HEARTS AND MINDS: CULTURAL NATION-BUILDING IN SOUTH VIETNAM, 1954-1963

DISSERTATION

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By

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ABSTRACT

In 1954, the Geneva Agreement divided Vietnam at the seventeenth parallel. For the next decade, the United States undertook policies intended to guarantee the survival of the non-communist government in South Vietnam. This was a critical endeavor, as the failure of nation-building programs caused the United States to shift to a military strategy in Vietnam. Existing studies of U.S.-South Vietnamese relations in the 1950s and early 1960s have not adequately explored the role of the Ngô Đình Diệm government in the nation-building effort. Most historians have been content to focus on American policy, largely ignoring South Vietnamese programs. Through extensive use of Vietnamese and American sources, this dissertation provides a more complete account of nation-building in South Vietnam.

This dissertation examines American and South Vietnamese attempts to use culture to create a viable nation in South Vietnam from 1954 to 1963. During this period, the American and South Vietnamese governments initiated programs to foster a sense of nationhood in South Vietnam. In the first years after the Geneva Agreement, these programs were meant to encourage support for Ngô Đình Diệm as a strong and able leader of South Vietnam. As Diệm’s regime took hold, the United States and South Vietnam changed their strategies. In the late 1950s, Diệm used public representations of Vietnamese history and culture to create a sense of Vietnamese nationalism in South
Vietnam. At the same time, the United States initiated programs to introduce the people of South Vietnam to the dominant features of American culture, namely capitalism and democracy.

American and South Vietnamese cultural strategies failed to win strong support for Diệm’s government. In the late 1950s, cultural nation-building programs were inconsistent and, at times, contradictory. American messages emphasizing the high standard of living enjoyed under capitalism, for example, contradicted Diệm’s calls for personal sacrifice for the nation. Furthermore, American and South Vietnam messages inadvertently brought attention to the economic and political shortcomings of the Diệm regime. As opposition to Diệm’s government grew, he used anti-democratic policies against his opponents, thus engendering further discontent in South Vietnam.
DEDICATED TO MY FAMILY
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

On March 11, 1962, the Republic of Vietnam inaugurated a monument to Trưng Trác and Trưng Nhị, Vietnamese sisters from the first century who had led a rebellion against Chinese rule. Madame Ngô Đình Nhu, sister-in-law of South Vietnamese President Ngô Đình Diệm, addressed the crowd, calling on them to join in the fight to defend the Republic. The celebration of the Trưng sisters was part of Diệm’s ongoing effort to create a sense of national identity in South Vietnam. It was also an attempt to galvanize support for the Diệm regime by linking it to the heroic episodes in Vietnam’s past. But several observers noted that the monument, while putatively recognizing the heroic actions of the Trưng sisters, bore an uncanny resemblance to Madame Nhu herself.

Less than two years later Diệm’s regime collapsed. On November 1, 1963, a group of military officers mounted a successful coup against the government. Upon hearing news of the coup, residents of Saigon gathered at Mê Linh square, where they tore down the statue of the Trưng sisters. The impulse to destroy the monument did not arise from any animosity toward the Trưng sisters themselves; they were—and they remain—two of the most famous and admired figures in Vietnamese history. The
destruction of the statue, like its construction two years earlier, was a symbolic act. In tearing down the statue, the crowd was eliminating a powerful symbol of the fallen regime.

The Vietnam War was a battle for hearts and minds. Historians have long recognized the role of public attitudes in the Vietnam conflict, concluding that the United States lost in Vietnam because it failed to win the allegiance of the Vietnamese people. But most accounts fail to adequately address the actions of South Vietnamese officials. The monument to the Trưng sisters was only one example of Diệm’s concerted efforts to gain public support for his regime. From 1954 to 1963, Diệm used propaganda, educational institutions, and public celebrations to promote a national culture in South Vietnam and to strengthen the Republic of Vietnam. During the same period, American cultural programs in South Vietnam employed similar tactics but a fundamentally different message. In order to diminish support for communism, the United States advertised the superiority of the American system of democratic capitalism. The contradictions between American and South Vietnamese cultural programs undermined their effectiveness, and the fall of the Diệm government signaled the failure of the cultural nation-building strategy in South Vietnam. Within eighteen months of the coup against Diệm, the struggle in South Vietnam would shift to the battlefield, where it remained for the next decade.

In June 1954, Ngô Đình Diệm returned to South Vietnam from exile in the United States and took the position of Prime Minister under Emperor Bảo Đại. The political evolution of South Vietnam to this point had been rather circuitous. In 1949, in an
attempt to placate Vietnamese aspirations for independence, French authorities had given Bảo Đại, Emperor of Vietnam, a modicum of autonomy. Under Bảo Đại, the State of Vietnam\(^1\) operated as a semi-autonomous protectorate in the French colonial empire. But Bảo Đại was little more than a figurehead, and many of the most critical decisions were left to French authorities. For the next five years, France fought Hồ Chí Minh’s nationalist independence movement, with little success. By 1954, France faced defeat in Vietnam. In a last-ditch effort to hold its colony, France committed its resources to a remote area in northwest Vietnam, near the border with Laos. At Điện Biên Phủ, Vietnamese communist forces surrounded the French army and won a dramatic military victory.

As the French army tried to hold the line at Điện Biên Phủ, negotiations were already underway to determine the future of Vietnam. At the Geneva Conference, France, China, and the Soviet Union agreed temporarily to divide Vietnam at the seventeenth parallel. Hồ Chí Minh and the Vietnamese communists would control the area north of the demarcation line. Bảo Đại’s State of Vietnam would govern the southern half of the country. According to the terms of the Geneva Agreements, after two years Vietnam would hold nationwide elections to reunify the country.

In the summer of 1954, Bảo Đại asked Diệm to serve as Prime Minister of the State of Vietnam, a position he held for the next fifteen months. In October 1955, Diệm organized a referendum to determine whether he or Bảo Đại would serve as head of state.

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\(^1\) The State of Vietnam, or SVN, existed from 1949 until October 1955, when Diệm declared the creation of the Republic of Vietnam (RVN). For the purposes of this paper, I use “Republic of Vietnam” and “South Vietnam” interchangeably to describe the State of Vietnam and the subsequent government under Diệm, except in cases where it is important to distinguish the Republic of Vietnam from its predecessor.
Diệm rigged the election, winning with ninety-eight percent of the votes. As president, Diệm, a fierce anti-communist, refused to abide by the conditions of the Geneva Treaty. In Diệm’s view, his government was not a signatory to the agreement and therefore was not obligated to accept its terms. Furthermore, he insisted that corruption and coercion in North Vietnam precluded any possibility of fair elections. Instead, Diệm focused on creating a South Vietnam strong and secure enough to exist independently of the communist north. For the next nine years, Diệm’s task was to prove that South Vietnam was a legitimate nation and that he, as a ruler, represented the people of South Vietnam.

Ngô Đình Diệm’s tenure as South Vietnamese head of state corresponded with the interregnum between the First and Second Indochina Wars. It is critical, therefore, to examine closely the goals, implementation, and results of American and South Vietnamese programs during the Diệm period. During this period, the United States and Diệm believed that they could build an independent South Vietnamese nation as a bulwark against communist expansion in Southeast Asia. By the early 1960s, the growing intensity of opposition to Diệm signaled the failure of this strategy. Despite the importance of this period, historians have not yet adequately explored U.S.-South

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2 What is commonly referred to in the United States as “The Vietnam War” is sometimes given other names for greater precision. Scholars often use the term “Second Indochina War” to describe the period from 1965 to 1975, to differentiate it from the First Indochina War (1949-1954) and the Third Indochina War (when Vietnam fought China and Cambodia in 1979-80). To add to the confusion, the Second Indochina War is sometimes called the “American War,” especially by people in Vietnam. Following American standards, I use “The Vietnam War,” unless context dictates greater specificity.

Vietnamese relations from 1954 to 1963. This dissertation examines cultural elements of nation-building and gives equal weight to South Vietnamese perspectives in order to provide a more complete account of the rise and fall of Ngô Đình Diệm.

This dissertation explores “cultural nation-building” in South Vietnam from 1954 to 1963. I use the term cultural nation-building to refer to the programs that had the direct and primary purpose of altering or strengthening public attitudes in support of South Vietnam or the United States. I include American and South Vietnamese informational policies and propaganda campaigns. I also explore the role of education policies, particularly school curricula, as a means of influencing public beliefs. Finally, I look at activities that fell outside of the realm of traditional propaganda and information, including public celebrations, commemorations, and displays of history.

All nation-building programs in Vietnam were, on some level, aimed at the attitudes and beliefs of the public. A strong military was necessary to provide internal security and defend against outside invasion, but it also fostered public confidence in the government. Land reform and economic progress were necessary because they gave people a stake in the nation and improved their estimation of the government. In studying programs that indirectly involved public support for South Vietnam, historians have ignored direct efforts to create, alter, or strengthen attitudes of the South Vietnamese people.

Both the United States and the Republic of Vietnam orchestrated cultural programs in South Vietnam after the Geneva Agreements of 1954. In Chapters 2, 3, and 4, I examine American and South Vietnamese informational programs initiated during
Diệm’s first two years in office. These campaigns relied on typical propaganda and information techniques to encourage domestic support for Diệm’s government of South Vietnam. South Vietnamese programs used the philosophy of Personalism to justify Diệm’s presidency and the policies he enacted after 1954. At the same time, the United States initiated a “crash” program to promote Diệm’s “Free Vietnam” as the rightful Vietnamese state and to show America’s commitment to South Vietnam. American and South Vietnamese messages were similar. Both countries tried to overcome initial skepticism about South Vietnam’s legitimacy by presenting Diệm as a strong leader and by attacking the communist system.

Once Diệm solidified his position and stabilized South Vietnam, Vietnamese cultural nation-building took on a slightly different tone. Chapters 5 and 6 explore South Vietnamese and American efforts to expand the cultural foundations of nation-building programs. At the end of 1956 and the beginning of 1957, the Republic of Vietnam began instituting programs aimed at forging a sense of national pride and cultural unity. This campaign enlisted public representations of Vietnamese history as a rallying point for the citizenry. Diệm also consciously associated his government and his family with Vietnam’s past. This effort, if successful, would imbue his regime with an even greater measure of legitimacy, one which grew out of millennia of historical progress. The Republic of Vietnam buttressed these efforts with other cultural nation-building programs, such as education reform, library and university expansions, and historic preservation projects.

American programs also changed with Diệm’s increasing stability. In 1957 and 1958, the United States Information Service (USIS) revised its programs in order to
emphasize American culture and values in an effort to foster admiration and support for the United States. American programs, like those of the Diệm government, included traditional information and propaganda mechanisms, such as radio broadcasts and magazine publishing. The USIS also used public displays, cultural centers, and language instruction to reach the Vietnamese public.

Although American and South Vietnamese cultural programs expanded in the late 1950s, several factors served to undermine their effectiveness. During this period, the two governments pursued divergent informational strategies in South Vietnam. Not only did they fail to coordinate their programs, but their messages were often contradictory. At the same time, Diệm’s autocratic domestic policies belied the positive messages of American and South Vietnamese propaganda. Furthermore, attempts to promote an admirable national culture—both American and Vietnamese—only highlighted the shortcomings of Diệm’s domestic policies.

Diệm’s efforts to influence attitudes toward his government were not limited to South Vietnam. Chapter 7 explores Diệm’s policies to “win the hearts and minds” of the American public. His goals were clear: Diệm believed that public support from Americans would translate into economic and political benefits for his regime. During the chaos of Diệm’s first years in office, he hired an American public relations firm to direct overseas informational programs in the United States. With the greater stability in 1957-1960, Diệm devoted more direct attention to his cultural campaign in the United States. Besides propaganda efforts directed by the Ministry of Information, South Vietnam tried to stimulate interest in Vietnamese culture and history. The centerpiece of this strategy was an exhibit of Vietnamese artifacts held at the Smithsonian in 1960.
By the end of 1960, Đệ́m was once again facing a domestic crisis. For the next three years, he dealt with a growing communist-inspired insurgency and declining public support, both in Vietnam and in the United States. The continuation of American and South Vietnamese cultural programs could not stem the tide of opposition. As Đệ́m’s position grew more precarious, South Vietnam had trouble presenting Đệ́m as a popular and democratic leader. The information that most influenced views on Vietnam did not come from either government, but from a press that reported increasing evidence of unrest. In fact, American and South Vietnamese cultural programs may have contributed to discontent by setting standards that could not be met by either government.

Historians have long lamented the dearth of studies incorporating Vietnamese voices into analysis of the Vietnam conflict.⁴ Accounts of the Đệ́m period have tended to downplay the role of Đệ́m and the government of South Vietnam while emphasizing American activities. Journalists and other first-hand observers wrote much of the literature on Đệ́m during his presidency, and historians have yet to adequately revisit these accounts. As a result, Western accounts of South Vietnam in the decade after Geneva focus on the actions of Americans politicians, military officers, and advisors.⁵ Scholars who have written more extensively on events and conditions in South Vietnam have failed fully to engage Đệ́m, often dismissing him as a hopeless outsider and


⁵ See, for example, Cecil B. Currey, Edward Lansdale, the Unquiet American (Boston, 1988); J. Lawton Collins, Lightning Joe: An Autobiography (Baton Rouge, 1979); John Ernst, Forging a Fateful Alliance: Michigan State University and the Vietnam War (East Lansing, 1998); James T. Fisher, Dr. America: The Lives of Thomas A. Dooley, 1937-1961 (Amherst, 1997).
ineffectual leader while placing American actors at center stage. In these accounts, historians and journalists described Diệm’s policies as “inspired by Americans, planned by Americans and carried out with close American guidance.”

In the years since the end of the Vietnam War, historians have written more complete accounts of South Vietnam under Diệm. In a survey of the American intervention in Vietnam, A. J. Langguth explored Diệm’s presidency, including the formation of his government and its political and social activities. In 2000, Philip Catton published a detailed analysis of Diệm’s various land reform programs. Catton used Vietnamese and American sources to probe the conflict between Diệm and the United States over land reform and showed the role of Diệm’s ideology in the creation and implementation of rural nation-building programs. My dissertation contributes to this emerging scholarship by exploring and analyzing actions, decisions, and programs within South Vietnam.

I also show the extent of South Vietnamese agency in the nation-building process. Writing in *Diplomatic History*, Max Paul Friedman commended diplomatic historians for “bringing Latin America back in” to studies of U.S.-Latin American relations. Friedman noted that current scholarship shows the various ways in which Latin American actors, especially political leaders, exhibited agency in their relationships with the United States. These new works cast doubt on depictions of Latin Americans as powerless to influence or affect American foreign policy in the region. Most Western historians describe nation-

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8 Denis Warner, *The Last Confucian* (New York, 1963), 79.


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building in South Vietnam as an American effort, sometimes helped (more often hindered) by the South Vietnamese. My research shows that the Republic of Vietnam was active in formulating and administering nation-building programs, especially in cultural areas.

Nation-building provides a basic framework for studying the Diệm regime. The nation-building effort in Vietnam has become a kind of cautionary tale for observers of international relations. In an article in *The Atlantic*, Francis Fukuyama identified the challenges inherent in any nation-building effort. While American involvement in Iraq clearly provided the context for Fukuyama’s analysis, his conclusions are relevant to U.S.-South Vietnamese relations during the Diệm period. Fukuyama observed that many people use the term “nation-building” when describing a process that would more accurately be called “state-building.” State-building, he explained, is the process of “creating or strengthening such government institutions as armies, police forces, judiciaries, central banks, tax-collection agencies, health and education systems, and the like.” Nation-building is different in that it involves “creating or repairing all the cultural, social, and historical ties that bind people together as a nation.”

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, the United States and Ngô Đình Diệm devoted substantial resources to such efforts in South Vietnam.

Existing studies of U.S.-South Vietnamese relations tend to focus on state-building programs. They look at land reform, Diệm’s creation of a national government, and economic development. These are, of course, critical areas of inquiry when examining the attempts to create a South Vietnamese state after 1954. But nation-

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building actually encompassed more than creating state institutions. At its base, creating a legitimate Republic of Vietnam required more than economic progress or military strength. It rested on the population coalescing behind the idea of a South Vietnamese nation. American and South Vietnamese policy makers recognized the cultural components of nationhood. Both governments, occasionally through different strategies, tried to encourage the public’s belief in the legitimacy of the Republic of Vietnam.

Attempts to create a nation, rather than a state, raise fundamental questions of what makes a national unit. Nationhood, historians have noted, is determined by more than simply national boundaries or a national government. In Benedict Anderson’s influential formulation, a nation is an “imagined community.” Most individuals in a nation will meet only a small fraction of their fellow community members. And yet, Anderson explained, “in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.”

David Potter, historian of the American Civil War, conceived of nationhood in similar terms. He argued that a nation was comprised of a collection of people who share a psychological sense of group loyalty.

Group loyalty and recognition of community define nationhood. This, of course, raises further questions. What gives people who may never know one another a sense of a common bond? Anderson argued that, historically, this bond was manufactured in several ways. For example, people from different parts of the world, with different traditions, customs, and languages, could find unity in their religious beliefs and

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practices. Nations developed in much the same way as religious communities, though Anderson noted some important differences. National groups, unlike religious groups, were “inherently limited” in that they did not envision all people joining their group. Potter’s definition was less well-defined: he argued that group loyalty arose from a common culture, whether it be linguistic, artistic, or historical.

The cultural foundations of nationhood create challenges for historians. Historians are typically concerned with the legitimacy of an individual’s or a group’s claims to leadership or power; only when a certain degree of national unity is reached will a leader or group of leaders have a legitimate claim to ruling over a national entity. One can gauge the economic strength of a community through statistical data, but abstractions such as ideas, sentiments, and attitudes cannot be measured as easily. Determining the predominant beliefs of a community can sometimes be measured through polling data and other indicators of public attitudes; these data are generally not, however, compiled as systematically as economic figures. Furthermore, the level of nationalism in a group of people can vary widely—group loyalty may be strong, weak, or moderate.¹¹

The history of the Republic of Vietnam is further complicated by a tendency among historians to challenge the premise on which the nation was formed and the values it represented. As Potter argued, historians tend to judge the legitimacy of a nation based on the culture that created it. In Potter’s example, historians of the American Civil War have dubbed the Confederacy as “sectionalist” and the United States as “nationalist” because most Civil War historians have opposed the institution of slavery around which

¹¹ Potter, “The Historian’s Use of Nationalism and Vice Versa,” 924-950.
the Confederacy was built. In reality, many Confederates were “nationalists,” though they had a different view of what constituted the nation. In Vietnam, Ngô Đình Diệm’s government represented values and policies anathema to many historians. Disapproval of the values or ideologies on which a nation is based, however, should not preclude a thorough and fair examination of the nation itself.

The modern history of Vietnam and the Vietnam War present similar conflicts for historians. Because of the outcome of the war, many historians questioned the Republic of Vietnam’s claim to legitimate nationhood. Had the Republic of Vietnam effectively represented the needs and desires of the South Vietnamese people, they argued, it would have survived as a nation. This argument assumes, as Potter pointed out, that nationalism and nationhood are “all-or-nothing” phenomena; that a government either is or is not a legitimate representative of the people. Potter noted, though, that national legitimacy is not “all or nothing”; it encompasses gradations of popular support. The Republic of Vietnam’s failure as a state does not necessarily indicate that it was not a true nation, just as the presence of a political opposition in communist North Vietnam does not suggest that it was an illegitimate state.

The ideas or cultures characteristic of a people are not static. Therefore, it is important to understand the role of governments or individuals in trying to manipulate or shape these views to contribute to nationalism and governmental legitimacy. Ernest Gellner noted that nationalism is not the awareness of community bonds, but the invention of the idea of a nation. In the case of South Vietnam, Diệm needed to invent a nation around which the population could rally. Proving the legitimacy of his

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government meant showing that it was indeed legitimately “national” in that it corresponded with the culture and desires of the people. While changing his policies or ideologies to fit with the views of the people was one way to increase this sense of coordination, he could also try to shape the culture of the public to fit with his own ideology. This was, in fact, one of the major efforts of Diệm’s government, as it is of many governments: to mold the ideas of the public in order to strengthen one’s claims to representing the views of the people. In addition, Diệm wanted to do more than simply encourage a certain set of beliefs. Creating a legitimate sense of nationalism required not only a common culture, but also a strong and stable society. These conditions of nationhood were closely related. As Diệm explained, “it is clear that intellectual and moral factors play a great part in our national recovery politically, economically, and socially.”

This project makes several important contributions to the existing literature on the Vietnam conflict. It takes a new approach to studying the nation-building programs in Vietnam by focusing on the cultural realm. Inspired by Benedict Anderson and others, I examine the role of ideas, values, and perceptions in forming a national community. Other historians writing on Vietnam claim to discuss nation-building, but they emphasize state-building. They focus in particular on political, economic, and military development in South Vietnam.

I also highlight the underlying conflicts between American and South Vietnamese cultural nation-building programs. In the early years of Diệm’s regime, the United States

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13 President Ngo Dinh Diem on Democracy (Addresses Relative to the Constitution), (Saigon, 1957), 33.
and South Vietnam generally coordinated their nation-building programs. Both sides stressed Diệm’s capability as leader and showed the early achievements of his regime. As his government took hold, however, the two governments pursued divergent cultural strategies. In 1957, Diệm altered his programs to emphasize the authentic Vietnamese roots of the South Vietnamese state. At the same time, the United States was using cultural propaganda to publicize the benefits of American political and economic culture. This lack of coordination, coupled with Diệm’s unpopular domestic programs, contributed to the rising opposition to Diệm in the late 1950s.

Finally, my dissertation contributes to recent studies of cultural transmission as part of international relations. In the past two decades, historians of American foreign policy have faced growing criticism for parochialism and elitism. Cold War historians, critics argue, have narrowly focused on the strategic or economic roots of America’s foreign policy. In recent years, a number of historians have focused on cultural aspects of international relations, including Americanization and globalization in the twentieth century. Emily Rosenberg, for example, explored the connections between the free flow of ideas and growing American economic influence throughout the globe in the early twentieth century. In Parting the Curtain, Walter Hixson suggested that exposure to American culture contributed to the decline of the Soviet Union. Reinhold Wagnleitner focused on U.S. culture in Austria, but drew a similar conclusion: many Austrians in the late 1940s and 1950s, particularly the youth, were enamored with anything considered “American.” In his examination of cultural transmission, intellectual historian Richard Pells argued that Europeans were ambivalent about American culture in the second half of the twentieth century. Europeans alternately decried the growing influence of base
American culture and sought out the latest American fads.\textsuperscript{14}

Scholars of Americanization have generally focused on events in Europe. But in the 1950s and 1960s, Vietnam was subject to an American influence every bit as strong as that in Europe. The United States consciously used informational activities to expose the people of South Vietnam to the central aspects of American culture. The presence of American military and civilian personnel provided a striking illustration of American culture and behaviors. The consequences of this cultural influence—the extent that American culture was transferred to Vietnam and the effect it had on South Vietnamese society and politics—are worthy of scrutiny.

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Note on Language

The romanized Vietnamese script (quốc ngữ) includes numerous diacritical marks; these indicate tonal inflections and different vowel sounds. Where possible, I have rendered Vietnamese words using their diacritical marks. I made exceptions for common place names (Vietnam instead of Việt Nam; Saigon instead of Sài Gòn) and

personal names written without diacritical marks in the original sources. Small variations in spelling, capitalization, and use of diacritics were left unchanged in direct quotations and citations.
This chapter examines Diệm’s efforts to legitimize the idea of a South Vietnamese state immediately after the division of Vietnam in 1954. In pursuit of this goal, Diệm used informational activities to publicize the successes of his new regime. By advertising South Vietnam’s accomplishments after 1954, Diệm hoped to build domestic and international support for the South Vietnamese state. He also initiated programs to create the ideological foundations for the Republic of Vietnam. Diệm propagated the philosophy of Personalism as the basis for the new state. Personalism incorporated the most important elements of Diệm’s political philosophy: strident anti-communism, a strong national leader, and a belief in sacrifice for the improvement of the nation. Personalism influenced Diệm’s early economic and political reforms, but he also disseminated the doctrine in hopes of creating a cultural foundation for South Vietnam while consolidating his power. By the end of 1956, Diệm had created and promoted a cultural framework for the Republic of Vietnam.
On June 18, 1954, Ngô Đình Diệm declared his intention to accept the position of Prime Minister in Bảo Đại’s government:

This is the hour of decision . . . The Vietnamese people, long deceived, are seeking a new path which will lead to their ardently desired ideals. I am firmly determined to lead the way to this path, overcoming any and all obstacles.\textsuperscript{15}

Diệm was acutely aware of the magnitude of the obstacles he faced upon becoming Prime Minister of the State of Vietnam. The impending French withdrawal and the negotiations at Geneva placed the future of Vietnam in doubt. One month later, the parties in Geneva agreed to divide Vietnam at the seventeenth parallel. Hồ Chí Minh and the Vietnamese communists took control of the northern half of the country; Diệm and Bảo Đại had authority over the area below the demarcation line. Administering the regime in South Vietnam presented a host of problems for Diệm. Vietnam’s political development was stunted, the legacy of a century of French colonial rule. War and colonialism had damaged the economy. Finally, the new government found few individuals with the necessary background to staff the civil service.

When Diệm took office in 1954, he did so without the confidence of many observers. Upon Diệm’s arrival in Saigon, one American official commented that he was “a messiah without a message.”\textsuperscript{16} “It was no surprise,” Joseph Buttinger observed, “that the fall of Diem was predicted daily in Vietnam and abroad.”\textsuperscript{17} The Prime Minister’s first task was to confront doubts about his legitimacy by eliminating threats to his political

\textsuperscript{15} President Ngo Dinh Diem on Democracy (Addresses Relative to the Constitution), (Saigon, 1957), 4-5.

\textsuperscript{16} Quoted in Kahin, Intervention, 78.

\textsuperscript{17} Buttinger, Vietnam, 392.
authority. In the fall of 1954, several military officers tried to initiate a coup against Diệm. He defeated the challenge, and by the beginning of 1955 he had established his control over the new government and the military. After putting down the coup attempt, Diệm still needed to defeat the Cao Đài, Hòa Hảo, and Binh Xuyen, politico-religious sects that challenged his control in South Vietnam. Cao Đài was a syncretic religion formed in southern Vietnam in the early twentieth century. It had many adherents in the areas west of Saigon, particularly in Tay Ninh province, site of the church’s Holy See. The Hòa Hảo was another indigenous religious group, an offshoot of Buddhism. Both the Hòa Hảo and the Cao Đài controlled independent military organizations. Unlike the Cao Đài and the Hòa Hảo, the Binh Xuyen was not a religious sect. It was roughly equivalent to a mafia organization or a particularly violent political machine. It ran brothels, gambling halls, and opium dens in Cholon, the Chinese area of Saigon. Under the State of Vietnam, Bảo Đại coexisted with the Binh Xuyen, allowing its members to run the police force. Diệm, however, viewed the Cao Đài, Hòa Hảo, and Binh Xuyen as threats to his political power.

Against the counsel of American, French, and Vietnamese advisors, Diệm began a campaign against the sects in 1955. By the end of the year, Diệm’s government had mostly defeated the military threat of the Cao Đài, Hòa Hảo, and Binh Xuyen, bringing sect-controlled areas under governmental authority. In early 1956, one of the last sect leaders was captured and executed by the South Vietnamese government. Military success, however, was only one part of the campaign against the sects. In late 1955, the Ministry of Information began a campaign to “win the hearts” [tranh thủ nhân tâm] of the population in the areas where the sects had been popular. The Ministry used mobile
propaganda units to distribute books, pamphlets, and other printed materials in the areas south and southwest of Saigon that had been the center of Cao Đài and Hòa Hảo strength. Much of the propaganda used photos in place of text in order to reach illiterate or semi-literate populations. Propaganda activities continued “day and night, in every remote village and hamlet.” As a result, one report concluded, “the hearts of the people turned toward the government” and the Ministry of Information won the allegiance of the people.\textsuperscript{18}

Diệm’s successful campaign against the sects was a huge victory for his young regime. In the spring of 1955, many people expected Diệm would soon step down from office or be overthrown. Over the next few months, Diệm surprised his critics by successfully strengthening his hold on power. As William Duiker explained, “Diem’s rapid and vigorous assertion of power was gratifying” to American officials, who wanted South Vietnam as a bulwark against communist expansion. But, as Duiker noted, more would be needed to transform South Vietnam into a bastion of the free world than mere force . . . . [Diem] would have to move with dispatch to resolve some of the social and economic problems that had plagued Vietnam since before the imposition of French rule nearly a century earlier.\textsuperscript{19}

Diệm’s challenges extended beyond the realm of the political. On a cultural level, he had to create an identity for South Vietnam. In the summer of 1954, South Vietnam looked like a sham state. Bảo Đại was an unpopular playboy tarnished by his past


\textsuperscript{19} William J. Duiker, Vietnam: Nation in Revolution (Boulder, 1983), 51.
cooperation with France and Japan. Diệm had returned to the country only a month earlier after years of exile; his popularity in South Vietnam was uncertain. The Geneva Agreement that created South Vietnam also stipulated that the division was temporary. Within two years, many observers believed, South Vietnam would no longer exist as a separate entity. Furthermore, many people, both in and out of Vietnam, saw Hồ Chí Minh’s government in North Vietnam as the more legitimate representation of the Vietnamese people.

To overcome these attitudes, Diệm needed to promote the idea that South Vietnam was a legitimate nation. The process of creating or encouraging the public’s support for or faith in a nation was challenging. Diệm needed to create the institutions that people equated with statehood—a political system, the armed forces, a sound economy. Furthermore, he needed to convey these accomplishments to the public in order to give them the sense that the state protected their interests and had prospects for survival. But merely creating the appearance of a state was not enough. True nationhood would be formed in the realm of ideas: a history, philosophy, or common culture that fostered public cohesion and a willingness to make individual sacrifices for the common good.

Diệm employed several strategies to encourage the public’s sense of nationhood. The victory against the sects had shown the value of effective propaganda and informational activities. In promoting the idea of the nation, information and cultural programs emphasized the creation of South Vietnam as a free and independent state, in direct contrast to communist North Vietnam. These programs also raised awareness of the regime’s accomplishments in the area of public administration, social progress, and
economic development. The program called attention to Diệm’s successes in creating the institutions that would guarantee the nation’s survival: governmental authority, public safety, and a democratic process.

In December 1955, shortly after defeating Bảo Đại in the national referendum, Diệm reorganized information activities in the Republic of Vietnam. Before Geneva, the Bảo Đại government included an information service, but under French rule the office had limited authority. In 1955, Diệm created the Ministry of Information and Youth to oversee South Vietnam’s information and propaganda programs. The Ministry of Information and Youth functioned much like the United States Information Agency, except that a large part of its activities took place within Vietnam (the USIA, by contrast, was prohibited from conducting information activities within the borders of the United States). Domestically, the Ministry distributed propaganda in a number of ways. It wrote, printed, and distributed pamphlets and books; broadcast radio signals throughout the country; and produced and screened propaganda films. The Ministry of Information also ran the Vietnam Press Agency, which provided press releases for newspapers and magazines while monitoring and censoring the media in South Vietnam. Finally, the Ministry of Information was responsible for various libraries and “cultural houses” which served as propaganda hubs for the government.20

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20 Nghị Định số 257-ND/BTT cải tổ Bộ Thông tin và Chiến tranh Tâm-ly, 1 July 1955. [Decision to restructure the Ministry of Information and Youth]. Folder 657: Sắc lệnh, Nghị định của Tổng thống Việt Nam Cộng Hòa v/v cải tổ Bộ Thông tin và chiến tranh tâm lý năm 1955 [Decrees and governmental decisions of the President of the Republic of Vietnam regarding the reorganization of the Ministry of Information and Psychological Warfare, 1955], PTTDICH, NAII.
Trần Chánh Thành served as Secretary of State in the reorganized ministry.\(^{21}\) In appointing Thành, Diệm showed the importance he attached to informational activities. Although Thành had been a member of the Communist-led Viet Minh, he left the organization in 1951. By 1954 he was a close ally of Ngô Đình Nhu. Nhu, in fact, sent Thành to Paris in June 1954 to accompany Diệm on his return to Vietnam. Besides his activities as Secretary of State for Information and Youth, Thành was also head of the National Revolutionary Movement, a political organization that worked closely with Diệm and Nhu. The NRM, along with other political groups, provided a mechanism for connecting the central government with the villages. The party itself was organized in much the way that Communist groups functioned in other nations. In the countryside, the NRM’s rural pacification programs included forced labor to build strategic hamlets, indoctrination sessions, and other “reeducation” methods, strategies gleaned in part from Thành’s experience in the Viet Minh.\(^{22}\)

Thành’s position as head of the NRM was not incidental. Besides showing his close personal connection to the Ngô brothers, participation in the NRM showed Thành’s familiarity with Personalism, a philosophy popularized by Emmanuel Mounier and other French Catholics in the 1930s. According to Personalism, modern societies tended to move toward opposing political and economic systems: communism on one side or capitalism on the other. Personalism was an attempt to negotiate a satisfactory response

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\(^{21}\) In the Republic of Vietnam, heads of cabinet ministries were referred to as “Secretaries of State.” For example, the head of the Ministry of the Interior was called “Secretary of State at the Interior” (rather than “Secretary of the Interior” or “Minister of the Interior”). Trần Chánh Thành’s official position was “Secretary of State for Information and Youth” [Bộ Trưởng Thông Tin và Thanh Niên].

to the twin dangers of Communism and industrial capitalism. Personalists believed that both systems threatened the dignity of the individual. In a communist society, the individual person was forced to sacrifice everything for the improvement of the community. Capitalism, in contrast, corrupted individuals by encouraging selfish acts and rank materialism. Personalism, according to its adherents, respected individual human dignity and also ensured the common good of society.

