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Introduction by David E. Anderson

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Introduction by David L. Anderson, California State University, Monterey Bay, and Naval Postgraduate School

Edward Miller's *Misalliance* is the most ambitious study to date of Ngo Dinh Diem, one of the central figures of the Vietnam War, and it comes at a time when the historiography on the war is in transition from primarily American-centered studies to more comparative and international histories. As a biography of Diem, the book uses an extensive array of Vietnamese and Western sources to craft as authentic a portrayal as possible of the man whom observers have variously described as a "porcelain Buddha," a "messiah without a message," "America's mandarin," and a "miracle man."¹ It has always been difficult to reconcile these descriptions, and Miller makes a serious effort to provide Diem his own identity and agency. He also seeks to analyze the "politics of nation building in South Vietnam" (16-17, 262) in order to provide the historical discussion of the rise and fall of the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) with a focus other than the themes of Cold-War containment or American neocolonialism. Nation building, of course, was often part of an American or Western agenda for Indochina, but in the hands of Miller, it becomes a Vietnamese vision of modernization advanced by Diem and his brother—and alter ego—Ngo Dinh Nhu. Whether or not Diem and Nhu can be separated historically is one of the subplots of their story, and Miller concludes that they were inseparable.

As the five excellent reviews that follow reveal, Ngo Dinh Diem continues to generate debate among historians. All of these reviewers applaud the depth of Miller's research and his assessments of previous scholarship on Diem, but they do not all agree with Miller's interpretation of this enigmatic figure. Tuong Vu terms the book "a major breakthrough" because the analysis does not begin with the presumption that the tragic fate of the RVN was predetermined. Christopher Goscha calls the book "a breath of fresh air" in the historiography on the war that has become stale with too many reiterations of the so-called orthodox and revisionist debate over whether Diem's American-backed regime in Vietnam was ever a viable alternative to the eventually victorious Democratic Republic of Vietnam. Philip Catton calls Miller's book a "long awaited and important contribution" because it frees this central Vietnamese actor from the "two dimensional" characterizations of him in other works. Catton and Sophie Quinn-Judge do not see this study as significantly departing from the orthodox-revisionist dialogue, but they agree that it places Diem, as it should, at the formative center of his nation. Catton sees much in Miller's study that is still close to the orthodox school, and, similarly, Quinn-Judge believes the study discounts both the Diem regime's inherent flaws and the Vietnam Workers Party's (VWP) strengths (themes inherent in the orthodox-revisionist debates). Gregory Daddis joins the others in their appreciation of Miller's portrait of Diem, not as an American puppet or hidebound traditionalist, but as a savvy politician. All the reviewers note approvingly that Miller's account gives Diem agency and with it a large measure of blame for what happened to his government. More than the others, Quinn-Judge detects in Miller's work somewhat of an

¹ George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975*, 4th ed. (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2002), 60-61; David L. Anderson, *Trapped by Success: The Eisenhower Administration and Vietnam, 1953-1961* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 47-48.

attempt to “rehabilitate Diem as a leader” in the course of trying to give the RVN president a bit of overdue credit for what he was attempting to create in Vietnam.

A key question that some of these reviewers address directly, and others imply, is whether it was ever possible for the Ngo family, regardless of their actual successes and failures, to have created a viable alternative in Vietnam to the ultimately victorious VWP led by Ho Chi Minh and eventually by Le Duan. Most Western observers of Diem, and the historical literature based upon their observations, have tended to write him off as out of touch with the political needs of post-colonial Vietnam. George Herring summarized these assessments of Diem: “He had no blueprint for building a modern nation or mobilizing his people.” In short, Herring notes, Diem “lacked the charisma” of his chief national rival, Ho Chi Minh.²

There are other recent and important works on Diem’s regime, including those by Catton, Seth Jacobs, Jessica Chapman, and Katherine Statler, but Miller’s goal in this particular volume is to give as fair of an appraisal as possible of the man himself, who ultimately failed to realize his vision.³ There is much more to this book than simply a sympathetic account of Diem and even of his difficult-to-like brother. Miller seeks to create a new discussion around the issue of modernization—new from the Cold-War driven orthodox and revisionist debates over the American war. Those debates are more about Washington than Saigon, but the two capitals are not easily separated. Although Miller wants to understand the motives and plans of Diem and Nhu, he is actually quite critical of the brothers. Their own mistakes were fatal to them and the RVN. Miller does not diminish the errors the United States made in its intervention in Vietnam, and he concludes that Washington and Saigon were bound by common failings (18).

Miller’s research findings engage key points in the historiography and the historical narrative of the war. He pointedly addresses the findings of other historians on the sect crisis of 1955, the paratrooper coup of 1960, the Buddhist revolt of 1963, and the generals’ coup that resulted in the murders of Diem and Nhu. Miller’s critiques of other writings are judicious (to use Catton’s term), but he is quite decided on some points. For example, Miller concludes that John Paul Vann was wrong about the Diem regime on almost every point when the American self-appointed counterinsurgency expert decided that he knew more about Vietnam’s internal politics than did Diem and Nhu (252). Vann’s views over the

² Herring, *America’s Longest War*, 59.

³ Philip E. Catton, *Diem’s Final Failure: Prelude to America’s War in Vietnam* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002); Seth Jacobs, *America’s Miracle Man in Vietnam: Ngo Dinh Diem, Religion, Race, and U.S. Intervention in Southeast Asia* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004); Seth Jacobs, *Cold War Mandarin: Ngo Dinh Diem and the Origins of America’s War in Vietnam, 1950-1953* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006); Kathryn Statler, *Replacing France: The Origins of American Intervention in Vietnam* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2007); Jessica M. Chapman, *Cauldron of Resistance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and 1950s Southern Vietnam* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013).

years have played a significant role in assessments of U.S. strategy and tactics in the war.⁴ Also, Miller disagrees with most accounts of Diem's final conversation with Henry Cabot Lodge as the RVN's senior military leaders carried out their coup d'état. Miller argues that Diem saw no reason for compromise or deception in his exchange with the American ambassador because he remained confident that the Americans would come to his support in this crisis just as they had done in the sect revolt in 1955 (277, 280, 317-18).

Miller argues that the RVN was far from an American enterprise, but obviously its security depended in large measure on its relationship with Washington. I have termed the RVN America's "counterfeit creation."⁵ Washington misrepresented the Saigon regime as a great success in the late 1950s when, in fact, its future was in grave doubt. Diem and his family, not the United States, created the RVN, but Washington made a decision in 1955 to "wholeheartedly" endorse Diem as leader.⁶ The subsequent American nation-building effort tried, through economic and military aid and advice, to impose an American-defined identity on post-colonial Vietnam. The ultimate failure, as Miller cogently argues, was owing to mistakes by both Washington and Saigon. Hanoi's dogged pursuit of its own vision for the country also had much to do with the limitation on the best laid plans by Diem and his American backers.

Goscha's review discusses at some length what he sees as a historiographical shift that is evident in Miller's documentation of Diem's modernization ideas. Historiographical shifts are seldom sea changes. They often are more evident in 'trend analysis' of the literature than in 'spot analysis' (to use the terminology of opinion pollsters). South Vietnamese agency does not itself challenge the orthodox school, but rather it strengthens the orthodox argument in relation to the revisionist one. The orthodox position is that the United States exaggerated the strategic importance of Indochina in the global Cold War and failed to align its limited interest in Vietnam with realistically attainable social and political objectives in Vietnam itself. Like most generic labels, 'orthodox' includes a variety of interpretations held together primarily by the concept of flawed containment, so well articulated by Herring and Robert Schulzinger.⁷ The revisionist position, advanced recently by Michael Lind and Mark Moyar and earlier in the memoirs of American senior military officers, is that America's application of the containment paradigm to the Vietnamese civil war was correct.⁸ Using as a source Rufus Phillips, who was an American advisor to the Diem

⁴ Neil Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 1988).

⁵ Anderson, *Trapped by Success*, 197.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 108-10.

⁷ Herring, *America's Longest War*; Robert D. Schulzinger, *A Time for War: The United States and Vietnam, 1941-1975* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

⁸ Michael Lind, *Vietnam, the Necessary War: A Reinterpretation of America's Most Disastrous Military Conflict* (New York: The Free Press, 1999); Mark Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954-1965* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Philip B. Davidson, *Vietnam at War: The History, 1946-*

government (and also a source for Miller), Moyar argues that Diem's pacification programs were working.⁹ According to Goscha, these orthodox and revisionist schools share in common an American-centrism from which Miller's work marks a sharp departure. Miller does not argue that Diem was successful; on the contrary, he demonstrates that the RVN president and his brother made serious mistakes. All of these reviewers give Miller much deserved credit for his persuasive argument that Diem and his modernization concept should be understood and evaluated in terms of the Ngo brothers' vision and desired results, rather than in terms of how Diem was or was not following what Americans thought he should be trying to accomplish.

Participants:

Edward Miller is Associate Professor of History at Dartmouth College. His research examines the Vietnam War from international and transnational history perspectives; he is particularly interested in the ways in which the war was shaped by global contests over development, modernization, and nation building. In addition to *Misalliance*, he is also the author of *The Vietnam War: A Documentary Reader*, to be published by Wiley-Blackwell in 2014. He is currently at work on a history of insurgency and counterinsurgency in Vietnam's Ben Tre province during the era of the Indochina Wars. Prof. Miller received his Ph.D. in History from Harvard University in 2004.

David L. Anderson is Professor of History at California State University, Monterey Bay, and Senior Lecturer of National Security Affairs at the Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, CA. He is the author or editor of numerous books and articles on the American war in Vietnam, including *The Columbia History of the Vietnam War* (2011). He is a past president of the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations and served in the Republic of Vietnam in the U.S. Army.

Philip E. Catton received his Ph.D. from Ohio University and is an Associate 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). His current research focuses on the 1954 Geneva Conference and the refugee exodus from North Vietnam.

Gregory A. Daddis is an Academy Professor in the Department of History at the United States Military Academy. A West Point graduate, he is a veteran of both Operations Desert Storm and Iraqi Freedom. He holds a PhD from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and is author of *No Sure Victory: Measuring U.S. Army Effectiveness and Progress in the*

1975 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988); U.S. Grant Sharp, *Strategy for Defeat: Vietnam in Retrospect* (San Rafael, CA: Presidio Press, 1978).

⁹ See, for example, Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken*, 207-8.

Vietnam War (Oxford University Press, 2011) and *Westmoreland's War: Reassessing American Strategy in Vietnam* (Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

Christopher Goscha is Associate Professor of International Relations at the Université du Québec à Montréal. He recently published *Vietnam: A State of War* (Vietnam : Un Etat né de la guerre), (Paris: Armand Colin, 2011) and *Historical Dictionary of the Indochina War: An International and Interdisciplinary Approach (1945-1954)*. He is currently completing the *Penguin History of Modern Vietnam*, tentatively entitled *Plural Vietnams* and a comparative history of colonial monarchies in a time of decolonization.

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Tuong Vu is Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Oregon and has held visiting appointments at Princeton University and National University of Singapore. His book, *Paths to Development in Asia: South Korea, Vietnam, China, and Indonesia* (2010), received a Bernard Schwartz Award Honorable Mention for the best book on Asia in 2011. He is co-editor of *Dynamics of the Cold War in Asia: Ideology, Identity, and Culture* (2009) and *Southeast Asia in Political Science: Theory, Region and Qualitative Analysis* (2008). His articles have appeared in *World Politics*, *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, *Studies in Comparative International Development*, *Theory and Society*, *South East Asia Research*, and *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*.

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

For a decade now, Edward Miller has been at the forefront of efforts to ‘Vietnamize’ the study of the Vietnam War. He has argued that the story of the conflict is incomplete without proper attention to the actions of Vietnamese groups and individuals; indeed, that key questions about the origins and outcome of the war, over which historians have spilled so much ink, cannot be answered satisfactorily without examining the Vietnamese side of events.¹ In particular, in numerous articles and presentations, Miller has sought to challenge stereotypes of Ngo Dinh Diem and add some substance to the two-dimensional figure that appears in most of the literature. It is a measure of the America-centric focus of this literature that while even the bitparts played by mid-level United States’ (U.S.) officials have begun to receive scholarly consideration, one of the principal Vietnamese characters in the conflict remains so under-studied.² Miller’s book, then, is a long-awaited and important contribution to the literature.

