insight into the evolution of the government's policies and the early efforts at putting its ideas into practice. Much of the scholarly coverage of Diem's first years in power concentrates on the consolidation of his political position, in the face of challenges from the army, politico-religious groups, and the former emperor Bao Dai. Stewart gives us a better sense of the Diem government's initial forays into the countryside and its attempts at nation building. He also makes it clear that even at this early stage of the U.S.-Vietnamese relationship, there were tensions between Washington and Saigon over policies and procedures. For example, discussions towards the end of 1955 over the issue of U.S. funding for Civic Action reveal that a number of American officials objected to what they saw as the overly political aspects of the program.

Second, Stewart stresses the connection between Diem's ideas for nation building and the developmental policies of other countries emerging from the shadows of colonial rule. He states that at the core of Civic Action's emphasis on rural engagement and reconstruction was the concept of 'community development,' an idea that was "sweeping the Third World at the midpoint of the twentieth century" (53). Stewart examines the concept's origins in New Deal urban development projects, its application in India in the late 1940s, and its widespread adoption in other postcolonial settings. By 1960, the United Nations estimated that "more than sixty developing states in Africa, Latin America and Asia had established community development programs" (66). Stewart still devotes considerable attention to the particularities and peculiarities of Diem's plans for nation building, but he also sets them in this broader context—that of "a transnational discourse of development where local state actors could lay claim to a global developmental vocabulary for their own ends" (126-127). Perhaps in treating South Vietnam in isolation and as a creation of the Cold War, scholars lost sight of the similarities that it shared with other newly independent societies. By placing the Diem government more in the mainstream of postcolonial history, Stewart makes it appear less of an oddity and outlier.

There are other areas where Stewart's book is less successful in illuminating the story of Civic Action and the character of the regime. Although covering Civic Action's ground level activities in some depth, Stewart does not paint a detailed portrait of the cadres who carried them out. Who were these people at the sharp end of nation building in South Vietnam? Stewart observes that initially the recruits were "young, university-trained men" who had fled the north after the country's partition (29); he also lists the qualifications that the program later established for recruits (young, healthy, patriotic, etc.). Nevertheless, the composition of the organization remains unclear, especially as Civic Action's activities expanded and it had to draw reluctant cadres from other government agencies. The issue is of some importance. As the vanguard of the Personalist Revolution, the program's cadres had to "duplicate the tactics of the communist agents at the village level and beat them at their own game" (26). Communist cadres were invariably villagers themselves and organically connected to the communities in which they operated. In contrast, as Jeffrey Race observes, Diem's civil servants were mostly outsiders, products of the urban upper classes, and they often possessed 'blank areas of consciousness' when it came to their rural compatriots; they neither understood nor empathized with them.⁴ What, then, about Civic Action cadres—how well attuned were they to the concerns and interests of the rural population, particularly those from the north whose regional accents made it difficult even to converse with southern villagers?

Some of the higher-level deliberations affecting the program remain obscure as well. For example, Stewart notes that Civic Action was initially restricted to the southern provinces of South Vietnam (and later extended into highland areas). The limitation may have reflected the influence of Ngo Dinh Can, one of Diem's brothers, who ran his own village cadre program in the central lowlands; however, Stewart does not proffer an explanation for the geographical restriction. An air of mystery also surrounds one of the key figures in Stewart's study, Kieu Cong Cung, the Commissioner General of the Special Commissariat for Civic Action from 1955 until his death in 1960. In his introduction, Stewart suggests that by bringing Cung into the story he will shed new light on the regime's policymaking process and demonstrate that there were other figures involved in it besides the Ngo family. Yet Cung's influence in the making of decisions is never entirely clear. He flits in and out of the picture, but the policymaking dynamics of the Diem government remain rather opaque. Perhaps we just do not have the kind of records—cabinet minutes, memoranda of conversation, etc.—that will allow us to penetrate the veil and assess more clearly the 'who, what, where, when, and

⁴ Jeffrey Race, *War Comes to Long An: Revolutionary Conflict in a Vietnamese Province* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 151.

why' of the regime's decision-making process. In short, Stewart is not as successful in explaining the politicking and policy discussions that shaped the program as he is in tracing its ideological roots.

Finally, Stewart leaves readers a little unsure about where he assigns responsibility for Diem's 'lost revolution.' On the one hand, he offers plenty of evidence to support a thesis that Diem never had much chance of establishing a viable southern state. South Vietnam's leader inherited a ramshackle administration, a countryside in which the Communists were already deeply embedded, and a restive and politically awakened peasantry that was susceptible to revolutionary appeals. Stewart argues that the regime's ideas about community development and nation building exacerbated these problems because villagers refused to behave according to theory—they did not exhibit the degree of communal solidarity that the regime expected of them. On the other hand, Stewart states on several occasions that the Civic Action program showed promise. By 1959, he notes that where Civic Action cadres operated, "the people were embracing the ideals of mutual self-help that underpinned the community development idea" (160). Stewart suggests that rather than a cause doomed from the outset, Civic Action was the victim of two problems that might have been overcome or avoided: a lack of resources to recruit and deploy a sufficient number of cadres; and other regime policies that poisoned relations between the government and population. He generally gives greater weight in his analysis to the structural obstacles that explain Diem's failure, but appears to leave the door open to the argument that the outcome might have been different.

