

***Misalliance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and the Fate of South Vietnam.*** Edward Miller. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013, 432 pp., ISBN 978-06-74-07298-5.

EDWARD MILLER'S BOLD NEW BOOK is a tightly argued historiographical corrective that recuperates the overlooked nuances and dimensions of the political career of former president of the Republic of Vietnam (RVN), Ngo Dinh Diem and his alliance with the U.S. government. Using declassified French, American, and Vietnamese sources, Miller's historical revision contravenes many of the assumptions and conclusions of English-language scholarship on the subject.

Miller's attention to individual agency and contingency (personal decisions and accidents as responsible for historical change) is a response to the existing literature, which is rife with structural interpretations of the U.S.-Diem alliance. These interpretations conclude that; a) Diem was an anticommunist client caught in Cold War geopolitics; b) Diem was a "traditionalist" swept away by modernizing forces; c) U.S. support was a means to establish an international liberal economic order; d) American policymakers were preoccupied with racist and Orientalist assumptions. Echoing historian Fredrik Logevall, Miller argues that the problem with such structural explanations is that they present the U.S. government's actions in Vietnam as foregone conclusions.

In contrast, Miller presents a multivocal history that converges on the processes and ideas of nation-building. Conflicting approaches to nation-building encompass the Vietnamese and American voices in this history. Miller also distinguishes the high- and low-modernist approaches to nation-building that split the Americans between macro development versus communal village-level projects. He demonstrates that Americans were forced to adjust and abandon their nation-building ideas because of their inadequate understanding of Vietnamese social/political realities.

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The South Vietnamese had their own understandings of how nation-building should proceed. Miller pointedly portrays the Ngo brothers—Ngo Dinh Diem and Ngo Dinh Nhu—as political agents. While Colonel Edward Lansdale thought it necessary to “win hearts and minds” of the Vietnamese, Ngo Dinh Nhu believed that a right organization could inspire people to support it. Wesley Fishel—who headed the Michigan State University Advisory Group that trained South Vietnamese civil servants, civil guards, and police—advocated building coalitions and alliances. But Ngo Dinh Diem advocated a divide-and-conquer strategy. Wolf Ladejinsky, an advisor to the US AID Mission, supported land reform, while Ngo Dinh Diem called for rural resettlement.

In addition, Miller rejects the perception, held by Colonel Lansdale, that Diem was fumbling his political role. Miller argues that the Ngo brothers were neither naïve nor helpless, and had actually calculated and planned for their movement into executive power. As Miller’s book elucidates, Diem had long championed the building of a viable Third Force in Vietnamese society that would be distinct from both French colonialism and Viet Minh communism. By the 1930s, Ngo Dinh Nhu had come to espouse personalism, a strain of Catholic social thought that he encountered in the writings of Emmanuel Mounier. Against both the self-interested individualism of liberalism and the oppressive tendencies of Marxism’s suppression of personal identity through extreme focus on the collective, Mounier sought to define *la personne* beyond merely economic terms; he saw the human being in its dignified totality and advocated social policies that balanced material needs with “spiritual” considerations. Personalism became the Diem administration’s official doctrine, labeled as a form of revolution and a new way of addressing Vietnamese political and social issues. Hardly passive recipients of U.S. aid and transmitters of U.S. nation-building designs, the Ngo brothers had their own political vision for the regeneration of Vietnam.

Miller provides rich stories about Diem’s early political career, which may lead one to question the credibility of the extant Vietnamese- and

English-language literature on Diem. Given his long and conspicuous personal history in politics, what accounts for the putative neglect of Diem's agency vis-à-vis the U.S. in historical narratives of the U.S.-Diem alliance? Any biography of Diem should give accounts of his early career and nationalist initiatives so that it would turn out to be illogical for scholars to conclude that he was simply plucked from obscurity or installed in office by the United States in 1954. This book manifests the mastery of Miller's research, which proves that popular notions on this subject seem suddenly unthinkable.

With regard to Miller's theoretical framework, one thinks of the limitations of agency and contingency as a model to determine cause-effect relations. In moving from structure to agency, there should be a meeting point of the two, wherein one illuminates, not replaces, the other. In this spirit, a deeper discussion on French colonialism would have enriched the discussion of personalism and that of nation-building of the Republic of Vietnam. Too much attention to contingency is also problematic in terms of focus and scope because focusing on historical accidents and unpredictable circumstances and outcomes can spiral into incoherence without a tightly delimited set of actors and field of analysis. For this reason, Miller's book focuses too much on Ngo's personal life at the expense of the crucial historical questions. The book is poised to answer the question that Miller himself poses to the extant literature—"what explains the spectacular early triumphs and the equally spectacular demise of the Ngo Dinh Diem government?" (8). However, Miller only answers that "the rise and the fall of the U.S.-Diem relationship turned on the agency of particular American and Vietnamese individuals" (10). His answer is ultimately secondary to his primary agenda of historical revision regarding Diem.

In a narrative that privileges both agency and contingency, the actors must be limited, but if so the larger Vietnamese population inevitably becomes obscured. This limitation becomes a disadvantage when Miller concludes that, in addition to their unworkable sweep and scale, U.S. and RVN nation-building designs "were also undermined by numerous and

repeated U.S. and RVN failures to accommodate the diverse revolutionary aspirations which existed within South Vietnam and which resisted subordination to a single ideological formulation” (326). For this reason, despite the discussion on the ideas of nation-building of certain actors, the book fails to provide a true picture of the nation, which should necessarily include the people who comprise the history of its making.

Those seeking a radical history may critique that Miller ultimately provides a traditional historical narrative that once again centers on Great Men. This is a valid charge. But revisionist history is not necessarily radical history. In fact, it often avails of traditional methods precisely to destabilize the previously accepted assumptions and conclusions that resulted from those methods. Miller set out to provide a more pluralistic and contingent narrative of the U.S.-Diem alliance, and on these grounds he offers a startling, persuasive historiographical revision indeed.

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