Central to the book is a reassessment of Ngo Dinh Diem. While giving the Americans their due, Miller places Diem and the Vietnamese at the center of his story. He shows how many of the key episodes of the period – from the political turmoil of 1954-1955 to the Buddhist Crisis of 1963 – cannot be properly understood without attention to their role. Thus, we gain a fresh perspective on familiar events. Miller’s treatment of the circumstances surrounding Diem’s rise to power in 1954 is a case in point, the author arguing convincingly that Diem, not the Americans, was responsible for his appointment as Prime Minister; the political machinations of Diem and his younger brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu, gave Bao Dai, the chief of state and former Emperor, little choice except to offer Diem the position. Here, and elsewhere, Miller frequently pauses to explore the ways in which his arguments intersect with existing interpretations and change our understanding of events, something he does carefully and judiciously rather than with iconoclastic abandon. His analysis is undergirded by impressive research, including archival materials from Vietnam, France, and the United States; Vietnamese memoirs, both in print and on the internet; interviews with hitherto untapped sources; and an exhaustive list of secondary works. Some of these materials also yield fascinating details that will be new to most students of the conflict, such as the background to the assassination attempt against Diem in 1957 and the self-immolation of the Buddhist monk, Quang Duc, in 1963.

In addition to putting Diem center-stage, Miller is keen to take issue with the usual portrayal of the South Vietnamese leader as either a creature of Washington or a hidebound mandarin. In part his interpretation rests on providing a much fuller picture of Diem’s early career than appears in existing accounts, most of which rely on the potted

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 (Fall 2009): 1-2.

² John W. Young, “Ambassador David Bruce and ‘LBJ’s War’: Vietnam Viewed from London, 1963-1968,” *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 22 (March 2011): 81-100; Jonathan Colman, “Lost crusader? Chester L. Cooper and the Vietnam War, 1963-68,” *Cold War History* 12 (August 2012): 429-449.

biography put together by journalists of the period. Drawing on documentary materials, French and Vietnamese language sources, and works by scholars of Vietnam Studies, Miller explores the beliefs and experiences of Diem and his right-hand man, Ngo Dinh Nhu, which helped shape the Saigon regime's approach to politics. He argues persuasively that Diem was neither an American stooge, nor an empty-headed traditionalist; he was a man with agency and his own vision of how to go about building a new nation-state, one that clashed in important respects with that of the United States. This clash, Miller suggests, is the key to understanding the development and demise of America's relationship with Diem: the "politics of nation building" best explain the evolution of relations between Washington and Saigon (16-17).

While Miller seeks to revise our understanding of Diem, he is not interested in deifying him. Miller's Diem is a more well-rounded historical figure, but not the savior of South Vietnam that appears in some older hagiographies, or the more recent study by Mark Moyar.³ Consequently, Miller does not view Diem's overthrow in November 1963 as the mistake that cost the Americans the war; indeed, he does not see the United States as the key player in the coup. Ultimately, he concludes, Diem was the architect of his own downfall because he could not fashion a vision of nation-building that was capable of appealing to his various non-communist constituents. Diem appears as tactically astute but strategically short-sighted, stubbornly adhering to a brand of conviction politics that eventually brought down his government. If we wanted to pigeonhole Miller, this conclusion about Diem's failings would place him in the 'Orthodox,' as opposed to the 'Revisionist,' camp in the debate over America's intervention in Vietnam: the former viewing the conflict as a tragic mistake and ill-fated adventure; the latter seeing it as a necessary and winnable war. Perhaps, this should give some pause for thought to those commentators who tend to assume that efforts to reassess the South Vietnamese leader are a 'Revisionist' enterprise, or even, as one historian has suggested, a politically-motivated attempt to justify America's role in Vietnam and its other interventions overseas.⁴ Diem 'revisionism' with a small 'r' is not necessarily a subset of Vietnam War 'Revisionism' with a capital 'R.'⁵

Miller presents a convincing portrait of Diem, and the differences between Diem and the Americans, but his analysis of the dynamics of U.S. policy is not always so persuasive. He argues that American officials disagreed not only with many of Diem's policies but also amongst themselves about the best strategy for nation building. In chapter two, he analyzes differing U.S. conceptions of nation-building, contrasting "high modernists," who emphasized top-down development, with "low modernists" favoring a bottom-up approach (56-60). These differences, he contends, better explain policy disagreements than

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

⁴ Robert Buzzanco, "Fear and (Self) Loathing in Lubbock, Texas, or How I Learned to Quit Worrying and Love Vietnam and Iraq," *Passport* 36 (December 2005): 5-14.

⁵ Philip E. Catton, "Ngo Dinh Diem and South Vietnam Reconsidered," in *Triumph Revisited: Historians Battle for the Vietnam War*, eds. Andrew Wiest and Michael J. Doidge, (New York: Routledge, 2010), 35-36.

interpretations which emphasize the bureaucratic perspectives or personal predilections of U.S. policymakers. This distinction between “high” and “low” modernism offers an interesting frame of analysis, but Miller does not return to it again until chapter seven and a discussion of the policies of the administration of President John F. Kennedy. It is not clear, then, how these differences over nation building influenced U.S. policy during the late-1950s. Nor does Miller really pursue his argument when examining conflicting American opinion about Diem in the early-1960s. His detailed, largely narrative-driven analysis of the denouement of the U.S.-Diem relationship does not include an extended discussion of the impact on American policy of the debate over the two modernisms.

Miller also misses opportunities to elaborate on one of the biggest issues that his book raises, perhaps the ‘\$64,000 Question’ of the Vietnam War; that is, whether a non-communist South Vietnam was ever truly viable. Miller takes seriously the notion that there was some real political and intellectual substance to the Diem government (and non-communist nationalism in general). He regards the regime’s ‘Personalist revolution’ as a genuine attempt to articulate a vision of nation building that could rival the one put forward by the Vietnamese communists. Yet, as he argues in his conclusion, that was not enough to assure its success. Diem’s “most glaring and most consequential” shortcoming, he observes, was his inability to develop a politics of nation-building that could satisfy the diverse visions and “nationalist imaginings” of other Vietnamese in South Vietnam – “especially those espoused by other noncommunist leaders and groups” (326). This observation begs a question that Miller tends to skate around: Could any leader of South Vietnam have fashioned a functioning state out of the eclectic mix of ideas and communities that made up southern society? Miller’s examination of the history of the Diem regime – from its confrontation with the politico-religious sects in 1954-1955 to its clash with Buddhist militants in 1963 – highlights the complexity of the polity that Diem inherited. Was Diem’s approach to nation-building, then, the principal obstacle to success, or was the nature of the South itself the fundamental, perhaps even insoluble problem? In short, was a non-communist South Vietnam doomed from the start? Miller’s conclusion seems to come close to arguing that this was indeed the case, but readers might wish for more commentary on this crucial question.

Review by Gregory A. Daddis, United States Military Academy

The interplay between history and biography is a complicated one. As a craft, biography requires the historian to enter into the mind of an individual, to analyze personal qualities that so often defy conclusive analysis. Even Charles A. Beard, who ranks among the most influential American historians of the early twentieth century, found the complexity of writing biography simply too intimidating. “I cannot be sure enough about human character and human motives,” Beard explained, “to write the life of anyone.”¹ Despite such misgivings, the course of history frequently, if not consistently, runs through the minds of individuals. The historian’s task thus oftentimes becomes one of interpreting what Beard found to be a rather inaccessible feature of the human experience.

For students of the Vietnam wars, the role of biography long has been influenced by the tendency of many historians, especially those surveying American participation, to search not for understanding, but for blame. Such agenda-driven works have sought culpability for a lost war by excoriating those who managed it. Their authors argue that the United States failed in Vietnam because individuals like President Lyndon Johnson, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, and General William Westmoreland—senior leaders who personified both naivety and hubris—mishandled their war with catastrophic results.² Perhaps unsurprisingly, historians have held South Vietnamese leaders, President Ngo Dinh Diem in particular, equally accountable. Seth Jacobs, for instance, has argued that “None of America’s Cold War allies did more to undermine the power and reputation of the United States than Ngo Dinh Diem.” Not only did Diem run roughshod over a “police state,” but his violations against human rights undermined the very presence of Americans hoping to contain the growing threat of communism in Southeast Asia.³

Edward Miller’s post-revisionist treatment of Diem, if not Vietnam biography more generally, stands at the centerpiece of his excellent new work, *Misalliance*. Rather than seeking blame, Miller explores the failed partnership between the United States and South Vietnam “by focusing on the interplay between American and Vietnamese personalities, ideas, and decisions” (10). This very much is a story of individuals. For Miller, however, the South Vietnamese matter most and he clearly sympathizes with the story’s central character, Ngo Dinh Diem. Unlike Mark Moyar, who extols Diem as “the immune system of South Vietnam,” Miller is more circumspect as he explores the character of an exceedingly

¹ Beard quoted in John A. Garraty, *The Nature of Biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1957), 11. On this point, see also John Lewis Gaddis, *The Landscape of History: How Historians Map the Past* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 114.

² On hubris and naivety, see Neil Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 1988), 289. For an example of reductively placing blame for a losing war on one individual, see Lewis Sorley, *Westmoreland: The General Who Lost Vietnam* (Boston, New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011).

³ Seth Jacobs, *Cold War Mandarin: Ngo Dinh Diem and the Origins of America’s War in Vietnam, 1950-1963* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006), 185.

complex man.⁴ In this portrayal, Diem is neither an American puppet nor a hidebound traditionalist. Instead, we see a savvy politician drawing on various cultural, religious, and ideological customs as he forms his own vision of a South Vietnam capable of withstanding both internal and external threats. The process of implementing this vision, often at odds with both Diem's American supporters and fellow Vietnamese nationalists, is where Miller focuses his lens and makes a significant contribution in bettering our understanding of a troubled alliance between 1954 and 1963.

While *Misalliance* continues a welcome trend of analyzing the Vietnam wars through the eyes of the Vietnamese themselves, American policymakers still play an important role here. Miller presents a cast of characters who all brought to Vietnam their own visions of nationhood: Michigan State University's Wesley Fishel, intent on collaborating with formerly colonized nations to build a liberal world order; Wolf Ladejinsky, "Mr. Land Reform" seeking to "channel the peasants' revolutionary impulses in the right direction"; and Edward Lansdale, the CIA operative who saw counterinsurgency and "psywar" as means to transform South Vietnam into a modern nation (79). These Americans, however, appear more as adjuncts to Diem and his brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu. Unlike David Halberstam, who contends that "Lansdale was one of the men who invented Diem," or James Carter, who maintains South Vietnam was a "failed American invention," Miller is intent in demonstrating the process of nation building was far from an exclusive American enterprise.⁵ In several passages, the author even presents the Ngo brothers as being under siege by well-intentioned yet overbearing Americans absorbed with using South Vietnam as a laboratory for implementing their ideas about social reconstruction in the post-World War II era.

In fact, these debates over nation building form the centerpiece of Miller's persuasive argument. South Vietnam was not simply an American-constructed bulwark against communism. Rather, the relationship between Diem and the United States revolved around competing interpretations of the proper relationship between the individual South Vietnamese and the Saigon government. These deliberations, if not outright disputes, rested on fundamental questions about South Vietnamese society. What was the proper relationship between tradition and modernity? How did religion—be it Confucianism, Catholicism, or Buddhism—factor into social transformation? How could Diem build support for a nation that was divorced from European and American theories yet simultaneously maintain crucial backing from the United States? And, perhaps most importantly, what definition of democracy best suited South Vietnam? The Ngo brothers had to answer all these questions while constructing a state in which few individuals or groups agreed on the answers. Worse, those Americans interested in maintaining an

⁴ Mark Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954-1965* (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 279.