Review by Jessica M. Chapman, Williams College

Recent scholarship has made clear that Ngo Dinh Diem and his brother Ngo Dinh Nhu possessed a genuine revolutionary vision for South Vietnam, rooted in Personalism.¹ It has become somewhat of a truism that they tried, but failed, to rally their constituents behind what ultimately turned out to be an arcane and poorly explained philosophical basis for nation-building. But not until Geoffrey Stewart's fascinating look at South Vietnam's Civic Action program have we been able to trace the mechanisms by which the Ngos sought to put their Personalist revolution into action at the village level. Their aim was not only to defeat the myriad enemies that threatened their regime, but also to promote a self-sacrificing, self-sufficient, and loyal peasantry with the goal of creating "a modern and viable nation capable of exercising its international sovereignty to the best of its ability in the global arena" (7). To achieve a combination of security and nation-building, sometimes without a clear hierarchy of priorities, the Special Commissariat for Civic Action under director Kieu Cong Cung undertook both counterinsurgency and community development, often blurring the lines between the two projects.

The Ngo brothers' concept of harnessing human resources to promote self-sufficiency, though rooted in Personalism, was in many ways consistent with broader ideas underpinning community development, a rural development movement circulating widely through the Third World in the 1950s. Stewart not only demonstrates that South Vietnam's Civic Action program resembled other postcolonial community development efforts, but also that Diem understood it to be part of that larger movement. Stewart's book takes the 'Cold War lens' off our view of Saigon politics and contributes to our understanding of the chasm that existed between South Vietnamese and American development models that contributed to what Edward Miller has aptly termed a "misalliance."² Diem may have stubbornly resisted American direction, but thanks to Stewart we can see much more clearly that he did so based on a set of (somewhat) coherent principles, rather than simply as a result of a fatally flawed personality.

Knowing what Diem was trying to accomplish, and how he went about it, enables us to better assess the regime's downfall. Ultimately, Stewart concludes, the Civic Action program—and the Personalist Revolution that underpinned it—failed for myriad reasons. Diem's determination to avoid dependence on American support, coupled with significant disagreement between Washington and Saigon over the program's goals and implementation, rendered it permanently underfunded and understaffed. To the extent that Civic Action succeeded in improving villagers' lives, it did so haphazardly and in an unsustainable fashion. At times Stewart seems a bit too sanguine about the prospects for a more robustly supported Special Commissariat for Civic Action to achieve Diem's revolutionary vision. In the end however, he concedes that the Personalist ideas underpinning the Ngo brothers' revolution were not only "far too convoluted to be easily understood," but also "inherently contradictory" (237). Therefore, he concludes, "The ends and means of their entire project were fundamentally incompatible" (238).

To Stewart, not only was Personalism ideologically inconsistent, its application via the Civic Action program was rooted in a flawed understanding of the typical South Vietnamese villager as what James Scott would call a "moral peasant," rather than the more apt "rational peasant" of Samuel Popkin's conception (235).³ While this is an intriguing suggestion, Stewart gives us little insight into the minds of villagers themselves to support this position. Nor does he provide much support for other claims about how the Civic Action program was received by villagers, other than to include the perspectives of elite village officials who

¹ Philip Catton, *Diem's Final Failure: Prelude to America's War in Vietnam* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2003); Jessica Chapman, *Cauldron of Resistance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and 1950s Southern Vietnam* (Cornell University Press, 2013); Edward Miller, *Misalliance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and the Fate of South Vietnam* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013); Nu-Anh Tran, "Contested Identities: Nationalism in the Republic of Vietnam (1954-1963)," PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2013.

² Matthew Connelly, "Taking off the Cold War Lens: Visions of North-South Conflict during the Algerian War for Independence," *American Historical Review* 105:3 (June 2000): 739-769; Miller, *Misalliance*.

³ James C. Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976); Samuel Popkin, *The Rational Peasant: The Political Economy of Rural Society in Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979).

collaborated with Cung and his cadres. Indeed, throughout the book, glimpses into the attitudes and reactions of villagers are filtered through South Vietnamese government agencies. Knowing how difficult it is to identify and access sources revealing peasant perspectives, this is less a criticism of Stewart's research than a reminder of the fact that there is at least one other side to this story that we do not quite know.

Stewart could have delved deeper into the seemingly significant fact that most of the Civic Action cadres were recruited from the North (35). Given the tensions that arose in South Vietnam surrounding the 1954 exodus of nearly one-million people from North to South, many of whom were among the minority Catholic population and resented for the favoritism they received from Diem's government, it seems likely that the demography of Civic Action cadres could have impeded the program's goal of generating good will towards a supposedly benevolent government. Even if this were not the case, it would be instructive to know why, and I would have liked to see the author take up the issue more fully.