Both Diệm and Nhu were committed believers in Personalism, and the philosophy provided a guiding ideology for the Republic of Vietnam. Personalist beliefs were apparent in various political and economic policies of the regime. For example, Personalists held that individuals could only develop in a society that addressed the basic economic needs of the people. Therefore, economic programs under Diệm were undertaken with the goal of creating the conditions necessary for individual growth in the citizenry. Personalism also tried to balance the rights of the individual with the authority of the state. Personalists like Diệm and Nhu believed that state control was a necessary counterweight to the liberties of the populace. Finally, Personalism emphasized the importance of individual struggle, sacrifice, and obligation to the community.

The philosophy of Personalism guided Thành’s National Revolutionary Movement; the party platform repeated, nearly verbatim, many of the ideas common in Diệm’s speeches. Leaders of the movement explained that “the basic purpose of the revolution is to found a governmental system based upon respect for the individual, a system which will provide the optimum conditions for the full development of human personality.”23 The NRM’s position on the importance of social and economic progress

was also strongly influenced by Personalism. As the Party’s platform explained, “[i]n order to guarantee a real and concrete possession of these liberties, it is necessary . . . to accelerate social progress in order to assure to each the minimum economic conditions necessary for the enjoyment of their political rights”\(^\text{24}\)

As head of the Ministry of Information and Youth, Thành incorporated similar ideas into South Vietnam’s informational activities. In the early years of the Republic of Vietnam, information activities delivered messages designed to give the population a sense of the Personalist foundations of the new regime. Personalism, in the view of the Ministry of Information, was both the correct philosophy and an effective means to attack communism. It conferred legitimacy on South Vietnam, and it provided an effective method for confronting communism. Anti-communism was the national policy, one information report explained, and Personalism was an “effective argument” to defeat the influence of Communism in the South.\(^\text{25}\)

Diệm’s contemporary critics and historians of the Republic of Vietnam criticized Diệm for his devotion to Personalism. They dismissed Personalism as vague, ambiguous, or impenetrable. Diệm’s public pronouncements certainly seem to support these conclusions. In many speeches, he described Personalism in terms that were almost

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\(^{24}\) “Program of Action of the National Revolutionary Movement,” *The Times of Viet Nam Weekly*, (January 28, 1956), 5.

\(^{25}\) “Hoạt-dòng đặc-biệt của tổng nha Thông-tin và các Nha sở trực thuộc từ 1954-1961” [Special activities of the Director of Information and dependent offices], p. 2. Folder 421: Báo cáo hoạt động năm 1954-1961 của cơ quan thuộc phủ Tổng-thông, [Activity reports of the organizations under the President’s office, 1954-1961], PTTDIC, NAII.
impossible to decipher. In a March 1956, for example, Diệm explained that the Republic of Vietnam needed to foster the growth of the permanent orientation of free men towards a democratic structure suited to the conditions and possibilities of the moment, but built out of a genuine respect for the dignity of the individual, from an ideal conception of community life where the common good takes precedence over the good of the individual, from a pluralism which does not represent either social conservatism or a collection of anarchical contradictions.

In the same speech, Diệm depicted his policies as

the path of the flowering of human personality, which has primacy over all temporal societies, and the center of gravity of our concerns can be nowhere else but in the walk of life where human personality is most gravely violated, namely Labor."

Most of Diệm’s critics failed to understand, however, that the usefulness of Personalism did not require that the public thoroughly understand the philosophy. In South Vietnam, the Ministry of Information used the philosophy of Personalism as a unifying theory for ideas that would benefit and strengthen the regime. In this regard, the intricacies of the philosophy as conceived by Mounier and others were less important than the ways in which the philosophy was presented to the Vietnamese public. The Ministry of Information stressed the elements of Personalism that would provide the greatest assistance to Diệm and the new government. Informational programs emphasized Personalism as a political system as well as a model for personal behavior. Personalism was presented as superior to and incompatible with communism. It also explained the need for a strong political leader and justified Diệm’s policies that limited individual rights and liberties. Information materials stated that South Vietnam embodied

26 President Ngo Dinh Diem on Democracy, 11.
a greater degree of freedom and democracy than North Vietnam, but that greater liberties in the South were necessarily moderated by the authority of the state. South Vietnam’s information materials also stressed the importance of struggle and self-sacrifice in the growth of the nation. Finally, the Ministry of Information publicized the accomplishments of the regime to show that the best prospects for Vietnam lay below the seventeenth parallel, “where hope for a better future for every human being was born.”

When Diệm came to power in South Vietnam, the population was highly skeptical of the Bảo Đại government. Bảo Đại had surrendered South Vietnam’s autonomy to French and Japanese control. The communists, by contrast, had managed to present themselves as democratic and nationalist. Diệm quickly took steps to counter this viewpoint by enacting political and economic reforms. The arrival of refugees from the north and Diệm’s simultaneous efforts to “overthrow the corrupt feudalist regime and establish a Republican system” proved that the South, not the North, was the manifestation of freedom and liberty. Diệm’s cultural strategy was to juxtapose the political systems in North and South Vietnam. In his speech accepting the position of Prime Minister in 1954, Diệm emphasized the importance of independence to the new nation. While the actors at Geneva threatened to divide the country and “subordinate it to foreign interests,” Diệm promised to protect the sovereignty and freedom of the

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27 President Ngo Dinh Diem on Democracy.

Vietnamese people. As the locus of freedom and liberty, Diệm’s state was the legitimate political entity in Vietnam. South Vietnam’s legitimacy, however, could only be measured relative to North Vietnam. In the first years after Geneva, the Diệm government tried to raise the status of South Vietnam by discrediting its counterpart above the seventeenth parallel. An active campaign to publicize the evils of communism was meant to foster stronger domestic support for Diệm’s government.

While Diệm distinguished South Vietnam from the tyranny of the communist North, he was careful also to distance it from the capitalist world. He worried that the establishment of a liberal capitalist democracy would lead to the “mistaken idea that our government will exploit the workers like many western democracies.” Providing a “middle way,” an attractive alternative to communism and capitalism was central to winning over the population. Diệm introduced the theory of Personalism to build the national spirit of South Vietnam. Simultaneously, his regime initiated a plan to implement the basic material principles of the philosophy, namely economic advancement.

Điệm saw Personalist ideas as a fundamental part of his cultural and informational programs. He peppered his speeches with references to the dignity of the human person and the importance of creating a nation that respected the individual without promoting selfishness. Especially in the early years of his government, Diệm believed Personalism offered the best solution to the twin evils of communism and capitalism. Internal

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29 President Ngo Đinh Diem on Democracy, 4-5.

documents addressing the content of information programs stressed the role of Personalist ideals in these activities. Diệm’s first years in office, then, were devoted to demonstrating that he had helped create a political system that was both independent from outside control and protected the rights of the individual. At the same time, Diệm called for sacrifices from the public, as only by sacrificing for the common good would South Vietnam create a strong nation.

The goal of the Ministry of Information was to publicize the bankruptcy of the communist system in order to present Diệm’s government in a more favorable light. Because “[d]enouncing communism was the national policy [of South Vietnam],” information would assist the government’s attempts to “exterminate communism in order to save and establish the country.”31 In the summer of 1955, the Ministry of Information organized a “campaign against communism” in South Vietnam. During the month of July, for example, the Office of Newspapers, a subsection of the Ministry of Information, wrote and distributed fifty-nine commentaries and offered four seminars on “the crimes of Vietnamese communists.” The radio service of the Ministry of Information broadcast programs about life in North Vietnam, “emphasizing the devastating exploitation” of the Vietnamese Communists. Every morning in Saigon, the radio station broadcast a program exposing the evils of communism. The “campaign to denounce communism” culminated in a series of events in mid-July. On July 19, the Ministry arranged for a

speaker to attack Communism; the speech attracted a large audience and, according to South Vietnamese reports, deeply affected the listeners. A few days later the Ministry of Information invited the public to witness 3,000 people renounce their former support for communism and pledged their allegiance to the Diệm government.32

The July 7 anniversary of Diệm’s first cabinet served as another opportunity for informational programming. Diệm used the “Double Seven” celebrations to announce the upcoming referendum to determine the future leadership of the nation, an event he later cited as evidence of his popularity and political legitimacy. During the same week, the Office of Information and Newspapers published articles and books denouncing communism and released a film called “A Portrait of the President” summarizing the nation’s accomplishments during Diệm’s first year in power. According to reports from the Ministry of Information, an exhibit of achievements during the regime of Ngô Đình Diệm attracted over two million visitors.33

The arrival of refugees from North Vietnam provided valuable material for South Vietnamese information. Almost one million people left North Vietnam to move south, vividly illustrating the propaganda themes of the South Vietnamese government. South Vietnamese informational policies used the refugee issue to demonstrate the freedom and liberty of life under Ngô Đình Diệm. In 1954 and 1955, for example, the Bureau of Information publicized the migration of refugees from North Vietnam, arguing that the

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exodus showed the repressive policies of the Vietnamese communists. Whereas the refugees had suffered in North Vietnam, in South Vietnam they enjoyed freedom and opportunity. “Their presence,” according to Diệm, “further reinforces our confidence in the righteousness of our cause.”

If the influx of northern refugees provided one of the great public relations opportunities for Diệm, so too did his success in defeating the political and religious sects. It is surprising, therefore, that Diệm rarely used the defeat of the sects in the government’s official propaganda activities. With the exception of a series of articles in the Saigon press trumpeting the capture and execution of Hòa Hảo leader Ba Cut in early 1956, the campaign against the sects was largely absent from Ministry of Information activities. This omission shows the weight that Diệm gave to finding a unifying philosophy for South Vietnam. The defeat of the sects, while important to establishing Diệm’s credibility as a strong national leader, did little to contribute to the creation of the Personalist republic. Furthermore, the campaign against the sects was rather divisive in South Vietnam, as governmental authority attacked organizations with considerable local support. Promoting the successful defeat of these local groups would only raise the specter of a divided south. The arrival of refugees, by contrast, illustrated both the attractiveness of the Diệm government and the tyranny of communism.

The survival of South Vietnam and the development of a Personalist republic, Diệm believed, rested on the presence of a strong central authority. Governmental authority was clearly necessary for political administration in South Vietnam, but it also served a cultural role for the new nation. Personalists strongly believed that state

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34 President Ngo Dinh Diem on Democracy, 8.
authority provided a necessary balance to the rights of the individual. Furthermore, the state was responsible for creating social and economic stability and progress, both of which created conditions favorable to the development of the individual, and therefore society as a whole. By publicizing the creation of these political institutions, Diệm encouraged public support for his administration.

Diệm’s promotion of a kind of “limited democracy” was critical, particularly in the early years of the Republic of Vietnam. Diệm was well aware of the opposition to his regime, and he enacted restrictions on the democratic process to protect his government. At the same time, he used information and propaganda to explain to the public why these restrictions were a necessary part of South Vietnam’s political system. The information strategy was meant to counter the propaganda of Vietnamese communists, which implored the population to demand greater personal freedoms in order to undermine Diệm’s Personalist revolution. South Vietnamese propaganda materials, Diệm’s speeches, and radio broadcasts all described Vietnamese democracy as a system without some of the institutions common to Western democracies. This political system—sometimes disparagingly called “Diemocracy” in the United States—differed significantly from the democratic systems common in the United States and Western Europe.

The National Revolutionary Movement (NRM) was a mouthpiece for Diệm’s views on circumscribed liberties. The NRM asserted that “the initial task of the revolution has been the consolidation of the power of the central authority.”

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Vietnam’s Personalist system compared favorably with “the Viet Cong regime which utterly destroys liberty in order to exploit the people.” The NRM seemed to anticipate criticisms of Diệm’s political system, stating that “true democracy” was “not just the right to vote every two or four years.” But some observers were skeptical. Even the Saigon press noticed that the NRM’s platform omitted some freedoms usually found in a democracy: “Excepting the notable absence of specific reference to some basic democratic liberties, which Party leaders assure us they espouse, the [NRM] program of action is a well-rounded program for democratic revolution.”

Several accounts of Diệm’s political philosophy repeated this point. While westerners conceived of democracy “in terms of votes and distribution of power,” Diệm eschewed this system in South Vietnam. The seemingly less “democratic” form of governance, he argued, was rooted in Vietnam’s past: “Historically, our political system has been based not on the concept of the management of the public affairs by the people or their representatives, but rather by an enlightened sovereign and an enlightened government.” Diệm conceded that outside observers might be shocked to see a democracy lacking “a parliament with debates, elected magistrates, elected officials, complete individual freedoms and so forth.” But he accused these critics of seeing “the form before the substance” and failing to understand Vietnam’s unique Personalist democracy.

36 “A Democratic Revolution,” 1, 6; “Program of Action of the National Revolutionary Movement,” 5.

37 President Ngo Dinh Diem, (Saigon, 1957), 12-13. These passages can also be found in Phuc Thien, President Ngo Dinh Diem’s Political Philosophy, (Saigon, 1956), 9 and Phuc Tien, “The Political Philosophy of Ngo Dinh Diem,” The Times of Viet Nam Weekly (October 13, 1956), 5.
Diệm firmly believed that national strength and legitimacy could only be guaranteed with social and economic stability. “The solution to social problems,” Diệm explained, “depends on economic prosperity.” Economic prosperity and, more importantly, social and economic equality, were prerequisites for full realization of the Personalist revolution. As the NRM explained, “[t]he greater the equality, the greater the degree of popular participation in governmental processes.” Moreover, eliminating or minimizing poverty would undermine support for communism: “we must also win the battle against mass poverty if we want to win the battle against communism.” So, in addition to creating a measure of group loyalty out of a common culture, Diệm had to guarantee economic and social conditions that would give the population a vested interest in the success of the nation. Diệm said as much, on many occasions. Similarly, many of his government’s informational materials emphasized the regime’s accomplishments in these areas.

Depictions of South Vietnam’s more equitable system buttressed the Ministry of Information’s denunciations of communism. Many of the RVN’s informational materials went to great lengths to describe a form of democracy where the rights of the individual, though important, did not take precedence over the state. This limited form of democracy was well suited for Diệm’s government. It allowed him to exercise control over potential

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38 *President Ngo Dinh Diem on Democracy*, 32.


40 *President Ngo Dinh Diem*, 11.
opposition in Vietnam while still espousing democratic ideals. Cultural programs presented South Vietnam’s combination of limited democracy and economic and social progress as evidence of the superiority of the Republic of Vietnam.

The Personalist emphasis on sacrifice constituted an important tenet in South Vietnamese cultural activities. Diệm’s vision of a Personalist political system required the citizenry to compromise some individual rights for the good of the community, and South Vietnamese cultural efforts explicitly linked the act of self-sacrifice with the strength and success of Vietnam. In doing so, the regime again enlisted Personalism to reinforce the primacy of the state over individuals in South Vietnam. Diệm also relied on episodes from Vietnamese history to illustrate the importance of personal sacrifice. While this strategy developed slowly, in subsequent years Diệm intensified his efforts to foster national unity by associating South Vietnam and the Diệm government with the collective memory of the Vietnamese people.

The theme of sacrifice had been an important part of Vietnamese propaganda in the early years of the Republic. Upon proclaiming the creation of the Republic, Diệm implored the people of South Vietnam to “remember all those who, long ago or only recently, made the supreme sacrifice in order that we might lead free and independent lives.” Six months later, Diệm spoke at the inauguration of the National Assembly, using almost the exact same language: “[L]et us think with gratitude upon the efforts of


42 President Ngo Dinh Diem on Democracy, 9.
all those, living and dead, who have sacrificed themselves in order that such a day as this might dawn on our Republic.” This sacrifice, Diệm stated, would inspire the gathered Assembly members to fulfill their duty to the people and nation. The national press picked up the call for personal sacrifice. An editorial in the Times of Viet Nam, for example, asked the people of Vietnam to “tighten their belts” in order to achieve economic independence for South Vietnam. Failure to make these sacrifices would lead “dangerously toward a statist and highly regimented economy.”

One of South Vietnam’s clearest attempts to link sacrifice, Vietnamese history, and the Diệm regime came in late 1956. On October 29, Madame Ngô Đình Nhu gave a speech at the Presidential Palace (Dinh Độc Lập) on the role of women in Vietnamese history. She used the speech as an opportunity to promote her ideas for gender equity in South Vietnam, noting the women who worked for Vietnamese independence and advancement throughout the country’s history. According to Madame Nhu, the history of Vietnam proved that women were equal to men in terms of their courage, determination, and sense of duty. Therefore, women had as much of an obligation as men to work to strengthen, improve, and defend the Republic of Vietnam. She also called on women to make sacrifices for the Republic of Vietnam, a theme common in South Vietnam’s

43 President Ngo Dinh Diem on Democracy, 19.

cultural and informational activities. This speech embodied the regime’s continued use of Personalism but also the emerging attempts to create an historically-based legitimacy for the Diệm government.45

Madame Nhu’s speech used dramatic events from Vietnamese history to enlist women in this struggle. She outlined women in history who had made significant contributions to Vietnamese civilization. Nhu pointed out that “the first well-known personage in the history of Viet Nam was a woman, the Queen Âu Cơ.” Other heroines followed, such as the Trưng Sisters, who fought Chinese domination in the first century A.D. Madame Nhu listed many other women who contributed to Vietnamese culture and literature, often through their willingness to fight Chinese domination. This theme became an important part of South Vietnamese cultural programs during Diệm’s presidency, particularly from 1957 to 1960 when his strength was at its height.

The heroic actions of women in Vietnam’s history, Madame Nhu suggested, could serve as a model for the women assembled in the Presidential Palace. Although Madame Nhu in some ways encouraged women to occupy a “natural” position in domestic relations, she also stressed women’s historic independence from their husbands and their activities outside of the domestic sphere. Triệu Áu, one of Vietnam’s most famous heroines, was known primarily for fighting Chinese rule in 248 A.D. As Nhu pointed out, however, Triệu Áu’s life as a warrior started earlier, when she killed her

sister-in-law for demanding that she fulfill certain household obligations. Triệu Âu, expressing a sentiment that certainly closely echoed that of Madame Nhu, resisted her brother’s entreaties to return to the hearth:

I wish to ride the tempests, walk over the unchained waves, behead the sharks of the sea of the East, clean the national territory to the frontiers of our enemies to save the people from their distress. I will never condescend to imitate those who bow their heads, bending the back to remain the servants of others.46

Madame Nhu’s depictions of Vietnamese heroines emphasized, above all, the sacrifices necessary to protect the nation. In almost every one of the examples she provided, the heroine gave her own life in the name of the struggle. The Trưng Sisters, for example, were admirable for creating a kingdom that briefly enjoyed independence from China. When Chinese soldiers regrouped and attacked the Trưng sisters’ kingdom at Mê Linh, they took their own lives, “preferring to drown rather than to surrender.” Subsequent woman warriors followed the Trưng sisters’ example, killing themselves rather than surrender to Chinese control. Madame Nhu favorably noted that these women, like the Trưng sisters and Triệu Âu, sacrificed their lives for the country. Other Vietnamese women had earned fame by dying rather than compromising their feminine virtues. Their “intransigence of purity and fidelity” made them models for Vietnamese women.47

The idea of sacrifice was also an important part of Diệm’s personal narrative, which became a large part of his claim to legitimacy in South Vietnam. As a national

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leader, he had always put the needs of the people ahead of his own. At times, he sacrificed personal power or glory if it threatened the common good. For example, Diệm liked to point out that on several occasions he resigned or refused powerful positions in Vietnam to avoid compromising Vietnamese independence. In the early 1930s, he served as Bảo Đại’s Minister of the Interior, but he resigned when French authorities refused to grant Vietnam greater autonomy. In 1945, he “twice declined Bao Dai’s invitation to form a government, considering that the situation created by Japanese occupation did not permit his country to attain real independence.” In early 1946, during a face-to-face meeting with Hồ Chí Minh, Diệm declined his offer to work with the Viet Minh against French rule. Months earlier, the Viet Minh had killed Diệm’s older brother during the August Revolution, another instance of Diệm’s great sacrifice for the country. In finally accepting the position of Prime Minister in 1954, Diệm explained that his earlier refusals signified an unwillingness to sacrifice the national interest for his own gain. Speaking just before the 1955 national referendum, he described the “bitter suffering” during the struggle for national independence, but also his commitment to continue working for a “free and democratic” Vietnam.

Diệm’s use of his personal narrative illustrated his unshakeable confidence in his own abilities and in his position as head of state. The Ministry of Information crafted a message using Diệm as a representation of the Personalist revolution in South Vietnam. According to this message, Diệm, as the enlightened sovereign, was responsible for creating the conditions necessary for economic and social stability, thus allowing for the

48 President Ngo Dinh Diem, 5-6.

49 President Ngo Dinh Diem on Democracy, 6.
development of the individual. As president, Diệm believed in his rightful position as an enlightened, if sometimes despotic, leader of the Vietnamese people. One propaganda piece went so far as to say that Diệm “is certainly as much a genius in his own right as the fruit of his time. And that is why he has been successful where others failed.” It is not surprising that this “Messiah-like complex” detracted from his ability to effectively connect with the population. In the coming years, such ongoing self-promotion alienated Diệm’s domestic and international supporters.

When Diệm came to power in South Vietnam, historian William Duiker noted, he “need[ed] to establish a regime able to respond to the collective aspirations of the population and to earn international recognition as a legitimate representative of Vietnamese nationalism.” In pursuit of this goal, cultural nation-building took on several forms and emphasized a number of messages. Diệm hoped to use ideas about Vietnam and his regime to unify the people of South Vietnam. In order to encourage support for his actions as president, he promoted the accomplishments of the regime and his personal involvement in attaining these goals. He also used the philosophy of Personalism to foster unity in South Vietnam and suggest the legitimacy of his government. Finally, he used various government organs to criticize the communist ideology of North Vietnam and describe the poor living conditions under the North

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51 Warner, The Last Confucian, 79.
52 Duiker, Vietnam, 51.
Vietnamese government. As the next chapter shows, Diệm enacted extensive informational programs, propaganda campaigns, and educational reforms to ensure that his messages reached the entire population of the South.
CHAPTER 3

REACHING THE PUBLIC: SOUTH VIETNAMESE INFORMATION AND EDUCATION, 1954-1956

On October 26, 1956, Diệm announced the promulgation of the Constitution of the Republic of Vietnam:

The pace with which we have organized Democracy in our country demonstrates at the same time the determination of our people and the heroic character of our destiny. It also indicates what is left to us to achieve in order to perfect the historical mission which has devolved upon our generation.

The act was the capstone of Diệm’s young presidency, and Diệm used the occasion to connect the previous two years of struggle to the broader context of Vietnam’s national culture and history. The speech also illustrated his ongoing commitment to a policy of building a strong, independent, and authentic South Vietnam. In it, he repeated the values that contributed to the success of the nation:

public service, the spirit of honour and national dignity, moral and intellectual honesty, the spirit of sacrifice, the sense of discipline, and personal responsibility, courtesy in human relations [and] . . . respect for others as for oneself.

Diệm’s description was a concise summary of the values encompassed in Personalism that had been crucial to forming a consensus in his first years in office. In this speech, however, Diệm connected these Personalist values to the traits that were fundamental to the Vietnamese people. The success of the nation, he explained, rested on Vietnam’s
“traditional civic virtues” such as thành and tin. “Thành,” Diệm explained, incorporated the concepts of loyalty, morality, and a clear understanding of one’s responsibilities to God, the nation, and the citizenry. “Tin” described “the sincere and courageous practice of all these duties, no matter how grievous.” Though the descriptions of “thành” and “tin” were almost identical to the values of Personalism, Diệm put these traits in a Vietnamese guise. Over the next few years, South Vietnam’s cultural programs continued to emphasize the authentic Vietnamese foundations of Diệm and the Republic of Vietnam.53

The strength of Diệm’s government in late 1956 allowed him to raise the possibility of a unified Vietnam. While it is unclear how seriously Diệm entertained reunification, the idea made its way into Diệm’s public statements and cultural programs. In 1955 and 1956, Diệm spoke out against national elections, knowing that he would likely lose to Hồ Chí Minh. Diệm knew that the combination of Hồ’s national popularity and the greater population in the North would have guaranteed his defeat. Furthermore, the elections were scheduled for a time when Diệm’s future as president of South Vietnam was very much in doubt. By defeating the sects in 1955, Diệm had showed that he could likely remain in power for the next few years, and he reversed his earlier opposition to the idea of Vietnamese unification. In proclaiming the Vietnamese Constitution, Diệm stated that the political accomplishments of the Republic provided the foundation for bringing North and South together under the same government. “It is in this sense,” he said, “that we will effectively work for the unification of the country.”

53 President Ngo Dinh Diem on Democracy, 19.
With Diệm’s guidance, “we will unify our ravaged fatherland.”\(^{54}\) Subsequent informational activities incorporated the message that all Vietnamese people were united by a unique heritage, a history and culture represented in the Diệm government.

In April 1957, the Vietnam Press Bulletin quoted a Saigon newspaper’s assessment of Diệm’s first three years in office:

> The President has scored outstanding successes in political and economic fields, so will he do on the cultural terrain. From now on, a bright future is shining.\(^{55}\)

The people of South Vietnam had every reason to be confident in the future of the nation. In three years, Diệm had stabilized conditions in South Vietnam and consolidated his position as president. He had defeated the politico-religious sects and enacted various political reforms meant to present South Vietnam as a legitimate state. Diệm’s ascendancy to the presidency, the election of the National Assembly, and the adoption of the Constitution all demonstrated the political development of the new nation.

For the next four years, Diệm expanded and diversified South Vietnam’s efforts at cultural nation-building. South Vietnam increased its capabilities in almost all areas of information distribution, including radio, film, and printing. Diệm also initiated educational reforms to spread his cultural messages and to strengthen his regime. South Vietnam broadened its cultural themes during this period as well. Programs emphasizing the common culture of the Vietnamese people joined Personalism and anti-communism in South Vietnamese informational activities. The stability from 1957 to 1960 allowed Diệm to disseminate these messages to the bulk of the South Vietnamese population.

\(^{54}\) *President Ngo Dinh Diem on Democracy*, 20.

On February 19, 1957, Trần Chánh Thành, Secretary of State for Information, visited the construction site of a new national film production center in Saigon. The film center was the first step in the expansion of South Vietnam’s domestic cultural programs in 1957; in addition to the creation of the film center, the Ministry of Information established a printing office, increased the publication and distribution of print materials, and greatly expanded its radio broadcasting capabilities. The center also pointed to the accomplishments of Diệm’s first two years in office. When Diệm came to power in 1954, many observers predicted a short reign for the new leader. By 1957, he had guided South Vietnam to a period of relative stability. The film center, which Thành boasted would “constitute one of the most important film production centers of South-East-Asia,” was solid evidence of the strength of the regime.56

The film center reflected the changing focus of Diệm’s domestic programs. Diệm had ordered the creation of a film center not only to improve South Vietnam’s information capabilities, but also to “contribute to the people’s culture . . . of Free Vietnam.”57 It was built in the center of the city, on the former site of an opium den. The opium house, with its “disastrous influence on the lives of the Vietnamese people for so many years,” would be replaced by a building meant to contribute to the positive cultural

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development of the nation.\textsuperscript{58} During the next few years, the Republic of Vietnam increasingly used informational programs as part of a larger effort to foster a strong national culture in South Vietnam.

Film production was not the only area where South Vietnam increased its information activities. The defeat of the sects and stabilization of the Republic gave Diệm’s government more flexibility and greater resources to devote to information and propaganda. In 1957, information programs increased significantly, reflecting both the importance of the effort and the greater resources available for its execution. With the help of American economic aid, the Ministry of Information built new radio broadcasting facilities in Vietnam and expanded its programming. Radio broadcasting was an important development in South Vietnam’s plan for an effective cultural policy. Radio was one of the most effective ways to reach the population of South Vietnam. Once radio towers were erected, even the most remote village could be reached with a signal. In order to ensure that villagers could hear the programming, the South Vietnamese government distributed radio receivers. Radio also addressed the challenges of reaching an illiterate or semi-literate audience. The government used radio broadcasts to spread information to segments of the population that were unwilling or unable to read printed propaganda.

The stable conditions in 1957 allowed the Ministry of Information to expand its printing and publishing activities. In 1957, the Republic of Vietnam created an Office of

\textsuperscript{58}Hai Ông Bộ Trưởng Hoàng Hưng và Trần Chánh Thành đến Xem Đàm Diệm Xây Cất Trung Tâm Quốc Gia Sản Xuất Điện Anh” (“Ministers Hoang Hung and Tran Chanh Thanh visit the construction site of the National Film Production Center”). Việt Nam Thông Tấn Xã [Viet Nam Press Bulletin], 19 February, 1957, p. X.
Printing to coordinate the production and distribution of informational materials. In 1957 alone, the Ministry of Information purchased or published more than 900,000 propaganda books and 1.1 million pamphlets, posters, and brochures. By 1959, the total number of printed propaganda materials exceeded seven million. In the late 1950s, the Republic of Vietnam expanded its distribution network both in Vietnam and overseas, directly mailing leaflets and books to individuals and organizations. In 1955 South Vietnam mailed publications to 325 addresses within Vietnam; by 1959 the number had grown to over 20,000.\(^\text{59}\)

Film production and propaganda in general, required cooperation and coordination between the South Vietnamese government and the United States Operations Mission (USOM) in Saigon. Both contributed funds for the construction of the film center, and the USIS and the South Vietnamese Ministry of Information often worked together to determine important themes to be used in informational materials. The United States also provided technical support for Vietnamese film production. Still, the South Vietnamese Ministry of Information was primarily responsible for operating the center. The Ministry of Information chose to emphasize certain propaganda themes, wrote the scripts, and produced the movies. The films were then screened in South Vietnamese movie theaters in much the same way that newsreels were used in the United States. The Ministry of Information also used mobile information units to reach villages

throughout South Vietnam. The units, often made from modified three-wheeled motorbikes, carried films and projection materials to remote areas and screened movies for the villagers.⁶⁰

South Vietnamese radio broadcasting was an area where American and RVN officials came into conflict over policy formation and implementation. Many employees in the Ministry of Information resented the influence of American advisors. Although the Americans were responsible mostly for technical assistance, they often provided unsolicited advice on the direction of information policies and the content of radio broadcasts. On the other side, Vietnamese incompetence and poor planning frustrated American advisors, especially considering the cash outlays that went to building radio broadcasting facilities.⁶¹

South Vietnam’s information campaign continued with some of the same themes used in the first years of Diệm’s rule. Radio broadcasts were an effective method to inform the public of the accomplishments of the regime and the dangers of communism. One of the main tasks for Vietnam radio was to broadcast news and information about the Republic of Vietnam and its many successes during Diệm’s first years in office. Radio Vietnam publicized the failures of communism, both in North Vietnam and elsewhere, and noted the political rights and economic advances enjoyed by people in South

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Vietnam. The office used wire services from the United States, Great Britain, and France, as well as Vietnam’s own press service, for news on international communism.62

Diệm used public speeches to send the same messages to the public. In October 1957, Diệm delivered a speech to the National Assembly, explaining the military, administrative, and social accomplishments of his government. He explained that the combination of the national army, village militia, and the civil guard had worked to provide internal and external security for the nation. Furthermore, the government succeeded in matching political independence with economic independence. Continued progress, however, was not guaranteed. In a statement echoing earlier information materials, Diệm noted that success in the economic field was only possible through private initiative and personal sacrifice.63

Informational activities continued earlier efforts to win public confidence in the government of South Vietnam. The Ministry of Information arranged seminars and performances in villages and hamlets as a means of demonstrating the successes of the RVN. These activities, besides simply explaining the achievements of the government, served to indoctrinate the peasantry. The Ministry’s cultural office organized about 2,000 performances to aid in citizens’ education, build democracy, and abolish social evils such as prostitution, gambling, and opium use. Beginning in 1958, the Ministry helped to

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63 Diem on Democracy, 30.
organize weekly seminars to create a strong sense of nationalism in the public. These seminars discussed current events, South Vietnam’s foreign policy, and the importance of building a democracy in Vietnam.

