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Introduction by Gary R. Hess

**Jessica Chapman. *Cauldron of Resistance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and 1950s Southern Vietnam.*** Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013. ISBN: 978-0-8014-5061-7 (hardcover, \$39.95).

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## Contents

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Introduction by Gary R. Hess, Bowling Green University .....	2
Review by James M. Carter, Drew University .....	5
Review by Scott Laderman, University of Minnesota, Duluth .....	7
Review by Geoffrey C. Stewart, Western University .....	10
Author's Response by Jessica M. Chapman, Williams College .....	14

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Introduction by Gary R. Hess, Bowling Green University

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Jessica M. Chapman contends that the political struggles within southern Vietnam during the early decades of the twentieth century decisively shaped the context of the American effort to establish a non-communist government in the southern half of the partitioned Vietnam of 1954. Conventional historical analysis based on the Cold War construct has centered on the American-supported government of Ngo Dinh Diem and marginalized competing nationalist groups, notably the Hoa Hao, Cao Dai, and Binh Xuyen. Based on her extensive research in Vietnamese, French, and American archives, Chapman suggests that *Cauldron of Resistance* makes four important arguments: first, that the Hoa Hao, Cao Dai, and Binh Xuyen – which she insists need to be identified as “political-religious organizations” not as “sects”—had deep roots with national objectives, dominated much of southern Vietnam, and enjoyed strong popular allegiances; second, that Diem during his first two years in power (1954-56) concentrated on the “threat” of the political-religious organizations, which were linked in government propaganda to the French and the communists as internal enemies, to justify building an oppressive and authoritarian state; third, that the United States uncritically accepted Diem’s contention that one-party rule was necessary for stability and legitimacy, thus alienating the important non-communist organizations which were denied any influence in the South Vietnamese government; and fourth, that the repressive tactics of the Diem government, that were rationalized in the name of nationalism in the guise of ‘personalism,’ generated widespread opposition that culminated in the formation of the National Liberation Front.

The reviewers find *Cauldron of Resistance* to be a significant contribution to the Vietnam-centered scholarship on the history of American involvement in that country, but question whether Chapman’s interpretation may be overstated. Since the first of her arguments is fundamental, her act of giving agency to the three political-religious organizations commands the most attention. As Geoffrey Stewart and Scott Laderman note, the effort to understand Vietnamese political movements of the early twentieth century as part of Vietnamese tradition and a regional search for modernity builds on the work of Mark Bradley and Seth Jacobs, among others. Stewart praises Chapman’s detailed analysis of the anti-colonial struggles in what she labels the “wild south” of the 1920s and 1930s, the shrewd political assessments and opportunism of Diem and the leadership of the three political-religious organizations during the First Indochina War, and, above all, the extent to which Diem capitalized on limits of the Cao Dai, Hoa Hao, and Binh Xuyen programs to justify his ‘personalism’ with its emphasis on moral authority. Laderman likewise is impressed by the “rich and comprehensive account of the southern Vietnamese political landscape” which, as Chapman makes clear, defies “sweeping generalizations about the political-religious groups.” This leads him to question whether the Cao Dai, Hoa Hao, and Binh Xuyen were truly nationalists, as Chapman avers. Chapman’s references to the Binh Xuyen’s priority to preserving its power and to the parochialism of the Cao Dai and Hoa Hao leave Laderman uncertain about their nationalist commitments. He also wonders how their followers responded to the decisions of the three groups’ leadership to collaborate with the Japanese and the French.

James Carter, while acknowledging Chapman's comprehensive treatment of the political developments in southern Vietnam, raises questions about her criticism of American perceptions and assumptions. Was the United States incorrect in assessing the Bao Dai, Hoa Hao, and Binh Xuyen as "gangsters and thugs . . . irrational and incapable of leadership?" Carter contends that the evidence to the contrary is sparse and that indeed Chapman characterizes the three groups as self-interested and preoccupied with narrow goals. The challenge, Carter underlines, is in determining their legitimacy. In short, he asks whether the Bao Dai, Hoa Hao, and Binh Xuyen could have, or should have, been co-opted into the effort to build a viable South Vietnam, as Chapman suggests. Carter's questions are related to reservations expressed by Stewart, who argues for a broader framework; he is concerned about how the nationalist discourse in southern Vietnam was related to that in other colonial areas and how Diem's personalism "fit" not only within the Vietnamese context but as an expression of Third World nationalist thought.

Stewart, Laderman, and Carter thus see *Cauldron of Resistance* as a significant work, one that is perhaps path-breaking in its history of southern Vietnamese political development. That Chapman's interpretation raises significant questions is, in many ways, a tribute to its forcefulness.

#### **Participants:**

**Jessica M. Chapman** is assistant professor of history at Williams College. She received her Ph.D. from the University of California, Santa Barbara in 2006. Her other publications include articles in *Diplomatic History* and the *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* and chapters in a number of edited volumes. She is currently researching a book on the international commodification of Kenyan runners in the post-colonial era.