These minor critiques aside, *Vietnam's Lost Revolution* reflects extensive and careful research in Vietnamese, American, and Canadian archives. It is by far the most enlightening book I have read on Diem's pursuit of a positive nation-building program in South Vietnam. By placing his study of South Vietnamese community development efforts in conversation with larger trends in the decolonizing world, he reminds us that Vietnam, while in many ways an exceptional case, was part of a bigger story of the intersection between the global processes of Cold War and decolonization. Diem, like his counterpart Ho Chi Minh in the North, was a nationalist first and a Cold Warrior second. Regardless of how flawed his nationalist vision may have been, how brutal his efforts to achieve it, and how spectacularly he failed, we are best served by evaluating his regime first and foremost in the context of post-colonial Vietnam.

Review by Jessica Elkind, San Francisco State University

More than fifty years after the first American combat troops arrived in Vietnam, the origins of the war remain a subject of debate. Was the Vietnam War primarily an outgrowth of the Cold War competition between the superpowers for influence in the Third World? Was it fundamentally a civil war, in which various Vietnamese leaders struggled to assert their dominance over the post-colonial state? How important were American efforts to bolster a separate state in South Vietnam? Geoffrey Stewart's *Vietnam's Lost Revolution* makes an important intervention in such debates. Drawing on recently-declassified Vietnamese archival sources as well as American records, Stewart emphasizes the role of South Vietnamese officials and their plans for nation building south of the seventeenth parallel. He argues that the origins of the Vietnam War can be traced directly to the inability of Ngo Dinh Diem's government to implement its vision for the future of South Vietnam.

Vietnam's Lost Revolution chronicles in exhaustive detail the rise and fall of the Special Commissariat for Civic Action, also known by its Vietnamese acronym as the CDV.¹ President Diem, along with his brother and political advisor Ngo Dinh Nhu, created the CDV to serve as a bridge between the Saigon regime and rural populations. The organization was charged with building support for Diem's government as well as improving the lives of South Vietnamese peasants. At first glance, Stewart's focus on Civic Action might appear overly narrow. After all, the CDV was one of many organizations—from Vietnam and the United States—engaged in nation-building and development efforts. However, the CDV played a central role in many of the Government of Vietnam's (GVN) most important programs, including land development and strategic hamlets, and the organization's fate was intricately linked with Diem's political fortunes. As Stewart skillfully demonstrates, studying Civic Action programs offers a vantage point for examining the broad contours of the Ngo brothers' vision for how to modernize their country, realize sweeping transformations in South Vietnamese society, and ensure their own political survival.

Vietnam's Lost Revolution is organized chronologically, though each chapter also takes a thematic approach to analyzing nation building in South Vietnam during Diem's presidency. The book begins with an examination of the origins of Civic Action. Following the partition of Vietnam in 1954, leaders in Saigon sought to establish control over areas that had been administered by the Viet Minh during the First Indochina War. The Geneva Accords called for national elections to be held in the summer of 1956. Diem and his American supporters understood that his only chance of winning those elections or preserving a separate state in southern Vietnam depended on pacifying rural areas and filling the administrative void left by departing French and Viet Minh administrators. As Stewart explains, the Special Commissariat was originally intended as a "temporary expedient" to address these challenges (26). Under the guidance of Kieu Cong Cung, a nationalist and former member of the Viet Minh, the CDV would consist of flexible, mobile units that would "go out into the countryside and fill the vacuum that was present between the central government ministries and the village population" (27).

According to Stewart, early Vietnamese and American assessments of the CDV were optimistic about the potential for Civic Action programs to improve peasants' standards of living and bolster popular support for the Saigon government. However, from the beginning, there were also indications that Civic Action efforts would face significant challenges. American advisors complained that the CDV was inefficient and duplicated work being carried out by various government ministries. Local officials, who were concerned with potential threats to their authority, raised more serious objections to the program. And some communities expressed deep reservations about whether the unproven leaders in Saigon seriously cared about addressing their needs and interests, particularly in light of the regime's harsh efforts to crush any and all opposition.

The next three chapters explore Diem's efforts to consolidate power and fundamentally transform South Vietnamese society through nation-building efforts and modernization schemes. Stewart shows how, between 1955 and 1959, the GVN reimaged and restructured the CDV. During those years, the organization went from being merely a propaganda wing of the central state to the primary instrument for disseminating the Ngo brothers' nation-building aims, especially in terms of community development. Relying heavily on GVN documents, Stewart offers a compelling discussion of the Ngos's conception of a Personalist Revolution. The French political philosophy of Personalism appealed to Diem and especially Nhu as an alternative to the excesses of both

¹ In Vietnamese, the Special Commissariat for Civic Action was the Dac Uy Phu Cong Dan Vu, or CDV.

Marxism-Leninism and western capitalism. The Ngo brothers envisioned community development efforts, in general, and Civic Action, in particular, as the primary vehicle for extending their revolutionary ideas to rural communities. According to Stewart, Diem and CDV Commissioner Cung saw community development as a “vehicle to elevate South Vietnam’s economy to a level of self-sufficiency that would allow it to stake out an independent place in the global arena” (126). In the final years of the decade, Cung worked tirelessly to transform the basic mission of the CDV and place all community development plans under the auspices of Civic Action teams. Although there is some repetition in this section of the book—particularly in Stewart’s description of the Ngo brothers’ revolutionary vision and his discussion of the restructuring of the CDV—these chapters offer rich detail and provide much of the evidence to support Stewart’s central arguments.