Anti-communism remained an important message in the regime’s cultural programs in 1957 and after. In 1957, for example, the Ministry of Information initiated a campaign to complement military and political efforts to attack communism. The Ministry crafted a program to attack communist propaganda in South Vietnam using the themes “eliminate communism, save the country” or “eliminate communism, protect the Republic” [diệt cộng cụu quốc and diệt cộng, bảo vệ Cộng Hòa]. Propaganda materials also criticized the policies of communists, both in Hanoi and elsewhere in the world. In July 1959, Ministry of Information propaganda materials demanded that the Hanoi government permit five hundred families to move south to reunite with their relatives. Other materials “exploited the contradictions in the communist system” by publicizing anti-communist uprisings in North Vietnam, Hungary, and Tibet.64

In 1957, the Republic of Vietnam began placing greater emphasis on the cultural content of information activities. The Office of Radio Broadcasting, for example, introduced programming dealing with the arts and culture. Cultural programs, the Office determined, would build republican and Personalist values in the populace.65 The Office of Radio used different musical genres in order to increase the audience for these

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65 For a discussion of the philosophy of Personalism and its role in Diệm’s early cultural programs, see Chapter 1.
programs. On any given day, they broadcast three sessions of traditional music, four of new music, and three of foreign music. These musical programs accounted for over seven hours of broadcasting per day, versus about five and one-half hours of other programming. Furthermore, cultural programming could contribute to the ongoing efforts to denounce communism and publicize the achievements of the Republic. Messages criticizing communism and glorifying the regime’s accomplishments were inserted in the cultural programs in order to satisfy the primary goals of “information, explanation, and commentary.”

Diệm’s growing attention to South Vietnamese cultural development after 1957 was apparent in his implementation of educational reforms. During the first two years of his regime, Diệm took initial steps toward altering the educational system he inherited from the French. The immediate political and military crises after Geneva, however, prevented him from devoting significant resources to educational reform. By the beginning of 1957, Diệm’s position allowed him more actively to pursue educational policies that would contribute to the development of a strong national culture in South Vietnam.

When Ngô Đình Diệm came to power in 1954, he inherited an educational system in disarray. France was in the midst of transferring schools to the South Vietnamese government, a process that had begun in 1949. Complicating matters, French authorities had created a divided school system without a unified administration. As of 1954, South

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Vietnam had accepted responsibility for administering public schools, secular and Catholic private schools, Franco-Native schools for minority students, and Chinese schools in Cholon. Diệm’s challenge was to unify these various schools in a national education program.\textsuperscript{67}

Some of the earliest attempts to reform South Vietnamese education after the French withdrawal were coordinated by American advisors, rather than the South Vietnamese government. In May 1955, Michigan State University sent scholars and political advisors to South Vietnam to aid in Diệm’s nation-building programs. The Michigan State University Group, or MSUG, encountered a dearth of adequately trained Vietnamese civil servants. In August, MSUG created the National Institute of Administration (NIA) to provide technical education for South Vietnamese officials. The school’s curriculum consisted of the skills and knowledge most important to civil servants: economics, statistics, accounting, constitutional law, and finance.\textsuperscript{68}

MSUG’s involvement in the National Institute of Administration and the prolific writings of MSUG employees have given the impression that the United States was responsible for educational affairs in South Vietnam. But American educational activities, while important, provide an incomplete picture of South Vietnam’s system of education under Diệm. As with other aspects of nation-building, examining American involvement in education has come at the expense of understanding South Vietnamese


\textsuperscript{68} For an historical overview of the Michigan State Group, see Ernst, \textit{Forging a Fateful Alliance}. Works written by people involved in the MSUG project include Montgomery, \textit{The Politics of Foreign Aid}; Scigliano, \textit{South Vietnam}; Richard W. Lindholm, ed. \textit{Viet-Nam: The First Five Years: An International Symposium} (Lansing, 1959); Guy Fox, Wesley Fishel, Gerald Hickey.
policies. Under Diệm, the Republic of Vietnam increased the number of primary and secondary schools and expanded higher education in South Vietnam. In December 1955, French authorities transferred administration of the University of Saigon to the Republic of Vietnam. The University of Saigon included colleges of Law, Letters, Medicine, and Architecture. Diệm created the University of Hue, worked with the United States to create an agricultural university at Blao (currently Bao Loc), and took over administration of the National Oceanographic Institute at Nha Trang. The Ministry of National Education also instituted several important reforms in primary and secondary curricula. These educational activities, like other cultural nation-building efforts, were undertaken in order to strengthen and stabilize the Diệm government.

National development in South Vietnam, Diệm believed, required a system of education that was open to the public and reflected the goals and ideologies of the nation. The Republic of Vietnam also needed to expand its educational facilities and reform the curriculum. Therefore, during Diệm’s presidency, the Ministry of National Education greatly increased educational facilities throughout Vietnam. From 1954 to 1960 the Republic of Vietnam constructed almost five thousand elementary and secondary schools, raising the national total from 1,780 to 6,774. During the same period, enrollment jumped from 443,865 to 1.5 million.69

In 1954, South Vietnam instituted a reform in elementary education. One key element of this reform was the creation of Community Pilot Schools [Tiểu-Học Công-

Đờng] throughout the country. The schools worked with the local population on community development projects. Students benefited by learning about the responsibilities of citizenship and by forging ties with the surrounding communities. Villages gained access to the knowledge of students and teachers and saw the concrete results of community development. The nation as a whole benefited because the schools provided a mechanism to increase contact between the government and the citizenry.

The South Vietnamese government established similar institutions focused on agricultural training. Like the first pilot schools, the agricultural schools were meant to “strengthen the relations between the Administration and the farmers, to act as coordinators between the two.” The Fundamental Education Center in Long An, outside of Saigon, trained teachers to work in the community schools. In addition to traditional pedagogy, future teachers learned how to lead community discussions, conduct surveys, organize community projects, and design educational posters and pamphlets. “In short,” the Ministry of National Education explained, “the school is the cultural center with one main objective: the improvement of the community living.”

The Community Pilot Program grew quickly. In the 1954-55 academic year, South Vietnam had two of these experimental schools with a total enrollment of 571 students. By the 1960-61 academic year, the RVN had 23 Community Schools with over 11,000 students. Schools offered vocational courses in accounting, typing, shorthand, mechanics, and home economics. Besides the obvious benefit of a population with technical skills, the vocational curriculum was meant to help students “live in harmony

with their fellow citizens.” In 1960, the government decided to implement the Community School curriculum in all of South Vietnam’s primary schools.71

In 1956, the Republic of Vietnam adopted a new educational curriculum to promote the cultural development and national strength of South Vietnam. The new national curriculum incorporated Personalist tenets, stating that Vietnamese education “must be a humanist education, respecting the sacred character of the human being, regarding man as an end in himself, and aiming at his full development.” Beginning in elementary school, Personalist ideas were used to teach “the rights and duties of man as a citizen of a democratic nation.” Throughout the educational system, the curriculum was designed to teach “the nature and sacred value of the human person, free and responsible for his destiny” and the “role that each individual will have in his free country, within the free world.” Such a form of education, South Vietnamese officials believed, would increase the number of citizens “able to perform adequately the task of national reconstruction.”72

The new curriculum used civic education to prevent the “infiltration” of communist propaganda and to teach students the “rights and duties” of the citizenry. At the same time, academic subjects encouraged nationalism and loyalty to the Diệm


Perhaps most importantly, Diệm saw education reform as a way to “undo” the cultural deterioration Vietnam and contribute to “the cultural revival of the people.”

Educational reform, like other cultural programs in South Vietnam, intensified from 1957 to 1960. In April 1958, the government created the Textbook, Translation, and Publication Service. The office translated important textbooks from French, English and Chinese into Vietnamese for use in South Vietnam’s primary, secondary, and post-secondary schools. It also wrote and published a small number of textbooks. From its inception until 1962, the textbook service published thirty-nine books for elementary schools, eighty-three for secondary schools, and nine for universities. In addition, the office translated one hundred twenty-two titles from Chinese, French, and English. During the same period, the office printed over three million books, maps, and periodicals for educational use in South Vietnam.

In 1959, a new educational program continued some of the reforms enacted three years earlier. Although the education policies initiated in 1956-57 had been successful, the curriculum was revised “to meet the present needs and conditions of Vietnam.” The new guidelines reflected the Diệm administration’s greater interest in creating a national culture. Imbuing children with a sense of Vietnam’s history and a feeling of responsibility to the government would strengthen Diệm’s regime and the Republic of

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74 President Ngo Dinh Diem on Democracy, 32.

Vietnam. To “reflect the new spirit of education,” the new curriculum emphasized Vietnamese language, national history, geography, and civic education.\textsuperscript{76} The ultimate goal of these reforms was to instill the “traditional culture” in the youth of Vietnam while also “opening their mind[s] to authentic values from abroad.”\textsuperscript{77}

Under the new plan, schools devoted considerable class time to Vietnamese language, the history of Vietnam, moral and civic education, and geography. In the first year of elementary school (grade five), students spent nine and one-half hours per week on Vietnamese language, including vocabulary, reading, recitation, dictation, and penmanship. They devoted another two hours to moral and civic education. These two subjects accounted for 11.5 of the 25 hours of class time each week. In grade four, the second year of elementary school, Vietnamese language constituted eight hours of class time, along with two hours of moral and civic education, one hour of history, and fifty minutes of geography. These subjects made up nearly one-half of all classroom hours each week. In grade three, the time spent on Vietnamese, civic and moral education, history, and geography increased to 13.5 hours. In the last two years of elementary school, students spent about 12 hours per week on these subjects.\textsuperscript{78}

Civic and moral education constituted the basis of students’ socialization as citizens of Vietnam. Moral education was important to “help the school children acquire the virtues that are necessary to the citizens of an independent country.” It also

\textsuperscript{76} Department of National Education, \textit{Elementary Education Curriculum}, 9.


\textsuperscript{78} Department of National Education, \textit{Elementary Education Curriculum}, 10-14.
introduced students to values that would benefit the nation. In the first years of school, students mostly learned etiquette and personal virtue. They were encouraged to fulfill their duties to their family, to their school, and to themselves. By the last two years of school, moral and civic education focused more on students’ duties to the country. In grade two, the penultimate grade in elementary school, civic education topics included “Patriotism,” “Respect for discipline,” and “Observance of the laws.” In the last year of elementary school, students were taught that “[a]ll actions disadvantageous to the nation must be avoided. Good morals and customs in Vietnam must be preserved.”

Civic education explained the responsibilities of the government and the obligations of the citizenry. Grade four teachers used “historical and geographical stories to rekindle the children’s patriotism and to make them realize that Vietnam is a large, beautiful country, and can become richer and stronger.” The following year, students learned the duties and obligations of citizens. In grade one, the civic education curriculum included teaching “love for justice and freedom [and] standing united to serve the country . . . [l]ove for and duties toward the National Colors, the National Anthem, and toward the President.” Finally, civic education explained the electoral process and the activities of the different branches of government.

Literacy was a key to intensifying nationalist feelings in South Vietnam. As Benedict Anderson noted, “print-language . . . invents nationalism” by allowing ideas to spread beyond personal contacts, thus forming national communities of people who may

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79 Department of National Education, Elementary Education Curriculum, 29-33.

80 Department of National Education, Elementary Education Curriculum, 34-36.
never meet but share the same values. South Vietnamese officials saw the nation-building potential of improving literacy. The Ministry of National Education stated that the purpose of adult literacy courses was to help people read so the government could give them “simplified courses in politics, civics, hygiene, history and geography, to help them widen their knowledge and thus become immune from Communist propaganda.”

While anti-illiteracy was a concern of the government in the first two years after Diệm came to power, the campaign expanded considerably during the 1956-1957 academic year. According to a report from the Ministry of National Education, the RVN made great strides in lowering illiteracy rates. Although these statistics may have been exaggerated, they indicated the great importance that the Republic of Vietnam placed on literacy.

One of the central goals of educational reforms during the Diệm presidency was to standardize Vietnamese as the primary language of instruction at all South Vietnamese

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81 Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 134.


schools. During the colonial period, Vietnamese was used for the first three years of elementary education. French was the language of instruction at secondary schools and at the university in Hanoi. The use of French in many Vietnamese schools was likely the result of French cultural nationalism as well as circumstance. Many colonial administrators undoubtedly believed that French was better suited than Vietnamese for intellectual development. Moreover, most secondary teachers and university professors were of either French birth or ancestry. They could not teach courses in Vietnamese even if it had been colonial policy.

As early as 1949, the State of Vietnam had begun phasing in Vietnamese as the language of instruction in Vietnamese elementary and secondary schools. The process proceeded slowly, and when Diệm took office he accelerated this policy. He pushed not only to standardize the language of instruction in elementary and secondary schools, but also in higher education. In 1955, the South Vietnamese government began a “systematic effort to expand the use of Vietnamese” in higher education. Such a policy would “facilitate a larger diffusion of Vietnamese culture for the great benefit of the nation as a whole.”84 Disseminating the native language would contribute to cultural development and a sense of nationalism grounded in Vietnamese culture and history.

Benedict Anderson cautioned against treating languages as “emblems of nationness, like flags, costumes, folk-dances, and the rest.”85 Instead, language is important as a means of creating imagined national communities by allowing communication between

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85 Anderson, Imagined Communities, 135. Emphasis in original.
citizens. In Vietnamese history, language often facilitated a sense of national consciousness. During centuries of Chinese control (from about the second century B.C.E. to the tenth century C.E.), Chinese was used in literature and in all official proceedings. “Even after the restoration of independence [in 939],” William Duiker wrote, “the dominance of Chinese ideographs continued for several centuries.”

Before the arrival of western missionaries, Vietnam’s written language, nôm, was created by rendering indigenous Vietnamese words in Chinese characters. Nôm incorporated Chinese characters phonetically close to Vietnamese words as well as new characters based on Chinese words with similar meanings. Nôm, with its close connection to Chinese, facilitated the development of Chinese-style institutions in Vietnam. Even after Vietnam won independence from China in the tenth century, Vietnamese elites’ use of nôm facilitated the dissemination of Chinese Confucianist ideals. In the words of Keith Taylor, “nom was used to express native concepts of kingship in terms advanced by the Chinese classics.”

In the seventeenth century, the French Jesuit Alexandre de Rhodes created a romanization system for Vietnamese called quốc ngữ or “national language.” In the nineteenth century, French colonial officials encouraged wider use of quốc ngữ as part of a policy to “de-sinicize” Vietnam. French officials and Catholic missionaries viewed Confucianism, and by extension Chinese and nôm, as obstacles to controlling or converting the population. David Marr, a leading historian of Vietnam, wrote that language policies were devised “to isolate Vietnam from its heritage and to neutralize the

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86 Duiker, Vietnam, 122.

traditional elite.”\textsuperscript{88} Ironically, French policies encouraging the spread of \textit{quốc ngữ} actually contributed to growing Vietnamese nationalism in the 1920s and 1930s, when it became “the popular medium for the expression of Vietnamese cultural (and national) solidarity.”\textsuperscript{89}

South Vietnamese officials recognized the social, cultural, and economic value of teaching Vietnamese. Vietnamese, according to one curriculum guide, provided students with a functional vocabulary and prepared them for personal interactions. Vietnamese language study also had broader cultural goals. As the Ministry of International Education noted, “the Vietnamese language is used to express and develop the ideas of the people.” Knowledge in the native language served Diệm’s goals of fostering the qualities important to national status. During the colonial period, educated Vietnamese spoke the language of the colonizers. Diệm hoped that the Republic of Vietnam could reclaim language as a symbol of the cultural independence of the nation.

The Vietnamese language curriculum also served as a way to socialize Vietnam’s youth in support of the government. Language education was not fully indoctrination, but certain lessons reinforced the authority of the state. For example, some vocabulary lessons used words related to government administration. The topics included “[g]overnment offices and palaces,” “administrative services,” and “[g]ood morals and customs.” The following year, students learned about systems of government and

\textsuperscript{88} Marr, \textit{Vietnamese Tradition on Trial}, 145.

\textsuperscript{89} Anderson, \textit{Imagined Communities}, 128. Emphasis in original.
military affairs. For reading exercises, students were required to memorize passages “that have a moral lesson and are practical.” By their second year, they were required to memorize the national anthem.⁹⁰

One of the fundamental purposes of elementary education, according to the Ministry of Education, was “safeguarding the nation, its prosperity, and the collective promotion of its people.” In order to develop “the national spirit,” elementary education included a curriculum based heavily on Vietnamese culture and history. The Educational Ministry recommended using the history of Vietnam “to teach the children to love the country, to praise the fighting spirit of the people, to love one another and stay united.” It also suggested that teachers “[u]se the Vietnamese language as an efficient means to develop national ideals.” Even geography had a “practical aim” beyond simply teaching students about the physical world. “It is through the understanding of the geography of their country,” the curriculum guide explained, “that the students can appreciate the pioneer’s work of their forefathers, and thereby develop a love for the country and the people.”⁹¹

History classes inculcated students with ideas that strengthened the nation and the government. Like other South Vietnamese cultural programs, the historical narrative of Vietnam emphasized “the fighting spirit of the people” and “the unyielding spirit of the people through the ages.” Students also learned of “the heroes who helped build up the


⁹¹ Department of National Education, Elementary Education Curriculum, 6-7, 45.
country, and the ancestors who contributed to the evolution of the national culture.” The Department of National Education explained the purpose of the history curriculum:

In learning the national history, the Vietnamese children must try and follow the examples of courage, sacrifice, solidarity and patriotism of our great men and women, to strive for better accomplishments everyday, in view of safeguarding and enriching our great cultural heritage.

To encourage patriotism and nationalism, students learned of the exploits of Vietnam’s greatest figures, particularly those who had fought for independence against China. In grade four, students learned the story of the Trương sisters’ famous revolt against the Han in 40 A.D. Students also studied Lady Trieu (Trieu Au), a woman who led a brief resistance movement against the Chinese in 248 A.D.

Elementary history education taught the stories of Ngô Quyền, Trần Hùng Đạo, and the two Battles of Bạch Đằng. Ngô Quyền was a Vietnamese general who led a resistance movement against the Chinese in the tenth century. In 938, Ngô Quyền attacked a Vietnamese general who had killed Ngô Quyền’s father-in-law. The local warlord, Kiều Công Tiền, petitioned China for assistance against Ngô Quyền’s forces. Chinese forces sailed up the Bạch Đằng River, near present-day Haiphong, to attack Quyên and his supporters. Ngô Quyên, however, anticipated this strategy and formulated a plan to destroy the Chinese troops. His men placed spikes with iron tips in the river, just below the surface of the water. They then engaged the Chinese forces and drew their ships upriver at high tide. When the tide went out, the Chinese warships dropped onto the spikes and became stuck in the river. The Vietnamese forces counterattacked, killing large numbers of Chinese troops, including the heir-apparent to the Chinese throne.92

The Second Battle of Bạch Đằng was similar to the first. Once again, a Vietnamese hero defeated Chinese forces who were working with traitorous Vietnamese warlords. Trần Hưng Đạo, still considered one of the great heroes of Vietnam, defended the Trần dynasty from a Mongol attack. In 1288, Trần Hưng Đạo engaged the Mongol forces at Bạch Đằng. Like Ngô Quyền, Trần Hưng Đạo placed metal spikes in the river that impaled the Mongol ships. Trần Hưng Đạo’s troops defeated the Mongols and killed or captured the opposing generals. The victory at Bạch Đằng “smashed China’s reputation to the ground.”

A history textbook published during Diệm’s presidency noted that Ngô Quyền’s victory at Bạch Đằng continued to serve as a source of Vietnamese patriotism. Quyền was honored because “he rid the country of the traitor Kiều-Công-Tiền and prevented it from falling back into Chinese hands. He put an end to the Chinese domination . . . achieved independence and opened the way for the future independent dynasties” of Vietnam. In North Vietnamese historiography, Ngô Quyền’s victory at Bạch Đằng provided a model for Vietnamese resistance against Ngô Đình Diệm and his American patrons. In the Republic of Vietnam, the story was also used as an analogy for Vietnam’s struggles in the twentieth century. But in the South, of course, Diệm and his allies stood

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for Vietnamese independence while Vietnamese communists, like Kiều Công Tiến, invited Chinese forces to control Vietnamese territory.\textsuperscript{95} Governmental guidelines encouraged teachers to convey these stories in a moving, eloquent and vivid manner, so as to arouse the student’s joy or sadness, admiration or anger, according to the different historical events unfolded before them. Only when this much is achieved can History lessons be profitable.\textsuperscript{96}

History education remained an important part of the curriculum in secondary schools. Here, again, the historical narrative was consistent with the predominant themes in Diệm’s cultural programs. Secondary school history texts depicted Vietnam’s ancient history in the language of nationhood, thus suggesting two thousand years of continuity from the origins of Vietnamese civilization to the Diệm government. History education also emphasized Vietnam’s political and cultural independence from China. Finally, policies of Vietnam’s most successful kings and emperors bore a striking resemblance to Diệm’s leadership of South Vietnam.

In her comparative analysis of North and South Vietnamese educational programs, Thaveeporn Vasavakul explored the historical narrative of textbooks used in South Vietnam’s secondary schools. She noted that textbooks used the language of nationhood even when describing ancient civilizations. South Vietnamese textbooks, for example, traced the Vietnamese people to the semi-mythical Hùng Kings, who ruled the kingdom of Văn Lang under the dynastic name Hùng Bàng in the centuries before the Common Era. History texts described Văn Lang as a country with demarcated borders

\textsuperscript{95} For North Vietnamese usage of Ngô Quyền, Trần Hùng Đạo, and the Battles of Bạch Đằng, see Patricia Pelley, \textit{Postcolonial Vietnam: New Histories of the National Past} (Durham, 2002), 182-185.

\textsuperscript{96} Department of National Education, \textit{Elementary Education Curriculum}, 38.
and a capital divided into fifteen administrative units. Vân Lang, as an independent country, occasionally fought wars to defeat “foreign invaders.” Accounts of Chinese domination in the early common era used similar language of “territory” and “borders”; in the fourth century, the Viet people “expelled” Chinese troops and “regained . . . two lost provinces.” The effect, Vasavakul noted, was that civilizations “which existed in the distant past were seen as historically, politically, and culturally comparable to the modern nation-state known as Viet-Nam.”

In addition to the terminology of nationhood, South Vietnamese history texts emphasized the strong currents of independence in Vietnamese history. Secondary schools, like elementary schools, offered an inventory of Vietnamese heroes who had resisted Chinese domination for millennia. Texts also highlighted Vietnam’s cultural independence from China. The Lac Viet, according to one text, preserved habits and customs different from the Chinese. The textbook’s message, according to Vasavakul, was that even under Chinese political control, “the Lac Viet possessed an independent national consciousness.”

In secondary schools, the curriculum called for a more detailed discussion of specific Vietnamese kings and emperors and their policies. This provided an opportunity to situate Ngô Đình Diệm with the greatest rulers in Vietnam’s long history. History courses placed great stock in leaders who built state institutions. The best Vietnamese kings were responsible for “the founding of a civil service system, the implementation of

97 Quoted in Thaveeporn Vasavakul, *Schools and politics in South and North Viet Nam*, 169-170.

98 Thaveeporn Vasavakul, *Schools and politics in South and North Viet Nam*, 173.

99 Thaveeporn Vasavakul, *Schools and politics in South and North Viet Nam*, 170.
a taxation system, the organization of the army, the establishment of the legal system, the
development of education, the arts, and culture.” Although this described kings and
emperors in Vietnam’s past, it could just as easily have been a summary of Diệm’s
accomplishments in South Vietnam. The textbook credited emperors who reconstructed
the capital city, not unlike Diệm’s historic preservation efforts in Hue. It also noted that
in 1803 the Gia Long Emperor established the Quốc Học school in Hue. Diệm made a
similar contribution to Vietnam’s education system with the creation of the University of
Hue in 1957.100

Policies indirectly related to education also promoted cultural development and
appreciation for Vietnam’s past. At the end of 1957, South Vietnam opened the National
Library and Cultural Center [Thư viện Quốc gia và Trung tâm Văn hóa] in Saigon. This
was a major project, in terms of cost, size, and its role in South Vietnam’s cultural
development. The library itself was built to hold one million books and periodicals. The
cultural center had a 1000 seat auditorium, two smaller lecture halls (500 and 200 seats),
an exhibition space, and rooms for audio and film presentations. The new library was
designed to draw the attention of the public, unlike an earlier, smaller library that passers-
by rarely noticed. Besides its size, the new library was notable for its location. It was
constructed in an area of high pedestrian and automobile traffic, within a few blocks of
several of Saigon’s most important landmarks, including the Bến Thành Market. It was

100 Thaveporn Vasavakul, Schools and politics in South and North Viet Nam, 178-79. For more on the
University of Hue, see Chapter 5.
directly across the street from Gia Long Palace, which served as Diệm’s residence from 1960 until 1963. The building itself, Diệm stated, was a symbol of the strength, vitality and indomitable spirit of the Vietnamese people.\(^\text{101}\)

The National Library and Cultural Center was not only a concrete symbol of the regime’s strength, it was also a means of preserving Vietnam’s culture and making it accessible to the public. At the groundbreaking for the library on July 3, 1956, Diệm stressed the centrality of Vietnam’s culture to the mission of the Republic. Over the centuries, Vietnam’s unique culture—especially its spirit of independence and resistance—“had been formed on the pages of our glorious history.” The library, he explained, was more than just a repository for Vietnamese literature:

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The duty of our generation consists not only of conserving, but also fostering this precious heritage, to cultivate this racial essence for transmitting to our descendants; for no fortress, impregnable though it may be, could be better than the spirit of independence and sovereignty, to effectively guarantee the survival of our race.\(^\text{102}\)
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Diệm saw cultural preservation as an important part of Vietnam’s national development. Foreign ideas threatened his goal of a Republic based on Personalist values. Still, Diệm recognized that the purpose of the National Library was to introduce the people of South Vietnam to the ideas that would most effectively serve both the individual and the state, and Vietnamese culture alone was not sufficient to fulfill this


goal. South Vietnam, in order to join the family of modern nations, had to embrace foreign ideas and philosophies. In pursuit of this goal, the library held books in French, English, and Chinese, along with its large collection of Vietnamese materials.

A national system of education and an extensive informational program gave Diệm the opportunity to foster public support for the South Vietnamese government. In addition to the messages of anti-communism and Personalism, Diệm used Vietnam’s history and culture to legitimize the regime. As Thaveeporn Vasavakul summarized,

\[\text{[T]he authority of the Republic of Viet Nam was based on the image of ‘sameness’ between its role of governance and that of its predecessors. [Educational materials] impressed upon the reader by constant repetition the similarity of past administrations with the modern one. This reflected the regime’s attempt to confer legitimacy upon its administration [and] . . . to create a legitimate base of contemporary authority through an implied historical continuity with past regimes.}\]

The United States was an active partner in these efforts to legitimize Diệm’s regime.

From 1954 until 1958, American propaganda in South Vietnam generally conformed to the pro-Diệm messages of the South Vietnamese government. In the late 1950s, however, American and South Vietnamese policies diverged with the United States using cultural programs to introduce American culture to South Vietnam.

\[103\text{ Thaveeporn Vasavakul, Schools and politics in South and North Viet Nam, 208.}\]
CHAPTER 4

UNITED STATES INFORMATION PROGRAMS IN SOUTH VIETNAM, 1954-1958

As one of the most contested Cold War battlegrounds, Vietnam was an important target of American informational programs. After the Geneva Convention, the United States Information Service post in Saigon faced the challenge of creating a message that would foster support for Ngô Đình Diệm’s South Vietnamese regime.104 From 1954 to 1956, American programs promoted Diệm as a national leader and explained the political, social, and economic consequences of life under communism. During this period, the USIS targeted the broad masses of South Vietnam as the audience for American informational activities. Beginning around 1957, the USIS altered its strategies in South Vietnam. Rather than promote Diệm and his achievements as president, USIS tried to introduce American society and culture to the people of South Vietnam. USIS also aimed its message at a smaller group of Vietnamese elites and opinion makers. American officials hoped that advertising the benefits of liberal

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104 United States Information Service (USIS) was the name given overseas posts of the USIA. By the late 1950s, USIS Vietnam included two posts: USIS Saigon and USIS Hue. It should be noted that the designation of USIS preceded the reorganization of American informational activities under the USIA in 1954.
democracy would weaken support for communism and bolster Diệm’s regime. American messages of economic prosperity and political liberties, however, highlighted social inequalities in South Vietnam. Furthermore, contradictions between American and South Vietnamese informational programs hindered their effectiveness.

In June 1953, just a year before the Geneva Convention, Dwight D. Eisenhower reorganized the U.S. government’s overseas informational activities. The Cold War forced the United States to assume responsibility as the leader of the free world, an obligation that Eisenhower believed could only be fulfilled through “the most efficient and cohesive possible organization for the conduct of our foreign affairs.”105 As part of this reform, Congress approved the creation of the United States Information Agency (USIA) to oversee the information programs previously administered by a number of different government agencies, including the International Information Administration, the Mutual Security Agency, and the Technical Cooperation Administration. Eisenhower explained that consolidating American information programs under the USIA would “lead to substantial economies and significantly improved effectiveness of administration.”106 Although Eisenhower emphasized the economic benefits of the reorganization, he also made it clear that the USIA would play a critical role in American


106 Eisenhower, “Reorganization of Foreign Aid and Information Programs,” 853.
foreign policy. In a White House press release, Eisenhower announced that “[o]ur overseas information service has never carried a heavier responsibility than it does now.”

Many observers agreed with Eisenhower’s assessment. The *Saturday Review* claimed that “[s]ince the end of the war almost everyone has recognized the need for an overseas program to maintain America’s position on the battlefront of world public opinion.” Edward Bernays, former adman and vocal commentator on American information programs, asserted that America’s “official overseas information program is vitally important to our national strength.” A number of factors explained Americans’ willingness to rely on information programs in the Cold War. Many critics believed that money spent on information programs would earn a far greater return than if it were used for the military. Pollster George Gallup, for example, argued that “$5,000,000,000 spent on today’s tanks, guns, and battleships will make far less difference in achieving ultimate victory over Communism than $5,000,000,000 appropriated for ideological warfare.”

New technology, including the growth of the electronic media, also facilitated the dissemination of information to virtually all parts of the world. Finally, some commentators expressed concern about the Soviets’ use of propaganda. They did not want the United States to fall behind in the battle to earn the goodwill of developing nations.

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American officials in Saigon recognized the need for a broad-based informational strategy in South Vietnam. As a memo from September 1954 explained,

The problem of information is very difficult, but very crucial. [The USIS] needs to disseminate information that reaches all groups—children, students, women, men, elders, etc. . . . It needs to have information activities which reaches [sic] every village. Every medium of information should be used—radio, press, tracts, movies, mobile units, loud speaker installations in communities, rallies, etc.¹¹¹

Two months later, President Eisenhower deemed that “the threat to the independence and security of Free Viet-Nam” had reached a “critical stage,” so he dispatched J. Lawton Collins to Vietnam to “coordinate and direct United States activities in Viet-Nam in support of United States policy objectives.”¹¹² The Foreign Operations Administration (FOA) and the USIA apprised Collins of the status of American information programs in Vietnam. A briefing book compiled by the FOA for Collins explained the “pressing necessity” to win support for the South Vietnamese government by disseminating information.¹¹³

USIA identified a number of objectives for its broad-based campaign after Diệm came to power in 1954. In Vietnam, it wanted to promote support for a “legal” (that is, non-communist) government, discredit the Viet Minh, encourage anti-communism, and improve government administration. One of the early USIS strategies was to


demonstrate to the South Vietnamese people that “they would be worse off in every way under the Viet Minh.” USIS drew attention to the “unpleasant aspects” of life in communist-controlled areas. As one USIS message explained, “[t]he lot of the people in the North has not improved under the Viet Minh; they are materially worse off in addition to having lost all freedom of thought, speech, and action.”