⁵ David Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest* (New York: Random House, 1969), 127. James M. Carter, *Inventing Vietnam: The United States and State Building, 1954-1968* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 13. Miller, 13.

independent, non-communist South Vietnam brought to Saigon their own agendas on nation building and democracy. As Miller suggests, Diem's visualization of democracy as a "social ethos based on a certain sense of moral duty" confounded most Americans who alternatively viewed their own government as a "form of political pluralism" (137).

The contested vision of democracy became embedded with equally difficult arguments over South Vietnam's path towards nationhood in the modern era. Thus, as Miller skillfully reveals, Diem's nation-building program was a question not just of ends, but of means as well. While many U.S. aid officials cut their teeth during Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal reform movement, Miller argues there was little consensus over how best to promote social change abroad. American officials debated the merits of centralized planning structures and locally-based programs that would help build the bonds between South Vietnam's rural population and the government in Saigon. J. Lawton Collins, Eisenhower's special envoy to Vietnam from 1954 to 1955, established a broad agenda that illustrated the intricacy of any nation-building program. Not long after the Geneva Accords, the U.S.-Diem alliance began collaborating on everything from military affairs to "refugee resettlement, land reform, the creation of a national assembly, financial/economic assistance, and the overhaul of the SVN civil service" (109).⁶ Given the breadth of such a program, it seems unsurprising that Americans met resistance over devising and implementing plans that struck at the very core of what it meant to be South Vietnamese. Both Diem and U.S. aid officials, in short, were proposing a transformation in the thinking of ordinary men and women across the span of Vietnamese society.

A growing insurgency inside South Vietnam's borders further complicated these debates over nation-building. Miller argues that the Ngo brothers recognized that security was only part of a larger formula for political and social change. Accordingly, Diem's measures to prevent internal subversion "were not based on force and domination alone; his plans also included propaganda and mass mobilization programs designed to gain the support of South Vietnam's rural masses" (187). Miller's evidence—prodigious throughout—supports such a claim, yet one cannot help but feel the frustrations of American advisors who lamented Diem's heavy-handed approach to his own people. No doubt Diem, backed by contemporary counterinsurgency doctrine, was correct in assuming that his political and social revolution would best be achieved in a secure environment. Yet despite Miller's noble efforts at accessing Diem's mind, the brutal tactics used by the Ngos to establish internal order remain a bit perplexing. The regime's harsh treatment of the population certainly confounded those in the Kennedy administration who believed that social reforms and popular support would produce battlefield successes. As in so many areas, Diem kept his own council when creating strategy for a political-military conflict.

This conflict ultimately was decided among the population and, as Miller demonstrates, even here the U.S.-Diem alliance clashed over basic philosophies on governance and the

⁶ It is important to note that the debate over modernization occurred in North Vietnam as well, so ably detailed in Lien-Hang T. Nguyen, *Hanoi's War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 42-46.

role of the people. If Americans like USAID advisor Rufus Phillips come across as having been naïve in viewing the population as “instinctively anticommunist,” (241) the South Vietnamese president appears to have been equally out of step with the masses despite being “exasperated with what he viewed as American ignorance of Vietnam’s rural realities.” For Diem, democracy depended less on uplifting local farmers through development programs and more on cultivating a self-sufficient population led by incorruptible government officials. Still, his strategy of resettling communities sought to create a new society “dominated by freeholding farmers of middling wealth and status” (160-161). Perhaps such inconsistencies help explain Diem’s incapacity to prompt the revolution deemed so crucial for building a new South Vietnamese nation. Miller, however, resists the temptation to blame Diem for these failures, rather emphasizing why a population resettlement and concentration strategy appeared best suited to his goals of engineering social change. The author’s reluctance to denounce Diem will likely irritate those searching for villains.

So too might the inability of Americans in South Vietnam to gain leverage over their ostensibly “junior” partners. Yet here Miller elucidates what the veteran journalist Stanley Karnow found decades ago when he claimed that the “American sway over Diem was always ephemeral.”⁷ In *Misalliance*, the inability of US officials to manipulate Diem comes into clear view. Given the dissonance over both the means and ends of American foreign policy in Southeast Asia, it seems no wonder that as early as 1956 Ambassador G. Frederick Reinhardt found American influence over Diem’s regime had been “extremely circumscribed” (148). Of course, Diem stood most responsible for limiting American influence. Cognizant that US aid often came with attached strings, the Ngos struggled mightily to maintain self-sufficiency, not only for themselves, but for their people as well. As Diem angrily declared, South Vietnam “did not want to be a protectorate” (229) The Ngo brothers also recognized that the American presence alone confirmed communist accusations that the Diem government was little more than a ‘puppet’ of the United States. Thus, the failure of American officials to gain political leverage in South Vietnam is better understood when viewed not from Washington but rather from Saigon.

Perhaps these failures are what make *Misalliance* such an important and relevant study. By necessity, if not choice, nation-building became a key component of American plans in Iraq and Afghanistan during the last decade. Proponents continue to argue that nation-building in both countries was a “moral duty,” while critics have maintained that the “hugely expensive U.S. attempt...in Afghanistan has had only limited success and may not survive an American withdrawal.”⁸ While comparing Vietnam to America’s more recent wars is a risky endeavor, clearly all three overseas experiences suggest that American power has its limits. As Miller demonstrates, the Ngo brothers were anxious to receive Washington’s support for defending South Vietnam but worried that an increased US military presence

⁷ Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (New York: The Viking Press, 1983), 220.

⁸ John Yemma, “Does nation-building work?” *The Christian Science Monitor*, 10 June 2012. Karen DeYoung, “Afghan nation-building programs not sustainable, report says,” *The Washington Post*, 7 June 2011.

“would damage the RVN government’s credibility both at home and abroad” (230) In the end, the Ngos fashioned, in their own minds, a vision of a South Vietnamese nation, even if that vision was at odds with the rural population and those Americans deployed on their own crusade to construct an overseas ally.

Review by Christopher Goscha, Université du Québec à Montréal

In a series of interconnecting arguments, Edward Miller's *Misalliance* reframes the study of the American-Republic of Vietnam relationship, further revises our understanding of Ngo Dinh Diem, the first president of the Republic, and provides new insights into the Indochina Wars (1945-1975). Miller's monograph is also a breath of fresh air for those dissatisfied with the tenacious 'orthodox' and 'revisionist' hold over the historiography of the conflicts in the field of American foreign relations. Miller makes it clear in his introduction, throughout his book, and in two separately published essays, that historiographical concerns are on his mind.¹ I would like to consider in this review Miller's contribution to the existing historiography how his book achieves three goals: moving us beyond the standard "Orthodox" and 'Revisionist' opposition; decentering the study of the Vietnam Wars from its still very American focus; and providing us with an alternative approach and methodology for studying other American partnerships in the non-Western world. Given the importance of what Miller is doing historiographically and in terms of method let me sum up the main disagreements in the Orthodox-Revisionist debate in order to determine the extent to which Miller's *Misalliance* moves us in new directions.

The Orthodox hold on the study of the Indochina Wars is impressive. Ever since Frances Fitzgerald won the Pulitzer and Bancroft prizes for her indictment of American intervention in Vietnam, *Fire in the Lake*, most scholars have tended to agree with her that the Americans, like the French, were fighting an unwinnable and largely illegitimate war in Vietnam.² Not only were the Americans supporting the wrong Vietnamese leaders, first Bao Dai, the president of the State of Vietnam, then Ngo Dinh Diem, but in so doing they were also placing themselves on the wrong side of History – Vietnamese history as defined by Fitzgerald to be a timeless, deep-seated culture of resistance to foreign invasion and colonial domination. Deeply influenced by the Orientalism of Paul Mus³, Fitzgerald saw in Ho Chi Minh and his Vietnam the manifestation of an authentic nationalism rooted in Vietnamese tradition and the timeless village culture upon which it turned. Ho was the rightful new sovereign, who had emerged in a time of great disorder to seize the 'mandate of heaven'. He was legitimate because he enjoyed the support of the people who emerged

¹ Edward Miller (with Tuong Vu), 'The Vietnam War as a Vietnamese War: Agency and Society in the Study of the Second Indochina War', *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, vol. 4, no. 3, (2009), pp. 1-16; Edward Miller, 'War Stories: The Taylor-Buzzanco Debate and the Future of the Vietnam War Studies', *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, vol. 1, no. 1, (August 2006), pp. 453-484.

² Frances Fitzgerald, *Fire in the Lake: The Vietnamese and Americans in Vietnam* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973) (first published in 1972, re-printed on several occasions, including in 2002).

³ Paul Mus, *Sociologie d'une guerre* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1952). She dedicates her book to Paul Mus and her father.

from their villages in times of national crisis.⁴ Nowhere was the bestowing of the national mandate better seen than in Bao Dai's spectacular abdication in August 1945 and transfer of authority to Ho and his Vietnam, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV).⁵ There was thus continuity between Ho and his patriotic ancestors.

Neither Mus nor Fitzgerald says much about Ho's communism, relationships with Josef Stalin and Mao Zedong, or his plans for transforming Vietnam along communist lines. If Ho converted to communism in Europe after WWI, it was because Leninism offered him the best way of liberating his country from colonialism. Indeed, the deaf ear President Woodrow Wilson turned to Ho's pleas for support in Paris in 1919 symbolizes one in a long litany of 'missed opportunities' for Orthodox scholars. Had U.S. President Woodrow Wilson and his successors been sincere in their anticolonialism, things might have turned out differently. Had the Americans drawn 'lessons' from the French experience during the First Indochina War, they could have avoided the 'tragedy' of the second. Orthodox heroes like Bernard Fall, Graham Greene, and even Charles de Gaulle, warned the American powers that be that they were doomed if they tried to go against 'History', against Ho's Vietnam.⁶

Further intellectual inspiration for Orthodox scholarship came from William Appleman Williams's classic critique of 'American exceptionalism', economic imperialism, and empire.⁷ Antiwar scholars saw in the Vietnam War confirmation of Williams's thesis that American economic interests, not Soviet or Chinese communist expansion, were at stake in Vietnam (Williams blamed Americans for starting the Cold War). Ho was not the problem; the American empire was. More recently, a new generation of orthodox scholars has relied on the Edward Saidian-inspired 'cultural turn' in diplomatic history to debunk the idea of American exceptionalism and demonstrate the cultural forces (racism, orientalism, religion) that made American policy-makers and presidents like Franklin Roosevelt and his successors much more colonialist and Orientalist-minded in their perceptions of non-Western peoples and independence movements than the myth of American anticolonialism has conceded. The critique of the Vietnamese side, however, is less nuanced. Communist nationalist myths do not receive the same critical attention as the American ones. Ho escapes remarkably unscathed. For Orthodox scholars, Ho, his journey that began in Versailles, and his Vietnam of 1945, become 'the' Vietnam. Ngo Dinh Diem owed his

⁴ For a Chinese parallel, see Chalmers Johnson's *Peasant Nationalism and Communist Power: The Emergence of Revolutionary China, 1937-1945* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1962). Chalmers of course went on to write *Blowback: The Costs and Consequences of American Empire* (Holt Paper Backs, 2004).

⁵ For a riveting glimpse of Mus and his Orientalism at work in the American anti-war movement, see Mus' appearance as the "Vietnam expert" in Emile de Antonio antiwar documentary, *In the Year of the Pig*, Turin Film, 1968, reissued in 2005 in DVD by Public Media. Frances Fitzgerald kindly explained to me that she was instrumental in bringing the two men together.

⁶ See David Schalk's glowing endorsement of Pierre Journoud's orthodox account of *De Gaulle et le Vietnam (1945-1969): Une réconciliation* (Paris: Tallandier, 2011), pp. 435-443.