Throughout the book, Stewart also addresses differences in the ways that Vietnamese and American policymakers understood community development and the role of the CDV. Ultimately, he suggests that there existed a basic incompatibility between American and Vietnamese visions for how best to implement modernization and nation-building efforts. Here Stewart’s arguments build upon and complement recent scholarship that emphasizes tensions and disagreements in the U.S.-South Vietnamese partnership.²

The final two chapters of the book address the ultimate failures of Civic Action and the demise of the CDV. As Stewart shows, Civic Action programs did not significantly improve material conditions and living standards in rural areas. He suggests that these shortcomings were largely the result of chronic shortages in funding and manpower. CDV efforts also failed to produce popular support for the Diem government and proved ineffective in countering the growing anti-government insurgency, which coalesced under the auspices of the National Liberation Front in December 1960. One of Stewart’s most compelling arguments is that Civic Action cadres undermined their goal of convincing peasants that Diem’s government was truly concerned with their welfare. He explains that, faced with growing discontent and anti-government violence in the countryside, “the commissariat became increasingly reactionary, turning away from community development...toward security and propaganda work, quite possibly increasing the peasantry’s sense of isolation” (163). By the early 1960s, the CDV’s involvement in the strategic hamlet program represented the organization’s acceptance of the Diem regime’s brutal and authoritarian approach to governance.

Stewart’s book dovetails with several recent trends in the historiography on the Vietnam War. First, and perhaps most importantly, it places Vietnamese actors at the center of the narrative and attributes significant agency to them.³ Stewart makes excellent use of Vietnamese archival materials, in particular the records of Diem’s government. In many ways, the most important figures in this story are Diem and Nhu. In Stewart’s account, Diem and Nhu do not appear as American puppets but rather as sincere—if also ambitious and self-righteous—champions of Vietnamese nationalism. Stewart also introduces and highlights the influence of lesser-known individuals, including Kieu Cong Cung and Ngo Trong Hieu, both of whom served as directors of the CDV. In addition, Stewart considers the role of Civic Action cadres, the young men who were sent to villages to “live amongst the peasantry and mobilize them to voluntarily work together to modernize their local institutions and infrastructure to improve their overall welfare” (2).

² Good examples of such scholarship include Philip Catton, *Diem’s Final Failure: Prelude to America’s War in Vietnam* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002); Jessica Chapman, *Cauldron of Resistance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and 1950s Southern Vietnam* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013); Jessica Elkind, *Aid Under Fire: Nation Building and the Vietnam War* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2016); and Edward Miller, *Misalliance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States and the Fate of South Vietnam* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013).

³ One of the most important trends in recent scholarship on the Vietnam War has been the incorporation of Vietnamese sources and perspectives. For good examples of this trend, see in particular, Pierre Asselin, *Hanoi’s Road to the Vietnam War, 1954-1965* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013); Catton, *Diem’s Final Failure*; Chapman, *Cauldron of Resistance*; Miller, *Misalliance*; and Lien-Hang Nguyen, *Hanoi’s War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012).

Second, Stewart contributes to the growing body of scholarship that seeks to remove the “Cold War lens” from studies of the conflict in Vietnam. Although he does not ignore the Cold War concerns that drove policy making in South Vietnam, especially for American officials, Stewart emphasizes the intersections between the Cold War and decolonization. In particular, he situates the book within the context of other literature on the global community development movement of the mid-twentieth century.⁴

Finally, Stewart shifts the focus from the period of full-scale war to the late 1950s and early 1960s. At that point, both South Vietnamese and American officials were primarily concerned with nation-building efforts to shore up popular support for a modern, non-Communist state south of the seventeenth parallel. While there are a number of other good studies that focus on the origins of the war and the connections between failed nation-building and military escalation, Stewart’s book is unique in its emphasis on the importance of Civic Action programs.

While Stewart’s basic conclusions and overarching arguments are not particularly novel, especially for those familiar with the work of Edward Miller, Philip Catton and others, his discussion of the CDV offers a fresh perspective on South Vietnamese nation-building efforts. Stewart provides a deep and meticulous examination of how officials in Saigon tried to implement their ambitious vision on the ground. More than any other existing study, this book sheds light on the “many contradictions in the Ngos’ revolution” and the reasons the people of South Vietnam failed to embrace its message (238). *Vietnam’s Lost Revolution* contributes significantly to scholarship on the Diem regime as well as the global community development movement. I believe that this book will shape how students and scholars view the origins of the Vietnam War and the failures of the South Vietnamese government for years to come.

⁴ See for example Nick Cullather, *The Hungry World: America Cold War Battle Against Poverty in Asia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010); Daniel Immerwahr, *Thinking Small: The United States and the Lure of Community Development* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015); and Nicole Sackley, “The Village as Cold War Site: Experts, Development, and the History of Rural Reconstruction,” *Journal of Global History* 6:3 (2011): 481-504.