Promoting Diệm and the southern government was more difficult than denouncing North Vietnam. USIS conceded that, as of mid-1955, Diệm had made little progress in raising the standard of living in South Vietnam. Although there were valid explanations for Diệm’s failure, this did not make the propaganda campaign any easier. Still, the USIS could point to South Vietnamese independence as Diệm’s greatest success. As Diệm’s government progressed politically and economically, the USIS would publicize these accomplishments. In the meantime, it would emphasize South Vietnam’s “strong efforts to improve the standard of living and security of all the people.”

One of the central themes of early USIS programs after the partition was that South Vietnam would survive as a nation. Information officials recognized that many people in South Vietnam were hesitant to throw their weight behind the new government unless they were certain it would survive. These attentistes had witnessed the Viet Minh’s successful fight against U.S.-backed French forces; the strength of the southern government was unproven. As one U.S. report explained, “[t]hey will gamble on Diem

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and Free Viet Nam only if they are convinced that it is a sure thing, and they have not yet seen or heard anything to convince them that it is.” The goal of the USIS was to demonstrate that the South Vietnamese state was, indeed, a “sure thing.” American officials determined that the most effective strategy would be to publicize the U.S. commitment to South Vietnam. In August 1955, the USIS decided to devote increased attention to the theme of American support and the likelihood that South Vietnam would defeat any attempts at subversion. These activities would “convince the people that the government and the army are, or will be when the time of decision arrives, strong enough to survive any attempted coup or invasion.”

USIS stressed that the Vietnamese, working in conjunction with the “Free World,” could “assure the continued sovereignty, independence and national growth of Free Vietnam.”

One of the notable changes in American strategy after Geneva was the target audience for USIA programs. During the French War the USIS targeted the “leadership element” in Vietnam. After 1954, however, the USIA initiated programs to reach the masses. Acting Director of the USIA Abbot Washburn explained that the situation after Geneva required “a broadening of activities to include a mass propaganda campaign.” The USIA “engaged in a mass persuasion of the people who will cast the ballots, grow


the food and comprise the labor force and the armed strength of their country.” The goal of the USIA was to convince them that “unity, stability and resistance to Communism are vital if their future is to be assured.”

The USIS plan in the first eighteen months after Diệm became Prime Minister was “unusually extensive.” The USIS used various methods to disseminate its messages of anti-communism, Diệm’s achievements, and American support for South Vietnam. In a two month period in late 1954, the post printed more than two million anti-communist pamphlets and distributed anti-communist news stories to the Vietnamese press. By 1955, USIS was publishing several magazines, as well as leaflets, pamphlets, posters, comic books, and calendars. The most popular publication was Free World, a magazine with a circulation of 230,000 copies each month that carried “pro-democracy and some anti-communist material.”

The United States used radio broadcasts and film screenings as part of the “crash program” after Geneva. By early 1955 USIS Saigon was producing two documentaries each month, as well as “full-length feature films carrying pro-democracy and/or anti-communist themes.” According to one report, motion pictures were “one of the fastest developing and most strongly emphasized program activities.”

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segments locally and dubbed USIA radio programs for broadcast in Vietnam. In late 1955, the USIS produced radio spots supporting Diệm’s position in the upcoming referendum. An officer in the radio section recalled that “USIA played a very big hand” in Diệm’s campaign, broadcasting radio spots in support of his candidacy.

Print materials, movies, and radio broadcasts could easily reach South Vietnam’s urban audience, particularly in Saigon. Sending informational messages to provincial areas, however, was far more difficult. Villages and hamlets did not have the necessary equipment to broadcast radio programs or screen films. Furthermore, lower literacy rates meant that printed materials could only reach a limited rural audience. In spring 1955, the USIS initiated a field program to overcome obstacles of rural information. For this program, the USIS recruited Vietnamese citizens to serve in two-man field teams working the provinces. The USIS supplied the teams with a radio receiver, typewriter, and mimeographing equipment. The teams then worked with local information offices under the South Vietnamese Ministry of Information to disseminate propaganda. After three months the USIS had formed and trained twelve field teams with plans for nine more in the following months.

Perhaps the most creative way of reaching the rural population was through theatrical performances. The USIS contracted two troupes of Vietnamese actors and

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musicians to travel to villages in South Vietnam. The troupes performed “songs, skits, and a short play,” a majority of which had anti-Viet Minh or pro-government themes. These performances provided a means of propaganda in areas with high rates of illiteracy. They were successful, the USIS concluded, in part because Viet Minh activities were easy to lampoon. They also drew large audiences in areas where the population was “starved for all forms of entertainment.”

With Diệm’s defeat of the sects and his consolidation of power in South Vietnam, in 1957 the United States Information Service turned its attention to drafting a new informational strategy. In the first two years after the partition, American programs targeted the masses of South Vietnam with messages stressing anti-communism and confidence in the government. In the relative stability of 1957, the USIS modified both the messages of its programs and the target audience. New programs were aimed at groups considered to be most influential in South Vietnamese society. The content tried to balance “support of the Diem government with material explaining U.S. policies, culture, and way of life.” By the middle of 1958, the USIS had formalized this strategy in the new country plan for South Vietnam.

Changing the target audience was one of the most important shifts in the U.S. informational strategy after 1957. In spite of efforts to spread America’s messages to the provinces, programs over the previous few years had failed to reach the “gray,

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anonymous hordes” of South Vietnam. Information officials concluded that high illiteracy rates in the villages, inconsistent access to radio receivers, and isolation from mobile exhibits made it difficult for the USIS to reach rural audiences. The new report proposed “selective” concentration as the best approach for American informational activities in South Vietnam.127

According to the plan adopted in 1958, “the basic assumption” of USIS was that the “actual and potential elite” represented the best target for informational activities. USIS specified precisely who constituted this group: top government and military officials, businessmen, professionals (including teachers, professors, writers, doctors, lawyers, and engineers), students, and the clergy. USIS also noted the potential influence of soldiers, labor unions, and mid-level civil servants. These groups were appealing targets for a number of reasons. The most educated Vietnamese in these demographics (including top officials, teachers, and other professionals) could be reached with written materials, though the plan noted the limited English proficiency of most South Vietnamese. Many of the members of these groups were centralized in Saigon-Cholon and Hue, facilitating distribution of American information. Those who were not necessarily in urban areas, such as soldiers, constituted a “captive audience” for films, leaflets, exhibits, and radio.128


The decision of USIS to target students corresponded with broader USIA attempts to reach younger audiences. USIA explained that in many countries, students and young people never came to USIS posts “unless they had rocks in their hands.” According to a USIA pamphlet, USIS officers were “trying to convince young people that the United States stands with them in their efforts to modernize their societies, and that democracy and freedom can be effective instruments in helping solve their problems and better their lives.” The USIA strategy specifically to target a young audience was not surprising. As the pamphlet mentioned, the youth had the potential to become the leaders of South Vietnam. But the message used in the youth campaign was also significant. American propaganda appealed to younger audiences’ interest in improving their material conditions. Furthermore, younger Vietnamese in urban areas may have made attractive targets as potential opinion-makers in Vietnam.

In 1957 and 1958, USIS expanded publication and distribution of materials aimed at younger audiences. It distributed copies of Young Citizen to public and private secondary schools and increased its translation services in order to provide textbooks on American literature. A USIA publication noted that the “more generalized translation program will increasingly make youth a major audience.” The Agency consolidated much of its magazine publishing into one title, Free World, which was popular with

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young readers. USIS increased the circulation of *Free World* from 100,000 to 150,000 and revised the content to introduce “broader perspectives on the Western world, especially the United States.”

Binational centers in Saigon and Hue served as the physical centers of American informational activities. In 1957, USIS constructed a new binational facility in Saigon. The facility, according to USIS reports, was “exceedingly handsome” and situated at the “best location of Saigon.” In the new center, USIS held film screenings, concerts, conferences, lectures, and receptions. The facility included a library where local residents could borrow American books and periodicals. USIS also offered English classes at the center. These courses were extremely popular: in autumn 1957, the binational center in Saigon enrolled 1200 students but turned away many others who wanted to enroll in the program.

At the end of 1957, the USIS turned its attention to creating a stronger presence in areas outside of Saigon, particularly Hue. Although Hue was smaller than some other Vietnamese cities, officials believed it was important to establish a presence in “this traditional seat of Vietnamese culture.” In November, the USIS opened a new, expanded

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information center in Hue. It included a library which, like the one in Saigon, was popular with local residents. The collection included 1200 books, half of which circulated to Vietnamese readers each month. In 1958, the United States opened a binational center in Hue. It included facilities for lectures, exhibits, conferences, and screenings of USIA films, and the Vietnamese-American Association offered English courses at the center. The United States Information Service was confident that the activities in Hue contributed to America’s informational and foreign policy goals in Vietnam. According to one assessment, “the injection of Americana into the intellectual bloodstream of that community has tended to sustain and deepen the pro-US orientation of the participating elite.”

The focus on specific audiences coincided with a new message in USIS programs. During Diệm’s first two years in office, the USIS had consciously avoided content emphasizing American culture. In 1955, for example, a USIS report mentioned that films presenting “general Americana” were not “felt to be of great value to the immediate objective of the program” in South Vietnam. Such films would only be used if they reinforced the message of American strength. USIS officials noted that these materials could be incorporated into the South Vietnamese informational strategy if and when Diệm had resolved the political, social, and economic obstacles facing South Vietnam.

By 1956, some observers began questioning the absence of American culture in USIS programming. A 1956 report drafted by USIS Vietnam lamented the lingering

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French cultural influence in South Vietnam. Even after the French withdrawal in 1954, French culture retained a strong presence in Vietnam and Vietnamese people had only a “spotty” picture of the United States. The report asserted that there was “an urgent need for establishing . . . [a] rapport between our two peoples which will obviate misunderstanding, prejudice, resentment, and criticism and promote mutual esteem, confidence, appreciation and friendship.”

In 1958, a revised USIS plan changed America’s informational strategy in Vietnam. It called for much greater attention to the United States, American policies, and American culture. In the 1950s, the success of the country seemed to prove the superiority of free-market capitalism and liberal democracy. A high standard of living, personal freedoms, and spiritual and cultural progress demonstrated the superiority of American culture and differentiated the United States from communist-bloc countries. The USIA emphasized these themes in “a steady, long-range effort to improve general understanding of [the United States] and of the American people.” These values differentiated the United States from the communist bloc countries. By encouraging other nations to adopt these values, the United States hoped to create international stability and win allies in the struggle against communism.

The new country plan elicited criticisms from at least one high-ranking USIS official in Saigon. Chester Opal, U.S. Public Affairs Officer (PAO) in Saigon from 1957


to 1960, drafted early versions of the 1958 country plan for South Vietnam. He later explained that he was concerned with the content of America’s message in South Vietnam. According to Opal, America’s objective in Vietnam was “to sell Diem to his own people. We were not selling the United States, we were not really selling American objectives, except tangentially and coincidentally, if they matched those of the Diem government.” U.S. Ambassador to South Vietnam Elbridge Durbrow apparently had other ideas. Durbrow had to sign off on the country plan, and Opal had trouble convincing him that USIS programming need not focus on American activities in South Vietnam or U.S. culture. When the plan was adopted in 1958, it reflected Durbrow’s belief that advertising America’s core values would be the most effective strategy in South Vietnam.

In the late 1950s, USIA programs throughout the world publicized the values of freedom and economic progress. Freedom was, in the words of USIA director George Allen, “the solid rock on which American ideals were founded.” According to USIA programs, freedom was more than an abstraction. The United States had put the ideals of freedom in action in a society founded on democratic participation. In 1956 and 1960, the Agency used American presidential elections to show democracy in action. In 1956, “peoples overseas were given a comprehensive picture of how Americans express their free choice in naming a President of the United States.” Four years later, “USIA undertook to achieve maximum understanding around the world of the Presidential

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139 Oral history interview with Chester H. Opal, January 10 and 12, 1989, p. 117. Foreign Affairs Oral History Project, Special Collections Division, GUL.

elections, as a means of illustrating democracy in action.”142 Another USIA pamphlet noted that “displays featuring American trade unions [and] American voters going to the polls . . . have been widely popular abroad.”143

Concordant with programs describing freedom and democracy, the USIA went to great lengths to show the superiority of America’s economic system. “People’s Capitalism,” a concept promoted by the USIA beginning in 1956, “[d]ebunked the ‘Wall Street rules the U.S.’ concept so long preached abroad by Soviet propagandists, with a clear portrayal of the American economy as modern capitalism, beneficial to the mass of the American people.” According to USIA literature, the United States had created “a modern form of capitalism which benefits the many (contrary to Red propaganda diatribes).”144 In 1960 the Agency “continued an active program to explain the functioning of this country’s free economy and the share all Americans have in its productiveness.”145 The USIA’s description was noteworthy. By using the term “people’s capitalism” the Agency co-opted Marxist rhetoric. “People’s capitalism” had helped the United States create the type of society promised by communism: one in which all people could enjoy a comfortable standard of living. According to one USIA publication, even Moscow “now admits that the masses in America are well fed, well

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clothed, and well housed.”146 USIA director George Allen also made clear that “people’s capitalism” created benefits outside of the economic sphere; it fostered “self respect and freedom of cultural and intellectual expression.”147

In spite of the emphasis on “Americana,” USIS officials apparently recognized the dangers of a strategy that was too heavily weighted toward American culture. In order to encourage positive views of “free world” cooperation, the USIS included the message that “successful international cooperation implies no compulsion as to government structure, cultural tradition or social forms of the nations involved.”148 This dictate, however, was often ignored. Many USIS programs in the late 1950s and early 1960s explicitly or implicitly argued for the superiority of economic liberalism and political democracy.

USIS programs in 1957 and 1958 created some tensions between the United States and South Vietnam. After 1957, the Vietnamese Ministry of Information took on greater responsibilities for propaganda and informational activities in South Vietnam. The USIS disbanded its field service units as South Vietnamese provincial activities increased. The USIS film production bureau also planned to cease operations when South Vietnam completed construction on its film production center. USIS officials expressed confidence in the reorganization of South Vietnamese informational activities,


particularly in the radio and press bureaus. One USIS report credited efforts by Trần Chánh Thành to “steer the [Ministry] away from its crude anti-Communist approach to propaganda.”

The USIS, however, was not completely satisfied with the South Vietnamese informational program. Diệm’s “heavy-handed and transparent” restrictions on the press undermined arguments that South Vietnam was a democratic and free nation. The USIS cited one instance when the Diệm government censored a Chinese-language publication when the authors refused to change the birthplace of Confucius from China to Vietnam. The government also restricted materials imported to South Vietnam, including a textbook with a map that depicted China and the Soviet Union as “too big and powerful” (USIS officials insisted the map was accurate). Diệm’s authoritarian policies at times directly interfered with American informational activities. In 1957, USIS produced a film documenting Diệm’s state visit to the United States. Distribution of the filmed was postponed when Diệm dictated that “all scenes showing the wife of the Vietnamese Ambassador in Washington, who had apparently hogged the camera, be cut out.”

The USIS strategy to introduce American culture to Vietnam also created friction between American and Vietnamese officials. While Radio Vietnam was willing to carry American news broadcasts, it was less interested in broadcasting American music. Radio

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Vietnam did have one music program that included American songs, but only those with “no vocals, no brass, [and] no tempo.” USIA provided music limited to “slow rhythms and folk tunes,” but Radio Vietnam cancelled the program anyway.\textsuperscript{151}

The elements of American culture that would make it into South Vietnam in subsequent years were even more problematic. The USIS took several opportunities to dramatize American democracy through exhibits and movies. These events, which occurred shortly before Diệm’s second suspicious election to the presidency, unintentionally called into question the level of freedom and democracy in South Vietnam.

In the early years of American involvement in South Vietnam, the United States generally coordinated its informational activities with those of Diệm’s government. In the late 1950s, however, the United States pursued a new strategy in its cultural programs in South Vietnam. Rather than simply promote Diệm’s abilities as president of South Vietnam, the United States Information Service began actively disseminating American culture in South Vietnam. The new American strategy may have created or strengthened positive attitudes about the United States, but they did not improve Diệm’s standing with

the citizenry. For his part, Diệm used his position of strength in the late 1950s to increase South Vietnamese cultural programs. While USIS used “Americana,” Diệm was intensifying his use of Vietnamese culture and history as a basis for his government.
In 1957, the Republic of Vietnam did more than just expand its information apparatus. Diệm also initiated a number of policies that spread a broader and more sophisticated cultural message. He increased the use of public festivals and holidays to promote the regime’s accomplishments. He also announced the creation of a new university in Hue, part of a program to enlist education in pursuit of cultural development. These activities maintained earlier informational activities by promoting Personalism and publicizing the regime’s important accomplishments. But they also signaled the shift to cultural programs that tried to connect Diệm’s government to the history and culture of the Vietnamese people.

Since the end of the Vietnam War, American historians have examined the ways in which Americans remember the Vietnam conflict and how the war is represented in American culture. These studies have shown that the contested nature of the Vietnam War lasted long after the conflict ended. Recent works have examined treatment of the war in American cinema, depictions of the war in veterans’ literature, and public
memorials for American soldiers. Studies of historical memory and the Vietnam War have not been limited to the American side. Luu Doan Huynh, Christophe Giebel, and Hue Tam Ho Tai have shown how memories of the war influenced Vietnamese politics and society after 1975. Just as the war is at the forefront of Americans’ cultural recollection, so too it is for the Vietnamese.

Fewer historians have noted how Vietnamese perceptions of the past influenced events during the Vietnam conflict itself. This is a critical issue, as notions of history are intimately tied to a sense of nationhood. As Benedict Anderson pointed out, the creation of an imagined national community is usually rooted in some conception of history. Nationalism, Anderson argued, fulfills human desires for a sense of continuity. Before the Enlightenment, religious conceptions of eternal life and heavenly paradise ameliorated the anxieties caused by mortality. The Enlightenment, with its emphasis on rationality and secularism, eroded the religious foundations for continuity. “What then was required,” Anderson argued, “was a secular transformation of fatality into continuity, contingency into meaning.” The idea of a nation, growing out of a lengthy history and continuing into the foreseeable future, fulfilled the need for continuity.


154 Anderson, Imagined Communities, 11-12.
Readers may take issue with Anderson’s description of the emotional succor provided by continuity and, therefore, a national community. It is harder to deny the phenomenon that led to Anderson’s explanation: nation-states and national groups creating historical narratives to legitimize their existence. This was certainly the case in Vietnam after World War II, when different ideas about Vietnamese nationhood competed for preeminence. While some observers have alluded to the role of history in Vietnamese nationalism, this subject warrants much closer examination.

In the 1950s and 1960s, observers noted that Vietnam’s understanding of historic struggles against outside invaders, first the Chinese and then the French, created a strong sense of independence in Vietnam. Vietnamese nationalism informed the opposition to the United States and strengthened the communist movement. The implication of Vietnam’s history of resistance was twofold. First, the United States, like China and France before, would not be able to defeat the unyielding movement for independence in Vietnam. Second, American intervention was predicated on the faulty assumption that Hồ Chí Minh was simply a tool of Chinese communism. These assertions, however, were often made with little analysis. Furthermore, they generally ignored the role of Vietnamese history in shaping the policies of Diệm and South Vietnam.

Frances FitzGerald was one of the strongest proponents of the idea that Vietnam’s traditional resistance to China shaped the modern history of the country, particularly the success of Hồ Chí Minh and the Vietnamese communists. FitzGerald published Fire in the Lake in 1972, when popular discontent with American involvement in Vietnam was at its height. The book argued that Vietnamese history influenced America’s failing intervention. America’s failure in Vietnam, FitzGerald explained, needed to be seen in
the context of Vietnam’s nationalist aspirations and its traditional animosity toward China. “While history does not give precise answers, it does give certain clues, certain indications as to the shape of the future,” FitzGerald wrote. “Vietnam is, after all, much older than the ‘threat of Communism,’ and below the ideological conflict lie older oppositions, older lines of force that articulate that conflict profoundly.”

While Vietnam “has always lived in the orbit of China,” the Vietnamese have viewed their neighbors to the north with a “balance of attraction and repulsion.” Throughout history, Vietnamese leaders have looked to China for cultural models while resisting Chinese political control. Even when Hồ Chí Minh and other Vietnamese communists saw China’s communist revolution as a promising example for Vietnam, they still rejected Chinese political domination. Furthermore, Vietnamese patriots in the twentieth century looked to other countries as possible counterweights to Chinese influence in Vietnam. American and French policies leading up to the war, however, forced Vietnam to turn to China as its most steadfast ally in its fight for independence.

FitzGerald’s analysis of Vietnam’s past suggested that Vietnamese nationalists would not inevitably side with Chinese communists. The communist influence over Vietnam’s patriots was an expedient strategy, largely because the United States and France refused to accept the possibility of non-communist nationalists in Vietnam. FitzGerald’s account offered another important conclusion about American policy in Vietnam and the failure of the Vietnam War. Vietnamese history showed that, in spite of

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156 FitzGerald, *Fire in the Lake*, 36-38.
some close cultural connections, the people of Vietnam were not satisfied to live as vassals under Chinese rule. If American policy makers had understood this, FitzGerald suggested, they would have realized the folly of a strategy based on preventing Vietnam from falling into the orbit of communist China. Vietnam’s suspicions of China constituted the strongest current in the history of Vietnam. This view became a popular explanation for America’s errors in Vietnam. The United States lost the war because the people of Vietnam had an unwavering, historically-informed commitment to independence.

Historians of the Vietnam War have updated some of FitzGerald’s ideas, but the conclusions remain essentially the same. Stanley Karnow explained the influence of Vietnam’s “national personality” on its resistance to China and France. Vietnam’s struggles against China, he explained, “infused in the Vietnamese a readiness to defend themselves, so that they evolved into a breed of warriors” with a strong commitment to nationhood.\(^{157}\) In his recent biography of Hồ Chí Minh, William Duiker also noted the importance of Vietnam’s past to its independence movements in the twentieth century. Centuries of Chinese rule led to a gradual “sinification” of Vietnamese culture,

\[\text{[b]ut if the Vietnamese people appeared willing to absorb almost whole the great tradition of powerful China, they proved adamant on the issue of self-rule. The heroic figures of traditional Vietnam . . . were all closely identified with resistance to Chinese domination. Out of the crucible of this effort emerged a people with a tenacious sense of their national identity and a willingness to defend their homeland against outside invasion.}\(^{158}\)


George Herring also suggested that Vietnamese history pointed to the eventual success of Hồ Chí Minh’s push for independence. While Hồ’s use of American language and symbolism in the Declaration of Independence on August 2, 1945 was important, so too was Vietnam’s earlier struggle for independence against the Chinese:

The August Revolution of 1945 marked yet another milestone in Vietnam’s centuries-old struggle against foreign domination. For roughly one thousand years, the land of Nam Viet had been the southern-most province of China, and while absorbing Chinese culture and institutions, the Vietnamese during much of the millennium fiercely resisted the rule of their larger northern neighbor.”

The respect and honor accorded to such heroes as the Trung sisters, Triệu Âu, Trần Hưng Đạo, and Lê Lợi showed the importance of resistance in Vietnam’s collective memory.159

Historical accounts of Vietnam’s struggle for independence suggested that in the twentieth century Hồ Chí Minh and the Vietnamese communists continued the legacy of resistance. The conventional wisdom holds that the Vietnamese communists were successful, in part, because they appealed to Vietnamese nationalism. As a result, Vietnamese communists gained support for their attempts to expel French colonialists. Vietnam’s historic willingness to make any sacrifice for independence helped it defeat France in 1954. Following the French defeat, Vietnamese communists were faced with a new foreign invader. In this interpretation, the United States replaced France as the outside power, and the United States was fated to suffer the same result. Contemporary observers and historians made this point, either explicitly or implicitly. George Kahin noted that “for many centuries a basic and constant theme of [Vietnamese] nationalism

was freedom from China’s domination.” Vietnamese communists saw the victory over France in 1954 as a continuation of victories over China in centuries past.¹⁶⁰

There is certainly some truth to this conclusion: many Vietnamese viewed Hồ Chí Minh as the most recent hero in a long history of resistance. This notion fails to fully explore, however, the position of Ngô Đình Diệm and South Vietnam in the historical evolution of Vietnam. How did South Vietnam fit in the historical narrative of the Vietnamese people? Was it simply a puppet, the tool of a foreign power to control Vietnam that needed to be defeated by the nationalist Hồ Chí Minh? Or was it the reverse, as Diệm himself argued? Diệm claimed that North Vietnam was a puppet state and Hồ Chí Minh was a lackey for the Chinese. Was Diệm successful in pushing this view, and if not, what accounts for his failure?

In recent years, historians have paid closer attention to the importance of collective memory. A growing literature examines the ways in which public understanding of the past influence society. Perceptions of the past say as much about a people’s history as it does about their contemporary society. Michael Kammen, in his study of historical memory in the United States, noted that “societies . . . reconstruct their pasts rather than faithfully record them, and . . . they do so with the needs of contemporary culture clearly in mind—manipulating the past in order to mold the present.”¹⁶¹ In this formulation, history is not static; a community’s perception of history changes with the community itself. The creation of a historical narrative serves various functions in a society. History can provide social cohesion and strengthen the unity of a

particular community. In a heterogeneous nation like the United States, Kammen argued, a sense of shared history can strengthen national unity. History and traditions can be used, however, to create an illusion of national unity where no such connection exists, or where such a connection is weak. People in power can “invoke the legitimacy of an artificially constructed past in order to buttress presentist assumptions and the authority of a regime.”

Kammen and other scholars have pointed out the challenges posed by analyzing the collective memory of a society or group of people. Views and interpretations of the past are constantly changing, and it is difficult to locate precisely a dominant strain of historical memory. Furthermore, at times a group of people looks to the past “for purely aesthetic and non-utilitarian reasons,” not to promote social cohesion nor to create a dominant power relationship. In the case of the Republic of Vietnam, gauging the collective memory of the population is problematic for a number of reasons. As a primarily agrarian society, information about traditions and historical memories of the population are diffuse. Furthermore, the Diệm government controlled many elements of intellectual production in South Vietnam, meaning that understanding “popular opinion” is quite difficult. However, it is quite clear that Diệm himself used history and tradition as tools for strengthening his government in South Vietnam, and his efforts are both accessible to study and worthy of close analysis. Diệm’s use of historical memory says a great deal about his early success in creating the Republic of Vietnam, but also his eventual failure to gain the backing of the population.

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Patricia Pelley has shown how communist historians in the 1950s and 1960s consciously produced an historical narrative in order to strengthen the communist cause. They configured Vietnam’s history in such a way that it naturally led to the telos of a communist society. Pelley’s work showed the necessity for contemporary historians to understand not only Vietnam’s past, but the way in which earlier generations constructed this past. While Pelley studied this process among Vietnamese communists, scholars have yet to examine the ways in which history was enlisted by the leadership of South Vietnam. This is an important topic, as South Vietnam used methods similar to those seen in North Vietnam in the 1950s and 1960s. Furthermore, the government of South Vietnam, and South Vietnamese historians, presented Vietnam’s past in such a way that Ngô Đình Diệm’s government appeared to be not only legitimate, but the product of a natural evolution in Vietnamese society.

One of the most striking characteristics of South Vietnam’s information program was its emphasis on Vietnamese history and resistance to China. Pelley has already shown that Vietnamese communist historians used similar narratives in the 1950s and 1960s, when they enshrined resistance “as the very principle of the past.” This narrative “undoubtedly helped to mobilize support for the war” against France and, later, the United States.\textsuperscript{163} South Vietnam used the same trope, in much the same way, to mobilize American support for Diệm. As one author wrote, any discussion of Vietnamese history

must begin by considering “the presence of China to the North, a huge mass of land and men, hanging over [Vietnam] as an eternal threat.”\(^{164}\) In South Vietnam, resistance to China was the “principle of the past.”

Pelley described “postcolonial” history as the attempt by communist historians to “establish distance between Vietnam and France.” After 1945, communist historians attempted to counter the prevailing accounts of Vietnamese history produced during the colonial period. In this way, the process of writing history became a means of declaring and normalizing Vietnamese independence. Communist historians contradicted many of the themes that had dominated French historical scholarship on Vietnamese history and culture. Postcolonial history emphasized the brutality and violence of colonialism, in stark contrast to French depictions of the \textit{mission civilisatrice}. Postcolonial scholars also fought the view, promoted by French historians, that Vietnam was a “smaller, less brilliant version of China.”\(^{165}\)

Pelley’s work highlighted a salient, if often overlooked, characteristic of Vietnamese conceptions of history. Pelley noted that historians make invalid assumptions about the ways in which people in Vietnam view the past. They describe Vietnamese historical consciousness “in transcendent and even mystical terms”: people in Vietnam share a common view of the past, this view is unchanging, and it is somehow independent of contemporary context. Pelley argued that, in fact, a shared view of the past, to the extent that it exists in Vietnam, grew out of the specific circumstances of the postcolonial period. At that time, communist historians actively used “the pedagogical

\(^{164}\) Thai Van Kiem, \textit{Viet-Nam, Past and Present} (Saigon?, no date [ca. 1957]), 432.

power of commemorative texts and events” to create a valuable, functional historical narrative.\textsuperscript{166} Ngô Đình Diệm employed historical narratives in much the same way as his communist enemies in the North.

South Vietnamese representations of history served two purposes for the Diệm government. First, they countered the assertion that Diệm was somehow not an authentically Vietnamese figure. Diệm’s opponents labeled him a puppet of the United States, calling him “Mỹ-Diệm” or “American Diệm.” By promoting the history of the Vietnamese people, Diệm demonstrated his close connection to Vietnamese culture. As Diệm’s official biography stated, “unlike many of the Vietnamese present politicians, President Ngo Dinh Diem was not educated abroad or in a completely Western school. He always maintained contact with Vietnamese reality.”\textsuperscript{167} Second, historical representations in South Vietnam suggested that the Republic of Vietnam, more than North Vietnam, was the legitimate continuation of Vietnam’s long historical trajectory. South Vietnam shared many traits with Vietnam’s earlier civilizations, especially in its strong aversion to outside influence from China. Furthermore, the Republic of Vietnam represented the will of the people of Vietnam. The success of South Vietnam, Diệm stated, “does not lie in any imported solution, ideas, or force. It is in the people themselves that we should look for it.”\textsuperscript{168}


\textsuperscript{167} President Ngo Dinh Diem, 17.

\textsuperscript{168} President Ngo Dinh Diem, 17.
Diệm often employed displays and celebrations of Vietnam’s history in support of his broader cultural nation-building effort. These cultural displays served various purposes for Diệm. The public celebrations of Vietnam’s history elicited a sense of national pride in the populace of South Vietnam. Furthermore, Diệm used many of these celebrations to promote the ideology of the regime, particularly its opposition to Chinese communism. Finally, public celebrations of Vietnam’s past were meant to grant a measure of legitimacy to Diệm’s rule. By connecting himself to Vietnam’s earlier leaders, Diệm hoped these celebrations would reinforce the conception that not only was he the legitimate leader of South Vietnam, but that he also represented the aspirations of the entire Vietnamese people.

During Diệm’s regime, public reminders of Vietnam’s history took many forms. The Republic of Vietnam created numerous holidays commemorating events or individuals in Vietnam’s past; holidays pre-dating Diệm’s rule took on a greater public role after 1954. These holidays were often accompanied with public processions, parades, speeches, and other cultural events. The Ministry of Information, Vietnam Press, and the Newspaper Bureau contributed by publicizing stories from Vietnam’s past.

Some of the holidays created under Diệm continued his regime’s attempts to advertise the social, economic, and political achievements of the government. The “Double Seven” day, for example, commemorated the date on which Diệm formed his first cabinet, July 7, 1954. In subsequent years, the Ministry of Information coordinated the effort to collect data on each of the governmental ministries and disseminate the information to the public. In 1958 the city of Saigon celebrated the “Double Seven” by organizing gatherings to review the accomplishments of the regime during the previous
four years. These gatherings were followed by a small reception for government officials. While the “Double Seven” was celebrated modestly, National Day in the Republic of Vietnam was a more extravagant affair. Several months before the October 26, 1958 holiday, the Ministry of Information, along with the provincial and municipal authorities in Saigon, began planning an exhibit to correspond with National Day.

