

CROSS-CURRENTS



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REVIEW ESSAY

Cauldron of Misalliances

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Edward Miller. *Misalliance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and the Fate of South Vietnam*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013. 432 pp. \$40 (cloth).

Jessica Chapman. *Cauldron of Resistance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and 1950s Southern Vietnam*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013. 296 pp. \$40 (cloth).

Just after midday on November 1, 1963, soldiers from the Army of the Republic of Vietnam, also called South Vietnam, filled the streets of Saigon. They surrounded the post office, the police headquarters, and other government buildings. A coup was under way. Ngô Đình Diệm, the president of the republic, and Ngô Đình Nhu, his brother and closest adviser, retreated to a bunker beneath the presidential palace. As events unfolded, Nhu became increasingly agitated, but Diệm calmly smoked and drank tea. He had survived an abortive coup three years earlier and an attempt on his life in 1957. But as afternoon became evening, Diệm was unable to reestablish order in Saigon. At around eight o'clock, he and his brother left the bunker through a side door and climbed into a waiting Citroën “Deux Chevaux.” The unassuming vehicle took the pair to a government-run youth activity center, where Diệm met the deputy mayor of Saigon, and then to the home of Ma Tuyen, a Chinese businessman and ally. When mutinous soldiers finally stormed the presidential palace on the following dawn, Diệm and Nhu were nowhere to be found. Hoping to secure safe passage out of Vietnam, Diệm revealed to the leaders of the coup that he and his brother were at the Church of Saint Francis Xavier in Chợ Lớn. A convoy of military vehicles

went to escort Diệm and Nhu to the headquarters of the Joint General Staff. But as they traveled through the streets of Saigon in the rear of an M113 armored personnel carrier, the soldiers transporting the pair shot and stabbed them.

For nine years, Diệm had led South Vietnam, aided and advised by his brother. With the assistance of the United States, he had tried to fashion a southern Vietnamese nation that was modern, democratic, and free. American presidents Dwight D. Eisenhower and John F. Kennedy had both supported him. Edward Lansdale, Wesley Fishel, Wolf Ladejinsky, and thousands of other American diplomats, soldiers, intelligence officers, social scientists, and aid experts provided Diệm's government with technical assistance. And South Vietnam received billions of dollars of military and economic assistance from the United States. But by November 1963, Diệm had lost the support of many of his people, crucial members of his own government, and the United States of America. Why?

In *Misalliance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and the Fate of South Vietnam*, Edward Miller argues that “nation-building ideas and agendas played central roles in the formation, evolution, and eventual undoing of Washington’s relationship with Diệm” (12). Nation building involved transforming South Vietnam into a “strong, stable, and prosperous society” (12). American and Vietnamese “ideas about nation building crucially affected the day-to-day functioning of the alliance” (12–13). But that alliance was never easy. The “Americans who went to South Vietnam after 1954 all too frequently found themselves adjusting, adapting, or discarding the nation-building plans and theories they had brought with them” (13). Such changes had to be made because Vietnamese social and political realities failed to conform to American plans and expectations. But very often, America’s South Vietnamese allies confounded such plans themselves. They “had their own ideas about how nation building should proceed” (13). Nation building in South Vietnam, Miller argues, was “a field of contest involving multiple American and Vietnamese agendas” (13). Modernization theory and positivist social science guided American nation-building agendas, while personalism, an opaque doctrine both antiliberal and anticommunist, guided Diệm.

Diệm and his American advisers diverged on many issues. They disagreed particularly sharply about how best to pursue development in the countryside. At the beginning of Diệm’s

premiership, landholdings in the countryside were concentrated in the hands of a small number of wealthy landowning families. Most of the rural population were tenant farmers who paid high rents and were perpetually in debt. Diệm's American advisers favored land redistribution. Diệm, however, believed that population resettlement was the key to transforming the countryside. Population resettlement would create economic prosperity by planting uncultivated lands with new crops. New settlements would help secure South Vietnam's borders with Laos and Cambodia and also create pockets of government support in otherwise hostile areas. The new settlements would become home to the personalist revolution, where the government could promote such values as mutual obligation and self-sufficiency. The first and arguably most successful resettlement project, known as the Cai San project, took place near the town of Long Xuyên in An Giang Province. But after a number of ambitious later initiatives, ending with the Strategic Hamlet Program in 1961, few of South Vietnam's rural inhabitants were better off. Indeed, no more than 10 percent of the rural population in South Vietnam became landowners as a result of Diệm's policies. Instead, the hasty and heavy-handed ways in which the government resettled people had left many disgruntled and disaffected with the regime.