Review by Van Nguyen-Marshall, Trent University

Geoffrey Stewart's book focuses on the birth and death of the Commissariat for Civic Action (or Đặc Ủy Phủ Công Dân Vụ, CDV), a little-known rural program that, according to Stewart, embodied South Vietnamese President Ngô Đình Diệm's vision of an independent modern Vietnam. The program was first conceived as a way to extend the government's reach into the countryside, a goal critical to Diệm's consolidation of power in the wake of the division of the country. Under the direction of a seemingly energetic and idealistic bureaucrat, Kiều Công Cung, the program moved toward community development. However, the need for security in the countryside meant that CDV personnel at times participated in 'pacification' operations, which eroded the local population's trust in them. While the Civic Action program had a short life and its impact is ambiguous, its conception, tenure, and demise reveal valuable insights about Ngô Đình Diệm and his regime.

In step with a number of path-breaking studies on Ngô Đình Diệm,¹ *Vietnam's Lost Revolution* lays to rest the notion that Diệm was a puppet of the United States without any nationalist aspirations of his own. Instead, Stewart's book presents evidence that Diệm and some of those around him, including his brother Nhu, had ideas and plans (however flawed) for building a viable independent Vietnam. Created even before the establishment of the Republic of Vietnam (RVN), the CDV was largely a Vietnamese initiative. While Diệm's close advisor Colonel Edward Lansdale supported the project and provided some seed money, other U.S. agencies, such as U.S. Operations Mission, did not. In other words, the CDV, guided by tenets of French philosopher Emmanuel Mounier's Personalism and community development ideals, reflected the objectives of Diệm and his government, rather than those of the U.S. Even though Stewart recognizes the agency of the RVN government, he is also critical of its assumptions, plans, and performance. In the last chapter Stewart discusses the conceptual and practical problems that made Diệm's rural program unfeasible from the outset.

In addition to demonstrating Diệm's ability for independent actions, Stewart's book contributes further to the historiography by framing the RVN's nation building within the wider postcolonial context. Stewart compares the undertakings of the CDV to other development projects pursued throughout the previously colonized world, in countries such as India, Cambodia, and Burma. While I would have liked to have seen a more detailed comparative analysis, the brief discussion is insightful. In framing the Diệm government's endeavours more broadly, Stewart challenges the conventional analytical approach, which privileges Cold-War dynamics and tends to examine Vietnam only in relation to the United States, without taking into account other influential factors and trends. However, at the same time, Stewart still stresses the critical role that the RVN's Cold-War ally played, especially in its chronic clashes with Diệm.

The value of understanding Diệm's regime within a larger postcolonial context has less to do with diminishing the importance of Cold War politics, and more with demonstrating that Vietnam was not exceptional in its postcolonial history, a point that Christopher Goscha also makes for Vietnamese history more generally.² Like its neighbors, Vietnam was grappling with the enormous challenge of envisioning, articulating, and creating a new nation state that was modern (but not Western), independent, and prosperous. In comprehending Vietnam's struggle within a postcolonial setting, one gets a better appreciation of the obstacles and complexities that the RVN faced. Moreover, in this broader context, one can perceive more clearly the global circulation of new thinking and practices; this approach may give pause to the knee-jerk assumption that ideas flowed unilinearly from the U.S. to Vietnam.

Notwithstanding the importance of the book's focus, the CDV and the Ngô brothers' nation-building efforts, the most interesting aspect of the book for me was Kiều Công Cung, whose story I wish Stewart had examined in more detail. I suspect that

¹ Philip Catton, *Diem's Final Failure. Prelude to America's War in Vietnam* (Lawrence: University of Kansas), 2002; Edward Miller, *Misalliance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and the Fate of South Vietnam* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), 2013; Jessica Chapman, *Cauldron of Resistance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and 1950s Southern Vietnam* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013); Matthew Masur, "Exhibiting Signs of Resistance: South Vietnam's Struggle for Legitimacy, 1954-1960," *Diplomatic History* 33:2 (April 2009): 293-313.

² Christopher Goscha, *The Penguin History of Modern Vietnam* (New York: Penguin, 2017).