Cultural displays relating to Vietnam’s history provide a sense of the evolution of Diệm’s leadership in South Vietnam. In the early years of his presidency, cultural displays and public celebrations emphasized his election to the presidency and the sacrifices necessary for implementing Vietnam’s “Personalist Revolution.” By 1957, however, Diệm was at the peak of his power in South Vietnam. It was at this time that cultural nation-building emphasized South Vietnam’s status as the “true” political manifestation of Vietnamese culture. This is seen in Diệm’s ongoing attempts to honor Vietnamese heroic figures, such as the Trưng sisters, in elaborate public holidays.

The Diệm administration upheld the Trưng sisters as the greatest heroes in Vietnam’s history. The Trưng sisters were daughters of a Vietnamese mandarin at a time when Vietnam was under Chinese rule. In 40 AD, they briefly threw off Chinese domination and established a small, independent kingdom. By 42 AD, the Chinese regrouped and recaptured the areas liberated by the Trưng sisters, ending the revolt. Like

many of Vietnam’s historical figures, the Trưng embodied heroism and resistance to China. Diệm tried to use them as potent national symbols of the qualities that were important to his regime.

The Trưng sisters constituted valuable historical figures for Diệm’s government. Their story had been retold often enough that they were well-known in Vietnam, but ambiguities in early accounts meant that later politicians and leaders could manipulate the history for different goals.\(^\text{170}\) For Diệm, elements of the story corresponded with his cultural objectives. In South Vietnam, Diệm emphasized the non-monarchical background of the sisters, their courage and patriotism in fighting China, and the sacrifice they made for their country.

Many Americans in the 1950s and 1960s criticized Diệm for his attempts at self-glorification. Diệm, it seemed to them, was simply trying to take on the position of Emperor in the new government; one American observer dismissed him as a “messiah without a message.”\(^\text{171}\) Diệm, however, saw it differently. He preferred to present himself as an enlightened, paternal mandarin, rather than an emperor. One South Vietnamese propaganda pamphlet noted that the “fundamental fact about Viet-Nam . . . is that historically, our political system has been based not on the concept of the management of the public affairs by the people or their representatives, but rather by an


\(^\text{171}\) Quoted in Kahin, \textit{Intervention} 78.
enlightened sovereign and an enlightened government.” Another report encouraged South Vietnam to destroy the vestiges of colonial education and replace them with a more appropriate indigenous system.

The Trung sisters conformed to this message of indigenous, enlightened, non-imperial leaders. Although they declared themselves the rulers of the kingdom of Mê Linh, they were not part of a dynastic family in Vietnam. They were daughters of a mandarin who ascended to power on their own merits. Diệm, too, was the child of a mandarin, and he became president of South Vietnam because of his character and his accomplishments, not because of his lineage. Diệm’s campaign to create a republic was predicated on denouncing the last Nguyễn emperor, Bảo Đại. In Diệm’s South Vietnam, celebrations for the Trung sisters emphasized their civic, rather than their royal, nature.

During Diệm’s rule, the Trung sisters were generally referred to as “Hai Bà Trung”; literally “Two Trung Ladies.” Before Diệm, the Trung sisters had been glorified in South Vietnam, but usually under the name “Trưng Nữ Vương,” or “Trung Queens.” One of the main boulevards in Saigon, named “Trưng Nữ Vương” under Bảo Đại, was changed to “Hai Bà Trung” when Diệm came to power. The labeling of the Trung sisters was not simply a matter of semantics. In Vietnamese, numerous terms represent

172 President Ngo Dinh Diem, 12.

173 “Chương-trình xây-dưng một nước Việt-Nam Quóc-gia Thuận-tuy” [“Plan to build an authentic Vietnamese nation”], p. 3. Folder 90: Tài liệu của văn phòng Phú Tổng Thống, Bộ Công Chánh và Giao thông về việc ông Võ Văn Thiên đề trình một chương trình xây dựng năm 1955-1956 [Documents of the President’s Office, Public Works, and Communications about Mr. Võ Văn Thien’s proposed building program, 1955-1956], PTTDICH NAII.

174 Nguyễn Q. Thắng and Nguyễn Đình Tư, Đường Phố Thành Phố Hồ Chí Minh [The Streets of Ho Chi Minh City] (Ho Chi Minh City, 2001), 34-35.
subtle differences in personal and familial relationships. As Keith Taylor has argued, the words used to denote political power have different meanings that do not appear in translation. "Vương," the Sino-Vietnamese word for king, is a ceremonial term that implies “a commission to rule from above.” "Vương," according to Taylor, does not connote intimacy or a “close relationship between ruler and people.” By excising the term vương from the Trưng Sisters, Diệm not only made them seem closer to the Vietnamese populace, but he declared them stronger symbols for his republican regime.

In 1955, Diệm declared an annual holiday in honor of the Trưng Sisters. “Hai Ba Trưng” day became one of the most important public celebrations during Diệm’s presidency. The narrative of the Trưng sisters was intended as a rallying point for people in South Vietnam. The story brought to life the idea that the people of Vietnam had a stake in the regime’s efforts to hold the line against the spread of communism and, by extension, Chinese influence. As one article in 1958 explained, anyone in South Vietnam could be a hero, not just people who distinguished themselves in battle. Through their daily activities, the people of South Vietnam were as heroic as the Trưng sisters.

Diệm organized national celebrations of the Trưng sisters in 1957, the peak of his rule in South Vietnam. The events of early March allowed Diệm to promote both the historic antecedents to his regime as well as the recent political accomplishments under his watch. March 4 was the first anniversary of the general elections of the National

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175 The example most familiar to westerners who have spent time in Vietnam is the complicated terms for familial relationships. In Vietnamese, dozens of words take the place of “you” or “I” in conversation. These terms signal subtle differences in age, status, or kinship.


Assembly, an event celebrated widely in the South Vietnamese press as evidence of the great political achievements of the Republic. Three days later, South Vietnam celebrated the anniversary of the Trưng sisters’ revolt against Chinese rule in the first century B.C. Of the two anniversaries, the Trưng sisters holiday was considerably larger and more important. On the morning of March 7, the regime held a celebration beginning at 7:00 am in front of the national assembly on Tự Do street. Official reports put the attendance at 500,000.\textsuperscript{178} The ceremony began with the South Vietnamese national anthem followed by a reading of the history of the Trưng Sisters. Mrs. Huỳnh Ngọc Như, a member of the National Assembly, gave a speech connecting the heroism of the Trưng Sisters to the activities of the women of South Vietnam. She encouraged South Vietnamese women “to worthily celebrate [sic] the commemorative ceremony of the Trưng Sisters” and to sympathize with women throughout the world, like those in North Vietnam, who were “oppressed by the tyranny of totalitarian communism.”\textsuperscript{179}

After speeches by women representatives in the National Assembly, Madame Ngô Đình Nhu spoke about the Trưng sisters, the status of women in Vietnam, and women’s obligations to strengthen the nation. Madame Nhu, Diệm’s sister-in-law and close advisor to the president, entreated women to “follow the Trưng sisters in the path which they have already traced.” Women, she continued, should do everything possible to assist in the economic development of the country, which would in turn make the country “more beautiful, more rich [and] the better to nourish us.” Madame Nhu

\textsuperscript{178} The number comes from Việt Tân Xã, the national press bulletin of the Republic of Vietnam. See morning bulletin for March 8, 1957, p. 1.

\textsuperscript{179} Vietnam Press Agency bulletin, March 8, 1957 (morning edition), p. II.
explained that women should also fulfill their obligations to the family, as “the family is the foundation of the Society and of the State.” “In applying with vigor all these principles,” she concluded, “we can do as much for our country as did the Trung Sisters.”\textsuperscript{180} After the commemoration at Lam Son square, supporters organized a parade to \textit{Dinh Độc Lập}, Independence Palace. Two girls on elephants led the parade, an image created to recall the heroic Trưng sisters leading the charge against Chinese power.

The Hai Bà Trưng celebration gave Diệm an opportunity to disseminate certain ideas meant to strengthen his position as President of South Vietnam. By presenting two Vietnamese women as national heroines, Diệm showed the egalitarianism that he believed characterized his regime. In South Vietnam’s Personalist regime, the state respected the dignity of all people, men and women alike. The celebration of Hai Bà Trưng Day in 1957, in particular, presented the idea of women’s role in the liberation and unification of Vietnam, as well as the social and cultural strength of South Vietnam. \textit{Cong Nhan}, a South Vietnamese newspaper, extolled the virtues of Vietnamese women. “In reading again the history of our country,” the article stated, “we can realize that the Vietnamese Woman is as capable of great exploits as men. Beside the Trưng Sisters, many other heroines sacrificed their lives for national independence.”\textsuperscript{181} Many of the reports of the Hai Ba Trung celebrations in 1957 drew special attention to Ngô Đình Diệm as a representation of the legacy of the Trưng Sisters. Several newspaper articles about the history of the Trưng sisters noted that the Trungs were one of the earliest examples of Vietnam’s struggle for independence, a mantle carried by Diệm in 1957.


Connecting Hai Ba Trung Day to National Women’s Day allowed Diệm to use the holiday to push for real social and economic accomplishments in South Vietnam. While much of the talk surrounding the holiday emphasized the Trưng Sisters’ status as warriors, the real task for South Vietnamese women was to preserve the family structure in South Vietnam. Madame Nhu, in her speech to the assembled crowds, encouraged women to work to strengthen the family, “which is the foundation of the Society and the State.” In spite of the various martial displays at the celebration, Madame Nhu downplayed the actual military activities of South Vietnamese women. “It is more exciting, of course, to take up arms and mount majestic elephants to go as they did to chase the invaders,” Madame Nhu explained. But until the time when that was necessary, women should focus their efforts on creating strong, traditional families.182 Women could do the greatest good for the country by “protecting and consolidating” the family unit.183

Commemorating the Trưng Sisters provided another opportunity to differentiate Diệm’s “true” Vietnamese government with that of North Vietnam. Many of the reports after the celebration stated that Vietnamese women had a special obligation to do whatever possible to “liberate North Vietnam from [the] communist yoke.” Cach Mang Quoc Gia, one of the most widely distributed South Vietnamese papers, noted “[i]n evoking the memory of these two heroines, we cannot help thinking of these traitors, the Vietminh, who have deliberately yielded North Vietnam to the Chinese communists. How have they been able to act in this way without feeling the slightest shame toward

these national glories?” The paper put South Vietnam’s struggle in terms of the actions of Vietnam’s heroes from centuries past, saying “[a]s descendents of the Trung Sisters we have the duty to suppress the Vietminh, traitors to the Motherland, and to bring freedom to our compatriots of the North. In short, we must keep intact the spirit of patriotism and independence of these illustrious predecessors.”

South Vietnamese writers reiterated the idea that resistance was a central trait of Vietnamese historical culture. One writer compared South Vietnam’s position in the late 1950s to Vietnam’s past struggles for independence. The “national spirit,” he explained, “has asserted itself in numerous crises. It has repelled more than one invasion and has thrown off both Chinese and French domination.” The stakes were particularly high after 1954 because the people in the north once again came under Chinese domination. North Vietnam was creating a way of life “incompatible with Vietnam’s . . . timeless traditions.” South Vietnam, in contrast, represented the possibility of “the nation’s eventual reunification in peace and prosperity.”

Other South Vietnamese holidays commemorated the lives of historic and mythic Vietnamese heroes. Holidays in honor of the Hùng kings, for example, were created to remind the people of South Vietnam of the origin of the Vietnamese kingdom and its heroic struggle against Chinese control. The Hùng Kings were the first rulers of the Vietnamese people, establishing a dynasty that lasted from 2879 to 258 B.C. The story of the Hùng Kings is a mytho-historic tale explaining the origin of the Vietnamese people

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and the first Vietnamese kingdom. According to legend, a Chinese ruler entered what is now Vietnam and declared it to be part of his kingdom. The local people could not bear this alien ruler, and they called out to Lạc Long Quân, the Dragon Lord from the Sea, to help them. Lạc Long Quân rose from the sea and banished the Chinese ruler. Lạc Long Quân and his wife, the fairy queen Âu Cơ, then had one hundred children, the progenitors of the Vietnamese people. One of their sons, Hùng Vương, was the first ruler of an independent Vietnamese kingdom.

The Hùng Kings offered certain themes that resonated with Diệm’s government and its view of Vietnam’s past and present. First, the story of the Hùng Kings, more than any other story in Vietnam’s history or national mythology, demonstrated the duration of Vietnam’s past. This idea had obvious benefits for Diệm, particularly considering the youth of the Republic of Vietnam. In many celebrations of the holiday, South Vietnamese officials or the press noted the importance of “a nation whose history dates as far back as more than two thousand years.”

Vietnamese legend dates the establishment of Hùng Vương’s kingdom to 2879 BC. Although archaeological evidence suggests early settlements in what is now northern Vietnam around that time, scholars doubt the presence of a unified kingdom with a central leadership. The imprecise dating of Hùng Vương was not incidental. The early presence of a Vietnamese kingdom demonstrated the great longevity of Vietnamese

186 Saigon Press Review (Morning), April 9, 1957, VII.
culture. Furthermore, the origin of the Hùng kingdom, according to Vietnamese legend, predates the earliest mytho-historic Chinese emperors. The legend, therefore, gave the Vietnamese a sense of equality with or superiority to the Chinese.\footnote{Taylor, \textit{The Birth of Vietnam}, 309.}

The Hùng Kings also reinforced South Vietnam’s conception of its historical struggle against Chinese aggression. Just as the Vietnamese communists used historical episodes to encourage resistance against French and later American forces, Diệm used the Hùng Kings to stress South Vietnam’s resistance to Chinese aggression. The people of Vietnam, one commentary on the holiday explained, have inherited the “will to never let ourselves [be] subjugated . . . . This very will had enabled our ancestors of yore to efficiently struggle against the Chinese expansionist schemes, and now helps us topple foreign domination.”\footnote{Saigon Press Review, (unique Edition), April 9, 1957, VIII}

The Hùng Kings holiday was also an opportunity to promote the unification of South Vietnam under Diệm’s leadership. Just a year earlier, Diệm had refused to hold national elections, a condition in the Geneva Agreement. Diệm declared that any national elections would necessarily be unfair, because it was impossible to hold free elections in a communist state. Diệm’s government used the Hùng Vương holiday in 1957 as an opportunity to support the idea of unification, as long as it took place in a manner favoring the Republic of Vietnam. Newspaper reports at the time of the holiday consistently expressed this view. The holiday, a weekly newspaper wrote, showed “our
determination to defend the sacred right to live in a whole bloc.” Another newspaper put it in similar terms: the memory of the Hùng Kings is “an impetus to speed up our struggle for national reunification and the completion of our democratic regime.”

Diệm also used the holidays to question North Vietnam’s commitment to the historic unity and independence of the Vietnamese people. One propaganda poster, created for the 1961 Hùng Vương celebration, depicted the Hùng Vương holiday as it was celebrated in North Vietnam:

Figure 5.1: South Vietnamese Propaganda Poster, 1961.

189 Saigon Press Review, (unique Edition), April 9, 1957, VIII; Saigon Press Review (Morning), April 9, 1957, VII.
The poster showed a Chinese communist officer giving orders to a North Vietnamese communist and two peasants. Standing beneath a picture of a monkey and a portrait of Karl Marx, the Chinese officer explained, “the picture above shows the origin of mankind. The picture below is our forefather.” The poster clearly criticized the social and economic inequality of life in North Vietnam. While the Chinese officer was obviously well fed, the Vietnamese peasants suffered from severe malnourishment. But the poster also denounced communists’ failure to honor Vietnam’s past. The implication was clear: North Vietnam communists betrayed their heritage by serving foreign leaders and adopting a foreign ideology. Worse still, this betrayal subjugated the people of North Vietnam to the traditional enemy of China.¹⁹⁰

Diệm’s efforts to strengthen South Vietnam’s connection to Vietnamese history was complicated by the relatively late incorporation of southern Vietnam (nam bo) into Vietnamese-controlled territory. Vietnam’s historical, cultural, and political antecedents were northern. The city of Hue in central Vietnam, however, provided Diệm with a clearer link to Vietnam’s past. Hue was considerably older, as a Vietnamese settlement, than Saigon. It was seen as a seat of learning and culture. Furthermore, for one hundred and fifty years Hue had served as the imperial capital for the Nguyễn Dynasty. As a result, Diệm initiated policies drawing attention to Hue as a symbol of South Vietnamese culture and politics.

¹⁹⁰ The cartoon is from Folder 17412: Tập tài liệu của Nhà Tổng Giám đốc Thông tin v/v lễ kỷ niệm Đức Quốc tổ Hưng Vương ngày 23-24.4.1961 [Documents of the Director of Information regarding the commemoration of Hung Vuong, April 23-24, 1961], PTTDIC, NAII.
The Red River Delta in northern Vietnam was the cradle of Vietnamese civilization. Archaeological evidence and early historical sources suggest the formation of a kingdom, known in the historiography as Văn Lang, around the seventh century B.C.E. In 258 B.C.E., King An Duong took over Văn Lang, renaming it Au Lac. In 111 B.C.E., Chinese forces conquered Au Lac, incorporating it as a Chinese province called Giao Chi. These three units—Văn Lang, Au Lac, and Giao Chi—were the predecessors to a modern Vietnamese state. Their territory, however, was limited to parts of northern and central Vietnam, as far south as present-day Quang Binh and Quang Tri provinces.\(^{191}\)

In the tenth century, Vietnam regained independence from China and formed the Đại Việt kingdom. For the next few centuries, Đại Việt fought Mongol invaders from the north and intermittently battled with the kingdom of Champa to the south. From the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries, Vietnamese dynasties moved steadily southward, subjugating or expelling the Cham and Khmer people and gaining control over what is now southern Vietnam.\(^{192}\) As Vietnamese-controlled territory moved southward, the political importance of Huế increased. In the seventeenth century, when two rival families ruled over a divided Vietnam, Huế (then known as Phú Xuân) served as the capital for the southern rulers. In 1802, when Nguyễn Huệ reunified Vietnam, he chose Huế as the imperial capital. Huế remained the capital until Bảo Đại abdicated in 1945.

By the Diệm period, Huế seemed to have lost its earlier glory. As Ellen Hammer described it, Huế was a “somnolent . . . political backwater.” “The city of Huế and the


\(^{192}\) See, for example, Duiker, *Vietnam*, 19-20.
surrounding area were poor,” she continued, “the land yielded little, and industry was nonexistent.”

Hue’s primary importance, according to most historians of the Republic of Vietnam, was as the home of Ngô Đình Diệm and his family. Several scholars noted Diệm’s personal connection to Hue and the great influence his family held over the area. Ngo Dinh Thuc, one of Diệm’s brothers, was the Archbishop of Hue. Another brother, Ngo Dinh Can, held no official position but was “in effect the Governor of Central Vietnam.”

Stanley Karnow, in his well-known study of the Vietnam war, called central Vietnam “the fiefdom of brother Can, a virtual warlord.”

The Ngôs’ dominance over central Vietnam was undoubtedly an important part of South Vietnamese history during the Diệm period. But by judging Hue primarily in political terms, historians have failed to recognize the great symbolic importance Diệm placed on the city. Throughout his presidency, Diệm initiated several important nation-building efforts in Hue. These programs had little to do with expanding the family’s influence over central Vietnam. Instead, the policies were aimed at reviving Hue’s position as an historic town and a seat of learning and culture.

On March 1, 1957, Ngô Đình Diệm signed a Presidential Decree establishing the University of Hue. The university, which was scheduled to open that autumn, would offer academic courses in the arts and sciences, law, fine arts, and education. The purpose of the university was, in part, to provide a regional educational institution for the people of central Vietnam. Traveling to Saigon for higher education was a logistical

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193 Hammer, Death in November, 107.
194 Scigliano, South Vietnam, 57.
challenge for people in central Vietnam. As such, the university was part of Diệm’s plan to make education more widely available to the people of Vietnam. A Ministry of National Education report stated that the university “would bring a feeling of joy” to the people of central Vietnam, who would no longer have to travel such a great distance for their education. In an article in The Times of Viet Nam, South Vietnamese scholar Nguyễn Đình Hoa explained that the newly established university “answers a true need for higher education in Central Viet Nam.”

Convenience was only one reason for locating the new university in Hue. The choice of Hue as the site of the university had as much to do with the historical importance of Hue, “once the seat of Vietnamese sovereigns and the Mandarin civil service and a center of learning and culture.” In 1803, a year after declaring the Nguyễn Dynasty, the Gia Long Emperor formed the Quốc Học school in Hue. Subsequent Nguyễn emperors, especially Minh Mạng, Thiệu Trị, and Tự Đức oversaw the expansion of literary and historical studies. As one RVN educational report noted, the new school was in the “ancient capital and an old-time cultural center of Viet

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Nam.”  A Vietnam Press Bulletin boasted that “the centuries-old and charming city of Hue . . . will take again its place among the intellectual centres of the country.”

The symbolism of the University of Hue rested on more than its presence in a city of historic and cultural importance. It was a striking example of the progress South Vietnam had made in the three years since the Geneva Convention. Under Diệm, the Republic of South Vietnam had dramatically increased access to primary and secondary education. It had also expanded higher education at the University of Saigon, adding new fields of study and constructing a second campus on the outskirts of the city. By 1960, South Vietnam had added an agricultural school and a Catholic university in Dalat to complement the universities in Saigon and Hue.

The University of Hue was the centerpiece of what Joseph Buttinger called the “educational renaissance which is spreading in this newly independent country.” In its first academic year (1957-58), the university had an enrollment of 358 students. By the 1960-61 academic year, enrollment had grown to 1431. The University included colleges of Letters, Law, Sciences, Pedagogy, and Sinology. In 1959, it expanded its course offerings, adding a pre-med program to the curriculum.


\[200\] Vietnam Presse, March 5, 1957 (evening), p. 6.


The symbolic advantages of the University of Hue were magnified by its proximity to North Vietnam. By building a university in Hue, an American commentator wrote, the Republic was creating a symbolic “beacon of learning whose existence could be a political factor in the peaceful but intense competition between two systems.”

Nguyen Dinh Hoa argued that the proximity of the university to the demarcation between North Vietnam and the “free South” provided “a showcase for what dynamic, humanistic democracy can do.”

Joseph Buttinger, in announcing the formation of the American Sponsors of the University of Hue, exclaimed that “[b]y its location on their frontier with the communist world, [the University] is also a manifestation of the confidence of the people of free South Viet Nam in their cause and its ultimate triumph.”

Hue’s position near communist North Vietnam and its reputation as a cultural center made it the locus for other cultural nation-building programs. The Republic of Vietnam constructed a radio broadcasting facility in Hue as part of South Vietnam’s larger informational program. The programming out of Hue devoted more attention to Vietnamese culture than did stations in other parts of the country. A report on broadcasting noted that many different cultures contributed to the modern characteristics of the nation. “In order to profit from what is good in these traditions,” the report explained, South Vietnam had to communicate its culture to the population. Furthermore, the radio station in Hue could reach people under North Vietnamese rule, subjecting them to RVN propaganda. The report cautioned that this sort of information

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program needed to be approached cautiously. Radio programs should not encourage “premature rebellion” in the North. Rather, they should focus on a more heavily cultural message. “[I]t is of the greatest importance” the report explained, to show people in the North “that there exists a country . . . on which they can rely for the preservation of the ideals and traditions to which they are bound by custom, conviction, and political ties.”

Days after Diệm announced the plan to build a new university in Hue, Ngô Đình Nhu traveled to Hue to review the preservation of historical monuments. The Republic of Vietnam also initiated a program to repair and renovate many of the cultural artifacts in Hue. According to Vietnam Press, Nhu’s delegation visited the Thai Hoa palace, the Thien Mu Pagoda, and the Van Thanh and Vo Thanh Temples. It was important, Nhu stated during the trip, that the people of Vietnam preserve the “national inheritance.”

The South Vietnamese government made sure its efforts to promote Hue as a symbolic site did not go unnoticed. In 1957, the Ministry of Education’s monthly cultural journal Văn Hóa Nguyệt San published an article called “Hue Muôn Thuở,” or “Hue through the Ages.” In 1960, the Ministry commissioned the author, Thái Văn Kiêm to expand the article into a book-length study called Cố Đô Hue [The Ancient Capital of Hue].

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206 “Justice Douglas to Lead U.S. Support for New University at Hue,” The Times of Viet Nam Weekly, 8 June 1957, 5.


Kiem’s accounts highlighted the characteristics of the old city that were most important to Diệm’s cultural nation-building strategy. Kiem’s accounts of Hue and its past focused heavily on the various rulers, kingdoms, and dynasties that had administered the city. Kiem included an annotated list of kings dating from the first century A.D. to the Nguyễn Dynasty. By tracing the history of Hue to the mythical Hồng Bàng dynasty, Kiem emphasized the continuity of ancient and modern Vietnam. Furthermore, as with the secondary school textbooks described earlier, Kiem’s emphasis on the political and administrative past suggested the historical antecedents for Vietnam as a national entity.  

Kiem provided detailed descriptions, photos, and maps of the Nguyễn emperors’ tombs, which were located near the city. The mausoleums, replete with ornate carvings and statues and sprawling temples, were a potent reminder of the prestige of the Nguyễn dynasty. Although Kiem conveyed the beauty and grandeur of the tombs themselves, he said little about the rule of most of the Nguyễn emperors. Kiem’s narrative ended conspicuously with the reign of Gia Long, thus obscuring the role of later Nguyễn emperors in submitting to the French. The book also described the imperial city and the forbidden citadel, the geographic embodiment of the Nguyen dynasty. Here he omitted information that did not correspond with Diệm’s nationalist cultural strategies.

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210 Kiêm, “Hue Muôn Thuở,” [Hue Through the Ages], 120-123.

211 Thái Văn Kiêm, Cô-Đô Hue [The Ancient Capital of Hue] and Kiêm, “Hue Muôn Thuở” [Hue Through the Ages].
In keeping with South Vietnam’s efforts to present Hue as the emblem of Vietnamese nationhood, he failed to mention that the imperial capital had been constructed in what one scholar called a “blatant imitation of the Forbidden City in Peking.”

Hue was also an important symbol for South Vietnam’s Office of Tourism. While Saigon was South Vietnam’s commercial center, Hue represented the glorious past of the Vietnamese people. Hue was home to many of the most important historical relics in Vietnamese history, including the imperial city and the tombs of some of Vietnam’s famous emperors. As one guidebook described it, “[i]t is in this Imperial City that one could grasp most easily the characteristics of Vietnamese civilization.” Another publication noted that the tombs around Hue “bear the story of the past and of its glory.”

As correspondence between the Mayor of Hue and Diệm indicated, the national government devoted considerable funds in the early 1960s to the repair of the art and architecture of Hue and Thua Thien province. One report explained that various

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212 Duiker, Vietnam, 122.
213 Tourism in Vietnam, (Horizons, no date), 13.
214 Visit Fascinating Vietnam, 11.
215 Letter, Governor of Hue to Ngô Đình Diệm, 7 December 1962. Folder 17904: Tài liệu của van Phong Tông Thống về các hoạt động văn hóa năm 1957 [sic; all the documents appear to be from 1962-63] [Documents of the President’s Office about cultural activities, 1957], PTTDICH NAII.
educational institutions, including the University of Hue, “have efficiently contributed to the conservation of ancient monuments and the classification and translation of literary and historical materials.”

By the early 1960s, Diệm and Nhu’s efforts were bearing fruit. Another program involved repairing the Vo Ban temple, which had fallen into disrepair in the years before Diệm came to power. The temple, a Vietnamese official pointed out, had been built in the nineteenth century, during the reign of Emperor Tự Đức. It had served as a monument to military officers who had struggled for Vietnam; its preservation would “call attention to the soldiers of the Republic of Vietnam who follow in the footsteps of the heroes before them.”

At the end of 1956, Diệm had completed the first stage of nation-building in South Vietnam. He had directed the political reforms to form a republic with a Constitution, an elected president, and a national assembly. He had also defeated several military and religious groups that challenged his political authority over South Vietnam. With this accomplished, Diệm began the next step in the nation-building process. Over the next four years, he sought to demonstrate that the Republic of Vietnam embodied the cultural values that signified nationhood. Diệm used propaganda, information programs, and public displays of history to illustrate his regime’s connection to Vietnamese culture.


217 Trần Văn Đôn to Ngô Đình Diệm, 24 January 1961. Folder 17401: Tài liệu của Bộ trưởng PTT về các hoạt động văn hóa năm 1961 [Documents of the Secretary of State PTT about cultural activities, 1961], PTTDICH, NAII.
These programs created a sense of nationalism in South Vietnam and helped to counter the perception that the Republic of Vietnam was an illegitimate puppet state. The programs were less successful, however, in merging a strong sense of cultural nationalism with support for Diệm as president.
CHAPTER 6


In 1959, the United States intensified its efforts to expose Vietnamese elites to American culture. The USIS also broadened its efforts by introducing examples of American culture with a less straightforward political purpose. Through movies, books, radio programs, and cultural events, the USIS presented the breadth of American culture.218 The USIS also continued to show freedom and democracy as central tenets of the American system. These values, presented in opposition to communist tyranny, were expected to win support for the United States. In 1959, USIA materials juxtaposed “the bright world of free choice” with “Communist enticements, subversion, and enslavement.”219 American programs highlighted the considerable economic strength of the United States. This message was explicit in some informational activities, but it was also implicit in American aid policies, which flooded South Vietnam with consumer

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goods. These programs could not, however, stem the growing disaffection with Diệm’s regime. In fact, by creating high expectations, they may have actually intensified opposition to Diệm’s policies.

Vietnam was one of nine countries in which the USIA administered the Informational Media Guaranty (IMG) program. The IMG facilitated the distribution of American books, magazines, newspapers, and motion pictures in nations with weak currencies by guaranteeing that the distributors could convert the foreign currency to American dollars. By 1958, for example, 130 theaters in South Vietnam screened American films. The IMG was one of the primary mechanisms through which Vietnamese, particularly in urban areas, were introduced to American culture. The IMG also distributed a wide variety of books to South Vietnam, providing a general introduction to American culture and thought. These included biographies of great Americans as well as novels like *Gone with the Wind*, *The Scarlet Letter*, and *The Old Man and the Sea*. Books were also available on a number of academic topics, such as history, law, and economics.

In 1959, USIS surveyed South Vietnamese on their book reading habits. The survey gauged the behavior of elite Vietnamese, including how regularly they read books in English and what books they preferred. It targeted a well-educated segment of South Vietnamese society: most were men with secondary or university education; about half

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220 United States Information Agency, *15th Report to Congress* (Washington, 1960), 26. The other countries with the program were Burma, Indonesia, Israel, Pakistan, the Philippines, Poland, Turkey, and Yugoslavia.
were students. The survey found that Vietnamese elites were interested in reading about foreign countries, particularly the United States. Eighty percent of respondents expressed interest in books on various aspects of American life, including science, education, art, and music. According to the survey, USIA book programs successfully introduced American culture to an audience hungry for knowledge about the United States. When asked about the benefits of book reading, respondents answered, “To know more about U.S.A.”; “To know more about U.S.A.’s music”; “To know the struggle of U.S. people”; and “To know clearly the life under the communist regime.”

The USIS also contracted a survey of radio-listening habits in major urban areas in South Vietnam. The survey found that almost half of radio listeners in Saigon, Nha Trang, and Hue listened to foreign programming, and a majority of these respondents preferred the Voice of America to the BBC, Radio Manila, or Radio Australia. Although the VOA did broadcast news programs, most respondents said they would rather listen to music. In fact, the results of the survey stated that “everything considered, jazz is the most appreciated kind of music. By jazz we must understand all types of modern music, ranging from Rock n’ roll to negro [sic] spirituals and folks [sic] songs.” This


phenomenon mirrored the results of American radio broadcasting in Western Europe. USIA used music programs, especially jazz shows, to attract listeners to the VOA or Radio Free Europe. If audiences tuned in for the music, they would also hear news and commentary that promoted American foreign policy aims.²²⁵

The Informational Media Guaranty program facilitated the distribution of Hollywood films in Saigon. In 1958 alone viewers in Saigon had access to over sixty American films. These films spanned virtually every Hollywood genre. Saigonese could see Marilyn Monroe in “Gentlemen Prefer Blondes” or “The Seven Year Itch,” Marlon Brando in “On the Waterfront,” and Sidney Poitier in “Blackboard Jungle.” Movies about World War II included “Bridge on the River Kwai” and “From Here to Eternity.” The IMG allowed South Vietnamese to watch Westerns like “Gunfight at the O.K. Corral” and epics such as “Gone with the Wind” and “The Ten Commandments.”²²⁶

USIS Saigon appreciated the role Hollywood movies could play in giving South Vietnamese a favorable impression of the United States. In January 1959, the USIS post contracted a local research agency to conduct a detailed survey of viewing habits of white-collar moviegoers in Saigon. The survey was based on five hundred personal interviews with people “generally representative of USIS/Saigon target audiences,” including students, professionals, businessmen, and military personnel.²²⁷

²²⁵ See, for example, Hixson, Parting the Curtain and Reinhold Wagnleitner, Coca-Colonization and the Cold War.


shed light on the ways in which USIS Saigon tried to disseminate American culture to South Vietnam and the elements of American culture that the post emphasized. It also provided information about South Vietnamese reactions to American films.