**Gary R. Hess** is Emeritus Distinguished Research Professor of History at Bowling Green State University. Much of his scholarship focused on American relations with South and Southeast Asia, including the Vietnam War. His most recent book is *Vietnam: Explaining America's Lost War* (2008).

**James M. Carter** (Ph.D. University of Houston) is Chair of the History Department at Drew University and specializes in American foreign relations and the Vietnam War. His book *Inventing Vietnam: The United States and State Building, 1954-1968* was published by Cambridge University Press in 2008. He has also written articles on war profiteering in Vietnam and Iraq and the U.S. advisory effort in Vietnam, and he has published reviews and essays in *The Journal of Military History*, *Peace & Change*, *The Journal of American History*, *The Asia Times*, and the BBC. Currently he is working on an article on the politics of corruption and the black market in Vietnam during the 1960s.

**Scott Laderman**, an associate professor of history at the University of Minnesota, Duluth, is the author of *Tours of Vietnam: War, Travel Guides, and Memory* (Duke University Press, 2009) and the co-editor, with Edwin Martini, of *Four Decades On: Vietnam, the United States, and the Legacies of the Second Indochina War* (Duke University Press, 2013). He received his Ph.D. in American Studies from the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities, in

2005. His *Empire in Waves: A Political History of Surfing* is forthcoming from the University of California Press.

**Geoffrey C. Stewart** is assistant professor of history at Western University. His research interests include America in the World, Vietnamese history and international relations. He is the author of “Hearts, Minds and Cong Dan Vu: The Special Commissariat for Civic Action and Nation-Building in Ngo Dinh Diem’s Vietnam, 1955-1957” which appears in the fall 2011 edition of the *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*. He has recently completed a manuscript that traces the rise and fall of the Special Commissariat for Civic Action as a vehicle for nation-building in Ngo Dinh Diem’s Vietnam and is currently working on a project that will look at the American relationship with the Diem regime from an international perspective.

Review by James M. Carter, Drew University

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The term 'Viet Cong' has undoubtedly brought about more confusion than clarity over the many decades of its usage. A pejorative invented to describe the frustratingly complex reality in southern Vietnam during the War, it continues to bedevil down to the present. My own students often fall back on it like a crutch to describe the 'enemy,' despite having been warned of such tendencies. In short, the still widely-used term conceals far more than it explains. And, as Richard Nixon might have said, its use would be easy, but it would be wrong.

*Cauldron of Resistance* is a welcome attempt to clear some of the confusion and fog and actually explain the varied forces that were vying for influence and power in Vietnam during a slice of the 1950s, that is, well before the United States decided to escalate to wider war. The author singles out the well-known Cao Dai, Hoa Hao, and Binh Xuyen, unifying them under the term "politico-religious groups" [4-5] of resistance in southern Vietnam. Her contention is that these groups had power, influence, and political ambition, and that the Americans too readily dismissed them in aiding Ngo Dinh Diem to build his regime and consolidate his own power. In the process of doing this, of course, the United States actively aided Diem in suppressing all rivals to power.

For the most part, the author's narrative of these events is a fairly standard treatment. The dilemma for the United States was obvious: in propping up one leader, resistance would emerge from other power brokers. In order to prevent instability, those others would have to be quieted and suppressed. The result was the slow but steady militarization of an increasingly authoritarian regime presided over by Ngo Dinh Diem. Once he was in place, the United States and Diem relied upon each other in an uneasy and dangerous relationship to simply maintain the status quo and eliminate any possible alternatives.

Undoubtedly, the current study provides greater and welcome detail on the various nationalist elements in and around southern Vietnam that became the victims of American heavy-handedness and Diem's dictatorship. For instance, we learn something of the extent to which the various "politico-religious" groups mentioned above grew organically out of a Vietnamese context. We learn more about their collective nationalist aspirations, and of their own efforts to navigate the fractious environment of the late colonial period. They deftly alternated between aligning their views with the French when they appeared to be in charge and shifted to America and its Cold War agenda in 1954 when that nation appeared on the scene.

Despite all efforts, the United States opted to prop up Ngo Dinh Diem as the only sufficiently anti-communist nationalist willing to carry out America's cold-war ambitions for Southeast Asia. The trajectory of this relationship was mostly predictable: the more the U.S. committed to Diem's regime, the more he required of the U.S. in material support to beat back any and all resistance—including those "politico-religious groups," which were termed 'Viet Cong.' Terming all opposition as 'Viet Cong' certainly simplified matters in the cold-war context. And it also no doubt reflected American ignorance and arrogance. The

point Chapman emphasizes, though, is that doing so also blindly eliminated (better) alternatives that would have yielded something better for Vietnam, better for the United States, and better for the world than what actually happened.