documentary sources on Cung are limited, given that he was a minor civil servant who died (presumably) relatively early, and that Stewart has found as much as one could expect. Nevertheless, I think it would have been useful to have contemplated more fully and explicitly what Cung's case suggests about the people who supported Diệm and/or the RVN. My sense is that Cung is more significant than the role he played as a supporter of Diệm's nation-building project: "...individuals like Kiêu Công Cung...were integral in trying to interpret the wishes of the regime and formulate policy accordingly' (7). As Stewart rightly observes later in the book, 'Cung's personal history encapsulates the complexities of life in postcolonial Vietnam' (25), since he served in the French Army, Trần Trọng Kim's government, the Việt Minh, and the RVN. According to Stewart, it was Cung who came up with the idea of 'going to the people.' This idea caught the attention of Lansdale and subsequently, Diệm. Cung's ingenuity, along with his apparent dedication to the goals of the CDV and community development, are worth underscoring because they dispel the notion that Diệm was surrounded by only sycophantic and incompetent bureaucrats. Cung's life is a helpful reminder that many bureaucrats, civil servants, and technocrats of the mid-1950s had grown up during the late colonial period when the public sphere was dominated by ruminations and debates about new concepts of society, nation, and national identity, all potent ideas for a country longing for its independence.³ From conservative to radical, Vietnamese intellectuals had been grappling with many competing notions about nation-state since the early twentieth century. Resistance and anti-colonial movements existed in a variety of configurations: from monarchist and millenarian to republican, anarchist, and communist. Despite the advances historians have made recently in locating modern nationalist aspirations in disparate groups hitherto deemed traditionalist, anti-modern, and opportunistic,⁴ there is still significant reluctance in the Vietnam War historiography to trace the genealogy of RVN supporters to the nascent period of Vietnamese nationalism. This reluctance tends to foreclose the possibility that RVN bureaucrats could have had nationalist credentials just as much as revolutionaries and communists. In this sense, Cung stands as an excellent example of a nationalist who experimented with a variety of pro-independence choices before *choosing* to ally with Diệm. His story suggests that perhaps he was more than just an interpreter of Diệm's vision, but was also enacting ideas of his own.

Along the same line of inquiry, I would have liked to have learned more about the cadres who signed up to go 'to the people.' Civic action was probably not an easy gig because, as Stewart indicates, Cung originally had trouble recruiting existing civil servants for the work. Consequently, Cung enlisted young university graduates who recently migrated from the north. As such, it would have been useful to have considered their motivations for joining the CDV team. Were the recruits motivated by something more than paid employment? Did Cung's and Diệm's idea of an independent, anti-communist modern nation-state resonate with them? As one who also struggles with the limitation of sources for my own research on the RVN, I know it may not be possible to answer these questions. But contemplating some possibilities would be useful, as it could shed some light on whether or not Diệm's vision had any appeal beyond his close supporters and perhaps might help explain his popularity in some quarters in the early days of the Republic.

As my comments suggest, there is still much to learn about the First Republic and Ngô Đình Diệm himself. Stewart's meticulously researched and well composed book is certainly a welcome addition, making a significant contribution to our understanding of this important period of Vietnamese history.

³ Alexander Woodside, *Community and Revolution in Modern Vietnam* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1976); David Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984); Hue-Tam Ho Tai, *Radicalism and the Origins of the Vietnamese Revolution* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1992); Shawn McHalle, *Print and Power: Confucianism, Communism, and Buddhism in the Making of Modern Vietnam* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004); Van Nguyen-Marshall, *In Search of Moral Authority: The Discourse on Poverty, Poor Relief, and Charity in French Colonial Vietnam* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008); Peter Zinoman, *Vietnamese Colonial Republican: The Political Vision of Vu Trong Phung* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013).

⁴ The examples I have in mind are the Cao Đài, Hòa Hảo, Binh Xuyên, and the Buddhist Revival Movement. See Chapman, *The Cauldron of Resistance*; Edward Miller, "Religious Revival and the Politics of Nation Building: Reinterpreting the 1963 'Buddhist crisis' in South Vietnam," *Modern Asian Studies* 49:6 (2015), 1903-1962; Kevin Li, "Partisan to Sovereign: The Making of the Binh Xuyên in Southern Vietnam, 1945-48," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 11:3-4 (2016): 140-187.

Author's Response by Geoffrey C. Stewart, University of Western Ontario

I would like to begin by extending my gratitude to the editors of H-Diplo for making my book the subject of this roundtable discussion and offering my sincerest thanks to Philip Catton, Jessica Chapman, Jessica Elkind and Van Nguyen-Marshall for their very engaged, balanced and insightful reviews. I am extremely pleased to see that I succeeded in achieving my overarching goals of highlighting the postcolonial nature of Ngô Đình Diệm's regime and continuing to advance the discussion of Vietnam's wars beyond the framework of the Cold War. The history of Vietnam's long struggle for independence and unification is, in part, a competition between various internal and external conceptions of modernity. The latter stages of this struggle occurred against the backdrop of the global Cold War. The subject of my book, the Special Commissariat for Civic Action, I believe, demonstrates this in the context of the nation-building plans of Ngô Đình Diệm's government. Civic Action was intended to help Ngô Đình Diệm promulgate a national and social revolution throughout the Vietnamese countryside to mobilize South Vietnam's human and material resources for the project of fashioning a viable nation below the seventeenth parallel. This new entity, Diệm hoped, would rival Hồ Chí Minh's state in the North for national legitimacy in the eyes of the people of Vietnam and enable his southern government to pursue its own destiny in the international realm.