⁷ William Appleman Williams, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy* (New York: A Delta Book, 1972).

ascendency to his American backers. Like Bao Dai before him, he was a Western ‘creature’, devoid of nationalist legitimacy and thus destined to failure. Ho becomes a seething nationalist in the orthodox narrative, for whom communism was but a means to reach a goal – independence from foreign domination, not the communist transformation of the Vietnamese state and society or the man who helped spread communism to Southeast Asia. Gabriel Kolko, a disciple of Williams, wrote a highly influential critique of American intervention in Vietnam, one in which he openly welcomed the victory of Ho’s Vietnam.⁸

Confronted with this orthodoxy, revisionist scholars have gone in exactly the opposite direction and with equally regrettable results. This has been especially true since the end of the Cold War. The revisions school argues that America was not imperially minded, and that Mao, Stalin, and Ho were the communist empire builders, bent on exporting communism to Vietnam and Asia. American involvement in Vietnam (and the Cold War) was thus fully justified. They argue that the domino theory was valid; internationalist communists and not their capitalist counterparts were the threats to world peace and global recovery. America’s containment strategy was thus a good thing in Europe and in Asia, including interventions in Vietnam and Korea. Ho of course becomes an internationalist communist of the worst kind in this narrative, a Comintern agent since the 1920s and the one who first welcomed the Chinese communists and Maoist-driven land reform to Vietnam in 1950. With the end of the Cold War, revisionist historians like Mark Moyar and Michael Lind, among others, published articles and books defending American involvement in Vietnam as a ‘necessary war’ and rehabilitated Ngo Dinh Diem as an integral part of this project.⁹ Like Fitzgerald, Moyar opens his revisionist account of the Vietnam Wars, *Triumph Forsaken*, by going far back in time, but with the clear goal of subverting the orthodox narrative to show that, as during the second half of the twentieth-century, Vietnam had never been territorially united or free of civil wars. On the contrary, divisions and internal strife are essential parts of Vietnamese history. And just as orthodox writers begin their narratives with Ho Chi Minh at Versailles in 1919, revisionists latch on to Diem and his break with the French a decade later to make the case that Diem, not Ho, was the real nationalist. And where Fitzgerald focuses on Diem’s un-Vietnamese Catholicism, revisionists underscore Ho Chi Minh’s conversion to an equally un-Vietnamese faith, communism. Echoing the ‘missed opportunities’ and ‘what ifs’ of their Orthodox counterparts, revisionists show where the Americans could have, indeed should have won the war had they just listened to this unsung nationalist hero, Ngo Dinh Diem. Revisionists are as uncritical of their Vietnamese ‘man’ as the Orthodox scholars are of theirs.

This parallel is hardly surprising since Orthodox and Revisionists share one thing in common. In their bids to defend or condemn American intervention, exceptionalism,

⁸ Gabriel Kolko, *Anatomy of a War: Vietnam, the United States, and the Modern Historical Experience* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1994 (first published in 1985)), p. xii.

⁹ Mark Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954-1965* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Mark Moyar, ‘Vietnam : Historians at War’, National Association of Scholars, (May 2008), http://www.nas.org/articles/Vietnam_Historians_at_War; and Michael Lind, *The Necessary War: A Reinterpretation of America’s Most Disastrous Military Conflict* (Free Press, 1999).

empire, racism, orientalism, lessons, and what ifs, both schools ended up constructing remarkably American-centered narratives. By focusing on high ranking American policy-makers and mindsets, by attempting to subvert or promote narratives of American 'exceptionalism' and 'empire', they ended up casting Ho Chi Minh and Ngo Dinh Diem in surprisingly essentialized and even Orientalist ways as Cold War 'Confucians' and "Mandarins".¹⁰ In so doing, these authors necessarily deny the Vietnamese much of the agency and the complexity they accord to their American protagonists. This is even true for those claiming to use Vietnamese 'archives' and 'primary sources' for the first time. It has more to do with the way both schools set up their narratives.¹¹

If my discussion of the two standard views is long, it is because these scholars dominate the study of the Indochina Wars in American foreign relations to this day, as a long list of very helpful H-Diplo roundtables and exchanges have shown (and which serve as excellent teaching tools for introducing students to questions of historiography, methodology, and even epistemology).¹² I also open on this note because Edward Miller's *Misalliance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and the Fate of South Vietnam* breaks sharply with both schools. *Misalliance* is not another treatise about enlightened or misguided American empire or orientalism, the hypocrisy of American 'exceptionalism', 'missed opportunities', 'lessons', 'winnable or 'unwinnable' wars, 'necessary' ones or 'triumphs forsaken'. It is no hagiography of Ngo Dinh Diem or glorification of his Republic. To my great relief (but a critique I cannot develop in greater detail here), Miller does not seek to replace an American-centered account of the Indochina Wars with an equally problematic Vietnamese one (It is not because one uses "Vietnamese sources" that one is somehow 'better' or closer to the 'truth.' A Vietnam-centered approach is just as problematic as the American-focused one.). What Miller does seek to write, and successfully achieves, is a nuanced history of both sides – the Americans and the Vietnamese – as they interacted in southern Vietnam

¹⁰ This resonates of earlier culturalist arguments among Mus, Fitzgerald, and Nguyen Khac Vien about Vietnamese communism with Confucian characteristics. See Nguyen Khac Vien on Frances Fitzgerald's *Fire in the Lake*, 'Myths and Truths', *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, vol. 4, no. 1, (1974), pp. 83-110.

¹¹ Sylvie Thénault makes a similar point in her new history of the Algerian War. Sylvie Thénault, *Histoire de la guerre d'indépendance algérienne*, (Paris : Flammarion, 2005), p. 19. She also takes to task the Franco-centric spin of the 'missed opportunities' school. One of the rare scholars to avoid the orthodox-revisionist trap and weave the different sides of the wars for Vietnam into a nuanced narrative is William S. Turley in his outstanding *The Second Indochina War: A Concise Political and Military History*, (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers 2009 (above all the revised 2nd edition).

¹² See Peter Zinoman's parallel critiques of Mark Bradley and Mark Moyar's respective orthodox and revisionist's accounts of the Vietnam War. H-Diplo/ISSF Roundtable, Volume II, No. 7 (2011) on Mark Philip Bradley. *Vietnam at War*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009 at <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/ISSF/PDF/ISSF-Roundtable-2-7.pdf> and H-Diplo/ISSF Roundtable on Mark Moyar. *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954-1965*. New York: Cambridge University Press, August 2006. Comment from Peter Zinoman at <http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl?trx=vx&list=H-Diplo&month=0707&week=b&msg=zUrS2%2bF1U9GosKvPpmt4fw&user=&pw=> For a sophisticated revisionist critique of the Indochina War, see Philippe Papin's review of my book, *Vietnam : Un Etat né de la guerre* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2011), at <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/roundtables/PDF/Roundtable-XIV-1.pdf>

between 1954 and 1963. While I do not necessarily find this to be a methodological, analytical, let alone a theoretical revolution, Miller's ability to cover both sides of the alliance is quite novel in both the fields of American foreign relations *and* Vietnamese studies when it comes to the Indochina Wars (1945-1975) at least. That Miller is a rare specialist of American foreign relations who has one foot firmly planted in modern Vietnamese studies, travels to Vietnam regularly, and knows the language well explains his ability to connect both sides. It is also linked to the fact that he is intensely interested in new, transnational approaches to understanding American and American diplomatic history, and not just the Western-focused Saidian ones mentioned above.¹³ Miller's desire to reach the "ground" level is of course important, as we shall see. Lastly, Miller has trolled the archives of the Republic of Vietnam held in Ho Chi Minh City, not to mention relevant holdings in the U.S. and France. He is the first to have gone through the long-open French SPCE files on Ngo Dinh Diem.¹⁴

In *Misalliance*, Miller argues that one can only understand the creation and the meltdown of the U.S.-Republic of Vietnam partnership by focusing on the "interplay between American and Vietnamese personalities, ideas, and decisions" (10). For Miller, "both the rise and the fall of the U.S.-Diem relationship turned on the agency of particular American and Vietnamese individuals" (10). More than anything else, he focuses on how American and Vietnamese policies, perceptions, and actions intersected, increasingly clashed over time and space in specific local contexts, and, ultimately, resulted in tragedy – the American-backed assassination of Ngo Dinh Diem, not Ho Chi Minh. American and Vietnamese architects of the alliance in 1954-55 could never have imagined such an outcome. Who could have? Anti-communist, anticolonialist, and Catholic, Ngo Dinh Diem was America's "miracle man," as Seth Jacobs puts it.¹⁵ But what the Americans found out quickly, Miller shows us by looking at both sides meticulously: that Ngo Dinh Diem (and the Vietnamese more generally) turned out to be their own players, with their own agendas, their own approaches, and would use the Americans when they could to achieve their own goals. The Vietnamese had agency, too.

How does Miller demonstrate the making and unmaking of this alliance with Diem and his Republic? At the 'ground level', he says. He doesn't deny the importance of official deliberations in Washington and similar ones in Saigon; but it was in the field in southern Vietnam where the interactions, interplays, and ultimately the 'misalliance' emerged, evolved, and morphed into something that neither side wanted or perhaps even knew was unraveling until it was too late. Miller also insists on contingency in the field in U.S.-Vietnamese relations, something often missing in studies focused on American mindsets

¹³ <http://www.dartmouth.edu/~history/faculty/emiller.html>

¹⁴ The *Service de Protection du Corps Expéditionnaire* (SPCE) files in Aix-en-Provence hold the French secret service files on Ngo Dinh Diem and other Vietnamese luminaries.

¹⁵ Seth Jacobs, *America's Miracle Man in Vietnam: Ngo Dinh Diem, Religion, Race and U.S. Intervention in Southeast Asia* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).

and overarching cultural approaches à la Mus and Fitzgerald. This is not only why Miller is frustrated by the Orthodox vs. Revisionist reductionism, but it is also why he argues against existing explanations of the U.S.-Diem alliance as the result of “American Cold War Geostrategic calculations”, the product of “American economic objectives”, or as the manifestation of “American ideological and cultural currents” (8). While Miller accepts that each of these paradigms is valid, none of them, individually or even in combination, adequately explains the ‘misalliance’ that ended in Ngo Dinh Diem’s death in 1963.

The meltdown occurred in the field, in the hands of specific people, both Vietnamese and American, at precise times, as they interacted in southern Vietnam, reacted to differing viewpoints, and reported back – increasingly frustrated, sometimes downright hopping mad. What drove the Americans up the wall?¹⁶ Development projects and nation-building – the very things that should have united them. Diem had his blocks; the Americans had theirs. They seemed highly compatible, at least at the outset. Each was keen on building up a modern economy and state capable of stopping Ho Chi Minh’s Vietnam and its international backers. The annoying French colonialists were finally gone and, much to American surprise, Diem dealt successfully with the Binh Xuyen and the ‘Sects’ in 1955 as he assembled that ever elusive non-communist modern national army (Miller’s analysis of these events in chapter 3 is the best to date in any language I read.). For Miller, nation-building and its attendant developmental projects were precisely the areas that brought the Americans and Vietnamese closest together on the ground and thus offer the best zones for studying their interactions. In richly detailed chapters on institution building, counter-insurgency, policing, armed forces, agrovilles, land reform, etc., Miller shows how specific people, ideas, and agendas clashed ever more vigorously in the field over time, playing “central roles in the formation, evolution, and eventual undoing of Washington’s relationship with Diem” (12).