On this point, I am not entirely convinced. First, the author repeatedly suggests that the United States was in error in assuming the ‘politico-religious groups’ were merely gangsters and thugs, and that they were irrational and incapable of leadership. She also suggests that historians have repeated this criticism. Of course, she is absolutely correct to point out this theme in the vast majority of the historical literature. What I do not see is a counter argument, aside from cursory comments such that the Binh Xuyen were “scandalized” by the violence employed by the communists, or that the various politico-religious groups “redoubled their efforts to assert their political relevance” (32, 66). I would like to have seen more on this point. Despite the author’s effort to portray these various groups and individuals in a different light, I get the impression that they were not at all in league, spent a great deal of time bickering, did not have a unified agenda, and were concerned chiefly with the short-term goals of survival and the protection of their own piece of the pie (64-7).

My second point has to do with the existence of ‘South’ Vietnam in the first place. Although not a central focus of the study, it is nonetheless present throughout. For instance, the author accepts that there was a ‘South’ Vietnam—a separate nation below the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel, and does so explicitly in the text by using the term “South Vietnam,” in a context that occurred years prior to the Geneva Conference decision to establish the temporary demilitarized zone. In doing so, this also seems to establish the parameters within which the various nationalists are discussed. For instance, the ‘politico-religious groups’ of southern Vietnam are the non-communist alternative that was crushed by the United States and Ngo Dinh Diem. They are the lost opportunity. The Viet Minh, on the other hand, are not really included in the accounting of nationalist forces opposing Diem and the United States. They are the ‘communist foes.’ In concluding, Chapman is clear: the ‘politico-religious groups’ “might have been exploited to shore up the Saigon government against encroachment from its northern neighbor or, at the very least, appeased sufficiently to make the communist task of organizing a largely native southern insurgency against the RVN more difficult” (197). The trouble comes in deciding who is legitimate and who is not, in creating and perpetuating boundaries, frameworks, and borders. Why is a somewhat arbitrary creation such as ‘politico-religious groups’ any more legitimate or capable of leading than the Viet Minh, or Ngo Dinh Diem, for that matter?

*Competing Nationalisms*

It is fitting that Jessica Chapman begins her excellent new book with an anecdote – a wonderful story about the 1958 film version of Graham Greene’s *The Quiet American* – involving the Cao Dai Holy See. The Cao Dai temple in Tay Ninh has, since the 1990s, been one of the more popular attractions for foreigners in Vietnam, even if only as a colorful add-on to day-trip tours of the higher profile Cu Chi Tunnels. It has been more than a decade since I was last there, but I recall its being presented as a strangely ahistorical place. Guides would say something about the Cao Dai faith being syncretic, and there would be references to Victor Hugo and Sun Yat-sen, but I do not believe there was anything about its substantial role as a political force in mid-twentieth-century Vietnam. Those familiar with *The Quiet American* might have gotten some inkling of the political significance of Cao Dai adherents, but how many foreign tourists today have actually seen or read that dusty relic of Cold War culture, including its 2002 filmic remake? And the absence goes beyond day trippers to Tay Ninh. Scholarship on the French and American wars is often surprisingly muted on contemporary Cao Dai history.

Thankfully, we now have Chapman’s work to fill this lacuna. *Cauldron of Resistance* excavates the important role played by three politico-religious groups during the era of American ascendancy: the Cao Dai and Hoa Hao religious organizations, both of which fielded armies of thousands, and the Binh Xuyen, the well-armed southern criminal syndicate that ran Saigon’s gambling and prostitution rings and for some time its police and security agency. As its subtitle indicates, *Cauldron of Resistance* is a study of the southern political leader Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and the politics of the south. But departing from most other scholarship on the 1950s, which has tended to focus mostly on Diem, the United States, and the Viet Minh and National Liberation Front, Chapman’s conceptualization of southern politics is simultaneously narrower and more expansive. The communist-led revolutionaries do show up in her book, but they do so more as explanatory context than as a principal object of study. Chapman instead emphasizes the domestic competition between Diem and the politico-religious organizations that, she argues, were his major political adversaries in the mid-1950s.

It is a challenge to write about entities for which relatively few primary sources either exist or are available to scholars. Judging from her endnotes, many of those sources that are available are documents generated by the two Western powers that most obviously sought to shape Vietnamese politics during the Bao Dai and Diem eras: France and the United States. But Chapman’s research has moved beyond that of many other scholars of the transition from French to American patronage. Demonstrating impressive linguistic skills, she mined not only the relevant French and American archives but, notably, also those of Vietnam. Chapman is of course aware of the politics of some of her materials, including the racist assumptions that, at least in the French and American cases, underlay their creation. Building on the work of scholars such as Mark Bradley and Seth Jacobs, she

expertly spotlights how these assumptions colored a number of reports transmitted to Paris and Washington.<sup>1</sup>

What emerges from her research is a rich and comprehensive account of the southern Vietnamese political landscape that found Diem competing with the Cao Dai, Hoa Hao, and Binh Xuyen for French and/or American support during the 1950s. By taking seriously the notion that the politico-religious groups were more than just a speed bump on Diem's drive to power, Chapman provides readers with a great deal. She reveals, for instance, just how firmly established and influential these organizations were in shaping southern politics, particularly in light of the relative weakness of the Viet Minh in the south. She convincingly argues, moreover, that the organizations were in considerable part the reason Diem first developed his instruments of repression. Indeed, the brutal policies the southern leader pursued in attempting to neutralize the politico-religious organizations helped to generate much of the resistance to his regime that would, in 1960, formally coalesce in the National Liberation Front. By foregrounding southern Vietnamese politics rather than the machinations of the United States, Chapman forces us to reconsider what we thought we knew about the origins of America's Vietnam war.