As each reviewer recognizes, one of the largest frustrations I incurred in conducting this study were the limitations imposed by the availability of sources regarding certain aspects of South Vietnam's Civic Action program. This led all the reviewers to raise questions about who the cadres were, what motivated them and how they were received by the peasantry they were sent to help. Catton, in particular, notes that it is important to consider who these cadres were as they were attempting to beat the Communists at their own game, theoretically under similar circumstances. So why, in other words, could the Communist cadres succeed where the Civic Action cadres could not? Was it because, as Chapman also asks, the Civic Action cadres were outsiders—a fact distinguished by regional dialects or accents? Or was it because they could not relate to the peasants and their concerns? The reviewers also raise questions specifically about the Special Commissariat for Civic Action, such as who, exactly, was its head, Commissioner General Kiều Công Cung? What role did he play in the implementation and evolution of the Civic Action program? And how and why was it expanded throughout South Vietnam?

Concrete and comprehensive answers to these questions, as each reviewer acknowledges, are dependent on filling in the gaps in the documentary record in the Vietnamese archives. The holdings of archives in the United States like the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) in Washington, DC and Michigan State University in East Lansing were particularly helpful in providing some of the details, but as the Civic Action program was a South Vietnamese affair, that is where the answers lie. Hopefully, archivists in Hồ Chí Minh City, Hà Nội, and the homes of other repositories in Vietnam will unearth and catalogue the crucial records for future scholars.

In the meantime, I will try to address the reviewers' comments to the best of my ability.

Regarding the question of who the cadres were: this was the most maddening part of the project. I was unable to come across any personnel files of the cadres in the Vietnamese Archives in Hồ Chí Minh City. The information regarding cadres that I did come across in the action reports filed by the Civic Action teams provided virtually no personal information on any of them. In fact, the reports rarely mention individual cadres at all. When they do, it is usually to recognize those killed in the line of duty (see, for example, 84). Most of the comments regarding performances are general and vague, either praising the good work of a team or identifying problems such as poor behaviour or the imperiousness of a particular group toward the people they were trying to help (34, 84-86, 152-153 and 155). I am the first to admit that this is one of the most glaring shortcomings of the book. As Van Nguyen-Marshall suggests in her comments, these records would offer tremendous insight into a particular segment of civil society during the First Republic of Vietnam (1955-1963), providing a glimpse at some of the countervailing conceptions of Vietnamese nationalism at play in this period.

As for what motivated the cadres, I have to think there were a wide variety of motives for young Vietnamese men and women to sign up. Some, like Kiều Công Cung, were no doubt anti-Communist nationalists who either believed in what the Diệm regime was offering or were opposed enough to the alternative visions being promoted by the various Southern groupings agitating against the Sài Gòn government to join. Others may have been looking for employment, as either a way to make ends meet or to

escape the drudgery of their daily lives.¹ Becoming a Civic Action cadre would have offered a steady paycheck as well as the chance for a more exciting life and, for the truly idealistic cadre, the opportunity to make a difference.

How were the Civic Action cadres received? This, as Chapman notes, is probably the most difficult question to answer, even with greater availability of sources. Given the sheer number of people affected by the Civic Action program and the variety of viewpoints involved this is a monumental task, as shown by works such as David Elliott's *The Vietnamese War: Revolution and Social Change in the Mekong Delta* and David Hunt's *Vietnam's Southern Revolution*.² As I point out in my book, the little evidence that can be gleaned from the Civic Action reports indicates that regional dialects did cause problems in communication with the villagers in certain cases. It led to frustration on behalf of the cadres involved to the detriment of the program (34-35, 85 and 154). Chapman's point "that the demography of the Civic Action cadres" may well have worked against them is duly noted. As outsiders, the cadres sent down to the villages were probably not as attuned to the basic concerns stemming from the everyday rhythms of village life such as the interpersonal dynamics, work habits, leisure patterns and other social behavior of individuals that make a community tick (85). Moreover, as the cadres came from afar, there would certainly have been an innate suspicion on the behalf of the peasantry toward these strangers in their midst, as was mentioned in some of the reports (34-35). This could have impeded the program's 'goal of generating good will' toward the regime. How much, and to what end, unfortunately, I cannot say.

None of this, however, should discount the probability that there were some outstanding cadres—individuals who did understand their objectives, had some broader sense of the challenges they faced, and were able to make a meaningful connection with the people they were sent out to help. But to answer a question alluded to by Catton, did they collectively have a "comprehensive and consistent theoretical interpretation of events" at the village level?³ This is impossible to say with the documentary evidence that is currently available.

Who was Kiều Công Cung? The head of Civic Action was one figure for whom I was able to find important details. The picture I was able to draw comes from a variety of sources including Vietnamese and American archives as well as some memoir literature, though, unfortunately, not from Kiều Công Cung himself.⁴ As Nguyen-Marshall so eloquently points out, Kiều Công Cung is one of the most interesting characters in the story and is symbolic of the larger pressures and choices faced by individuals serving a decolonizing state in the Cold War world. He had a vision for an independent Vietnam that was consistent with Ngô Đình Diệm's, yet was very much his own man. He was determined that he would be the one to see it to fruition. This is most evident in Civic Action's evolution into a vehicle for community development.