Miller’s story of misalliance is thus as much about the Americans and their ideas as it is about the Vietnamese and theirs. This is why he carefully opens his book with *longue durée* discussions of the Americans and Vietnamese. His first chapter takes up the Vietnamese side by focusing on the man who would lead the Republic of Vietnam and build the alliance, Ngo Dinh Diem. Here, however, Miller is not out to rehabilitate Diem like the revisionists, or even cast him as the real or seething nationalist as Orthodox scholars do with Ho Chi Minh. Miller doesn’t really need to bother, for he wants to understand Diem on his own terms, with all his flaws and Miller never fails to point them out. He also wants to delve into the wider historical forces that formed Vietnam, the Vietnamese, and Diem, including the ideas, ideologies, and developmental theories introduced by and through the French colonial connection. His discussion of Vietnamese Catholicism is refreshing. Relying on recent and

¹⁶ I borrow this idea, of course, from Hope Harrison’s wonderful book, *Driving the Soviets up the Wall: Soviet-East German Relations, 1953-1961* (Princeton : Princeton University Press, 2003). Strangely, Miller never mentions this book’s methodology in his study. He should have.

sophisticated scholarship on Catholic Vietnam,¹⁷ Miller shows how the nationalization of the Vietnamese Church during the interwar years affected Diem and other nationalists. Miller also demonstrates how Ngo Dinh Diem was not the Orientalist subservient mandarin as some have portrayed him; but rather an individual who looked to Vietnamese, French, Catholic, and internationalist models of development, state-craft and nationalism long before coming to power. This is a major contribution to our understanding and historical contextualization of Ngo Dinh Diem.

In his second chapter, Miller provides us with the American side. He explores the historical roots of American nation-building, development models, and the impact of the New Deal on such thinking as it was projected into the post WWII *and* postcolonial world. Miller convincingly shows how American models of high and low modernity in the 1930s in particular colored the minds of advisors sent to Vietnam (and elsewhere in the global South) to help the Vietnamese implement development and modernization programs. I found his discussion of the Point IV program (the American technical assistance program begun in 1949 to help developing countries), debates over it, and how it was exported and implemented in Asia after WWII particularly insightful. Not only does this allow Miller to show how two different views of ‘modernization’, ‘nation-building’ and ‘development’ emerged in postcolonial Vietnam from 1954, but it also allows him to make his point that these ideas mattered, that they had roots in the past, gave rise to different perceptions and agendas in the present, played themselves out in contradictory ways on the ground, and, in so doing, set the stage for very different ways of building an alliance (and a state) in postcolonial Republican Vietnam. American social scientists and intelligence officers debarking in South Vietnam in 1954 like Wesley Fishel, Edward Lansdale, and Wolf Ladejnsky had the best of intentions, but soon found themselves at odds with Diem and a range of other Vietnamese over contesting ideas and policies for developing Vietnam in the countryside, among the people (chapter 2).

There is no need to summarize the book and all its ‘findings’. There are many. Suffice it to say that, with this dual American-Vietnamese historical foundation in place, Miller can then focus ‘on the ground’ thematically, on how joint efforts at nation-building and development eventually became points of contention between the two sides, between specific individuals in fact, in certain local contexts in southern Vietnam, not just in Saigon or Washington. Miller shows how both sides, often with the best of intentions and certainly a shared anticommunism, worked at cross purposes and increasingly in outright, hostile opposition when it came to rural development, institution building, land reform, agrovilles, strategic hamlets, counterinsurgency, and policing. And then Miller is capable of taking us up above to explore how the Americans and the Vietnamese could talk past each other, no doubt smiling politely, but still livid. Nowhere do we see this disconnect better than at the end of Miller’s book, when he takes us, the alliance, and the fate of the Republic up to the last days of Diem’s life as this flawed man tried desperately to understand what the Americans really wanted of him. Miller’s last chapter on the coup that ended Diem’s life,

¹⁷ See Charles Keith, *Catholic Vietnam: A Church from Empire to Nation*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012).

symbolized movingly by the besieged president's telephone conversation with the American Ambassador, is a poignant example of how mutual perceptions and mindsets in precise circumstances led to tragedy. When I closed the book, I felt I had grasped better how a whole range of forces, on both sides, had contributed to this tragic 'misalliance.' I came away feeling that Miller had succeeded in emphasizing not just the importance of factoring in the ground level, but had also subtly demonstrated why we need more studies connecting both sides of the alliance in order to understand how things fall apart up above because of such misperceptions. If we have such studies for other American alliances, say in Western Europe or Soviet ones with East Germany, Miller's book is an excellent example of why scholars working on the Vietnam Wars (1945-1975) should let go of the Western-focused Orthodox and Revisionist approaches as well as monocausal explanations, whether cultural or geopolitical in nature.

Some will no doubt say that Miller is pushing through an open door. True, Philip Catton's path-breaking reappraisal of Ngo Dinh Diem and his policies in 2003 opened the way for others to work on Diem and the Republic in ways going beyond the Orthodox and Revisionist accounts outlined above.¹⁸ Miller fully acknowledges Catton's work. Nor is Miller the first to talk about 'nation-building' and 'modernization theory' in American interventions abroad. But what sets *Misalliance* apart from the vast majority of publications on the Vietnam War and Ngo Dinh Diem in particular is his unique ability to combine his training and specialization in American Foreign relations history and modern Vietnam in order to explore the mutual perceptions and interactions between the two sides 'up above' and 'down below' and to show how they led to misalliance. In so doing, he has produced a rare study that is neither 'Vietnam' -- nor 'American' -- centered.

Could Miller's approach serve as a useful model for studying earlier periods? I think so. In many ways, the methodology he has developed to study the American-Vietnamese *Misalliance* could serve as inspiration for a badly needed study of Franco-Vietnamese relations, the famous Bao Dai 'solution' in particular, and the fate of the State of Vietnam (1949-1954), the Republic's predecessor. One could even fathom similar studies of the Indochinese Federation and the short-lived Republic of Cochinchina, and the States of Laos and Cambodia, all of which have received scant attention in the existing historiography on the Indochina conflicts. Were Bao Dai, Ngo Dinh Diem, or even Nguyen Van Thinh and Nguyen Van Xuan (respective presidents of the Cochinchinese Republic) simple colonial 'creatures' devoid of all agency? Bao Dai was most certainly flawed, but he enraged the French as much as Diem infuriated the Americans. And what happened down below, 'in the field', where the French and their Vietnamese partners supposedly collaborated. Their colonial and national legitimacy and security depended on the rural outcome. After all, this earlier period -- not Miller's in my view -- initiated complex and contesting state-building, nation-making, development projects, competing land reform initiatives, counterinsurgency connections, mass politics and mobilization campaigns about which we know little -- neither the French, nor the Vietnamese, sides. Were they failures like the

¹⁸ Philip Catton, *Diem's Final Failure: Prelude to America's War in Vietnam* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2003).

American-Diem one? I personally think so, but that does not mean they are historically unimportant. François Guillemot, whose work Miller cites, has started to provide insights into this earlier period and the relationship with the French.¹⁹ But I would be willing to wager that further research into the First Indochina War period – including the vanquished – will throw new light on the way we understand an array of Vietnams – including Ho Chi Minh's. The period of the First Indochina War in particular is wide open to young scholars who take the time to learn both French and Vietnamese and to let go of the Orthodox and Revisionist teleologies in favor of Miller's connected, ground level, and seriously researched approach.

For the linguistically gifted, Miller's 'ground level' approach to studying *misalliances* (there are scores of them littering world history from the time of the Han and the Romans) could also be applied to communist Vietnam's relationship with its own allies in Laos and Cambodia during all three Indochina Wars (1945-1991). Or even the Chinese communist relationship with Ho's Vietnam. Vatthana Pholsena has already shown what such a ground-level approach might yield for communist Lao-Vietnamese relations. Evan Gottesman has shown brilliantly how Vietnamese communists engaged in nation building in Cambodia after the Khmer Rouge.²⁰ Surely the elements of agency, contingency, perceptions, and mindsets apply to these Asian actors as much as they do to Western ones. To what extent did racism and Orientalism color Vietnamese perceptions and understanding of their Lao and Cambodian allies? Their foes? Vice versa? A lot, I would think. Why did the Vietnamese communist alliance with the Lao apparently succeed while the one with the Khmer Rouge melted down catastrophically? Communist Vietnamese were certainly determined to bring modernization projects and their brand of communist 'modernization theory' to western Indochina. What happened in discussions in Hanoi and Beijing certainly mattered; but what happened in the field, in the Mekong Delta, that was capable of triggering a violent break between communist brothers before the Americans even withdrew in 1975? We know little about such relationships and yet whatever happened 'down there' helped set off the Third Indochina War in 1978-1979. The histories of the Vietnamese, Chinese, Cambodian, and French *misalliance(s)* remain to be written.

Lastly, Miller's 'ground level' approach could also serve as a useful model for studying recent American wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Rather than rushing off to show why these wars were either 'necessary' or to be avoided at all costs as 'Another Vietnam Lesson', as hardcore Orthodox and Revisionist historians are so prone to do, we might do better to think cool-headedly about factoring the 'Hamid Karzais' into the picture without turning them into heroes or puppets. We might consider giving them agency, thinking about their pasts, mindsets, networks, and goals, and perhaps trying to understand how all of 'this'

¹⁹ François Guillemot, *Dai Viet, indépendance et révolution au Vietnam: L'échec de la troisième voie (1938-1955)* (Paris: Les Indes Savantes, 2012).

²⁰ Vatthana Pholsena, 'Une génération de patriotes: l'éducation révolutionnaire, du Laos au Vietnam', *Communisme*, volume I, (2013), pp. 231-258 and Evan Gottesman, *Cambodia after the Khmer Rouge: Inside the Politics of Nation Building*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002).

intersected with American agency and the contingency of all occupations, Western or not. This is no easy task, to be sure. Miller's approach requires language training, a lot of time in the field, and the sifting through of massive amounts of information.

It also requires more sophisticated conceptualization. While I share Miller's methodological penchant for using the ground level to frame the analysis of how American and Republican Vietnamese grew apart over each aspect of nation-building (see above), I fear that Miller missed a chance to explore a number of other related and, to my mind, important things also occurring on the ground. For example, Miller's Chapter 6 on "limited partners" and the subsection on "the limits of collaboration" (239-247) are conceptually and, well, empirically disappointing. I would submit that further work on the Vietnam War that goes to the 'ground level' – where I think it should – and explores socio-political interactions – as I also think it should – would benefit from a closer reading of literature on the concept and the complexity of collaboration. Miller's discussion of collaboration would have benefitted greatly from a wider reading on the social and theoretical dimensions of collaboration in Europe during WWII or even in Japanese Korea and China. I'm thinking of the work of Istvan Deak, Jan Gross, Mark Mazower, Michael Kim, Timothy Brooke, and Henry Rousso, among others.²¹ Collaboration, as Gross argues, is power-driven and can change over space and time, up above and down below, for elites and the common man.²² The weaker partner can also collaborate with the new occupier in order to push through long-desired socio-economic projects, indeed revolutions. This was certainly the reason why the famous Vietnamese modernizer and patriot, Phan Chu Trinh, collaborated with the French in the early twentieth-century. Marshal Philippe Pétain similarly saw in the Germans the chance to push through his 'national revolution' against the Republican project. Sometimes the weaker partners succeed. Usually they do not. But it is always highly risky business, especially the more asymmetrical the relationships. Indeed collaboration can get you killed, especially if you jeopardize the larger strategic goals of the stronger power in an alliance. Ngo Dinh Diem's tragic end reminds me strangely of Nguyen Van Thinh's suicide in November 1946, when it was clear that the French no longer trusted him as president of the Cochinchinese Republic. The Republic of Vietnam, like the Cochinchinese Republic for the French, was a weapon for the Americans. Diem would have understood the American 'weaponizing' of his state because he broke with the French precisely over this matter in 1947, a linkage which Miller fails to analyze. Bao Dai resisted passively (he knew how dangerous the French were); he holed himself up in Dalat, leading one French Indochina hand to swear to Bao Dai in a fit of rage that though the French might well lose in Vietnam, they would ensure that the King of the Nguyen suffered an even worse fate. Miller's

²¹ See the essays in Istvan Deak, Jan T. Gross, and Tony Judt, eds., *The Politics of Retribution in Europe: World War II and Its Aftermath* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); Mark Mazower, *Hitler's Empire: How the Nazis Ruled Europe* (London: Penguin, 2008); Timothy Brook, *Collaboration: Japanese Agents and Local Elites in Wartime China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005); Michael Kim, 'Regards sur la collaboration coréenne', *Vingtième Siècle*, no. 94, (April-June 2007), pp. 35-44 ; and the essays by leading French scholars in Henry Rousso, ed., *Les Collabos* (Paris: Pluriel, 2011).