One thing that becomes clear from *Cauldron of Resistance* is that sweeping generalizations about the politico-religious groups are not possible. While only two were religious, all three were factionalized and, more often than not, anti-Communist. That "more often than not" is significant, as it hints at a question that some readers may, like me, find themselves asking: How do we define Vietnamese nationalism? This is a question that has troubled scholars and partisans of the Vietnam War for years. Probably the most enduring dispute has centered on whether Ho Chi Minh was a nationalist or a Communist. As Chapman rightly notes, most scholars have "reached the conclusion that he was both, that the duality posed no contradiction" (197). Moreover, we are now, I trust, past the point of debating whether Ngo Dinh Diem was a nationalist or a puppet doing America's bidding. *My-Diem* (America-Diem) was about as explosive a slur as could be leveled at the southern dictator during the American war. The evidence, however, is quite clear that he was not simply Washington's stooge. His regime may have relied on American support and shared certain American objectives, but it is also clear that Diem pursued – often in an intensely stubborn manner – a vision of Vietnamese modernization that was, yes, corrupt and brutal, but also deeply rooted in the personalist and anti-Communist beliefs that he believed were best suited for the state-building project he undertook with American backing.<sup>2</sup>

So what about the Cao Dai, Hoa Hao, and Binh Xuyen? Chapman refers to them as nationalists in her book, and there are certainly good reasons for doing so. Still, the

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Philip Bradley, *Imagining Vietnam and America: The Making of Postcolonial Vietnam, 1919-1950* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Seth Jacobs, *America's Miracle Man in Vietnam: Ngo Dinh Diem, Religion, Race, and U.S. Intervention in Southeast Asia* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2004).

<sup>2</sup> Especially significant in this regard is Ed Miller's recently published *Misalliance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and the Fate of South Vietnam* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2013).

designation leaves me a bit uneasy. These were, after all, groups that in multiple ways collaborated with the colonialists and occupiers of their homeland. They were for years on the Japanese and French payrolls. They encouraged support for Bao Dai when he was widely viewed as a figurehead for French colonial interests but was more amenable than Diem to including them in his government. Some members of the groups shifted their support to Diem when he offered sufficiently large bribes. And, as Chapman so well shows, the leadership of the three organizations repeatedly attempted to win Washington's support as the Americans began inheriting the French imperial project in the 1950s. In other words, the picture that emerges of the politico-religious groups, or at least their dominant factions, is one of crass opportunism. Chapman notes as much of the Binh Xuyen and its leader Bay Vien, for instance: they "were motivated largely by the less-than-lofty ambitions of protecting and enhancing their own wealth and power" (22). Elsewhere she refers to the Cao Dai and Hoa Hao's "more parochial motives to retain and expand their own power" in their dealings with Ngo Dinh Diem (84). All of which raises a question: Is there a point at which we should cease referring to collaborators and opportunists as nationalists? This is, to be sure, a complicated issue. Diem worked with the Americans and relied on American support, while the government in Hanoi was on the receiving end of Chinese and Soviet largesse. There was, in other words, opportunism of various sorts on all sides. But the cases of Diem and the DRV strike me as being quite different from those of the Cao Dai, Hoa Hao, and Binh Xuyen. Or am I mistaken?

One related set of questions with which I was left may be impossible to answer. Chapman's admirable research in Vietnamese, French, and American sources allows us to see the maneuvering of various leaders of the politico-religious organizations with each other, with Diem, and with the outside powers. But what was happening at the grassroots? How, for example, did the members of the groups feel about their leaders' decision to collaborate with the Japanese and the French? When the three organizations signed military conventions with France in 1947 and 1948 – the Cao Dai even pledged "loyal collaboration" (35) – what was the response of those who were not in leadership positions? Are there sources – internal documents, interviews, memoirs, press accounts – that shed light on potential dissent within the organizations?

Jessica Chapman has written a fundamentally important book. If earlier accounts of the 1950s have focused overwhelmingly on Paris and/or Washington and treated Ngo Dinh Diem, Bao Dai, and the communist-led revolutionaries as alone embodying the competing political aspirations of the Vietnamese, *Cauldron of Resistance* has forced us to look more sharply at the political milieu on the ground in southern Vietnam. What we see is a messy but fascinating world of internal strife, deal-making, and brutal repression that had major consequences for U.S. foreign policy. Chapman's book never loses sight of the international dimension, but it rounds out the global history of the Vietnam Wars in original and productive ways. This is required reading.