The avenues the discontented could follow were narrow. Diệm took strong measures against potential rebellion and subversion. While he used propaganda and mass mobilization to gain the support of the rural population, he also relied heavily on coercion and punishment to quell protest and crush revolt. Many members of the communist-led Việt Minh had remained in the south after 1954 and led opposition to Diệm and his government. Government security forces arrested or killed thousands of communist cadres and other opponents. In May 1959, the government adopted Law 10/59, which created special military tribunals to investigate and pass judgment on anybody accused of murder, sabotage, or any "offense to national security." A combination of mass arrests, show trials, public beheadings, and summary executions generated fear and resentment across South Vietnam. Many South Vietnamese flocked to join the National Liberation Front (NLF), an organization created by the Vietnam Workers' Party in Hanoi to support insurrection in the south. The brutal approach of the South Vietnamese government helped foment the very insurgency it was supposed to prevent. In an open letter to Diệm on April 19, 1960, eighteen civilian political leaders condemned the lack of political freedom, harsh

security measures, and rural development policies in South Vietnam, among other things. Frustration with Diệm in the armed forces became so heated that three battalions of paratroopers staged a coup in November. In December, the American ambassador to Saigon, Elbridge Durbrow, reported a “serious undercurrent of skepticism” in Saigon. There was “widespread popular dissatisfaction” in South Vietnam because of the ongoing war and the government’s “heavy-handed methods of operation” (213).

Such methods did not abate. In 1963, Diệm used brutality to suppress an uprising among South Vietnam’s Buddhists. Buddhists had long experienced discrimination and bigotry from Catholic officials in the Diệm government. But tensions became particularly acute in Central Vietnam after Diệm’s brother Ngô Đình Thục became archbishop of Huế in 1960. Thục flaunted his authority and evangelized militantly, sometimes forcing people to convert to Catholicism. Buddhists resented the actions of Thục and his subordinates and the official favor shown to Catholics. They also opposed government policies that threatened the development of South Vietnam as a modern Buddhist nation. Open conflict between Buddhists and the government broke out on May 8, 1963. A crowd had gathered in the courtyard of the radio station at Huế to hear a special broadcast to mark Wesak Day, which commemorates the birth, enlightenment, and death of the Buddha. When the broadcast did not begin as expected, the crowd became angry and restless. Soldiers and police arrived to restore order. But there was pandemonium, and nine demonstrators were killed. The General Buddhist Association led months of protest against the regime. On June 11, the monk Thích Quảng Đức set himself ablaze on Lê Văn Duyệt Street in Saigon and brought global attention to the Buddhist cause in South Vietnam. There were further rallies, marches, suicides, and self-immolations. On August 20, the confrontation between Buddhists and the government reached a climax when government forces raided dozens of pagodas in Saigon, Huế, and Đà Nẵng and detained hundreds of Buddhists. Washington and other world capitals issued fierce condemnations of the South Vietnamese government.

By the fall of 1963, support for Diệm was waning in the United States and, indeed, in South Vietnam. On September 2, Walter Cronkite interviewed President Kennedy on CBS News. Kennedy criticized Diệm’s crackdown against the Buddhists as “very unwise” and as evidence that “the government has gotten out of touch with the people” (295). The president’s view was

shared by many senior members of his administration. Senator Mike Mansfield had been one of Diệm's earliest and most ardent supporters. But after visiting the country at the end of 1962, he found South Vietnam "less, not more stable" than when he had visited it in 1955. He also thought it "more removed from, rather than closer to, the achievement of popularly responsible and responsive government" (254). If the alliance between Diệm and the United States had deteriorated badly, so too had the alliance between Diệm and the people he governed, as American observers noted. By the fall of 1963, the welcoming crowds of Vietnamese and Chinese residents who greeted Diệm when he arrived in Saigon on June 25, 1954, had become angry groups of protesters, clamoring for his removal.

Diệm and his government are sharply drawn and sensitively shaded in *Misalliance*. But throughout the book, the people Diệm governed are left in the background, gray and undifferentiated. They are referred to as "the masses," "crowds," "mobs," "rural dwellers," "farmers," "highlanders," and "Buddhists," among other bland social aggregates. For Diệm and his American advisers, the people of South Vietnam were objects to be acted upon—resettled, indoctrinated, coerced, controlled, and made into productive citizens. They were treated as though they had no agency. They receive the same treatment in *Misalliance*. But the peoples of South Vietnam had projects and goals of their own. They pursued those goals in the context of overlapping social networks of mutuality and obligation. Notions of mutuality and obligation structured the relationships between landlords and tenants, employers and employees, clergy and laypeople, creditors and debtors, those who governed and those who were governed in South Vietnam. Such relationships defined people's identities and loyalties. But rapid economic change fueled by American aid, forced relocation, seemingly arbitrary violence or its threat, and official corruption eroded or destroyed many of these relationships in the countryside during Diệm's presidency. As a result, many people's loyalty to the government was eroded or destroyed. Large numbers of rural Vietnamese were increasingly unable to ensure the physical and economic security of their families or even to worship as they pleased under Diệm's rule. So they forged new relationships that allowed them to better pursue their goals and that engendered new loyalties. In many parts of South Vietnam, those relationships were with members of the NLF. The most important alliance between 1954 and 1963 may not have been that between Diệm and

the United States, but that between Diệm and the people of South Vietnam. The fundamental *misalliance* was between Diệm and his people.