²² Jan T. Gross, 'Themes for a Social History of War Experience and Collaboration', in Deak, et. al. *The Politics of Retribution*, pp. 15-35.

discussion of collaboration serves his methodological goal of flushing out the zones where the breakdown in the field occurred between the Americans and the Vietnamese; but in this rather narrow approach he misses the opportunity to bring out the complexity, importance, and the dangers of collaboration over a longer period of time reaching back to Ngo Dinh Diem's involvement in the first Bao Dai solution of 1933-1934 and his refusal to get involved in the one of 1947.

Miller also fails to demonstrate, in my view, what the 'ground level' in southern Vietnam meant in terms of statecraft. It wasn't a question of building one state, the Republic of Vietnam. The problem was that since September 1945, Vietnamese, French, Chinese, and then Americans had all tried to project, protect, and consolidate a myriad of states – not just diplomatically on high but, above all, down below, all the way down, to the village level. The Indochina Wars were a sustained and savage battle over controlling people, occupying territory, gathering information, and building states – in the cities and countryside. Unlike the European wars that pitted two conventional armies against each other in battles to knock the other out, the Indochina and Vietnam Wars were the home to several embattled states, colonial, national, and hybrid, each of which was determined in one way or another to suppress the others' sovereignty. Armies fought to defeat each other in the field from 1950 to be sure, but they also sought to protect their respective states and to extend them in the most minute of ways on the ground in collaboration with administrators, propagandists, and security agents. One group could be an ally one day and an enemy the next. This continued to be the case in southern Vietnam after 1954, especially given that the Geneva division of 'Vietnam' into two states was merely provisional. Miller deals with some of these matters in his chapter on counterinsurgency, but I can't help but think that a more in-depth treatment of this local fragmentation of society and statecraft on the ground would have provided an interesting way to say more about Diem, his state, and American and Vietnamese understandings of war.²³ Strikingly absent in Miller's book is any real discussion of Hanoi's attempt to create a competing state in the south and how the war of sovereignties this generated "on the ground" impacted on Diem's state-building and relationship with the Americans.

Miller might object that this would have taken him far beyond the confines of his book and no doubt the length allotted by his editor. Perhaps. In any case, we should thank Miller for producing such an important and thought-provoking book, a model for moving us beyond the binaries and the American centrism of the Orthodox and Revisionist historians, a study of the wars for Vietnam that finally brings American foreign relations and Vietnamese studies together. I will place my copy of Edward Miller's *Misalliance* right next to my copy of John Dower's Pulitzer Prize-winning history of Japanese-American relations, *Embracing Defeat*.²⁴ Why? Because Miller does for the Vietnamese-U.S. experience what Dower did for that other key relationship in America's diplomatic history in Asia: he tells the story of both

²³ See also Emile Simpson's, *War from the Ground Up: Twenty-First-Century Combat as Politics* (London: Christopher Hurst, 2012).

²⁴ John Dower, *Embracing Defeat* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2000).

sides as they intersected, not just up above but also on the ground.

Edward Miller has produced a careful yet fluently-written reconsideration of the Ngo brothers, Diem and Nhu, and their relationship with the United States. He forces us to look again at our assumptions regarding several facets of their story, including how Ngo Dinh Diem came to power in 1954-5; the inspiration for the 1961 Strategic Hamlet program; the roots of the Buddhist Crisis in 1963; and the genesis of the Generals' Coup that finally brought the two brothers to their death in 1963. The author makes two main interlinked arguments: first, that Diem was his own man, someone who came to power by his own efforts and who made his own decisions; second, that the early history of the Vietnam War was one of conflict over modernization, nation building, and development theories. These conflicts played out both among the U.S. advisers and between these advisers and the Ngo brothers. Complicating the debates over what Miller characterizes in Chapter two as "high modernity" in the top-down Rostow mode, and "low modernity" – practices that emphasize direct community engagement, identified with advisor Edward Lansdale's style of democracy promotion – was the vexing question of counter-insurgency.

Within his restricted framework, Miller does a fine job of demonstrating that the debate over nation-building in South Vietnam was fraught with misunderstandings and clashes over control of the program. The rebuffs encountered by Wesley Fishel of the Michigan State advisory group, for example, or the lawyers seconded to advise on the drafting of the constitution in 1956, highlight President Diem's insistence on following his own path. Likewise, the parting advice of Ambassador Elbridge Durbrow in 1960 to bring Nhu's Can Lao Party out of clandestinity and broaden the cabinet went nowhere. Indeed, Miller is thoroughly convincing when it comes to demonstrating Diem's stubborn independence against the Western specialists who came to set Vietnam on the road to democracy. My one caveat on this point is that Miller at the same time persuades me that it is impossible to separate the decisions and successes of the two brothers. From the early 1950s, when Ngo Dinh Nhu began to make the contacts that would help his older brother ascend to the post of Prime Minister in 1954, to the final years of his life, Nhu was the essential political fixer and counselor.

However, if Miller is hoping to rehabilitate Diem as a leader, I would have to say that he has failed. Like a good defense lawyer, he makes a valiant attempt to showcase the best aspects of this hapless man. But in the end, my original negative opinion about Diem and his brother was only reinforced. The brothers appear in this close examination of their thinking and uncompromising political style to have been disastrously out of touch with the country they ruled. Their over-confidence, resulting from their 1955 political and military victories, created by 1962-3 what Miller depicts as delusional optimism regarding their ability to defeat the communist insurgency, while outmaneuvering their rivals within the Republic. But it is their views on social transformation, which were embodied in the vague doctrines of 'personalism,' that appear not just to have been rigid and elitist, but also repellent.

Miller would like to show that Diem was a Confucian democrat, whose understanding of the concept involved an emphasis on moral duty. “This definition was a far cry from the standard meaning of democracy favored by postwar American theorists, most of whom thought of democracy as a form of political pluralism” (137), he writes. (Is there any other kind?) In reality, the only sort of democracy that Diem could envisage for South Vietnam was a new version of the traditional Confucian authoritarianism. As Miller argues, “For Diem, democracy and good governance depended on the leadership of wise and incorruptible officials who could be counted on to uphold an ethos of mutual social responsibility” (151). This system might have been defensible in terms of Vietnamese culture had it not been carried out with such total disregard for the popular welfare. But Diem and Nhu had such a strong sense of their own rectitude and destiny that they apparently never bothered to find out what their policies were doing to their own people.

Here we enter the heart of the grand transformation, both mental and physical, in which Diem and Nhu hoped to engage the peasants, who at that time comprised roughly 95% of the population. In their final years, this was embodied in the Strategic Hamlet program, sometimes known as the New Life program. In Nhu’s mind this was a project intertwined with his interpretation of ‘personalism.’ In the late 1930s, While a student in Europe Nhu had discovered personalism, a third-way philosophy elaborated by Catholic philosopher Emmanuel Mounier to fill the spiritual void between western capitalism and communist materialism; in this system, personal engagement with society and one’s community were the key to overcoming the extremes of the post-World War II world. Both Nhu and Diem placed a version of this idea at the center of their national revolution for Vietnam. But their idea of engagement was that they would give the orders and others would do their duty by obeying. As Miller shows, in the Strategic Hamlet program begun in 1961, as well as the previous land development efforts carried out by the First Republic, the peasants and settlers were expected “to find personal fulfillment within a web of communal activities and obligations – and thus embrace the personalist revolution” (176). What this amounted to was a crushing load of unpaid labor for the farmers who had to dismantle their houses, transport them to resettlement areas and build the fortifications to keep themselves cooped up at night. Both the Agroville program of resettlement, which ended in 1960, and the smaller Strategic Hamlet program provoked a backlash among the peasants, who resented what was in fact a continuation of the tradition of *corvée* labor, used by both the Vietnamese emperors and the French.

Miller’s discussion of high and low modernism could have usefully been extended to the later portions of his book, to shed more light on the top-down methods the Ngos adopted to bring security to the countryside. By highlighting the influence of French counter-insurgency expert Roger Trinquier’s prescription for ‘strategic hamlets,’ Miller makes clear that by 1961 the Diem government, with U.S. support, had determined that force would be necessary to restore order before the benefits of Western aid could be demonstrated to the Vietnamese peasants. (232-4) As Miller explains, “Like many other counterinsurgency theorists, Trinquier believed that enlisting the participation of ‘the people’ was essential to success. Yet he firmly rejected the notion that this participation could only be secured by winning hearts and minds. “We know that it is not at all necessary to have the sympathy of a majority of people in order to rule them... The right organization can turn the trick” (233).

But somehow or other, this military-enforced concentration of the rural population was supposed to be a part of the personalist revolution, instilling a spirit of self-sufficiency and mutual aid in the peasants (234).

At this point the reader anticipates some references to the unpopularity of the Strategic Hamlet program among the rural people. Numerous other studies on the U.S. War in Vietnam have broached this topic, but Miller for some reason does not explain that for most of the peasants, the program added many burdens to their existence. Jeffrey Race goes into some detail on this topic in his classic, *War Comes to Long An*, pointing out that the security being provided to villagers was irrelevant to their needs, since “the population was not the object of attack”.¹ On page 300, Miller finally quotes a remark made by Diem’s own Vice President to the September 1963 Taylor-McNamara mission, a statement that jarringly reveals the truth: “the Viet Cong were broadly popular in the countryside and there were ‘not more than 20 to 30 properly defended hamlets in the whole country’” (300).

It seems to me that if one takes the high modernity vs. low modernity contrast to its logical conclusion, then we should make some reference to the communists’ success at community-based organizing. So long as they were in opposition to the central government, their practice of living among the people led them to tailor their policies to popular needs, such as rent reduction and land redistribution. The history of communism in Vietnam makes it clear that the communists are no better than anyone else at high modernity -- they made many tragic errors in their schemes for economic modernization, as is now widely admitted. But one should at least acknowledge the nature of their successes in the early 1960s. In contrast, Diem and Nhu showed disdain for the views of ordinary people, and the widespread unhappiness with their rule, as revealed to the Taylor-McNamara mission, did much to fuel the Buddhist crisis that brought about their downfall. Even after a careful re-evaluation of Diem’s time in power, with the myths stripped away, the blame for his tragic end has to be placed on Diem’s own shoulders.

¹ Jeffrey Race, *War Comes to Long An* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), p. 192.

Review by Tuong Vu, University of Oregon

Unlike his archrival Ho Chi Minh, President Ngo Dinh Diem of the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) has never been seriously studied. Like his fellow nationalist leaders in other Asian countries such as Rhee Syngman of South Korea and Chiang Kai-shek of China, Ngo has long been treated with contempt by biased or ignorant American writers and scholars. Fortunately, Ngo has finally found his historian in Edward Miller, just like Rhee and Chiang whose legacies have recently been reevaluated.¹ Miller's long-awaited book is a major breakthrough for our understanding of Ngo Dinh Diem and the U.S.-RVN alliance. While Miller acknowledges that geopolitical, economic, and ideological factors undergirded that alliance, he argues that the formation and undoing of the alliance can only be explained by the interplay between American and Vietnamese personalities, ideas, and decisions.

By situating his study in the context of Vietnamese history and culture, Miller offers a fascinating account of how Ngo Dinh Diem and his supporters maneuvered their allies, rivals, and enemies to take and keep power. The story was full of historical contingencies and the outcomes were far from predictable. Miller effectively dispels the myth that Ngo Dinh Diem was a puppet of the U.S. and an inept and brutal dictator. American support certainly provided the Ngo regime the resources for its nation-building project, but Ngo Dinh Diem fought hard to establish himself before that support was offered to him. His career as a politician also achieved success as well as failure, and the failure that ended his government and his life in 1963 was caused primarily by his self-confidence, the very character trait that had earlier brought him his success. Finally, Ngo Dinh Diem had a modernizing vision for South Vietnam, and his regime was not simply built on coercion.