Jessica Chapman's book, *Cauldron of Resistance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and 1950s Southern Vietnam*, is an important addition to the new body of literature that has emerged on the Vietnam Conflict in the past two decades.<sup>1</sup> It skillfully uses sources from a variety of archives in France, the United States and Vietnam to explore the various political and religious rivals faced by the Diem regime in 1950s southern Vietnam—making it a truly international history of South Vietnamese president Ngo Dinh Diem's efforts to consolidate his hold on power. In doing so, it privileges South Vietnamese perspectives over those of the Western powers—namely the United States—providing much needed agency to the indigenous actors in their struggle to establish what *they* perceived to be a viable, independent and modern South Vietnamese state.

As has been well-documented by the recent literature on the Vietnam conflict, access to Vietnamese archives has changed the way we, as scholars, can now look at the war.<sup>2</sup> No longer do we need to rely solely on Western sources, particularly documents from American and French archives, but we can now employ Vietnamese language material to provide a Vietnamese voice to the history of the Vietnamese struggle for independence. *Cauldron of Resistance* continues this trend. Jessica Chapman consults a variety of sources from National Archives Number 2 and the General Sciences Library in Ho Chi Minh City to explore the domestic political milieu in Saigon during the pivotal years of 1953-1956 when the French withdrew their military forces from Vietnam and handed the administrative reins over to Ngo Dinh Diem's fledgling government. Chapman uses this material to further recent scholarship on the First Republic of Vietnam<sup>3</sup> by looking beyond Diem's efforts to establish an independent republic in the southern half of Vietnam and exploring the social and political aims of the groups that constituted his largest political rivals in the early stages of his leadership: the Hoa Hao and Cao Dai religious organizations and the Binh Xuyen crime syndicate. Speaking from experience, negotiating the Vietnamese archives is no simple task. Collections are incomplete, and access to certain material deemed

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<sup>1</sup> See for example, Robert K. Brigham, *Guerrilla Diplomacy: The NLF's Foreign Relations and the Viet Nam War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998); Mark Philip Bradley, *Imagining Vietnam and America: The Making of Postcolonial Vietnam, 1919-1950* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Philip E. Catton, *Diem's Final Failure: Prelude to America's War in Vietnam* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2002); Pierre Asselin, *A Bitter Peace: Washington, Hanoi, and the Making of the Paris Agreement* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press); and Lien-Hang T. Nguyen, *Hanoi's War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> See Mark Bradley and Robert K. Brigham, "Vietnamese Archives and Scholarship on the Cold War Period: Two Reports," Cold War International History Project (CWIHP) Working Paper #7 (Washington, DC, September 1993); and Matthew Masur and Edward Miller, "Saigon Revisited: Researching South Vietnam's Republican Era (1954-1975) at Archives and Libraries in Ho Chi Minh City," CWIHP (September 5, 2006).

<sup>3</sup> For the sake of this review, the First Republic of Vietnam refers to the period of Ngo Dinh Diem's leadership following his ascension to the premiership of the State of Vietnam in July 1954 and lasting until his death in November 1963.

politically sensitive by the government in Hanoi may be restricted. Chapman does a wonderful job of internationalizing her research to incorporate documents and texts housed in the French archives at Aix-en-Provence and in Paris, the Eisenhower presidential library in Kansas, the Hoover Institution at Stanford University, and the National Archives and Records Administration in College Park, Maryland, among other places, to fill in the gaps in the material that is available in Ho Chi Minh City and provide a more complete accounting of the various non-communist alternatives that existed to Diem's vision of a post-colonial Vietnam.

It is by including these alternative perspectives that Chapman's work really shines. This enables her to continue to push the scholarship of the origins of the Vietnam conflict away from the American Cold War perspective which has dominated much of the early literature and demonstrate that local social and political concerns drove the burgeoning conflict in South Vietnam at this time as much—if not more so—than the geopolitical concerns of Paris and Washington, and to a lesser extent Moscow and Beijing. By giving agency to the non-communist groups competing with Diem for the political allegiance of the South Vietnamese people, *Cauldron of Resistance* provides its most significant contribution to the literature of the Diem regime. It does so in three ways.

First, by rooting her discussion of the origins of the Hoa Hao and Cao Dai in the anticolonial struggles of Vietnam's "wild south" between the 1920s and 1940s, Chapman indicates that these groups had, at the very least, a kernel of their own vision of what should constitute a socially just, independent Vietnamese state well before Ngo Dinh Diem's rise to power (15-16). Chapman contends that once the possibility of Vietnamese independence became a reality at the Geneva Conference in 1954, these ideas had "crystallized" as "political platforms emphasizing their commitments to fighting communism, to modernizing the country's infrastructure and political system, and to liberating the country from outside control" (66). She places these renderings of an independent Vietnam in opposition to those that were being promoted by members of the Viet Minh and Diem's government. In doing so, she situates the religious organizations in what Mark Bradley calls "a revolutionary war of ideas over the vision that should guide Vietnamese society into the post-colonial future"<sup>4</sup>—in other words, the struggle for modernity that was occurring in Vietnam in the wake of the failed French imperial project in Indochina. To take the argument further, and include the anticolonial position of the Binh Xuyen—hardly the purveyors of social justice that the Cao Dai and Hoa Hao could claim to be—this line of reasoning suggests that these groups were also part of a much broader struggle against imperialism that was occurring across the region. It would be interesting to compare the ideological and philosophical underpinnings of these groups in South Vietnam with other anticolonial syncretic or millenarian clusters in neighbouring states like Burma, Malaya or the Indonesian archipelago and place the struggle over what a modern Vietnamese state could look like into a broader Southeast Asian context.