USIS Saigon was particularly interested in how viewers in Saigon responded to American films. The IMG survey commissioned by USIS Saigon asked viewers if they thought Hollywood films presented a realistic picture of American life and whether these movies influenced their opinions of the United States. According to the survey, 49.6 percent of viewers thought that Hollywood films “faithfully portray[ed]” American life while only 16.6 percent thought the films distorted it. Fifty percent of respondents said that the last Hollywood film they saw gave them a favorable impression of American life, but less than five percent got an unfavorable impression. Over eighty percent of respondents said that viewing Hollywood films had contributed “a great deal” or “somewhat” to their impression of the United States. Perhaps most important was what viewers learned about America from Hollywood films. When asked to give examples of what they learned about the United States from Hollywood films, the most common response was “high standard of living.” The list of responses also included “American personality,” “democracy,” “civilization,” “strength of the U.S.,” and “society.”

The results of the survey seemed to indicate that USIS Saigon’s cultural programs were successful. The post noted that about half of the respondents saw twenty or more Hollywood movies each year and that Hollywood films left a favorable impression of life in the United States. These results were particularly important because they dealt with a

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228 Results to IMG Movie Survey, pp. 37, 33, 52, 57. Enclosure no. 3 to Despatch no. 147 from USIS Saigon, April 14, 1959. Vietnam, 1959-1962, Country Project Files, 1951-1964, Office of Research, Records of the United States Information Agency (RG 306), USNA.
key segment of USIS Saigon’s target audience. Thirty-nine percent of the respondents were students and another nineteen percent were white-collar workers. Seventy-one percent of the sample was between the ages of twenty-one and thirty-five, and seventy percent had at least the equivalent of a high school diploma.\textsuperscript{229} Young, educated, urban residents were a particularly influential segment of the population, and in the 1960s USIS programs would increasingly target this demographic.

The movie, radio, and book reading surveys provided a detailed record of American cultural efforts in South Vietnam in the late 1950s. In total, USIS surveyed about 5000 people in South Vietnam to gauge their impressions of the United States. These surveys, the USIS concluded, “demonstrated beyond doubt the existence of a strong interest in things American, particularly American science, technology, education and the fine arts.” The surveys also showed “a clearly evident disposition to look toward the U.S. with favor.” The adoption of a less political information strategy, USIS officials concluded, had been a success.\textsuperscript{230}

The USIS post in Saigon was an impressive symbol of American strength and its commitment to cultural activities in South Vietnam. By the late 1950s, USIS Saigon was one of the largest posts in the world, with twenty American employees and over 200 local


The post, located in downtown Saigon, was the center of American informational programs in South Vietnam. American officials believed the building itself could serve as a symbol for the United States and its commitment to South Vietnam. One report boasted,

USIS occupies excellent, roomy quarters in three floors of a street corner building at a prime location in downtown Saigon, about a mile from the Embassy. It is completely air-conditioned. The facilities include a library (ground floor); 150-seat auditorium; radio studios; and film editing and recording rooms. The square footage totals 33,454.²³²

Thirty years later, an American Public Affairs Officer recalled that the post was “a big thing” in an “absolutely magnificent” location.²³³ The facility advertised American strength, economic development, and wealth.

The USIS library in Saigon was an important medium for presenting information about American society, culture, and politics. It offered free book-lending services, a children’s corner, a reference division, periodicals and professional journals, including over 1,000 books on various subjects in French and Vietnamese.²³⁴ The USIS ran the center, which lent books and magazines, offered English classes, displayed exhibits on American society, and served as a meeting place. The USIS also ran a smaller facility in Hue, and, by 1955, had over twenty Vietnamese-run information centers in the

²³¹ Oral history interview with Chester H. Opal, January 10 and 12, 1989, p. 109. Foreign Affairs Oral History Project, Special Collections Division, GUL.


²³³ Oral history interview, John M. Anspacher, March 22, 1988, p. 30. Foreign Affairs Oral History Project, Special Collections Division, GUL.

provinces.\textsuperscript{235} Besides offering published materials at the libraries and information centers, the USIS used English classes, radio broadcasts, films, a press service, and mobile exhibits to spread its message to Vietnam.\textsuperscript{236}

The USIS used the library to show South Vietnamese the workings of America’s political system. In 1960 the library was renamed the Abraham Lincoln Library and, in February, exhibited materials on the sixteenth president. The displays included a bust of the president, the text of the Gettysburg Address, and “various books and pamphlets, in both English and Vietnamese, illustrative of Lincoln’s life and times.” The library also screened a UCLA-produced documentary film, “The Face of Lincoln,” in both English and Vietnamese. For two weeks the USIS showed the movie three times daily to sold-out crowds. In about one month, over 36,000 people attended the exhibit. For those who could not attend the exhibit, the radio division of USIS Saigon broadcast the opening ceremonies and a documentary about the president.\textsuperscript{237}

These activities in Vietnam corresponded with USIA’s use of the sesquicentennial of Abraham Lincoln’s birth to demonstrate “the American aspirations—shared with freedom-loving people everywhere—of individual freedom and human rights.”\textsuperscript{238} The USIS made a point of employing historical analogies to convey its message to a Vietnamese audience. The strategy after 1958 called on the USIS to “[d]ramatize phases


in our historic past” which corresponded to life in South Vietnam in the late 1950s. In doing so, the United States could “show [that] we have faced and solved similar problems without having to compromise our basic beliefs.”

The USIS library used other means of introducing Vietnamese citizens to America’s political traditions. During the 1960 U.S. presidential election, the USIS organized a display of voting returns to illustrate “Democracy in Action.” John Anspacher, the Public Affairs Officer in Saigon from 1960 to 1964, later described the election special as the “biggest thing we had [in 1960].” The USIA was proud to announce that the event “drew 10,000 persons within 11 hours.” Of course, to many Vietnamese this program may have appeared disingenuous. Only five years earlier residents of South Vietnamese saw Ngô Đình Diệm receive over 98 percent of the vote in what was obviously a rigged election.

In addition to the facility in Saigon, USIS also operated a library in Hue. As in Saigon, the library in Hue served as a center for American informational activities in the area. The USIS library in Hue provided patrons with political materials, such as the texts of U.S. foreign policy speeches, but it also introduced Vietnamese to American culture more generally. A USIS survey asked, “In your opinion, why does the United States

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240 Oral history interview with John M. Anspacher, March 22, 1988, p. 28. Foreign Affairs Oral History Project, Special Collections Division, GUL.

Information Service have a library in Vietnam?” Vietnamese responses indicated that they understood the fundamental purpose of the library, and U.S. cultural programs in general:

To disseminate American culture, civilization, sciences and technology.
For closer ties of friendship between two countries.
To help Vietnamese to understand the Free world, culture and life in other countries.
For cultural exchanges between two countries.
For better understanding of life in American, by the Vietnamese.
To promote friendship between countries of the world.242

USIS used American materials to improve Vietnamese understanding of the United States. Vietnamese who used the facilities at the library cited Ernest Hemingway, Pearl Buck, Mark Twain, Edgar Allen Poe, and John Steinbeck as among their favorite American authors. The patrons read a diverse collection of American magazines, including *Time*, *Life*, *Boy’s Life*, *Newsweek*, *Reader’s Digest*, and *Sports Illustrated*. The most popular magazine, however, was *Free World*, which the USIA published monthly in Vietnamese and English. Patrons could also listen to American record albums, watch films, and study English at the library. Respondents to the USIS survey requested that the library offer more exhibits on American history, culture, science, education, economic affairs, industry, technology, customs, religion, and family life. All in all, the efforts of the USIS appeared successful. When patrons of the library were asked, “What opinion do you have of the following countries?”, seventy-five percent answered

“excellent” or “good” for the United States. This combined percentage was higher than for any of the other countries, which included India, France, the Philippines, Indonesia, Britain, and the RVN.243

In the 1950s, the United States implemented several programs incorporating English-language education into American cultural activities. These efforts began as early as 1950, when a U.S. official noted the emerging popularity of English in Indochina. People were buying French-English dictionaries and English books and magazines, and English classes had long waiting lists. Providing English teachers and teaching materials to Vietnam, one report concluded, “would be one of the most effective ways of stimulating economic development and the growth of internationalism in Indochina.”244

English programs expanded in the years after the Geneva Convention. In early 1955 the Agency established a Vietnamese-American Association in Saigon. One of its primary activities was to offer English classes to South Vietnamese officers and soldiers.245 By the end of the year, the program had grown to include twenty-eight volunteer Americans teaching English to over 1800 Vietnamese. The classes, which


were conducted primarily in the USIS library, attracted military personnel, professionals, government employees, and South Vietnamese teachers of English. The courses gave American officials direct access to South Vietnamese residents and helped to create an educated class that could facilitate U.S.-Vietnamese relations. It also allowed the USIA another conduit for introducing American culture to a South Vietnamese audience.

By 1958, Vietnamese soldiers and civilians could study English at the binational center in Hue. These courses gave the USIS a chance to buttress other informational activities. “Class materials,” according to USIS report, “contain an impressive but unobtrusive amount of Americana.” In addition to English classes, American Fulbright professors taught courses in Saigon on American studies and American civilization. USIS Saigon also worked with the South Vietnamese Ministry of Education to produce “anti-Communist, pro-government” textbooks for use in secondary schools.

A report by the “Inter-Agency Working Group on U.S. Government English-Language Programs” explained the important functions of promoting English as a foreign policy strategy. “Any statement of general policy on the English language programs of the U.S. Government,” the report began, “must begin with an acknowledgment of the powerful role of language as a medium of communication and as a means whereby the

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broad cultural patterns of a people are expressed.” By simply encouraging people to learn English, the United States could spread American culture to other parts of the world. The USIA used this philosophy in determining its programming on the Voice of America. In October 1959 the VOA began a strategy of using “special English words” in radio programs. Words of particular value would be used slowly and clearly to help listeners understand them. The list of words hinted at the elements of American culture that the USIA deemed important. “Special words” included numerous terms about American culture and politics, such as foreign aid program, technical assistance, automation, collective bargaining, consumer goods, cultural exchange, democratic, self-determination, free, freedom, public housing, automobile, import, and export.250

English instruction became an important element of USIS activities in Vietnam, especially in the late 1950s. The USIS viewed the spread of English as a project that would contribute to America’s short- and long-term goals in Vietnam. In the short term, English helped the United States with its broad nation-building activities in South Vietnam. It was especially important for technicians, government officials, and military officers to understand English, so as to facilitate U.S.-South Vietnamese cooperation in economic and military development. But knowledge of English would also contribute to

250 “Report of Inter-Agency Working Group on U.S. Government English Language Programs,” no date (circa May 10, 1960) and “Special English Words,” October 1 January 1960. U.S. President’s Committee on Information Activities Abroad (Sprague Committee), Records, 1959-61, DDEL.
the long-term goal of greater Vietnamese understanding of the United States. English
provided a “scaffolding . . . on which . . . an enduring harmony of interests may be
built.”

The Vietnamese-American Association was primarily responsible for English
instruction in South Vietnam. The Vietnamese-American Association had been formed
in May 1955 by a group of Americans living in Saigon. The group presented itself as an
independent organization of Americans and Vietnamese that wanted “to foster better
understanding between the peoples of Vietnam and the United States.” While the
group did operate semi-autonomously, it was closely linked to the United States
Information Service and USOM. The USIA provided startup costs for the group, and the
USIS used the group as another means of reaching the South Vietnamese public.
Furthermore, many USIS-sponsored cultural programs were held at the Vietnamese-
American Association.

Initially, the Vietnamese-American Association offered English courses for
Vietnamese military officers who were scheduled to travel to the United States for further
training. The Association also offered evening classes for the general public. By the end
of 1955, it had thirty English instructors teaching three hundred students. By autumn

469), USNA.
1957, 1200 students enrolled for fall classes at the binational center in Saigon. In May 1958, USIS opened a binational center in Hue, and the Vietnamese-American Association began offering English classes there as well.\textsuperscript{253}

The Vietnamese-American Association initiated a number of programs to expose residents of Saigon to American culture. The Association published a quarterly journal, sponsored tours of Saigon, screened films, and offered English classes. Its goal, like that of the USIS, was to foster mutual understanding between the United States and South Vietnam. In the late 1950s, the Vietnamese-American Association’s social and cultural programs provided Vietnamese with an introduction to the diversity of American culture. These activities, the Association’s journal explained, would “attract both Vietnamese and American” to the center. Introducing Vietnamese to American culture and increasing contacts between Americans and Vietnamese would fulfill the association’s primary objective of “foster[ing] better understanding between the peoples of Vietnam and the United States.”\textsuperscript{254}

The Vietnamese-American Association was an effective way of disguising American informational activities in South Vietnam. USIS officials believed that unattributed information was the most effective means of propaganda. When the


audience was aware of the political origin of the material, they were generally more skeptical of the message. Because the Vietnamese-American Association presented itself as a private organization, a USIS assessment explained, it was “not generally associated with USIS in either the minds of the Vietnamese or the American resident in Saigon.”

Even though the Association had a board of directors composed of both Vietnamese and Americans, this was intended to further disguise the official function of the organization. The USIS strategy was for “the American director and other staff members of the Association try to make the Vietnamese feel that it is their organization.”

American economic aid offered a dramatic example of the wealth of the United States. It also served as a powerful illustration of American culture. From 1955 until 1963, the Commercial Import Program (CIP) provided almost $2 billion in aid to South Vietnam. At least 80 percent of American aid came in the form of goods exported directly into Vietnam, the overwhelming majority of which were consumer goods. As early as 1955, the United States Operations Mission (USOM) in Saigon tried to reduce the number of products ineligible for CIP importation. Officials asked for permission to

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import passenger vehicles, air conditioners, freezers, motion picture equipment, outboard motors, radio receivers, household refrigerators, and canned goods. By the end of the decade, imported goods included stereos and water skis.

The volume of commodities was also high. From 1952 to 1960, the total number of vehicles in South Vietnam, including passenger cars, trucks, motorcycles, and motor scooters, jumped from 22,000 to almost 100,000. A Committee on Foreign Relations report described Saigon as “crowded with passenger automobiles, including many late model European and U.S. cars.” As of January 1958, South Vietnam had enough typewriters to satisfy five years of consumption and enough calculating machines, including electric calculators, for eight years. It also had a stock of textiles “sufficient to give about two suits of clothes to every Vietnamese man, woman, and child.”

Leland Barrows, head of the American aid program in Vietnam, hoped that the program would foster support for Diệm. The CIP, he explained, “served the political value of supplying the Vietnamese middle-class with goods they wanted and could afford to buy,” providing “a source of loyalty to Diệm from the army, the civil servants and professional people, who were able to obtain better clothes [and] better household

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258 Scigliano, South Vietnam, 124.


260 Fall, “Will South Vietnam Be Next?,” 492.
Another observer was more explicit: the purpose of American aid was to “keep the people from rising up against the government” by increasing the standard of living.\textsuperscript{262}

Some American officials worried that a message highlighting America’s economic strength could alienate the South Vietnamese. In 1958, the USIS listed “French-fostered opinions of [Americans’] . . . preoccupation with material goods” as a factor limiting the success of U.S. informational programs.\textsuperscript{263} A pamphlet from the People-to-People program, however, suggested ways that America’s wealth and political ideologies could complement one another in informational activities. It recommended responding to the question, “Are you Americans as materialistic as some people say you are?” by answering:

If by being materialistic you mean that Americans want to live as well and comfortably as they can, we plead guilty. But a high standard of living is not proof of a materialistic outlook on life . . . . [M]any . . . of us are deeply concerned with the spiritual and cultural side of life.\textsuperscript{264}

The Commercial Import Program certainly contributed to a higher standard of living in Vietnam, especially in Saigon. But American aid was not offered in such a way as to promote sustained economic development in South Vietnam. In addition to the importation of consumer goods, American aid went to building and improving South

\textsuperscript{261} Kahin, \textit{Intervention}, 116.


\textsuperscript{263} “Annual USIS Assessment Report for Period October 1, 1956 Through September 30, 1957,” p. 5. Foreign Service Despatches, Asia, Records of the United States Information Agency (RG 306), USNA.

\textsuperscript{264} “Americans Abroad: Spokesmen for the United States,” 37-38. Records, 1959-61, U.S. President’s Committee on Information Activities Abroad (Sprague Committee), DDEL.
Vietnam’s infrastructure. For many Vietnamese, these construction projects highlighted American priorities in South Vietnam. And as with the CIP, these projects sent a mixed message. From 1957 to 1960, South Vietnam added 47,000 square meters of movie theaters and dance halls. During the same period, American aid contributed to only 6500 square meters of hospitals and 3500 square meters of rice mills. American assistance, it appeared, fulfilled an immediate function by raising the standard of living for many Vietnamese. But it did not contribute to the necessary long-term development of a strong and stable Vietnam.\(^{265}\)

Although American officials believed USIS activities had been successful in South Vietnam, they ignored evidence that the U.S. cultural campaign undermined the Diệm administration. Diệm understood the importance of establishing himself as a legitimate, independent ruler of South Vietnam. To this end, most South Vietnamese propaganda downplayed American support for South Vietnam, instead focusing on Diệm’s achievements and promoting Diệm as a legitimate national hero. The United States first pursued a policy of encouraging support for South Vietnam by emphasizing America’s contributions to the Diệm government. After 1956, with Diệm’s position in less doubt, the United States shifted to informational programs illustrating American culture and values.

USIS reports hinted at the contradiction between American propaganda and Diệm’s attempts to demonstrate his independence and national credentials. In 1959, describing the great strides taken under Diệm, a USIS report credited “the value of the

\(^{265}\) Buttinger, *Vietnam*, 454.
enormous material and moral contribution of the United States.” A few pages later, the same report listed “Diem’s subservience to the ‘American imperialists’” as a major theme in communist propaganda against the Southern government. American officials saw these characteristics independently, without making the obvious connection between a concerted effort to publicize the United States and growing attitudes that Diệm was an American puppet.266

America’s attempts to use informational programs to win support for Ngô Đình Diệm and his administration failed. The goals of USIA programs in South Vietnam were simply incompatible with Diệm’s actions as president. While the United States preached freedom, democracy, and “people’s capitalism,” Vietnamese faced a repressive regime and an increasingly unequal distribution of wealth. One American Public Affairs Officer explained Diem’s decline in the 1960s:

I think we did manage to inculcate the Vietnamese with some ideas about how the United States worked, particularly in the media area, and in some measure: democracy [sic]. Now, Ngo Dinh Diem himself was not a democrat by any means. He was about as autocratic and dictatorial as anybody could be. . . . Our principal problem . . . was to present our concepts of democracy and political and economic theory and practice in the face of the dictatorial oppression that Diem laid on his people.267


267 Oral history interview with John M. Anspacher, March 22, 1988, p. 30. Foreign Affairs Oral History Project, Special Collections Division, GUL.
CHAPTER 7

VIETNAMIZING AMERICA: NGÔ ĐÌNH DIỆM’S OVERSEAS CULTURAL PROGRAMS

As previous chapters have demonstrated, both the United States and South Vietnam administered broad cultural and informational programs to win the allegiance of South Vietnamese citizens. But South Vietnam’s survival was not simply predicated on domestic support. The struggle for Vietnam was an international affair, and the Republic of Vietnam needed outside assistance to buttress the regime. Without America’s military and economic might, South Vietnam would likely succumb to the threat of Vietnamese communism.

After the Geneva Convention, South Vietnam could count on American support for the new regime. American opposition to the spread of communism was well established and the United States had provided considerable economic aid and military assistance to France in its attempt to defeat communist Viet Minh forces. While Vietnam itself may have had limited strategic importance, American policy makers viewed any
communist advance as a threat to U.S. global interests.\footnote{There is a sizeable literature on the U.S. decision to back the Republic of Vietnam. While this is still a topic of debate, I accept the view that the overriding goal in Vietnam was to prevent the further spread of communism. See Herring, \textit{America’s Longest War}. Other works discussing America’s early decisions in Vietnam include Anderson, \textit{Trapped by Success}; Lloyd Gardner, \textit{Approaching Vietnam: From World War II through Dien Bien Phu, 1941-1954} (New York, 1988); Andrew Rotter, \textit{The Path to Vietnam: Origins of the American Commitment to Southeast Asia} (Ithaca, 1987); Gary R. Hess, \textit{The United States’ Emergence as a Southeast Asian Power, 1940-1950} (New York, 1987). For a historiographical overview of the roots of the American commitment to Vietnam, see Gary R. Hess “The Unending Debate: Historians and the Vietnam War” in Michael Hogan (ed.), \textit{America and the World: The Historiography of American Foreign Relations since 1941} (Cambridge, 1995).} U.S. support for Ngô Đình Diệm, however, was not absolute. American support for a non-communist government in South Vietnam did not guarantee that Diệm would be the man to lead the country. At various times during Diệm’s tenure in office, American officials expressed healthy skepticism about his ability to rule effectively and to create a strong, independent nation. Diệm’s often volatile relationship with the U.S. Embassy, the State Department, and the White House left him cognizant of the possibility that the United States could back other nationalist, non-communist leaders.

Diệm believed that a broad base of support in the United States could help strengthen his position as South Vietnam’s head of state. South Vietnamese officials understood that winning the confidence of the President or important foreign policy makers was only part of the challenge. Vietnamese officials regularly expressed the need to direct propaganda at the American public \([\text{công chúng Mỹ}].\) Diệm believed that public opinion in favor of his regime would keep pressure on Congress to allocate larger sums of money to South Vietnam’s protection. As one South Vietnamese official explained, if the American public held a high opinion of South Vietnam, it would lead to increased
material support [ Middle h o vật chất ] for the Vietnamese government. Furthermore,
public support for South Vietnam could give Diệm greater flexibility in his interactions
with American officials. Although Diệm was happy to receive American economic
assistance, he chafed at American attempts to dictate policy in South Vietnam.

Almost immediately after taking office in 1954, Diệm initiated a campaign to win
American public support for his regime. During Diệm’s first years in office, South
Vietnamese propaganda in the United States targeted influential citizens, primarily
disseminating information about Diệm, the new nation of South Vietnam, and its
struggles to survive on the frontier with the communist world. As Diệm stabilized
conditions in South Vietnam, he expanded and diversified propaganda programs in the
United States. The Republic of Vietnam targeted larger segments of the American public
and employed less overtly political messages.

South Vietnam’s propaganda and informational activities in the United States
provide insight into Diệm’s struggle for national legitimacy from 1954 to 1963 and the
failure of the U.S.-South Vietnamese partnership during this fractious period. These
programs demonstrated that, contrary to the prevailing historiographical view, Diệm was
not a silent partner in his relations with the United States. While some historians have
noted Diệm’s ability to stymie American policies in South Vietnam, Diệm’s strength vis-
à-vis the United States is still portrayed as reactive or defensive. South Vietnam’s
 informational activities show the extent to which Diệm was an independent actor, not

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simply a puppet of the United States. They also suggest Diệm’s ongoing efforts to gain even greater leverage over American officials whom he saw as domineering.

South Vietnam’s propaganda program in the United States deepens our understanding of cultural influence and transmission. International historians have explored the ability of core powers to project their cultures onto other parts of the world. According to this model, the United States (and, according to some scholars, other Western powers) have engaged in the “Coca-Colonization” of the rest of the world. As noted in previous chapters, historians have explored America’s conscious efforts, primarily through the USIA, to spread American culture and ideas through the world. Few historians, however, have examined other countries’ efforts to influence American culture. The relationship between the United States and South Vietnam suggests that historians need to consider different paths of global cultural transmission.

South Vietnam’s cultural activities in the United States were surprisingly wide-ranging. The Republic of Vietnam, along with its American public relations firm, organized conferences and symposia, published editorials, and distributed propaganda materials. With the cooperation of the Smithsonian Institution, the Republic of Vietnam created a traveling exhibit of ancient and contemporary Vietnamese artifacts and art pieces. Finally, the RVN promoted South Vietnam as a tourist destination. These activities were intended to demonstrate the political vitality and stability of the new regime. At the same time, Vietnamese officials wanted to show that Vietnam was a

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country rich in culture and history and therefore worth defending. Finally, they hoped that “mutual understanding” between Americans and Vietnamese would cement the military, economic, and political relations between the two countries.

South Vietnam’s propaganda activities in the United States took different forms. From 1954 until about the end of 1956, Diệm was mostly concerned with domestic issues, particularly his battles against the religious and political sects and his effort to create a functioning government. While Diệm was interested in spreading propaganda in the United States, he had limited resources to pursue this strategy. During this period South Vietnam hired an American public relations firm to conduct informational activities in the United States. Beginning around 1957, Diệm devoted more attention to its overseas cultural diplomacy. Informational activities continued to stress political and social conditions in South Vietnam, but they also incorporated more material on Vietnamese culture and history. The Republic of Vietnam targeted a larger segment of the American public in hopes that broad American support would lead to more resolute support for Diệm’s regime.

The attempted coup against Diệm in 1960 forced an important shift in South Vietnam’s propaganda. Vietnamese officials feared that the event would lead Americans to question Diệm’s popular support and South Vietnam’s ability to withstand communist subversion. This change in public opinion could cause the United States to withdraw its material support from South Vietnam. As a result, Diệm stepped up propaganda activities in late 1960 and early 1961. As the situation grew more urgent, South Vietnam turned to more direct propaganda messages. Rather than simply encourage general
admiration for South Vietnamese culture and society, RVN officials decided to convince Americans that South Vietnam was instituting democratic reforms and Diệm was winning support from the citizenry.

South Vietnam’s propaganda efforts ultimately failed to create an upsurge in American sympathy for Diệm and his regime. In the final years of Diệm’s presidency, propaganda emphasizing the democratic nature of his regime corresponded with increasingly autocratic measures. Diệm’s brutal suppression of the Buddhist protests in 1963 showed the transparency of Diệm’s claims of a democratic regime. Feeling threatened from internal dissent, communist subversion, and growing weariness from his American allies, Diệm became less interested in propaganda and informational activities. In doing so, he guaranteed that his regime would lose the public relations battle.

From 1954 until October 1956, Ngô Đình Diệm was occupied with domestic issues in South Vietnam. Nonetheless, South Vietnamese officials initiated some overseas information programs in order to bring attention to the accomplishments of the new regime. In March 1956, for example, the Ministry of Youth and Information began producing a propaganda film to send to South Vietnam’s consulates and embassies and to screen at international conferences. The purpose of the film, explained Information Minister Trần Chánh Thành, was to “promote the undertakings and achievements of each
ministry” since Diệm came to power in July 1954.\textsuperscript{271} “[E]very scene in the film,” Thành explained, “must . . . speak to the determination of the government, the unity of the people, and the spirit of patriotism.”\textsuperscript{272}

Thành’s detailed outline of the film’s content illustrated the themes that were central to South Vietnam’s propaganda campaign shortly after Diệm came to power. Thành suggested the film open with a short introduction to Vietnamese geography, describing scenic areas and the country’s abundant natural resources. This was followed by a section on Vietnam’s history of colonization and resistance. The film would profile Vietnam’s greatest modern nationalists, including Phan Bội Châu, Phan Chu Trinh, and, of course, Ngô Đình Diệm, “the scholar-patriot” who created a national revolutionary movement and won the support of the people. The bulk of the film, according to the outline, would cover the accomplishments of the Diệm government. Thành wanted to advertise the economic and social policies that had brought stability to South Vietnam in the eighteen months since the Geneva Convention. In this regard, the film would emphasize the return of Vietnamese authority to South Vietnam, Diệm’s defeat of the sects, and the resettlement of refugees from the North.\textsuperscript{273}

\textsuperscript{271} Trần Chánh Thành to governmental ministers, 10 March 1956. Folder 16075: Tài liệu của Bộ Thông tin và Thanh niên v/v đề cao thành tích của các Bộ trong phim Nhân dân “Việt Nam Hiện đại năm 1956” [Documents of the Ministry of Information and Youth regarding publicizing the accomplishments of each Ministry in the film entitled “Modern Vietnam 1956”], PTTDICH, NAII.

\textsuperscript{272} Trần Chánh Thành to governmental ministers, 10 March 1956. Folder 16075: Tài liệu của Bộ Thông tin và Thanh niên v/v đề cao thành tích của các Bộ trong phim Nhân dân “Việt Nam Hiện đại năm 1956” [Documents of the Ministry of Information and Youth regarding publicizing the accomplishments of each Ministry in the film entitled “Modern Vietnam 1956”], PTTDICH, NAII.

\textsuperscript{273} “Lược Phác Nội-Dung Cuốn Phim Việt-Nam Hiện Đại” (“Outline Content of the Film ‘Modern Vietnam’”), no date. Folder 16075: Tài liệu của Bộ Thông tin và Thanh niên v/v đề cao thành tích của các Bộ trong phim Nhân dân “Việt Nam Hiện đại năm 1956” [Documents of the Ministry of Information and Youth regarding publicizing the accomplishments of each Ministry in the film entitled “Modern Vietnam 1956”], PTTDICH, NAII.
The burden of dealing with domestic issues limited South Vietnam’s ability to devote its full attention to overseas propaganda. Nevertheless, South Vietnamese officials recognized that support from abroad, especially the United States, could pay great dividends for the new government. South Vietnam, therefore, turned to others for assistance in its early informational campaign. In 1955, South Vietnam signed a contract with Harold Oram and Associates, an American public relations firm, to manage Vietnam’s propaganda efforts in the United States.

The Oram group’s initial activities on behalf of South Vietnam primarily involved working closely with the American Friends of Vietnam (AFV), a group of influential Americans who supported the non-communist southern government after 1954. The Oram firm worked with the AFV to influence elite American opinion about Ngô Đình Diệm and the situation in South Vietnam. Harold Oram and Gilbert Jonas, a top employee at the firm, were influential members of the AFV. According to an Oram staffer, one of the primary goals of the firm was to target a select group of “policy initiators and thought-molders” in the United States.\footnote{Report on Oram activities, no date (circa 1959-1960), p. 8. Folder 8982: Tài liệu của Bộ Trưởng PTT v/v thiết lập và hoạt động của các Tòa đại diện VN ở ngoại quốc năm 1960 [Documents of the Secretary of State at the Presidency regarding the establishment and activities of Vietnamese representative offices in foreign countries, 1960], PTTDICH, NAII.} Through its connections with the American Friends of Vietnam, the Oram firm had access to a diverse and influential group of Americans, including many congressmen, governors, religious leaders, and academics.\footnote{An Oram report clearly explained that the purpose of working closely with}
AFV was to “execute a program on [South Vietnam’s] behalf, using the [F]riends’ reputation and efforts as a spearhead of the effort to influence people on behalf of the client.”

In early 1956, Gilbert Jonas began working full-time for the American Friends of Vietnam. At the same time, he was directing South Vietnam’s public relations activities as an employee of the Oram firm. Because of this connection, it is difficult to ascertain whether South Vietnam, the AFV, or Jonas himself was most influential in creating and executing pro-RVN activities in the United States. It is probably accurate to describe these public relations strategies as the outgrowth of a communion of interests between the three actors. The language used by Oram, South Vietnamese officials, and AFV members suggests a general agreement on the most effective way to promote the common goal of Diệm’s survival.