In fact, a major contribution of the book concerns the conflicting visions of development between Americans and Vietnamese. The case in point is rural reform to which Miller devotes one entire chapter. While American advisors such as Wolf Ladejinsky wanted the South Vietnamese government to implement a land reform similar to U.S.-supported reforms in Japan and Taiwan, Ngo Dinh Diem had his own idea that emphasized not land redistribution but the resettlement of rural communities. This idea was built on French analyses and policies of the 1930s that pointed to the problem of overpopulation in Vietnam's major deltas. Ngo Dinh Diem's idea indicated his more ambitious and comprehensive agenda of rural reform that included not just equal ownership but also long-term sustainability, the expansion of cultivated areas, the diversification of crops, and the strengthening of border areas.

Miller's focus on the clashes between Vietnamese and American visions leads him to conclude that the failure of the alliance (and the implied sorry fate of South Vietnam) was

¹ Jay Taylor, *The Generalissimo: Chiang Kai-Shek and the Struggle for Modern China* (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009); Stephen Jin-Woo Kim, *Master of Manipulation: Syngman Rhee and the Seoul-Washington Alliance, 1953-1960* (Seoul: Yonsei University Press, 2001).

caused by both Saigon's and Washington's "unwillingness to accommodate South Vietnam's myriad and diverse revolutionary aspirations."² These aspirations, Miller argues,

resisted subordination to a single ideological formulation. In various ways, this pattern of failure endured in South Vietnam throughout the massive U.S. military intervention of the late 1960s, down to the last days of the Republic in the 1970s. The pattern also persisted in transposed form in the reunified Vietnam that the Vietnamese Communist Party ruled after 1975.³

One may question whether the "aspirations" of ordinary South Vietnamese were really "revolutionary," or whether they simply wanted to be left alone. If Miller's argument is accepted, the Vietnam War thus emerges without a winner. The communists won the territory but that does not mean they won the hearts and minds of South Vietnamese. Once Ho Chi Minh's successors were in a position to force Stalinist schemes on the Southern population after 1975, they failed even more spectacularly than Ngo Dinh Diem did. Farmers would rather destroy crops and slaughter draft animals than join agricultural cooperatives. At least two million Vietnamese voted with their feet by escaping Vietnam by boat.

Miller's *Misalliance* makes another major contribution to the scholarship on the Vietnam War by shedding light on the thinking of the Ngo regime about the communist threat and its approach to solving the security problem. Miller shows convincingly that Saigon was not oblivious to that threat, nor did it rely only on brute force. In particular, Ngo Dinh Diem believed in the superiority of South Vietnam's social and economic model compared to the communist model, and was optimistic about the long-term prospects for Vietnam's national unification once that superiority became obvious. (In this Ngo was both right and wrong, if we use Korea as a reference point. It was already clear by the 1980s which model was more successful with respect to North and South Korea; nevertheless, unification has not taken place and it is easy to underestimate the ability of the North Korean regime to persist). In any case, Ngo's strategy against insurgency was built on his astute understanding of the strategic situation in Indochina after 1954 and his successful experience as a provincial chief in 1930-1931. The strategy combined mass mobilization, indoctrination and coercion, not unlike what the Ho regime employed in North Vietnam. Ngo's "Denounce Communism" campaign was highly effective and by 1958 "the party appeared to have been eliminated as a political force" in South Vietnam.⁴

Miller points out two reasons as to why Ngo Dinh Diem's counter-insurgency success did not last. One factor was the indiscriminate character of the violence employed by

² Edward Miller, *Misalliance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and the Fate of South Vietnam* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2013), 18.

³ *Ibid.*, 326.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 198.

government officials that ostensibly targeted only communists but in fact trapped many noncommunists. The other reason was Hanoi's direction of a violent campaign in the South to regain its communist base. Miller's argument is insightful and backed by strong evidence but one can take it one step further with a comparison between North and South Vietnam. While the exact number of communists being killed by RVN security forces is not known, Miller argues that it was "far lower than the thousands," or in other words, fewer than the number of executions in North Vietnam during land reform.⁵ This North Vietnamese campaign was supposed to target only landlords but ended up killing many rich and even middle peasants. The campaign in the North forced hundreds of thousands to flee to the South and provoked a revolt in Nghe An in November 1956 that lasted for two weeks before being crushed.⁶ In comparison with the South, the violence unleashed in North Vietnam thus occurred on a larger scale, was no less indiscriminate, and encountered even greater resistance. While violence is morally repugnant, in the final analysis what explains the different outcomes between North (rural stability) and South (rural insurgency) is not the violence but the external factor: Saigon had neither the desire nor ability to incite a rebellion in the North, while Hanoi under Communist Party First Secretary Le Duan's leadership since 1959 poured almost all of the resources at its disposal into fostering a Southern revolt. Any assessment of Ngo Dinh Diem's legacy must take this fact into account.

Another important point of comparison between North and South that emerges through Miller's analysis of Saigon politics concerns Ngo Dinh Diem's rural development policy. North Vietnamese leaders gave priority to land redistribution followed by the formation of rural cooperatives in the mold of Chinese communes but on a much smaller scale. Hanoi also resettled North Vietnamese to border regions, and mobilized thousands of peasants to work for large-scale irrigation projects. The divergent development strategies between the North and South Vietnamese governments suggest that Ho Chi Minh and his comrades were more committed to social reform than was Ngo Dinh Diem. The former sought a class route to nation-building,⁷ whereas the latter favored an approach that put stronger emphasis on moral rectification and economic incentives.

Externally, Hanoi sincerely looked to Moscow and Beijing for policy guidance, while Saigon maintained a greater level of independence or distance from Washington. For example, land reform in North Vietnam was launched at the urging of Joseph Stalin and Mao Zedong.

⁵ Various sources estimate the number of executions in North Vietnam to be about 15,000. See Vo Nhan Tri, *Vietnam's economic policy since 1975* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1990), 3; and Tuong Vu, *Paths to Development in Asia: South Korea, Vietnam, China, and Indonesia* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 103.

⁶ Peter Hansen, "Bac Di Cu: Catholic Refugees from the North of Vietnam, and Their Role in the Southern Republic, 1954-1959," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 4, 3 (2009): 173-211; Ang Cheng Guan, *Vietnamese Communists' Relations with China and the Second Indochina Conflict, 1956-1962* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 1997), 42.

⁷ Stein Tonnesson, "The Class Route to Nationhood: China, Vietnam, Norway, Cyprus - and France," *Nations and Nationalism* 15, 3: 375-395.

At the same time, land reform cadres on the ground were supervised by Chinese advisors. According to some sources,⁸ Ho Chi Minh supported the goals of the campaign but was ambivalent about its timing and its degree of cruelty. Despite some internal dissension, the land reform in North Vietnam went ahead and was a great success because it helped Ho's party centralize power and consolidate its rule over the countryside. Here one cannot help but wonder, if Ngo Dinh Diem had been ideologically closer to the U.S., and if his regime had been so dependent on the U.S. to the extent that he had to accept his American advisor Wolf Ladejinsky's advice to carry out a more thorough land reform (as Ho did with respect to his Soviet and Chinese advisors), whether the fate of South Vietnam could have been different.

Still another interesting parallel exists between Ngo Dinh Diem and Le Duan, the North Vietnamese leader, in the two men's overconfidence. By the late 1950s, Le Duan and not Ho was the real leader in North Vietnam. As Miller points out, during 1962 the battle situation turned in Saigon's favor, and right before the coup in November 1963, Ngo Dinh Diem and his brother were thinking that Saigon was on the verge of victory.⁹ Documents made available by Hanoi after the war showed that Le Duan was optimistic about victory for the North in 1962, especially after the Geneva Conference on Laos (U.S. concessions there made it appear weak to him).¹⁰ On the news of the coup in Saigon in November 1963, at the 9th Plenum of the Vietnam Workers' Party, Le Duan and his militant comrades persuaded the rest of the Party leadership to accept a daring plan to rush troops to the South to defeat Saigon *before* the U.S. had made up its mind to intervene.¹¹ This plan unfolded with, among other attacks, the communist bombing of Bien Hoa airbase and the first Maddox incident. These attacks did not defeat Saigon but prompted U.S. retaliation with Operation Rolling Thunder and the landing of U.S. Marines in Da Nang in 1965. Unlike Ngo Dinh Diem, who lost U.S. support and was killed for being overconfident, Le Duan was rewarded for taking risks. Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev had opposed a militant communist line in South Vietnam but he was removed in 1964. His successors offered full support to North Vietnam in response to Rolling Thunder.

To conclude, Edward Miller's *Misalliance* makes a major breakthrough in the study of the Vietnam War. It is deeply researched, carefully argued, and forcefully written. It shows a different Ngo Dinh Diem than the one we know from existing scholarship, and it suggests that the fate of South Vietnam was far from being predetermined.

⁸ Hoang Tung, "Nhưng kỷ niệm về bác Hồ" [Memories of Uncle Ho]. Available at <http://www.diendan.org/viet-nam/tu-lieu-hoang-tung-1920-2010-noi-ve-ho-chi-minh/>

⁹ Miller, *Misalliance*, 302-311.

¹⁰ "Thu của đồng chí Lê Duẩn gửi Trung Ương Cục miền Nam" [Letter from comrade Le Duan to the Southern Central Office], July 18, 1962, 716, 722.

¹¹ Lien Hang Nguyen argues that some central leaders who questioned the wisdom of Le Duan's strategy were intimidated into accepting his plan at the Plenum. See *Hanoi's War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 64-68.

Author's Response by Edward Miller, Dartmouth College

As rewarding as it is for an author to see his or her work in print, it is even more gratifying to read the commentaries of fellow scholars who have critically and thoughtfully evaluated that work. I very much appreciate all five of the searching and incisive reviews presented in this roundtable, as well as the opportunity to respond to them.

Let me begin with a comment offered by another reader of my book—in this case, one of the anonymous reviewers who evaluated it when it was still in manuscript form. That reviewer observed that “every historical interpretation of the Vietnam War rests upon a particular interpretation of Ngo Dinh Diem.” Although I had not previously thought of Diem in that way, I realized that the reviewer was correct. For Vietnam War historians, Diem’s significance seems to go beyond his status as the founder and longest-serving leader of the South Vietnamese state. Nor does his historical importance lie merely in the fact that his death in 1963 is now widely seen as one of the proverbial turning points in the history of the war. Instead, Diem’s prominence in Vietnam War historiography has to do with the things he has been made to stand for, and the ways in which historians and others have used him to explain the origins of the war, as well as its post-1963 escalation and outcome. My book is no exception to this trend, even if the particular uses to which I put Diem are different in some key respects from the ways that other scholars have employed him.

The practice of drawing connections between Diem and larger questions about the history of the war is apparent in these five reviews, and especially in the invocations of the long-running debate between the ‘orthodox’ and ‘revisionist’ schools of Vietnam War history. While I deliberately avoided any mention of this debate in *Misalliance*, its interpretive strictures are apparently not so easily set aside. I will point out, however, that there is considerable disagreement among the reviewers over whether and how the book can be related to one or the other of these schools. Philip Catton suggests that my interpretation of Diem inclines toward the orthodox perspective, since I see the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) president as “the architect of his own downfall.” In contrast, Sophie Quinn-Judge seems to push me toward the revisionist camp. In her judgment, I make a “valiant attempt to showcase” Diem’s best aspects, only to come up short in my efforts “to rehabilitate Diem as a leader.” (Quinn-Judge also compares me to “a good defense lawyer”—surely as backhanded a compliment as has ever appeared on H-Diplo.) Tuong Vu appears to locate me in the revisionist camp; however, unlike Quinn-Judge, Vu is more sanguine about my contributions in this regard, since he credits me with “effectively dispel[ling] the myth that Ngo Dinh Diem was... an inept and brutal dictator.” Gregory Daddis adds an interesting interpretive twist to the debate by describing my treatment of Diem as “post-revisionist.” But Daddis goes on to portray me as an author who “clearly sympathizes” with Diem—a remark which appears to pull me at least partway back into the revisionist orbit.