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<sup>4</sup> Mark Philip Bradley, *Vietnam at War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 2.

Second, Chapman demonstrates that members of each organization—the Cao Dai, Hoa Hao, and Binh Xuyen—were quite aware of how much potential for political gain the international climate of the Cold War offered them. When vying for power with Ngo Dinh Diem in 1954, each group couched its platform in opposition to the “three social ills” of colonialism, feudalism, and communism, which, Chapman notes, have been intimately connected with Diem, but in reality are part of a much broader anticolonial discourse that had been occurring in Vietnam since the 1920s and 1930s (66). According to Chapman, this language was not chosen simply to solidify their nationalist and anticommunist credentials in the contests against Diem and the Viet Minh; it was also intended to acquire American support (62). With the precipitous decline of the French position in Indochina at the end of the First Indochina War, the politico-religious leaders were quite conscious that the United States government would replace the French as the principle backers of a non-communist government in Saigon. As Chapman shows, the leaders of the Cao Dai, Hoa Hao, and Binh Xuyen believed if they were to have any chance of heading such a government, they would require American “sanction” (60). Given the American emphasis on containing communism in Asia at the midpoint of the twentieth century following the ‘loss’ of China and outbreak of hostilities on the Korean peninsula, this meant promoting a developmental program with a deliberately anticommunist agenda.

Third, in what constitutes the book’s greatest contribution to scholarship on the Diem regime, Chapman argues that the Cao Dai, Hoa Hao, and Binh Xuyen provided Diem with a vehicle to articulate his own vision of a non-communist postcolonial Vietnam. This Vietnamese state would be founded by a regime that brought not just “political and military stability, but also moral order” (117). According to Chapman, Diem used various official and unofficial government organs to demonize the leaders of the politico-religious groups as dangerous opponents of his regime, while extolling his own personal virtues (and those of a ‘martyred’ ally) as an example of model citizenship that the South Vietnamese people should emulate. Not only does Chapman contend that this helped Diem to consolidate his hold on power, but she convincingly demonstrates how this enabled Diem to lay out his conception of a “national revolution” to “lead the country toward modernity, independence, and reunification” (118). At the heart of this revolution was the philosophy of Personalism, articulated by the thinker Emmanuel Mounier and other humanist philosophers during the interwar period in France. This dense and idiosyncratic philosophy has been at the heart of many recent analyses of the First Republic.<sup>5</sup> Chapman makes an excellent contribution to the works of these scholars with her own account of how Diem conceived of translating his vision of a “personalist democracy”—one “that promoted a stable and satisfying life for its citizens” while keeping the people removed from “the arena of political engagement”—into a concrete national identity that rested on a citizenry that exhibited upstanding “personal conduct and communal responsibility” (122).

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<sup>5</sup> See for example, Catton, 41-50; Edward Miller, “Vision, Power and Agency: The Ascent of Ngo Dinh Diem, 1945-1954,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 35(3) (October 2004), 448-450; and Geoffrey C. Stewart, “Hearts, Minds and Cong Dan Vu: The Special Commissariat for Civic Action and Nation-Building in Ngo Dinh Diem’s Vietnam, 1955-1957,” *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 6(3) (Fall 2011), 73-74.

Each of these three contributions to the scholarship on the First Republic of Vietnam demonstrates that alternative visions of modernity existed in South Vietnam during the 1950s, and that the political situation was fluid. Various stakeholders were competing with one another for power. Until Diem vanquished his political and religious foes in 1955, the viability of his regime was very much in question. Up to this point, proving to the Americans that he would be worthy of the support that would be essential for the survival of his regime was contingent on local South Vietnamese realities which had very little to do with the global Cold War.