In early 1956, the American Friends of Vietnam initiated a campaign to “enlighten American public opinion” on the strategic importance South Vietnam, the promise of the Diệm regime, and the dangers of communist North Vietnam. The Friends arranged speaking engagements for Trần Văn Chương, South Vietnam’s ambassador to the United States, and John O’Daniel, the chairman of the AFV. The

275 For more on the membership of the American Friends of Vietnam, see Morgan, *The Vietnam Lobby*.


group also asked its members with connections to political and media figures to encourage greater support for Diệm. The centerpiece of the AFV’s campaign was a symposium on Vietnam to be held in New York in June.²⁷⁸

Gilbert Jonas initially planned for the symposium to address the proposed national plebiscite in Vietnam, but State Department officials and Ambassador Chương suggested otherwise. Little would be gained, they believed, by drawing public attention to such a controversial issue, especially considering that Diệm did not plan to participate in the elections. Jonas and O’Daniel agreed to focus instead on “refugee, charitable, educational, and investment activities.”²⁷⁹ Tom Dooley, a Navy doctor famous for his work with Vietnamese refugees, described the evils of the Viet Minh. Leo Cherne discussed the prospects for economic growth in South Vietnam. He concluded that South Vietnam, like West Berlin, could become “a window for freedom.”²⁸⁰ Other speakers included Joseph Buttinger, John F. Kennedy, and Hans Morgenthau. Diệm recognized the gathering by sending a cable thanking the AFV for its work on behalf of South Vietnam.

The symposium in New York was emblematic of South Vietnam’s early informational activities in the United States. Domestic instability in Vietnam, compounded by the relative newness of the Diệm government, prevented South Vietnam from aggressively pursuing informational strategies in the United States. Diệm’s solution was to hire the Oram firm to represent South Vietnam’s interests in the United States.

²⁷⁸ Morgan, The Vietnam Lobby, 39.
²⁷⁹ Morgan, The Vietnam Lobby, 41.
²⁸⁰ Quoted in Morgan, The Vietnam Lobby, 42.
The Oram firm, through its work with the American Friends of Vietnam, helped the RVN publicize the critical issues in South Vietnam and Diệm’s role in the future success of the country.

As Diệm succeeded in building the foundations for nationhood in South Vietnam, he and his advisors devoted greater attention to informational campaigns, propaganda, and cultural diplomacy in the United States. Diệm continued to promote his nation’s political, economic, and social achievements since the Geneva Convention. At the same time, South Vietnam broadened its message in the United States. Beginning around the end of 1956, Diệm tried to present Americans with a fuller picture of Vietnamese culture. Diệm hoped that improving “mutual cultural understanding” would lead to greater support for South Vietnam. He also believed that Vietnam’s culture and history could provide compelling arguments for the legitimacy of the South Vietnamese state.

Diệm’s government employed various methods to influence public opinion in the United States. These programs show Diệm’s willingness to work outside of the traditional U.S.-Vietnamese political relationship that was dictated at the American embassy in Saigon. They also indicate the ideas that Diệm believed were most important in winning American and international support for his nascent regime. Finally, they help to explain the growing confidence in Diệm in the late 1950s, even though this support eventually waned in the early 1960s.
On September 21, 1956, Diệm sent a memorandum to his cabinet ministers explaining the urgency of overseas propaganda:

In order to introduce Vietnam to the people of friendly nations, we need to have pamphlets written in English and French and with pictures and diagrams. The pamphlets must concisely explain the projects we have completed and those we intend to implement in the areas of administration, finance, economics, social policy, education, health, etc.

Diệm asked cabinet ministers to collect information about activities in their ministries. After reviewing the materials, the Ministry of Information would print the documents and publicize them in foreign countries. This program, Diệm wrote, “would increase the value [giá trị] of our country in the international community.”

Within a few days, Trần Chánh Thành arranged for Horizons, a monthly journal based in Saigon, to publish the informational pamphlets. By June 1957, the Ministry of Information was distributing the pamphlets to South Vietnamese embassies and consulates throughout the world.

The Horizons pamphlets offer a window into Diệm’s strategies for winning international support for his regime. After the Geneva Convention, Diệm’s first challenge was to create the foundations for a new state in South Vietnam. Some of the Horizons publications, with their focus on social, political, and economic achievements of the regime, clearly reflected this goal. By the end of 1956, however, Diệm had mostly completed the first steps in building a new state and he turned his attention to showing

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281 Letter, Diệm to Prime Minister, September 21, 1956. Folder 18760: Hồ sơ về hoạt động tin tuyên truyền ở ngoài quốc năm 1956-1959 [Folder about overseas propaganda activities, 1956-1959], PTTDICH, NAII.


283 Letter from Châu to ministers, June 21 1957. Folder 18760: Hồ sơ về hoạt động tin tuyên truyền ở ngoài quốc năm 1956-1959 [Folder about overseas propaganda activities, 1956-1959], PTTDICH, NAII.
the cultural development of South Vietnam. *Horizons* pamphlets on Vietnamese music and theater, for example, did not specifically address the political or economic status of South Vietnam in the late 1950s. They were the beginning of Diệm’s broader program of “cultural propaganda” [tuyên truyền văn hóa] in the United States.

The recurring themes in *Horizons* pamphlets illustrated South Vietnam’s commitment to both political and cultural propaganda. Several tracts juxtaposed the freedom of South Vietnam with the tyranny of communist North Vietnam. They also described South Vietnam as an independent national entity while criticizing Chinese and Soviet influence over North Vietnam. On issues of culture, the propaganda materials emphasized the longevity, diversity, and sophistication of Vietnamese civilization. The pamphlets subtly reinforced the message that Vietnam had historically rejected Chinese domination, suggesting that South Vietnam was continuing this tradition in its resistance to communism.

A common topic in these propaganda efforts was Diệm’s patriotism. As one tract explained, “All Vietnamese patriots without exception wished to put an end to the partitioning of their country . . . Seeing this to be the aspiration of the whole country, President Ngo-Dinh-Diem set this goal as the paramount and imperative task of his government.” Diệm’s fervent patriotism was evidenced, the pamphlet continued, by his refusal to sign the Geneva Agreements, which provided for “the amputation of the national territory.” The Viet Minh “signed the same texts without a flicker of hesitation.”
Oddly enough, while crediting Diệm’s steadfast refusal to sign the “ill-fated” Geneva Agreement, the pamphlet also praised him for honoring the treaty:

[T]he Republic of Vietnam . . . scrupulously respects all the provisions of a text which does not bear its signature, while one records daily violations of the same provisions by the Viet-Minh, who signed and benefited by these agreements.284

The intense praise for Diệm was matched only by the bitter denunciations of Vietnamese communists. The pamphlet catalogued North Vietnam’s numerous violations of the Geneva Agreement and the violent repression of North Vietnamese citizens. Most damning, the essay characterized North Vietnam’s willingness to “offer [Vietnam] as a present to its masters in Peking and Moscow.” After 1954, Vietnamese communists “presented their Chinese and Russian masters with their sovereignty.” The idea of independence was absent in Hanoi, where “pictures of the Kremlin and Peking masters stand near that of Ho-Chi-Minh; the Russian, Chinese and Viet-Minh flags are flown together. The three anthems are played one after another.”285

Other *Horizons* essays distributed in the United States presented the Vietnamese as a people with a sophisticated, well-developed, long-lasting culture. One publication offered a long, detailed description of the history of hát bội, a traditional form of theater. *Hát bội*, with its strict formalism, was a complicated art whose “real beauty [could] only be appreciated by a cultured audience.” After devoting eleven pages to a discussion of hát bội, the pamphlet included only four sentences on hát chèo, a “simplified” form of theater “much in favor in North Vietnam.” *Hát chèo*, the essay noted flatly, was

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284 The *Fight Against the Subversive Communist Activities in South Vietnam*, (Saigon, 1956), 1, 7, 8.

285 The *Fight Against the Subversive Communist Activities in South Vietnam*, 1, 14, 15.
characterized primarily by “grotesque songs and riddles.”

A different pamphlet described Vietnam’s traditional crafts, including metalworking, silk weaving, pottery, laquerwork, and embroidery. The skill and intelligence of pioneers in these crafts “provided the Vietnamese people with its economic, social, and cultural upsurge.”

Other publications traced the history of Tet celebrations and the originality of Vietnamese musical interests.

South Vietnamese propaganda shed light on how Diệm and other RVN officials viewed their positions as the rulers of South Vietnam. The two most common criticisms leveled at Diệm were that he would not be able to bring stability to South Vietnam and that he was not sufficiently “Vietnamese” to gain the public’s confidence. By October 1956, Diệm had mostly answered the first concern; cultural propaganda was a means to address the second. The Horizons publications offered evidence of Diệm’s strong commitment to preserving and popularizing Vietnam’s cultural traditions. Propaganda pamphlets distributed in the United States denounced North Vietnamese Communists who “disavowed the ancient national culture and know nothing outside the thought of the modern apostles of the communist credo.” In Hanoi, according to these publications, “the words of great Vietnamese poets have vanished from the public libraries, and the national heroes are unknown.”

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286 The Vietnamese Theatre (Saigon, n.d.), 14, 19.

287 The Origins of Certain Aspects of Culture and Traditional Crafts in Vietnam, (Saigon, no date), 18.

288 Vietnamese Customs and Legends Related to Tet (Saigon, n.d.) and The Vietnamese Music (Saigon, n.d.).

289 The Fight Against the Subversive Communist Activities in South Vietnam, 1, 14, 16.
The complicated relationship between Vietnam and China was the other recurring theme in South Vietnamese cultural publications. Several pamphlets conceded that Vietnamese civilization had some roots in China. They emphasized, however, that contemporary Vietnamese culture was distinct from that of China. Millennia of evolution, combined with a tradition of adopting foreign elements, had created cultural forms unique to Vietnam. Vietnamese theater, for example, had Chinese roots, but “[a]fter a period of assimilation, there was such a rapid evolution that all Chinese elements disappeared and the Vietnamese theatre no longer bore any resemblance to its Chinese counterpart.”²⁹⁰ Similarly, although Tết was of Chinese origin, the festival developed over time in Vietnam to the point that in the modern world it showed “only a remote resemblance to the Chinese festival.”²⁹¹

In distinguishing the two national cultures, propaganda materials offered thinly-veiled judgments in favor of Vietnamese forms. One essay characterized the “dissonance” of Chinese music, noting that the “shrill high-pitched sounds which are the hallmark of the Chinese theater have never been appreciated by the Vietnamese music-lovers.” The Vietnamese people, with their historic dedication to music “notably improved the Chinese instruments, casting aside those which had only been built to create the dissonances so little relished by music-lovers.”²⁹²

These cultural narratives served a dual purpose for Diệm and the Republic of Vietnam. First, they suggested a general aesthetic value in Vietnamese culture. Any


²⁹¹ *Vietnamese Customs and Legends Related to Tết*, 5.

²⁹² *The Vietnamese Music*, 6-7.
admiration and respect afforded to Vietnamese civilization could be transferred to the South Vietnamese government. Second, depictions of Vietnamese culture reinforced the idea of historic tension between Vietnam and China. In cultural terms, this showed that Vietnam was, in fact, distinct from China. It also supported the message of Vietnam’s ongoing struggles for political independence from China. For at least two thousand years, according to this argument, the people of Vietnam had fought against Chinese domination. Ngô Đình Diệm’s strong opposition to China, coupled with Hồ Chí Minh’s willingness to work with Chinese communists, showed that the Republic of Vietnam was the truer modern manifestation of a Vietnamese nation.

In 1957, the Ministry of National Education published *Vietnam, Past and Present*, an English translation of a collection of articles on Vietnamese culture and history. Nguyễn Dương Đôn, the Secretary of State for National Education, wrote in the introduction that the book “examines the attributes of an already ancient civilisation; sums up the legacy of an already long, and often glorious history; and traces the varying phases of the Vietnamese people’s struggle throughout the centuries to achieve their independence.”²⁹³ A section on Vietnamese history stated that any discussion of Vietnamese history must begin by considering “the presence of China to the North, a huge mass of land and men, hanging over [Vietnam] as an eternal threat.”²⁹⁴ The brief survey of Vietnam’s past continued with numerous examples of Vietnamese heroes who fought against Chinese invaders, including the Trung sisters, Mai Hac De, Lý Thường Kiệt, Lê Lợi, and Trần Hưng Đạo. Vietnam’s historic struggles against foreign invaders


served South Vietnam’s propaganda program nicely. Just as Vietnamese heroes had fought and defeated Chinese invaders in centuries past, South Vietnam would successfully withstand the invasion of Soviet- and Chinese-supported communists.

South Vietnam’s repeated efforts to invoke Vietnamese heroes and Vietnam’s battles with China have unfortunately been ignored by Western scholars. Numerous studies of Hồ Chí Minh and Vietnamese communism point out that North Vietnam effectively gained the support of many Vietnamese people by claiming connections to earlier Vietnamese patriots. According to these studies, American officials did not understand the history of Vietnam and failed to see that the communists, like so many of Vietnam’s traditional heroes, would resist American control as they had resisted the French and Chinese before. This analysis fails to account for South Vietnam’s use of the same legends of resistance.

Diệm’s government found other avenues for propagandizing in the United States. Promoting Vietnam as a tourist destination, for example, would accomplish several goals for the Republic of Vietnam. A growing tourist industry would inject revenue into South Vietnam’s economy. But South Vietnam could also use promotional materials as another method of informing Americans about Vietnamese history and about the South Vietnamese government. In this way, tourism literature was another form of the RVN’s campaign to improve Americans’ impressions of South Vietnam.

As part of the growing interest in culture and diplomatic history, some diplomatic historians have explored the role of tourism in American foreign relations. In *Awkward Dominion*, Frank Costigliola, briefly addressed the subject of American travelers to
Europe in the 1920s. American tourists flocked to Europe after World War I, a trend that injected hundreds of millions of dollars into the European economy. It also engendered resentment from Europeans, especially Parisians who absorbed the brunt of American tourism. By the end of the 1920s, tourists and expatriates had created an “American economy” in Paris where they attended American schools and churches, belonged to American organizations, read American newspapers, ate American food, and enjoyed American entertainments.295 In his study of U.S.-Cuban relations, Thomas Paterson painted an even more critical picture of the consequences of American tourism. During the Batista regime, so many Americans traveled to Cuba for drinking, gambling, and prostitution that by the end of the decade Havana had earned a reputation as “the brothel of the New World.”296

Costigliola and Paterson showed the value of looking at tourism as more than just an economic relationship primarily by documenting the social and cultural disorder caused by American tourists. In a later study, Dennis Merrill suggested a slightly more ambiguous relationship between tourist and host country. The dynamics of tourism provide a window into the ways “overseas peoples have responded to and manipulated U.S. hegemony.” Borrowing from anthropological studies, Merrill noted that localities often develop a tourist agency to “display their existence and establish their power.”

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the case of Puerto Rico, “commonwealth authorities possessed just enough autonomous
decision-making space within the imperial relationship” to dictate some aspects of the
tourist industry.297

The State of Vietnam had created an Office of Tourism in 1950, but the war
against the Viet Minh and the uncertainty after Geneva discouraged travelers from
visiting Vietnam. By 1957, the Republic of Vietnam was looking for ways for reverse
this trend. An article in The Times of Viet Nam stated that “political instability and the
lack of security during wartime” had seriously damaged Vietnam’s tourist industry,
“[b]ut the situation has improved considerably and the time has come to develop and
promote tourism in Vietnam.” The Office of National Tourism’s “rise from its
involuntary lethargy” progressed rather slowly.298 At the end of 1958, Hồ Quan Phước,
the director of the Office, sent a report to Diệm suggesting changes in South Vietnam’s
tourism policies. Phước argued that tourism would bring many important benefits to the
nation in the areas of technology, commerce, and transportation. These, in turn, would
contribute to social, political, cultural, and economic development. Phước noted that
many other countries, including those in Southeast Asia, had expanded their tourism
facilities, to the great benefit of the nation. For South Vietnam to enjoy similar success,
Phước suggested that the Office of National Tourism engage in greater efforts to
publicize Vietnam as an international tourist destination.299


299 Hồ Quan Phước to the Prime Minister at the Presidency, 24 November 1958. Folder 2174: Hồ sơ v/v
cải tổ Nha Quốc Gia du lịch năm 1950-1960 [File regarding restructuring of the National Tourism Office,
1950-1960], PTTDIC, NAI.
By 1960, South Vietnam had made considerable infrastructure improvements in the name of developing tourism. The government had improved road networks, expanded airport facilities, and built tourist offices. The Office of National Tourism pointed to the expansion of hotel facilities as a significant accomplishment for South Vietnam. Many hotels that had ceased operations during the fighting in Saigon reopened by 1961. Furthermore, from 1954 to 1961, several new international standard hotels opened in Saigon, Hue, Dalat, and Nha Trang.

The most celebrated of the new luxury hotels was the Caravelle, located at Lam Son Square in the center of Saigon. Construction began in 1956, and the hotel officially opened on December 24, 1959, at which point it became the most recognizable symbol of high-end tourism in South Vietnam. One travel guide advertised the hotel’s “all air-conditioned building decorated with France’s St. Gobain glass and Italian marble.” The bar on the top floor was a compulsory stop for tourists in Saigon. In what was perhaps an unintended metaphor for South Vietnam at the end of the 1950s, the ten-story hotel towered over the National Assembly building, located directly across the street.

The Office of National Tourism attributed its success to its ongoing efforts to publicize Vietnam as a tourist destination. In 1958, for example, the Republic of Vietnam participated in the International Tourism Conference in Brussels. The Office

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300 Nha Quốc Gia Du Lịch [National Tourism Office], “Tổ chức các công tác quan trọng đã thực hiện trong các năm vừa qua và công cụ du lịch trong năm tới” [Report on important activities implemented each year and undertakings planned in the coming years], p. 2. Folder 421: Bảo cáo hoạt động năm 1954-1961 của cơ quan thuộc phủ Tổng-thống, [Activity reports of the organizations under the President’s office, 1954-1961], PTTDICH, NAII.

was also active in printing tourist materials in English for overseas distribution. The greatest factor in attracting visitors to South Vietnam, one report stated, was the overseas presence of Vietnamese students, tourists, and workers. “Seeing the faces of the Vietnamese people (especially the women) . . . was the reason so many tourists wanted to come to Vietnam and learn more about our country.”

Travel brochures employed images of beautiful Vietnamese women to entice visitors. A *Horizons* publication on tourism rather bizarrely described Vietnamese women as graceful in their gaudy, tight-fitting dresses, with skilled make-up, punctilious in their traditional politeness.

Another pamphlet relied on similar imagery in describing “the street scenes of Oriental life so compelling to foreigners”:

the rush hour traffic jam, made not by cars, but by scooters; the service station for unlucky bicycles, equipment hanging on a tree or a street corner; the vendors of soup, dried meat, sugar cane juice; . . . and, above all, the doe-eyed shapely Vietnamese girls dressed in the most gracious way.

The beauty of the natural scenery competed with the attractiveness of Vietnamese women as the best reason to visit Vietnam. Tourist brochures touted South Vietnam’s great diversity of natural attractions: the endless rice fields of the Mekong Delta, the beaches along the coast, the waterfalls around Dalat, and the hunting preserves in the

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302 Nha Quốc Gia Du Lịch [National Tourism Office], “Tờ trình về các công tác quan trọng đã thực hiện trong các năm vừa qua và công cuộc điều chỉnh trong năm tới” [Report on important activities implemented each year and undertakings planned in the coming years], pp. 3-4. Folder 421: Báo cáo hoạt động năm 1954-1961 của cơ quan thuộc phủ Tổng-thống, [Activity reports of the organizations under the President’s office, 1954-1961], PTTDICH, NAII.

303 *Tourism in Vietnam*, (Saigon 1957), 5 (emphasis in original).

304 *Visit Fascinating Vietnam* (Saigon, 1961), 5 (emphasis in original).
Central Highlands. They also promoted South Vietnam’s cultural and historic sites, such as the imperial relics in Hue, Cham ruins in Qui Nhon province, the Cao Đài Temple in Tay Ninh province, and countless temples and pagodas. Pamphlets included other information that would be of interest to travelers, including air routes, visa procedures, climate, restaurants, and hotels.  

Tourism brochures did more than provide useful information for visitors. They constructed an image of Vietnam that would foster positive views of Vietnamese culture and society, as well as the new Republic of Vietnam. Guidebooks and articles deflected attention from the political and economic instability in South Vietnam, emphasizing instead the peacefulness of a trip to Vietnam. Hue, in spite of its proximity to North Vietnam, was a place for “leisurely wandering.” In the evening, tourists could take a relaxing ride on the Perfume River in the Vietnamese equivalent of a Venetian gondola:

> By the purest and happiest coincidence, the boatman is seconded by a boatgirl, who is often pretty. Almost always she has a voice clear as crystal and she rows the boat slowly, humming songs which never fail to bring the Muses to the poets and musicians.

Based on descriptions in tourist literature, it appeared that the only guns in Vietnam belonged to big game hunters around Dalat.

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The tourism industry also emphasized the cultural and ethnic diversity of Vietnam, a theme that appeared often in South Vietnamese propaganda. Almost every tourist pamphlet mentioned the excitement of a trip to Chợ Lớn, the Chinese district a few kilometers down the road from the center of Saigon. One publication stated that Saigon’s most interesting feature was that it was “a meeting point between the West and Asia” where “Vietnamese, Chinese, Indians, and Europeans blend together their civilizations and their particular ways of living in the city.”

Numerous references to the achievements of the Diệm regime provide the clearest evidence that tourist publications were also used to spread propaganda. Visit Fascinating Vietnam estimated South Vietnam’s population at about twelve million and mentioned that this figure included “about one million happily resettled refugees” from communist North Vietnam. One passage from the essay could have come directly from the Ministry of Information:

This pamphlet deals primarily with the physical aspects and picturesque side of Vietnam. There is, however, another aspect of Vietnam which cannot fail to captivate the tourist: the stimulating picture of the Free Republic of Viet-Nam which remains attached to its ancient heritage while working for economic and social progress. Vast programs of community development, construction, social reform, education, and modernization, all contribute towards a transformation that is taking place so rapidly that it is impossible for the visitor to remain unaware of it.

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308 Tourism in Vietnam, 3, 5.
One of the most important episodes in Diệm’s plan to win American public support for his regime came in 1960, when South Vietnam arranged an exhibit of archaeological pieces and handicrafts at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington D.C. The planning of this exhibit, its content, and South Vietnam’s reasons for organizing such a display illustrate a new dimension in South Vietnam’s relationship with the United States. The exhibit showed the extent that Ngô Đình Diệm was active in trying to improve his diplomatic position in regards to the United States. If not for the attempted coup against Diệm in 1960, which corresponded with the run of the exhibit in Washington, Diệm may have been more successful in creating a positive image of his regime in the United States.

Planning for the Smithsonian exhibit covered a five-year period beginning at about the time of Diệm’s return to Vietnam in 1954. The process of arranging the exhibit—like the exhibit itself—illuminates some of the critical issues in U.S.-South Vietnamese relations in the late 1950s. American planners were cognizant of Diệm’s uncertain future, but his success at strengthening his government convinced organizers to proceed with the exhibit. At the same time, Vietnamese officials had their own agenda. They wanted to make sure that the exhibit presented an acceptable message to American viewers. The negotiations between Smithsonian representatives and Diệm’s officials provide an example of the subtle conflicts between the United States and South Vietnam. They also highlight South Vietnam’s active role in relations between the two countries, including its involvement in events in the United States.

The idea for an American exhibition of Vietnamese art was first proposed in early 1954, but it was abandoned because of instability in the region. In May 1955, Thomas
Beggs, Director of the Smithsonian’s National Collection of Fine Arts, revisited the idea. He contacted the United States Operations Mission to Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam to explore the possibility of displaying Indochinese art at the Smithsonian. Beggs’ proposal was met with some encouragement, but planning proceeded slowly. As the USOM representative explained, the chaos in Saigon made in 1955 made it difficult to think about something like an art exhibit.

As Diệm gained control of the situation in Saigon, planning for the exhibit moved more rapidly. In November 1956, Swedish archaeologist Olov Janse arranged a meeting between Beggs and Du Phuoc Long, the Second Secretary of the Vietnamese Embassy in Washington, to discuss the exhibit. As Long explained, the RVN needed to foster general respect and admiration for Vietnamese culture and the Vietnamese people. Overseas cultural propaganda, he believed, would insure the survival of the new nation.

Olov Janse, a Swedish archaeologist, served as a liaison between the Smithsonian and the Vietnamese embassy in Washington. In the 1930s Janse had conducted important excavations in French Indochina that established him as one of the world’s preeminent scholars of Vietnamese antiquities. By the mid-1950s he was living in Washington DC, where he established contacts with officials at the Smithsonian Institution. Long and Beggs agreed that displaying Vietnamese artifacts in the United States would reap benefits for the new Republic of Vietnam. In a letter to Vietnamese Ambassador Trần Văn Chuong, Beggs explained that an exhibit would “bring to Americans better understanding of your enchanting country and the fine draftsmenship of your people.”

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Du Phuoc Long was even more sanguine: the exhibit was “a good opportunity” to engage in “political and cultural propaganda for the government and people of Vietnam.”

The idea for an exhibit in the United States quickly gained support from Vietnamese officials. In a report to Trần Văn Chưởng, Long explained that the exhibit would show “the evolution of the Vietnamese people: their race, politics, economics, customs, and art.” In late November the Vietnamese Embassy forwarded its proposal to the Ministry of National Education in Saigon, making a strong case for full support of the exhibit. Cultural propaganda was important in foreign countries, and nowhere more than in the United States. If the American public understood the Vietnamese people and the nation of Vietnam [Dân tộc và nước Việt Nam], South Vietnam would receive more material and spiritual support [úng hỗ vật chất và tình thần].

On March 27, 1957, representatives from the U.S. State Department, the Vietnamese embassy, and the Smithsonian met to discuss the exhibit. They discussed the original plan for an Indochina exhibit and its cancellation around the time of the Geneva Conference. The new proposal, they agreed, “limits the exhibit to works from south Viet

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Nam.” In May, Beggs explained in a letter to a colleague, “the stabilization of political affairs in Viet Nam” led to the resumption of planning for the Indochina exhibit, but now with a solely Vietnamese focus.

Around the same time, Secretary of National Education Nguyễn Dương Đôn sent a letter to Diệm outlining the proposal to exhibit Vietnamese artifacts at the Smithsonian. The exhibit, Đôn pronounced, was “a favorable opportunity to propagandize in the areas of politics, culture, and economics.” After suggesting certain types of artifacts that would be included in the exhibit, Đôn noted that the materials “would be chosen so that the American public [công chúng Mỹ] would have a clear idea of the richness of Vietnamese culture and the way of life in the Republic of Vietnam.” Diệm agreed, and in April he approved the proposed exhibit.

The change in exhibit planning in 1956 and 1957 showed the changing conceptions of “Vietnam” during this period. In 1954, the initial exhibit proposal called for displaying Indochinese art—pieces from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. With the French withdrawal and the Geneva Agreements, “Vietnam” took on meaning as a political and cultural entity. By 1957, Vietnam actually existed as a nation, one with a cultural history that could be exhibited at the Smithsonian. It was also clear that the exhibit offered an endorsement of the Diệm’s South Vietnamese government as the

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315 Beggs to Perry T. Rathbone, May 13, 1957. Box 46, Office of the Director, Records, 1912-1965 (RU 312), SIA.

rightful Vietnamese state. Diệm’s state visit to the United States in May 1957 showed
the great strides South Vietnam had made in three years and conveyed the idea that the
Republic of Vietnam was an important battleground in the global war against
communism. As Beggs explained, Diệm’s visit “has done much to stimulate government
interest in our undertaking.”

Over the next three years, the Republic of Vietnam and the Smithsonian
organized the exhibit. The Vietnamese Ministry of National Education, first under
Nguyễn Dương Đơn and then Trần Hru Thé, was primarily responsible for organizing
the exhibit. The Secretaries of State communicated with Ngô Đình Diệm and members
of his cabinet to insure that the exhibit represented South Vietnam’s diplomatic interests.
In March 1959, Thé submitted a proposal to Diệm outlining the types of artifacts that
would be included in the display, the duration of the exhibit, and the cost. Thé reiterated
the sentiments of other Vietnamese officials. The exhibit was “a rare opportunity for
America and the world to better understand conditions in Vietnam.” The “primary aim,”
he continued, “was for the American people to understand the abundance and richness of
the culture of Vietnam and the life of the Vietnamese people from the past to the
present.”

American organizations, both private and public, offered support of the exhibit.
The United States Information Agency and the U.S. Navy were responsible for packing
the objects in Saigon and shipping them to San Francisco. In the United States, the

317 Beggs to Rathbone, May 13, 1957. Box 46, Office of the Director, Records, 1912-1965 (RU 312), SIA.

318 Thé to Diệm, 16 March 1959. Folder 17397: Hồ sơ v/v tổ chức triển lãm văn hoá VN tại Mỹ quốc năm
PTTDICH, NAI II.
Smithsonian Institution and the American Friends of Vietnam worked together to organize and publicize the exhibit. The Smithsonian Institution published a museum guide that was available for purchase at the museum. The American Friends of Vietnam included the guide in its catalog of publications that it distributed to members of the organization and other interested parties. The AFV also covered the expenses of transporting the museum pieces from San Francisco to Washington.319

The American Friends of Vietnam also helped to arrange some of the stops for the traveling exhibit. After its initial run in Washington, the Smithsonian planned to divide the pieces into two smaller exhibits for showings in Baltimore, Cleveland, Philadelphia, St. Louis, and Portland. A wide audience had obvious appeal for all involved parties. Besides bringing attention to the Smithsonian Institution, it would give the Republic of Vietnam an opportunity to reach a greater segment of the American public. The original Smithsonian plan, however, skipped two of the most important cities in the United States: New York and Boston. This oversight was a concern for the American Friends of Vietnam. As Louis Andreatta, the Executive Secretary of the AFV, later noted, a stop in New York City would make “a definite contribution to American-Vietnamese understanding.”320 In November, Gilbert Jonas contacted Columbia and Brandeis

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Universities to arrange for showings of the exhibit. Milton Sachs, another AFV member and professor of political science at Brandeis, coordinated the Boston stop of the traveling exhibit.\footnote{Andreatta to Truong Buu Khanh, January 17, 1961. Folder 43, Box 8, Douglas Pike Collection: Other Manuscripts—American Friends of Vietnam, TTU VA.}

On October 26, 1960, “The Art and Archaeology of Viet Nam” opened at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington. Over the next six weeks, visitors to the Smithsonian Museum of Natural History saw an impressive collection of Vietnamese relics, many of which had never been displayed in the United States. The exhibit also introduced patrons to contemporary Vietnamese culture through a wide variety of handicrafts and cultural objects. Although visitors to the museum may not have recognized it, the pieces at the exhibit were chosen to shape to perceptions of the audience. For the Republic of Vietnam, this cultural event had important diplomatic implications.

In constructing a narrative of Vietnamese culture, the exhibit emphasized several themes, all of which corresponded to the messages in South Vietnam’s propaganda campaign. First, the exhibit showed pieces of high aesthetic value, meant to elicit praise for Vietnamese crafts and raise Americans’ estimation of Vietnamese culture. The exhibit also depicted the great longevity of Vietnamese civilization, a heritage claimed by Diệm and the RVN. Finally, the exhibit illustrated the diversity of Vietnamese culture; Vietnam’s many contacts with other civilizations helped to create a unique and dynamic

\footnote{Andreatta to Truong Buu Khanh, January 17, 1961. Folder 43, Box 8, Douglas Pike Collection: Other Manuscripts—American Friends of Vietnam, TTU VA.}
culture. Displaying Vietnamese civilization in this way fit with the overriding theme of South Vietnamese propaganda: Vietnam’s history was characterized by resistance to China. The RVN and Ngô Đình Diệm, were the modern embodiments of this history and culture, and therefore representative of the “true” Vietnam.

RVN officials wanted Americans to hold a high opinion of Vietnam’s culture—its music, artwork, and religion. A wide variety of crafts and art pieces showed the “fine draftsmanship” and “enchanting” quality of Vietnamese culture. Silk scarves, brocaded tunics, and ornate theatrical costumes attested to Vietnamese skills in weaving and embroidery. The exhibit also included intricately carved mother-of-pearl, tortoise shell, buffalo horn, marble, ivory, and examples of engraving and metalwork.

Demonstrating the longevity of Vietnamese civilization would attach greater legitimacy to the new state. When the exhibit opened in 1960, the Republic of Vietnam was exactly five years old—the exhibit opened on October 26, the anniversary of Diệm’s declaration of the republic. Many pieces in the exhibit testified to the ancient origins of Vietnamese civilization. The Buddha of Đồng Dương, making its first appearance in the United States, was one of the centerpieces of the exhibit. It was an impressive three-and-a-half-foot tall bronze standing Buddha from the Funan civilization in the Mekong Delta. Like other pieces, the statue was an excellent representation of beauty and craftsmanship—images of the piece appeared in newspaper accounts of the exhibit and it

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was displayed prominently in the guide accompanying the exhibit. But it also showed the
duration of Vietnamese civilization. Cast around 300 C.E., it was one of the oldest pieces
in the exhibit.