From the inception of the Special Commissariat, Kiều Công Cung had been enamored by the community development ideal and this influenced his approach to the program (53, especially fn 42). When the Diệm government elected to embrace the community development ideal as part of its national revolution and launch a community development plan of its own, Kiều Công Cung wanted to be sure it would adhere to his design and that the Special Commissariat for Civic Action would be its guiding force (90-91 and 94-95). While the details are admittedly murky, given the spotty nature of the documentary record, it is quite clear from what information we do have that a power struggle occurred between Huỳnh Văn Diệm—the Director General of Planning within the Office of the Presidency, who had been tasked with developing a community development plan—and Kiều Công Cung over the direction community development would take in Vietnam (104-105, 129, 131-138 and 144-148). By 1958

¹ David Hunt, *Vietnam's Southern Revolution: From Peasant Insurrection to Total War* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2008), 15.

² David Elliott, *The Vietnamese War: Revolution and Social Change in the Mekong Delta, 1930-1975*, 2 vols. (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 2003) and Hunt, *Vietnam's Southern Revolution*.

³ Jeffrey Race, *War Comes to Long An: Revolutionary Conflict in a Vietnamese Province* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 151.

⁴ Rufus Phillips, *Why Vietnam Matters: An Eyewitness Account of Lessons Not Learned* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2008), 74-76.

Kiều Công Cung ultimately prevailed and began implementing his own community development plan later that year (148-161). Unfortunately, due to the limitations of the material available in Hồ Chí Minh City, and the fact that Kiều Công Cung's untimely death in 1960 precluded any chance of him recording his memoirs, we still cannot get his own perspective of what was driving him.

How was the Civic Action program extended out into the countryside? The intention to extend Civic Action beyond the southern provinces into central Vietnam and the Highlands was evident from the first major reorganization of the Special Commissariat in November 1955—if not before—when Ngô Đình Diệm made it a permanent government organ (50-51). However, it was not actually expanded at that time due to a lack of resources (58). It was not until April 1956, when the Civic Action teams were reorganized into smaller groups to maximize the reach of the cadres into the countryside, a move which allowed the Special Commissariat to broaden its presence, that Civic Action teams began to appear in the Central Highlands (75-80). While Catton is right that “we just do not have the kind of records” necessary to “penetrate the veil” shrouding the deliberations over the pace of Civic Action's expansion, the decision over when to broaden the reach of the Special Commissariat appears to have been based on feasibility. Catton's suggestion that the initial reason not to commit Civic Action cadres to the region was the influence of Diệm's younger brother Ngô Đình Can is certainly plausible. As Edward Miller has demonstrated, Ngô Đình Can was the political authority in central Vietnam which, occasionally, put him at odds with his brothers, and this may very well have played a role in the government's initial decision not to extend Civic Action into central Vietnam.⁵ However, based on the Special Commissariat's chronic shortage in manpower and funding, the more likely explanation is that it simply was not in a position to start sending cadres into the Highland provinces until the April 1956 reorganization.

Finally, Catton asks where I assign “responsibility for Diem's ‘lost revolution.’” Was Diệm's ambition to fashion a viable state out of South Vietnam doomed from the start due to the insurmountable obstacles that were a legacy of Vietnam's colonial past, or do I believe that the program could have succeeded with more funding and manpower and less association with the other ill-fated, reactionary, and nefarious aspects of the regime? Any perceived ambivalence on this matter is a result of trying to avoid a deterministic narrative that contends that Civic Action's failure was a foregone conclusion while demonstrating that its undoing was solely a result of factors found within South Vietnam. Diệm's nation-building program was far too ambitious for an organization like Civic Action to realize on its own, particularly given the circumstances it faced in the 1950s. Quite simply, the Republic of Vietnam did not have the financial or technical resources required to provide for this program. This impeded its ability to address the perennial manpower shortage that prevented it from reaching the countryside as widely and deeply as was necessary. Then, toward the end of the decade, as the insurgency grew more intense, the cadres that were active proved unable to keep up with the increasingly violent resistance they faced in the countryside. Their reach became even more circumscribed. Even with a far less reactionary regime, it would have been extremely idealistic to believe that the ideological assumptions underpinning the program—Personalism—and their manifestation in community development, which required South Vietnam's village population volunteering their time, energy and resources to Diệm's nation-building effort, would resonate with the peasantry. The tenets of Personalism were far too convoluted to reverberate with a portion of the population which probably just wanted to be left alone, and it would be naïve to believe that those living at subsistence level would be willing to sacrifice their own self-interest to embrace community development.

To close, I would like to briefly address one final point raised by Nguyen-Marshall. In her review she states she would have liked “a more detailed comparative analysis” with other developmental projects being pursued by recently decolonized states. The point is well-taken. Not only would it continue to broaden our understanding of how the forces of decolonization intersected with the Cold War in the Global South, but a comparative study that examines nation-building projects and the exchange of ideas between Vietnam and other newly emerging states potentially offers us a means to offset some of the analytical challenges posed by limited archival collections.

⁵ Edward Miller, *Misalliance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and the Fate of South Vietnam* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), 42, 47, 48 and 256-267.