These realities, particularly the different, and competing, formulas for promoting social justice, self-determination, and national identity, were, however, part of the transnational phenomenon of decolonization. By bringing them to light and identifying them as constituent parts of the various conceptions of modernity at play in southern Vietnam, *Cauldron of Resistance* points to broader questions which should be the focus of future inquiry. First, Chapman argues the politico-religious organizations' commitment to modernizing Vietnam's "infrastructure and political system" was part of a larger discourse about "liberating Vietnam from imperialist aggression and transforming society into one capable of surviving autonomously and competing in the modern world" (66). Where does this national discourse fit into the broader transnational discourse about modernity that was occurring across the decolonizing world? How do the ideas of political and religious leaders about community, nationalism, development, and even communism compare with those of their counterparts in other colonial states? Second, where does Ngo Dinh Diem fit within this discourse? Was Diem simply another autocrat motivated by a deep-seated anticommunism or, with his promotion of moral rearmament, "ideal citizenship" and "personalist democracy" (122-123), should he be considered alongside other failed third-world nationalist revolutionaries? Finally, how does this change our perception of other revolutionary elements at play in South Vietnam, particularly the various groups that came to form the National Liberation Front? David Hunt has offered an excellent social history of the southern revolution in the Mekong Delta. He suggests that myriad conceptions of what it meant to be modern were at work among the individuals who would be labeled members of the NLF.<sup>6</sup> *Cauldron of Resistance* adds several other visions of Vietnam's future to the discussion and reinforces the contention that for the Vietnamese people, the Vietnam War was ultimately a struggle over whose conception of modernity would prevail.

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<sup>6</sup> David Hunt, *Vietnam's Southern Revolution: From Peasant Insurrection to Total War* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2008), 7-9.

Let me begin by thanking my colleagues Geoffrey Stewart, Scott Laderman, and James Carter for their thoughtful comments and critiques. I'm gratified that all three reviewers found something of value in *Cauldron of Resistance*, particularly concerning the ways that it uses a wide range of international archival materials to complicate our understanding of southern Vietnam's political sphere in the years leading up to America's War in Vietnam. Collectively, these reviewers have honed in on important questions about what it meant to be 'nationalist,' 'legitimate,' and even politically significant in the context of revolutionary Vietnam. My comments below will focus primarily on that common thread that runs throughout the three reviews, clarifying along the way what I see as a few misreadings of my arguments that are rooted, I suspect, in the ambiguity of the very term 'nationalist.'

Laderman raises most explicitly the question: "How do we define Vietnamese nationalism?" Laderman's question about how to designate the nationalist label is a good one, well worth engaging, and probably not to be settled here. He points out that debates over whether Ho Chi Minh was a nationalist or a communist, and whether Ngo Dinh Diem was a nationalist or an American puppet, have both been settled to the tune that each of these leaders was in his own way a nationalist. This is despite the connections with foreign governments, ideological rigidity, corruption, and tendencies to suppress dissent by brutal means that mar their legacies. Yet the extension of the term 'nationalist' to the Cao Dai, Hoa Hao, and Binh Xuyen seems, to him, a step too far. According to Laderman, their "crass opportunism" and lack of unity may be enough to overshadow entirely their political visions for the nation that Stewart describes as "alternative visions of modernity" resting at the heart of Vietnam's postcolonial struggle. Laderman argues that we should at least consider whether the tendencies of politico-religious organizations to collaborate with (or attempt to court) outside powers—including the French, the Japanese, and the Americans—undermined their nationalist claims in the context of Vietnam's decolonizing process. I am open to the suggestion that 'nationalist' may not be the best term to describe the nation-wide political platforms that these organizations put forth, but I would object to relegating them to a separate political and moral stratum than that occupied by Ho Chi Minh and Ngo Dinh Diem, as doing so would reify their marginalization as political forces in Vietnam's complex anticolonial milieu.

In any case, I'm not sure the distinction Laderman proposes drawing between the politico-religious organizations and the familiar figures of Ho Chi Minh and Ngo Dinh Diem holds up to close scrutiny. That these two leaders' machinations seem less crassly opportunistic (despite the good measure of crass opportunism displayed by both) could be explained by the simple fact that they succeeded in gaining favor with dominant foreign backers, obviating the need to maneuver quite as blatantly, and desperately, as did their challengers. And if that maneuvering by the politico-religious organizations was all in the name of gaining a say in national politics, whether for noble or self-serving reasons, how readily can we dismiss it? Had Cao Dai "Pope" Pham Cong Tac been the one selected to take the reins of power in Saigon after the Geneva Accords, I suspect historians would now be able to make

at least as good a case for him as a flawed nationalist with a narrow but sincere modernizing vision as some scholars now make for Ngo Dinh Diem. Crediting those securely in power—and thus possessing the means to enact a coherent political program, often by force backed by foreign aid—with nationalist credentials while denying the same to those struggling to oppose entrenched power by any means necessary seems rife with pitfalls.

It strikes me that debates over the definition of Vietnamese nationalism are based on the propensity among scholars of the Vietnam Wars to ascribe positive value judgments to the inherently value-neutral term ‘nationalist.’ In many other contexts, nationalism and nationalists are seen primarily as forces of fragmentation and purveyors of violence and oppression. Yet scholars of the Vietnam War often treat nationalism as something praiseworthy, honorable, redeeming, unifying, and maybe even pure. It sometimes seems as though the search for true nationalists in decolonizing Vietnam is really a search for ‘good guys,’ demanding that we vigilantly deny the moniker to the ‘bad guys.’ This may stem from the underlying self-reference that pervades American scholarship on the Vietnam Wars, as arguments about the true nationalism of various leaders seem to revolve around questions about whether the American War in Vietnam was necessary and justified—or at least understandable—or misguided at best and, at worst, neocolonial and criminal. But allowing those concerns to dominate our analysis of Vietnamese politics will prevent us from understanding that realm in all its complexity. Too much hand-wringing over who deserves the nationalist label threatens to distract attention from the full range of actors that argued for an independent Vietnam and angled to participate in the national government that followed, however venal and inchoate their motives may have been. The bottom line is that Vietnam comprised many politicized elements struggling to define Vietnam’s future, as Stewart rightly notes. While some may have been more or less savory than others—a judgment that seems likely to vary depending on one’s political perspective—the political environment in which they operated cannot be understood fully without considering the complex relationships and interactions among and between the lot.