In *Cauldron of Resistance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and 1950s Southern Vietnam*, Jessica Chapman seeks to understand just that misalliance. She argues that it began during Diệm's first two years of office. In opposition to Diệm and his government, the Hòa Hảo and Cao Đài religious organizations and the Bình Xuyên criminal syndicate “had national political ambitions and substantial power and influence” (5). As a consequence, Diệm “constructed his government and developed its most unpopular institutions and practices largely in an effort to neutralize” them (6). The United States too readily accepted that “authoritarian rule was necessary to quell chaos in Vietnam, and that such a government would be capable of generating popular legitimacy” (7). The “authoritarian state system and indiscriminate terror tactics” that Diệm established between 1954 and 1956 “generated the widespread opposition to his government that encouraged Hanoi to form the National Liberation Front” (8).

Diệm faced many challenges when he first arrived in South Vietnam at the end of June 1954. The leader of the national army, General Nguyễn Văn Hinh, was allied with the Hòa Hảo, Cao Đài, and Bình Xuyên, and refused to recognize Diệm's authority. The crisis was resolved only after Hinh resigned and fled to Paris. The Hòa Hảo, Cao Đài, and Bình Xuyên all had their own local bases of power and sought roles in the new national government. Together they established a United Front of Nationalist Forces to oppose Diệm and secure power. The confrontation culminated in a pitched battle at the end of April 1955 between the national army and Bình Xuyên forces, which ended with victory for the army. Diệm then had to eradicate the rump of the organizations that made up the United Front. He also felt that he had to remove the former emperor, Bảo Đại, as the chief of state of South Vietnam, which he did by engineering the outcome of the country's first referendum on October 23, 1955. Diệm used propaganda, violence and its threat, and corruption in dealing with all these problems. Yet these facts alone cannot explain why so many South Vietnamese, especially those in government positions and residents of Saigon, experienced the period from the Geneva Conference of 1954 to the formation of the NLF as “Six Years of Peace.” The repressiveness of the Diệm regime might have encouraged Hanoi to found the NLF in 1960, but Hanoi had goals beyond assisting

Vietnamese in the south. Similarly, the experience of repression cannot alone explain why many South Vietnamese joined the NLF. They had any number of motives. Some were coerced into joining. Others sought physical and economic security in the front. Still others joined because family, friends, neighbors, bosses, or fellow employees had joined the movement.

Understanding the conflict between Diệm and his rivals requires a more sophisticated picture of South Vietnamese society than *Cauldron of Resistance* portrays. Such a picture would depict the leaders and membership of the Hòa Hảo, Cao Đài, Bình Xuyên, and perhaps even the NLF in as much color as it does Diệm. This picture might be painted using captured documents in French and Vietnamese archives, as well as Vietnamese-language memoirs, pamphlets, periodicals, newspapers, and monographs. Such documents might make it possible to understand the motives of Diệm's opponents as they understood themselves instead of the ways Diệm and his allies understood them. A more sophisticated picture might reveal South Vietnamese society as more than "wild" (13, 14, 15, 32, 38), "almost anarchic" (70), or a "site of near anarchy" (74).

Cauldron of Resistance is wild in its own ways. In addition to persistent infelicities (such as referring to the Cao Đài, Hòa Hảo, and Bình Xuyên collectively as "politico-religious organizations"), there are a number of careless mistakes in the body text (such as "enslaving in them in a manner" (140)) and some phrases and formulations are repeated ("controlled one third of the territory and population below the seventeenth parallel," on pages 4 and 74, for example). Some items in the bibliography are incorrectly attributed (an article by Pascal Bourdeaux is said to have been written by Jérémy Jammes, for example, and the reference is garbled), while others are misspelled (the complete works of Pierre Mendès-France are cited as *Ouvres Completes*, rather than *Œuvres complètes*). But perhaps the most troubling errors are in the appendix of "Select Vietnamese Names with Diacritics." The preface states that "readers familiar with the Vietnamese language will notice the absence of diacritics and tone markers on Vietnamese words in the pages of this book." They have been excluded from the text "to render it more accessible to a wider range of readers. However, several important proper names, place names, and names of organizations appear with diacritics in an appendix" (ix). Unfortunately, the appendix is full of mistakes. The first appears on the second line: "Bảo Đại" is written as "Bảo Đạ." Three lines below, his cousin and prime minister, Prince Bửu Lộc, is entered in the

appendix as “Burr Loc.” “Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương” on the following line should read “Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương,” and “Nguyen,” later in the list, should read “Nguyễn,” to mention only four of many such errors. Greater care and craftsmanship would also render the book more accessible to a wider range of readers.

Both *Misalliance* and *Cauldron of Resistance* depict Ngô Đình Diệm with judiciousness and insight. However, if future historians are to understand better the rise and fall of his government, they will have to study the society that he governed with at least the same industry and diligence that these two books display.

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