My own views on the orthodox-or-revisionist question accord best with the assessment offered by Christopher Goscha. While I readily acknowledge the valuable contributions that scholars in both schools have made to our knowledge of Vietnam War history, I think

Goscha is correct that each camp is the other's interpretive mirror image. As a result, the sound and fury of their battles with each other have obscured some common shortcomings. As Goscha notes, both schools are equally American-centered in their interpretative emphases and research agendas; they are also equally reductionist in their respective treatments of Vietnamese society, culture, and politics. (Goscha's comments on the unexpected parallels between the work of Frances Fitzgerald and that of Mark Moyar are especially illuminating in this regard.) I would add that the orthodox and revisionist approaches share the same curious disinterest in the history of colonialism in Vietnam, and they do not much consider the myriad ways in which the ideas and practices of the colonial era lingered on in both North and South Vietnam after 1954. Orthodox authors are quick to denounce U.S. empire, and their revisionist counterparts decry communist imperial ambitions. But neither group has much to say about how or why these postcolonial imperial ventures became entangled with the enduring political, ideological, and social legacies of France's Indochina empire.

Like Goscha, I do not see my interpretation of Diem as either revisionist or orthodox. Contrary to what Quinn-Judge suggests, I did not set out to "rehabilitate" Diem—in fact, I explicitly disavowed that objective in my introduction (10), and nothing in the text contradicts this disavowal. Nor is *Misalliance* an attempt to deny that Diem was a dictator, or a bid to excuse the brutality of some of his policies. Indeed, the book quite thoroughly documents the brutal qualities of his rule (as Quinn-Judge acknowledges). So my interpretation is a far cry from the sympathetic portrayals of Diem that some revisionist authors have offered. This of course does not make me an advocate of the orthodox view. As several of the reviewers point out, I present detailed evidence that Diem engineered his own rise to power and that he did not owe his 1954 appointment to U.S. intervention on his behalf—a claim that directly challenges an enduring tenet of the orthodox interpretation. It is true, as Catton observes, that I depict Diem as the architect of his own demise, as have some orthodox scholars. But my explanation of how Diem made his own fate is radically different from the caricatured and simplistic representations that appear in most orthodox accounts. The heart of the book is my attempt to detail Diem's nation-building agenda by situating it within the broader frame of modern Vietnamese history, and especially by tracing its origins to the politics, society, and culture of the late colonial era. This approach, in turn, makes it possible for me to relate Diem's rise and fall to the ways in which his nation-building agenda intersected and collided with the agendas of other groups and individuals (both American and Vietnamese).

Does this all mean that *Misalliance* is best characterized as a "post-revisionist" book, as Daddis proposes? Perhaps—but I am a bit leery of that term and the interpretive baggage that it carries. For me, the phrase recalls the post-revisionist school of Cold War historiography and its attempts during the 1970s and 1980s to produce some kind of vaguely Hegelian "synthesis" of the dueling arguments about who was responsible for starting the Cold War.¹ This is not at all what I hoped to accomplish in *Misalliance*. Instead

¹ John Lewis Gaddis, "The Emerging Post-Revisionist Synthesis on the Origins of the Cold War." *Diplomatic History* 7 (July 1983): 171–190.

of trying to split the difference between existing interpretations, I envisioned the book as an attempt to take an altogether different approach to the study of U.S.-South Vietnam relations during 1954-1963. This is why I focus so heavily on the interplay among American and South Vietnamese ideas about nation building, development, and modernization. For me, nation building is not a “niche topic” in Vietnam War history (as one revisionist would have it).² Nor was nation building the means by which the United States undertook to “invent” South Vietnam (as an orthodox scholar recently insisted).³ Instead, I see nation building in Vietnam as a field of contest involving multiple agendas, leaders, and groups—including both Americans and Vietnamese. I am convinced, moreover, that untangling these overlapping contests over nation building is essential to gaining a fuller understanding of the origins, course, and outcome of the Vietnam War. In this regard, I am indebted much more to recent work on the history of development in both colonial and postcolonial contexts than to the existing scholarship on U.S. relations with Diem’s government.⁴

I believe that an approach to Vietnam War history which places nation building and development at its center can shed new light on some of the oldest and most contentious questions in the historiography. Consider Philip Catton’s \$64,000 question about “whether a non-communist South Vietnam was ever truly viable.” Catton is entirely justified in asking for my answer to this much-debated question, since it remains as relevant as ever to explorations of both the origins and the outcomes of the war. As both revisionists and orthodox scholars have acknowledged, this debate about ‘viability’ is really a debate about *legitimacy*: was it ever realistic for anyone to suppose that Diem’s republic could displace the communists in the eyes of South Vietnamese as the icons of nationalist legitimacy in South Vietnam? Or was the RVN doomed even before Diem had founded it, undone both by the communists’ dedication to the nationalist cause and by the Saigon government’s inefficiency, corruption, and venality?

My answer to this question starts from the proposition that legitimacy in Vietnam during the twentieth century was never an all-or-nothing phenomenon—that is, it was not something that belonged exclusively to a single leader, party, or state, nor was it something that became ‘fixed’ after a certain date.⁵ Instead, legitimacy was contested throughout the

² Mark Moyar, “Vietnam: Historians at War,” National Association of Scholars, 24 March 2008, http://www.nas.org/articles/Vietnam_Historians_at_War, accessed 21 Aug 2013.

³ James Carter, *Inventing Vietnam: the United States and State Building, 1954-1968* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

⁴ For a helpful overview of the rapidly growing scholarship on development in the history of U.S. Foreign Relations in the twentieth century, see Daniel Immerwahr, “Modernization and Development in U.S. Foreign Relations,” review essay, *Passport: The Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations*, September 2012. For a global and comparative perspective, see Frederick Cooper, “Writing the History of Development,” *Journal of Modern European History* 8 (2010): 5–23.

⁵ By 1954, according to one recent account, Ho Chi Minh and the communists “had opposed the Japanese and driven out the French and thereby secured a nationalist legitimacy that was, in a fundamental

war by both state and non-state actors. As such, it was intimately bound up with what I refer to as “the politics of nation building” in both North and South Vietnam. Given the enormous attention and resources devoted to nation-building projects and programs, it is not surprising to find that the legitimacy of various governments, groups, and leaders ebbed and flowed over time.

This is not to say that legitimacy in Vietnam was always and everywhere up for grabs, or that all of the contestants began from the same starting point. For example, it is obvious that Ho Chi Minh and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) enjoyed a huge reputational advantage over Diem’s Saigon regime in many parts of Vietnam in 1954 (even if Diem was not quite as lacking in reputational assets as some scholars have supposed). Nevertheless, Vietnam War scholars should resist the practice of projecting the circumstances that prevailed at a particular moment onto other times and places. In the case of the DRV, recent research shows that its relations with the people it claimed as its citizens were far more contentious and problematic than previously believed. Similarly, scholarship on the communist movement in the south after 1954 reveals that the party’s legitimacy changed sharply over time, and from community to community.

The legitimacy of Diem and the state he led also varied considerably between 1954 and 1963, his initial disadvantages notwithstanding. While I do not have space here to recap all of my findings in depth, I believe the book shows that Diem’s nation-building efforts resulted in several notable successes, as well as some rather spectacular failures. Although the failures clearly outweighed the successes in the long run, this outcome was not a foregone conclusion from the outset. Given the up-and-down course of the regime’s fortunes, it is not surprising to discover that its legitimacy in the eyes of many South Vietnamese was also subject to change.

Diem’s most impressive nation-building achievements came mainly during his early years of power. Many of these took place in the realm of state building. In the year following his against-all-odds victory in the battle of Saigon, Diem proclaimed the formation of the RVN, extended its effective authority over most of South Vietnam’s territory, held elections for a National Assembly, drafted and promulgated a constitution, launched a major agrarian resettlement program (the Land Development Program), and began reorganizing South Vietnam’s internal security forces. While not all of these initiatives achieved their long-term goals, their immediate effect—combined with Diem’s defeat of the widely despised Binh Xuyen cartel, his removal of the unpopular ex-emperor Bao Dai, and his successful efforts to force France to withdraw the last of its colonial troops from Vietnam—served mostly to enhance the fledgling regime’s status. (While the referendum that Diem used to dispose of Bao Dai was obviously rigged, it did not provoke a popular backlash, or diminish the perception that Diem and the RVN were becoming a credible rival to Ho and the DRV.)

way, fixed for all time—whatever their later governing misdeeds.” Fredrik Logevall, *Embers of War: The fall of an empire and the making of America’s Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 2012), xxii.

Unfortunately for Diem, these apparent state-building triumphs did not carry over into the area of identity building—that is, to the efforts to persuade ordinary South Vietnamese to link themselves to the RVN state, its institutions, and his leadership. The regime’s heavy-handed indoctrination and mass mobilization tactics, its indiscriminate use of coercion and violence in its security operations, its reliance on the abstruse doctrine of personalism (*chu nghĩa nhân vi*), its perceived retreat from democracy in the National Assembly elections of 1959—all of these contributed to a marked erosion of the regime’s political fortunes during the late 1950s. While these developments are not sufficient by themselves to explain the emergence of the communist-led insurgency that erupted in South Vietnam during 1959-1960, they were clearly contributing factors.

Diem’s record during his last years in power also reflects numerous missteps and missed opportunities. To their credit, Diem and his brother Ngo Dinh Nhu had recognized by 1960 that many of their nation-building programs were failing and that new policies and tactics were needed. But the solution they devised—the Strategic Hamlet Program—was even more grandiose and less effective as an identity-building measure than their previous agrarian reform programs. Meanwhile, the brothers steadfastly refused to accommodate those groups and leaders who had once supported them but who had become alienated from the regime—a category that now included the members of anti-communist political parties, the commanders of the South Vietnamese army, certain Buddhist organizations, and even substantial numbers of Vietnamese Catholics. During 1962 and 1963, the Ngos could have made different choices that would have strengthened their regime and at least improved their chances of staying in power. But they were convinced that they were winning the war, that the hamlet program was working, and that there was no need for them to compromise with anyone.

The above is not meant to provide a definitive answer to Catton’s \$64,000 question. Indeed, the arguments and evidence I present in *Misalliance* are at most only a first step towards such an answer. To make a more comprehensive assessment of the ‘viability’ of the RVN (both during the Diem period and afterwards), Vietnam War scholars need to delve into the complex history of state-society relations in South Vietnam during the RVN era. Since my book examines those relations only in a very limited and targeted fashion, there is clearly much more work that remains to be done.

In connection with this last point, I must both agree and disagree with Goscha, who criticizes me for not situating my study of the U.S.-Diem alliance within the broader history of collaboration in the Indochina Wars, and for not providing a more thoroughgoing account of the complexities of state- and nation building at the “ground level.” I heartily endorse Goscha’s representation of this period as one in which Indochina was “home to several embattled states, colonial, national, and hybrid, each of which was determined in one way or another to suppress the others’ sovereignty.” I also think Goscha is right to connect Diem’s understanding of the dangers of collaboration with the United States to his pre-1954 experiences and especially to his failed attempt to manipulate the “Bao Dai solution” to his own advantage. (I did mention that episode in Chapter One, though Goscha is no doubt right that I could have analyzed it at more length.) More generally, I probably should have been more careful in my use of ‘collaboration’ as an analytical concept and a

historical theme--though I think that my discussion of the South Vietnamese political landscape at the time that Diem took office in 1954 does acknowledge at least a bit of the context that Goscha says is missing. However, I cannot see how I could have feasibly included the kind of synoptic examination of state-society relations in South Vietnam within the confines of a book on the U.S.-Diem alliance. Squeezing in an in-depth assessment of communist state-building in the south also seems like a tall order. (I daresay my editor will agree with me on these last points). I expect that the coming years will bring other books by Vietnam War historians that contribute more to the study of South Vietnam at the 'ground level.' I am sure these future works will provide new insights to the important questions Goscha has raised here.

All disagreements aside, I am very grateful to all of the reviewers for their comments. Let me also express my appreciation to the H-Diplo editors, both for organizing this roundtable and for their editorial work on it.

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