The impulse to identify clear-cut heroes and villains in Vietnam’s wars for independence may underlie Carter’s mistaken impression that I have argued that the politico-religious organizations in question posed “(better) alternatives that would have yielded something better for the United States, and better for the world than what actually happened.” My point, in urging readers to take seriously the Cao Dai, Hoa Hao, and Binh Xuyen as national political actors, was decidedly not that they were “more legitimate or capable of leading than the Viet Minh, or Ngo Dinh Diem, for that matter.” Rather, my objective was to demonstrate that these organizations, often in tandem and sometimes alone, proffered nation-wide platforms, cast in patriotic terms and backed by widespread political influence and military force, with which any leader would have to contend if he hoped to establish a viable government in southern Vietnam (or comprising southern Vietnam) in the long term. As I argue in my conclusion, the objective of establishing a stable, legitimate non-communist state in the south of Vietnam would have been difficult to attain in that politically fractious region, even for a leader without the shortcomings that I attribute to Ngo Dinh Diem (200). By referring to the politico-religious groups as nationalists, I did not

intend to ascribe a value judgment, nor to imply that replacing Ngo Dinh Diem with these groups would have been the quick fix needed to stop communism in its tracks in Vietnam. That outcome was unlikely in any case, and to my mind not particularly desirable. In treating the Cao Dai, Hoa Hao, and Binh Xuyen as potent forces in southern Vietnam, and Ngo Dinh Diem's treatment of them as gravely consequential, I simply describe a political reality. What I do argue would have been better for the United States, for the Vietnamese, and for the world than what actually happened was for Washington to have recognized that political reality—how poorly the struggle within Vietnam conformed to its Cold War paradigm—and to have opted not to get involved in the long, protracted war that it chose to wage there.

I am frankly baffled by Carter's claim that I accept the existence of South Vietnam as a separate nation below the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel "by using the term 'South Vietnam,' in a context that occurred years prior to the Geneva Conference decision to establish the demilitarized zone." It is true that I accept the existence of a South Vietnamese state from the time it was established in July 1954 to the time communist forces toppled it in April 1975. One might question the legitimacy of that government and, as Carter does in his own work, its ability to survive without massive American assistance. Indeed, I tend to view Ngo Dinh Diem's government and those that followed as wanting for legitimacy and highly dependent. But it is fruitless to deny that the apparatus of the state existed, and that its leaders possessed powers to make and enforce laws, to command the armed forces, to regulate the economy, to control the press, and in so doing to suppress dissent and limit the parameters of possible political expression. The fact that the state's reality shaped the political possibilities south of the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel during those years is central to my examination of the southern Vietnamese political milieu after Ngo Dinh Diem took power. Carter is mistaken in his claim that I refer to an entity such as "South Vietnam" prior to the creation of that state in summer 1954. In fact, I was quite careful throughout the book to use that term only when referring to the state over which Ngo Dinh Diem presided, and to use the regional designation "southern Vietnam" in all other cases. Indeed the use of the more cumbersome "1950s Southern Vietnam" rather than "1950s South Vietnam" in the subtitle reflects how important I regard the distinction between the region and the state. I cannot promise that readers will not be able to unearth an errant anachronistic reference to "South Vietnam" in the pages of the book, but I think the intent behind my use of the two terms "South Vietnam" and "southern Vietnam" is actually quite clear. The region of southern Vietnam clearly possessed unique cultural, political, and social characteristics that distinguished it within the larger geopolitical entity of Vietnam, and the contours of southern Vietnamese politics had a bearing on the course and outcome of Vietnam's wars for independence.

As all three reviewers note, there is more work to be done to flesh out the dynamics among the full range of revolutionary elements in southern Vietnam—often referred to by the shorthand "Viet Cong"—including but not limited to the politico-religious organizations and the communists. Laderman asks how rank-and-file members of the Cao Dai, Hoa Hao, and Binh Xuyen reacted to their leaders' machinations. And Stewart, brings up several ways in which it will be important for scholars in the future to look at political developments in southern Vietnam during this period not simply as products of regional particularities, but as part of a "broader transnational discourse about modernity that was

occurring across the decolonizing world.” These are all important questions, and I am thrilled to see that *Cauldron of Resistance* provoked three fine scholars to train their attention on issues that place Vietnamese and Southeast Asian perspectives, rather than America’s Cold War concerns, at the fore.

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