The accompanying exhibit guide reinforced the theme of longevity. Trần Văn
Chương, South Vietnam’s Ambassador to the United States, wrote in the guide that the
artifacts illustrated “the originality of the Vietnamese culture which appeared thousands
of years ago.” Vietnam’s dynastic history, according to the essay, began in 2789
B.C.E. with the Hùng kings, who ruled Vietnam until 258 B.C.E. under the dynastic
name of Hong Bàng. But the Hong Bàng period predates Vietnam’s recorded history;
that is, the Hùng kings are mythic or mytho-historic, rather than actual historic, figures.
South Vietnam’s decision to emphasize the Hong Bàng dynasty as the beginning of
Vietnamese history showed the great longevity of Vietnamese civilization. The duration
of Vietnamese history served the nation-building needs of the Republic of Vietnam by
challenging the notion of South Vietnam’s youth. Even if the regime had only been in
existence for five years, it was legacy of 4500 years of civilization.

Tracing Vietnamese history to the Hùng Kings and the Hong Bàng Dynasty also
served to distinguish Vietnamese and Chinese culture and history. One of the goals of
South Vietnam’s propaganda was to counter the perception that Vietnamese society was
simply an outgrowth of Chinese culture. While the pieces in the exhibit made this clear
by showing Vietnam’s connections to other cultures, the essay used a historic model to

323 Invoice lists, Smithsonian Institution Archives. Record Unit 312, National Collection of Fine Arts,
Office of the Director, Records, 1912-1965, SIA.

324 The Art and Archaeology of Viet Nam: Crossroads of Cultures, 3.
make the same argument. Locating Vietnamese origins in 2789 B.C.E. showed that Vietnamese society existed and indeed flourished for thousands of years before the Chinese occupation. In other words, the “natural” state of Vietnamese society was independent, subsequent Chinese rule was an aberration that could be corrected.\(^{325}\)

One of the great strengths of Vietnamese culture was that it incorporated the best elements from different civilizations. South Vietnamese intellectuals had argued that the blending of foreign and indigenous influences had contributed to Vietnam’s cultural strength. Traditional written Vietnamese (chữ nôm), for example, used modified Chinese characters, while Vietnam’s modern writing system adapted the Roman alphabet to represent Vietnamese words. In the 13th century, King Trần Thái Tông wrote on the parallels between the Indian import of Buddhism and the Chinese philosophy of Confucianism, creating an amalgamation for Vietnam. Vietnamese religious practices included Christianity, Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism, animism, and ancestor worship.\(^{326}\) Presenting Vietnam’s diversity reinforced the idea that Vietnam was culturally distinct from China.

The exhibit showed modern Vietnamese culture as the product of centuries of evolution and adaptation, combining indigenous elements with Chinese, Muong, Thai, Khmer, Cham, Arabic, and even Hellenic cultural traits. Objects in the exhibit clearly reflected the diverse sources of Vietnamese culture. The exhibit included contemporary handicrafts from several of Vietnam’s minority groups as well as ancient Cham carvings.

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325 Communist historians during this period also dated Vietnam’s history to the Hồng Bàng, for some of the same reasons. See Pelley, *Postcolonial Vietnam*, 65-66.

Examining the origin and evolution of Vietnamese culture, Beggs concluded, would help in “enlarging and nourishing our understanding of the life and customs of a gracious and friendly people.”327 The objects in the exhibit, Beggs explained, showed the “deeply rooted, indigenous culture” of Vietnam.

Pieces excavated from Oc-Eo, an ancient civilization located in southern Vietnam, provided the most striking example of the extent of outside influences on Vietnamese culture. The exhibit described the “[s]trong Greco-Roman kinship” and the “Greek, Roman, Indian, and local affinities” of coins and cameos from Oc-Eo. Several of the coins clearly depicted Roman Emperors from the early common era. The exhibit guide explained the significance of these pieces quite succinctly: Vietnamese culture, it said, “is not to be regarded primarily as sub-Chinese in nature.”328 This comment is telling, and it illustrated the way in which the Republic of Vietnam created the Smithsonian exhibit with an eye toward the Cold War. Showing the cultural development of Vietnam was, in and of itself, a worthy goal for the South Vietnamese government. It was important, though, to link Vietnamese civilization, Vietnam’s historic struggles against China, and South Vietnam’s political position in 1960.

The exhibit guide incorporated one of the dominant tropes in Vietnamese conceptions of national history: the heroic resistance to Chinese control. In 111 B.C.E., what is now Vietnam “fell under Chinese domination.” For the next thousand years, Vietnamese “national leaders . . . struggled against Chinese overlords.” The essay glossed over the period of Chinese rule, except to mention Vietnamese heroes who fought

327 *Art and Archaeology of Viet Nam.*

328 *Art and Archaeology of Viet Nam, 9.*
for independence during this period. In 939 C.E., Vietnam finally achieved “liberation” from China, but for several centuries resisted further Chinese encroachments. The Trần family, for example, “earned national fame by thrice repelling wild Mongol invaders,” while Lê Lợi ended a short period of cultural domination by the Ming Chinese.

This historic narrative was not incidental. By normalizing Vietnam’s resistance to China, the exhibit lent credibility to the Republic of Vietnam. In 1960, Vietnam again faced the threat of foreign domination. Vietnamese Communists ruled the northern half of the country and were attempting to conquer “Free Vietnam” below the Seventeenth Parallel. It was easy to see Communist control of North Vietnam as a continuation of centuries of Chinese imperial designs in Vietnam, especially because the People’s Republic of China provided material support for North Vietnam. If resistance to China was the “principal of the past,” then South Vietnam, with its anti-Communist and anti-Chinese positions, was the legitimate Vietnamese nation, at least in cultural-historic terms. 

This also may explain why Beggs’ essay made no reference to the century of French domination that immediately preceded the formation of the Republic of Vietnam. Describing the successful defeat of French forces would necessitate mentioning the crucial role of Hồ Chí Minh and the Vietnamese communists. Furthermore, in the Cold War context it was better to gloss over Western imperialism and emphasize the current threat of Communist domination.

The guide situated Ngô Đình Diệm in Vietnam’s historic and cultural development. The exhibit guide noted that Vietnamese culture “flourished” in the period immediately after Vietnam gained its independence in 939. Vietnamese dynasties

“advanced national prosperity” and established educational institutions and a civil
service. Similarly, after Lê Lợi’s heroics, civil administration improved and “the arts
again flourished.” Diệm was much like his esteemed predecessors. As the guide stated,

The history of Viet Nam is replete with periods of subjugation
followed by periods of the resurgence of its indigenous creative
genius. The recent establishment of a republican form of
government under President Ngo-Dinh-Diệm again releases the
creative urge of Vietnamese craftsmen and indicates the
revitalization of traditional arts and the flowering of new forms of
expression.330

The timing of the Smithsonian opening was an important element of South
Vietnam’s goal for the exhibit. Although the exhibit was tentatively scheduled to open in
late 1957 or early 1958, delays forced the Ministry of Education to postpone the showing.
In early 1959 Smithsonian officials suggested that the exhibit open on October 26,
Independence Day in South Vietnam. Trần Hửu Thẹ agreed, for obvious reasons. The
exhibit, as several Vietnamese officials had already stated, was an opportunity to
introduce the American public to political, economic, and social conditions in South
Vietnam. Primary among these was the creation of an independent republic, Diệm’s
election to the presidency, and the great accomplishments of the Republic of Vietnam in
its five years of existence. More than any other day, October 26 represented these ideas.

The timing of the Smithsonian exhibit was important for another, less obvious,
reason. As Thẹ was completing preparations for the exhibit, he sent Diệm a message
with some final issues that needed to be decided. It was very important, Thẹ explained,
to use the exhibit to influence the press and form public opinion. This was especially

330 Art and Archaeology of Viet Nam, 14.
important in autumn 1960 because it coincided with the Presidential campaign and
election in the United States. Thé likely believed that the exhibit could win public
support for Vietnam at a time when the candidates were most concerned with winning the
White House. Rather than try to influence American politicians directly, South Vietnam
hoped to create a wave of public support in the United States that American officials
would have to recognize.

On January 12, 1961, the exhibit began a two-week stop at Columbia University.
After the original showing in Washington D.C., New York was the most important
destination for the traveling exhibit. Showing the exhibit in New York provided access
to the largest population center in the United States. Furthermore, the people in New
York were both politically and culturally active. Ambassador Chuòng and his wife,
along with other embassy staff, made the trip from Washington to New York for the
opening of the exhibit.331

American and Vietnamese officials saw the potential of the New York stop of the
exhibit. South Vietnam’s propagandizing at the exhibit, however, may have undermined
the cause of mutual understanding. The South Vietnamese government distributed
political materials at the exhibit in hopes of influencing visitors’ views of Diệm’s
government. Some of the people who attended the exhibit expressed their annoyance at
receiving political tracts at an art exhibit. Louis Andreatta, the Executive Secretary of the

331 Chuòng to Buttinger, 6 January 1961, Folder 43, Box 8, Douglas Pike Collection: Other Manuscripts—
American Friends of Vietnam, TTU VA.
American Friends of Vietnam, sent a letter to the Vietnamese Embassy in Washington to “strongly urge that any literature available for distribution or examination at future showings be confined to that of a cultural nature.”

While assessing the reactions of visitors to the exhibit is challenging, there is evidence indicating some of the public responses. The Smithsonian and the Vietnamese embassy tried to track viewer responses in a number of ways. Beggs and Duc asked curators at other museums to report on their experiences in hosting the exhibit, including number of visitors and press coverage of the event. These concerns show that American and South Vietnamese officials were keenly aware of the public relations and international relations implications for the exhibit. The responses of the curators, along with articles in various newspapers and magazines, provide a sense of the exhibit’s ability to influence Americans’ views of Vietnam.

After leaving Washington, the exhibit traveled to a dozen other American cities. Attendance and responses varied. In Baltimore, over 10,000 visited the Baltimore Museum of Art during the exhibits run in early 1961. According to staff reports from the museum, “the exhibition was received favorable and with interest by our public, although it was felt that a certain proportion of the archaeological material appealed specifically only to rather sophisticated and informed visitors.” The museum at the University of Pennsylvania, which hosted the exhibit in the spring of 1961, had a similar experience. The museum had about 26,000 visitors during the month-long exhibition. The exhibit

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332 Andreatta to Truong Buu Khanh, 27 January 1961, Folder 43, Box 08, Douglas Pike Collection: Other Manuscripts-American Friends of Vietnam, TTU VA.

333 Denys P. Myers to Thomas Beggs, May 10, 1962. Box 46, Office of the Director, Records, 1912-1965 (RU 312), SIA.
was appealing to students and professors interested in Asian art and culture, but it also provided “a great deal of pleasure for the art public of the greater Philadelphia area.”

In St. Louis, 42,763 people attended the museum during the six week duration of the Vietnam exhibit. In Cleveland, about 50,000 people attended the museum; the visitors “expressed very real interest.”

By some measures, the Smithsonian exhibit was a success. It reached a considerable audience in several cities around the United States and it gave Diệm access to well-educated and culturally active Americans. American newspapers publicized the exhibit, meaning that many people who never saw the display still knew about it. The Republic of Vietnam used the exhibit to combine political propaganda with a more general presentation of Vietnamese cultural and history. This strategy, however, led to mixed responses from Americans. While viewers seemed to appreciate the arts and crafts, some were angered by the obvious attempt at political propaganda.

The greater failure of the exhibit had more to do with events outside of the United States. While the exhibit ran in Washington, a group of military officers initiated a coup attempt against Diệm and Nhu. Although the Ngô brothers survived the attack, early reports suggested that they had been deposed. The coup was not a page one item in American newspapers, but it did receive coverage comparable to that of the Smithsonian exhibit. Just as Diệm was mounting a cultural offensive in the United States, his regime

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334 David Crownover to Thomas Beggs, November 2, 1961. Box 46, Office of the Director, Records, 1912-1965 (RU 312), SIA.

335 Constance Gill to Thomas Beggs, April 27, 1962. Box 46, Office of the Director, Records, 1912-1965 (RU 312), SIA.
was facing its greatest domestic challenge. For the next three years, he would fight a losing battle for the hearts and minds of people in Vietnam and in the United States.

Shortly after Diệm came to power, he initiated policies intended to alter public opinion in the United States. Through public relations activities, propaganda, and the Smithsonian exhibit, Diệm hoped Americans would develop positive opinions of his regime and of Vietnamese culture in general. These activities, however, corresponded with a period of growing domestic opposition in South Vietnam. By late 1960, Americans may have had greater admiration of Vietnamese culture, but with the November coup attempt, they were skeptical of Diệm’s ability to lead the country.
CHAPTER 8

THE FAILURE OF CULTURAL PROGRAMS, 1961-1963

The November 1960 coup attempt brought attention to Diệm’s vulnerability in South Vietnam, but it was not the first sign of trouble for the regime. A few years earlier, Diệm was celebrated as the miracle man who saved South Vietnam from communism. By the end of 1960, he faced a growing rural insurgency, disaffection in the military leadership, and doubts from American advisors. These crises prompted Diệm to pursue a different course in South Vietnam’s propaganda campaigns. Diệm intensified anti-communist rhetoric, targeting it specifically at rural areas in danger of communist influence. Diệm also increased the level of self-promotion, presenting himself as the unquestioned singular authority over South Vietnam. Finally, he used propaganda and information to distance his regime from the United States. These messages corresponded with Diệm’s political, economic, and military policies in the early 1960s. Diệm could not, however, forestall the end of his regime.

Even before the November coup attempt, Diệm’s policies had elicited vocal responses from some critics of the government. In April 1960, for example, a group of eighteen prominent individuals drafted a manifesto denouncing Diệm’s repressive policies. The Caravelle Group, as they came to be known, called Diệm’s government
“antidemocratic” and likened it to “dictatorial Communist regimes.” The protest was noteworthy because members of the Caravelle Group were prominent South Vietnamese anti-communists. Some had been active in other nationalist groups and the religious sects, but at least ten of the individuals had served as cabinet ministers in either the Bảo Đại or Diệm governments.336

The Caravelle Group was not the only threat to Diệm in the spring of 1960. Secretary of State for the Presidency Nguyen Dinh Thuan, during a visit to the United States, met with Gilbert Jonas and Harold Oram to discuss conditions in South Vietnam. Thuan admitted that the communist insurgency and assassination campaigns were “very serious” matters. Around the same time, American newspapers and magazines began commenting on the lack of security in South Vietnam. Jonas brought at least one of these articles to the attention of the South Vietnamese embassy in Washington. The embassy expressed its concern about this development, noting that it might “alarm American public opinion.”337

In the months leading up to the November 1960 coup attempt, conditions worsened in South Vietnam. Vietnamese communists continued their guerrilla campaign in the countryside, assassinating village leaders, encouraging defections, and capturing materiel. By August, the U.S. State Department reported that dissatisfaction with Diệm from his own officials had reached its highest level since Diệm consolidated power in

336 Quote is from Buttinger, Vietnam, 450. For more on the Caravelle Group, see Kahin, Intervention, 122-123 and Anderson, Trapped by Success, 183-184.

337 Jonas to Churong, 15 April 1960. Folder 9110: Tài liệu v/v quan hệ giữa Việt Nam với Mỹ năm 1960 [Documents about Vietnamese relations with the United States, 1960], PTTDICH NAI. 
1956. Many of the criticisms, however, were not aimed specifically at Diệm. Vietnamese officials, like their American counterparts, saw the Nhus as the greatest obstacle to a strong, liberal South Vietnam.\(^{338}\)

As conditions deteriorated in the early 1960s, Diệm grew increasingly isolated. Although American officials blamed Diệm’s problems on his brother’s heavy-handed policies, Diệm remained loyal to Nhu and his wife. Diệm’s allegiance to his family exacerbated tensions with the United States and further alienated the population of South Vietnam. During the last years of Diệm’s presidency, Ngô Đình Nhu and Madame Nhu remained involved in South Vietnamese policies, including in the areas of propaganda and domestic information. Their intractability contributed to Diệm’s loss of support, both domestically and from his American advisors.

Ngô Đình Nhu was, according to many accounts, the most feared and hated individual in South Vietnam. Although he held no official position, he was vaguely addressed as Diệm’s “political advisor.” Nhu was responsible for internal security, a task he pursued with various extra-governmental organizations. According to Joseph Buttinger, “[t]here was not one totalitarian stratagem that Nhu failed to employ. The only weapons he never resorted to in the fight against Communism were those of democracy.”\(^{339}\)

Nhu’s pet project during the last years of Diệm’s presidency was the strategic hamlet program. The strategic hamlet program was one in a series of projects aimed at defeating the communist insurgency in rural South Vietnam. South Vietnamese peasants,

\(^{338}\) Kahin, *Intervention*, 123.

\(^{339}\) Buttinger, *Vietnam*, 446.
under the direction of national and provincial officials, built fortified hamlets to prevent communist cadres from recruiting or intimidating the local population. As part of the program, residents in the hamlets underwent ideological training. While this indoctrination putatively followed from the Personalist philosophy, it was heavily focused on the message of anti-communism. Like the strategic hamlets and other pacification programs, Diệm’s informational strategy in the early 1960s was to protect the regime by attacking the rural insurgency.

In October 1960, Diệm reorganized the government, eliminating the Ministry of Information. In the new system, a Directorate of Information was formed under the “superministry” of Civic Affairs. Trần Chánh Thành, who had fallen out of favor with Diệm, was reappointed as South Vietnam’s ambassador to Tunisia. Dr. Phan Van Tao took over control of information activities. Under Tao, the Directorate of Information pursued a different plan of action. After the election, information activities shifted their focus. Under the new directorate, “[c]overt action was given precedence over traditional overt action in order to more efficiently [sic] defeat the propaganda efforts of the Viet Cong.”

South Vietnam continued to use radio broadcasts, film screenings, and mobile propaganda units. In an attempt to undercut support for the National Liberation Front, South Vietnamese propaganda increased its anti-communist programming.

Radio broadcasts in the early 1960s covered a wide range of political and cultural topics. The repressive North Vietnamese government, for example, was a common subject of radio programming. In April 1960, for example, the subjects of broadcast programs included “The harsh actions of the Vietnamese communists against the people

340 Eight Years of the Ngo Dinh Diem Administration, 1954-1962, 494, 506.
of the North,” “Unemployment in North Vietnam,” “Communist suppression of religion,” and “Vietnamese communist policy of exploiting workers.” These were juxtaposed with the progress of South Vietnam under Diệm, South Vietnam’s growing role in the international community, and celebrations of national holidays. Information activities in early 1961 retained the earlier emphasis on sacrifice and struggle for Vietnam. The Republic of Vietnam was fighting communist propaganda meant to incite cries for greater liberties from the people of South Vietnam. The communists, one report noted, were capitalizing on the fact that many people in South Vietnam wanted the country to advance quickly from its position of underdevelopment. The Republic of Vietnam, through its information programs, needed to convince the people that it was necessary to make certain short-term sacrifices for the long-term success of the nation. Other countries, such as Turkey, Japan, and West Germany, had asked for personal sacrifices from the people and subsequently enjoyed greater national strength. Under the leadership of Ngô Đình Diệm, South Vietnam could do the same. This sacrifice, the strategy specified, was not to be made for the benefit of certain individuals, or for a minority in South Vietnam. The sacrifice was “for the people, for the nation of Vietnam [tổ-quốc Việt Nam], for us, and for posterity.”

During summer 1961, South Vietnam’s National Film Center and the United States Information Service began an effort to produce and distribute propaganda films in

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342 Trần Văn Thọ, “Chi thị về đường lối Thông Tin” [“Instructions about the policy path of information”], 10 January, 1961, pp. 3-4. Folder 17457: Hồ sơ về các hoạt động Thông tin truyền truyền năm 1961 [Folder about information and propaganda activities, 1961], PTTDICH NAI.
South Vietnam. In July, American and South Vietnamese officials determined appropriate themes for propaganda films and divided responsibilities for writing the scripts. The United States Information Service, the National Film Center, and the Office of Psychological Warfare each took responsibility for about fifteen film scripts. Earlier efforts at USIS-Vietnamese collaboration had been hampered by disagreements over messages for films, but by 1961 both sides seemed to have put aside these differences. One Vietnamese official directed his staff to “cooperate closely” with the USIS in order quickly to complete scripts for the propaganda movies.343

By the end of the year, the three offices had produced more than six thousand copies of fifty-four different propaganda films. The Republic of Vietnam reserved five hundred copies for overseas distribution; the rest were screened in Vietnam. In urban areas, movie houses were required to show these propaganda films, often before screening motion pictures. The Directorate of Information used mobile information units made from modified three-wheel motorbikes to reach villages and hamlets in more remote parts of the country. These mobile units carried projection equipment and screens that could be set up almost anywhere. In the Mekong Delta, the directorate used information boats to reach the population.

The films produced in 1961 reflected the changing priorities of the South Vietnamese government. Most of the films were aimed at stopping the rural insurgency. Some movies explained tactics for military personnel, others were aimed at introducing

343 “Bản tóm tắt phiên nhóm thứ nhất của ủy ban kế hoạch điện ảnh ngày 24-7-1961” [Summary of the first meeting of the film planning committee, 24 July 1961], p. 3. Folder 17652: Hồ sơ v/v Thực hiện phim huấn luyện và phim chiếu cho dân chúng xem năm 1961-1965 [File regarding implementing training films and movies for popular viewing, 1961-1965], PTTDIC, NAIL.
the rural population to the achievements of RVN ministries and governmental organs. In order to reach the rural population effectively, South Vietnamese officials dictated that the films be straightforward and engaging, without too many statistics or dull storylines.344

The most common purpose of the films, however, was to expose the evils of communist insurgents in the countryside. The United States Information Service produced films with the strongest anti-communist themes. In June 1961, USIS submitted a list of topics for movies to be produced in the subsequent months. These included one titled “Viet Cong and Women,” which “contrast[ed] Viet Cong propaganda aimed at women and their crimes of kidnapping, rape, [and] destruction of maternity clinics.” Another film “show[ed] a friendly, kind, idealistic man who gradually loses his temper and reveals himself as a raving, fanatic, ugly killer.”345 The USIS wrote scripts for at least two anti-communist films, “Know Your Enemy” and “Viet Cong Diary.” The techniques used in the films were representative of both American and Vietnamese propaganda at the time.

“Know Your Enemy” began with stock footage of “burning buildings, devastation . . . [an] Old woman weeping [and] wrecked house.” This was followed by a communist radio announcer, “cast for fanatical type,” describing life under communism. Halfway through the film, the first “rabid” announcer was replaced with a new voice of

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345 “42 Suggested Themes for Movies to Show Villagers in Insecure Areas,” June 22, 1961. Folder 17400: Tài liệu của BT PTT v/v thực hiện phim chiếu bóng cho dân chúng năm 1961 [Documents of the Secretary of State at the Presidency about implementing films for the masses, 1961], PTTDICH NAII.
Vietnamese communism, “a woman, but hard-looking, strident, a jittery dame with no feminine loveliness about her. And she is even more rabid and intense than the man.”

The film was meant to show the discrepancy between communist rhetoric of freedom and liberty and the violent actions of communist guerrillas. The film juxtaposed communist claims of bringing a “better life” to Vietnam with the violence and inequality of the communist system. The Vietnamese communist, the film stated, “has betrayed his native land . . . [a]nd spit upon his fathers’ tombs, and the altars of his gods.”

The central contradiction in communism, according to “Know Your Enemy,” was that it promised freedom but delivered enslavement. When the “V.C. Announcer” in the film claimed that Vietnam was subject to imperialism, the narrator responded, “Well, that is true and the truth must be faced. His imperialism! The imperialism to which he would enslave us!” Communism, with its “misshapen body of beliefs . . . nurtured with the additives of gall at the poisoned well-springs of Pekin [sic]” threatened the hard-fought independence of the Vietnamese people. The film depicted Hồ Chí Minh as the imperialists’ agent in Vietnam, labeling him the “Governor-General” of Hanoi. To show true democracy, the film included a montage of democratic symbols, including the U.S. capitol, “Congress in session, circa. [sic] 1776,” the South Vietnamese Assembly, and election crowds in Saigon.

“Know Your Enemy” drove home its anti-communist message with dramatic scenes of violence and depravity. The film used psywar photos of “murdered atrocity victims,” a dismembered female victim and a murdered nun. The film included a scene

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in which a child, recruited by the NLF, threw a bomb at a crowded market. The narrator stated, “Tragic, to be sure. But more tragic by ten thousand times, the slaughter of innocence in the heart of a child. There is a special hell for that.” At the same time, the boy was shown viewing the carnage with “a gleeful grin on his face.” The script explained that “[t]his will be pointed up the more if the boy selected is, otherwise, attractive.”

The film “Viet Cong Diary” criticized communism not only for its violence, but also for its disruption of gender and familial responsibilities. In it, a young woman member of the National Liberation Front begins to doubt her communist convictions. Early in the movie, she is described as “cold and distant,” but upon protecting a peasant who is about to be raped by another NLF cadre “for the very first time . . . she reacts . . . like a woman.” The film suggested that Vietnamese communists sacrificed morality in their attempts to subvert the South Vietnamese government. This depiction of a female cadre is especially interesting when viewed next to the RVN’s propaganda about women’s roles. The character in the film has forgotten her maternal responsibilities; they only reawaken when she sees a young girl threatened. South Vietnamese rhetoric and policies, by contrast, emphasized the importance of family and the contributions each member makes to a family unit. In the film, the breakdown of family roles and the depravity of communism go hand-in-hand.347

Other films countered communist claims that Diệm was simply a puppet of the United States. “We Accept” was produced to show that South Vietnam remained

sovereign, in spite of communist propaganda to the contrary. Another film showed Diệm discussing his relationship with the United States, “[p]roving he is no puppet, emphasizing his independence.” They could not, however, distract attention from the growing unpopularity of the Diệm regime.

In February 1961, in the face of the declining security conditions in South Vietnam, Diệm announced his candidacy for the April presidential elections. The outcome of the election was never in doubt—Diệm and his running mate, Nguyễn Ngọc Thơ, were elected with 89% of the votes in a three-way race. But the campaign gave Diệm another means of publicizing his achievements as President of South Vietnam. In a radio address to the public, Diệm reminded listeners of conditions in 1954. The communist “scorched-earth” policy had destroyed South Vietnam’s infrastructure. The army’s inadequacies were matched only by those of the education system, which “did not meet even one-twentieth of the nation’s needs.” Under Diệm, however, the “work of reconstruction has rapidly attained excellent results.” He noted new construction projects, agricultural reforms, an increased standard of living, and the expansion of education.

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349 41 Suggested Themes for Movies to Show Villagers in Insecure Areas, 22 June 1961, p. 3. Folder 17400: Tài liệu của BT PTT v/v thực hiện phim chiếu bóng cho dân chúng năm 1961 [Documents of the Secretary of State at the Presidency about implementing films for the masses, 1961], PTTDICH NAII.

350 Diệm and Tho received roughly six million votes out of 6.7 million cast. President Ngo Dinh Diem and the Election of April 9, 1961, (Saigon, 1961), 66.

351 Diem and the Election of April 9, 1961, 7-11.
Throughout February and March, Diệm hammered home the message of progress in South Vietnam. This effort was not without its challenges. On March 23, Diệm gave a press conference to discuss his candidacy. After some brief opening words, Diệm opened the floor for questions from the assembled reporters. Fielding a question about future RVN programs, Diệm responded that he wanted “to explain thoroughly the main features of a few specific subjects.” He then proceeded to spend one hour and forty-five minutes explaining programs in the areas of education (primary, secondary, and post-secondary), health, labor, and economic development. Later, an American public relations advisor suggested that Diệm had not “connected” with his audience, in large part because the press conference had lasted over three hours. Moreover, the advisor explained, “the consensus of opinion among the foreign press present was that the first question sounded too much like a plant.”

The Directorate of Information explained that programs after the election were based on Diệm’s five-year plan for South Vietnam. The three-part program called for improving military affairs, raising the standard of living, and “protecting the spirit of the masses” [bao vệ tinh thần quận chúng]. In its responsibility to the last goal, the Directorate of Information stressed the theme of anti-communism and supporting the policies of the government. The new policy called for broad distribution of

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informational materials, not only in South Vietnam but “throughout the whole territory,” from the southernmost point of Camau to the “Chinese-Vietnamese border.” Most importantly, propaganda needed to be directed at the hamlets in the countryside [thôn ấp]. For the next several years, propaganda became an integral part of efforts to quell the rural insurgency.\textsuperscript{354}

The Directorate of Information used a combination of new technology and old methods to reach the countryside. By July 1962, the Saigon station was broadcasting eighteen hours per day and the Hue station thirteen, an increase of four hours per station over earlier broadcasting. The format for radio broadcasts had changed as well, expanding to include “book reviews, poetry forums, employment assistance, sports and physical education and folk songs.” In addition, “[n]ews and commentaries were inserted into musical programs.” To ensure that the rural population could access radio signals, the government distributed radio receivers. By 1962 South Vietnam had equipped 279 villages with radios and had plans to distribute 1300 more.\textsuperscript{355} The Republic of Vietnam also boasted almost 3,000 information halls and over 9000 subposts, and 2400 reading rooms. The government had constructed 2,402 public address towers for propaganda broadcasts and over 100,000 bulletin boards for posting news and information.\textsuperscript{356}


\textsuperscript{355} Eight Years of the Ngo Dinh Diem Administration, 1954-1962, 491-492.

\textsuperscript{356} Eight Years of the Ngo Dinh Diem Administration, 1954-1962, 490.
One of the biggest challenges to Diệm’s informational campaign was the growing unpopularity of Ngô Đình Nhu and his wife. Madame Nhu’s infamy rivaled that of her husband. Buttinger claimed that she was the only person in Vietnam who could outdo Nhu in “arrogance, suspicion, power drive, and lack of candor and humanity.” As a member of the National Assembly, she was primarily concerned with women’s issues. In 1958, she took the lead in passing the “Family Bill,” which went into effect in January 1959. The most controversial articles in the bill regulated Vietnamese marital relationships, prohibiting divorce in almost all circumstances and providing harsh punishments for adultery and polygamy. Madame Nhu was also instrumental in passing a 1962 bill outlawing dancing, beauty contests, cock fighting, prostitution, and gambling.\textsuperscript{357} Her growing power during Diệm’s presidency, Karnow stated, “signaled a regime in decay.” Joseph Buttinger put it even more bluntly: “The help she gave the faltering Diem regime was the sort of help rendered a drowning man by a rock tied to his neck.”\textsuperscript{358}

Madam Nhu, like her husband, exerted influence through her involvement in political organizations. She was the founder and head of the Women’s Solidarity Movement; she also led a women’s paramilitary force. These organizations gave Madame Nhu a high profile, especially in Saigon where they marched in various parades and political celebrations. Madame Nhu and her organizations were particularly involved in commemorations of the Trưng Sisters, Vietnam’s most famous heroines.


\textsuperscript{358} Karnow, \textit{Vietnam}, 266; Buttinger, \textit{Vietnam}, 446.
In December 1961, Madame Nhu proposed building a statue to commemorate the Trưng sisters. mê Linh park, the terminus of Hai Bà Trưng street in the center of Saigon, would serve as the perfect location for such a monument. At the time, however, mê Linh park was already the home to two statues that had been constructed during the colonial period. Madame Nhu consulted with Vũ Văn Mẫu, the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, and decided that the existing statues could be torn down. Plans for the Hai Bà Trưng statue required not only the destruction of the French statues, but also fifty-three trees that surrounded them.\(^359\) The new statue was inaugurated on Hai Bà Trưng Day, March 11, 1962. The monument featured Trưng Trắc and Trưng Nhị perched atop a concrete pedestal, ready to defend the nation.

In a ceremony inaugurating the statue, Madame Nhu addressed the crowd on the significance of the Trưng sisters to South Vietnam’s struggles. Trưng Trắc, Madame Nhu pointed out, stood facing north, with “sword half-drawn from her scabbard . . . ready to march forward into battle.” Trưng Nhị faced the opposite way “in an attitude full of resolution and vigilance.” The back-to-back pose of the sisters may have been intended as a subtle denunciation of American attacks on the Diệm regime. Besides facing the obvious enemy to the North, the sisters, “with their backs to one another . . . watch the

\(^{359}\) Technical Office, City of Saigon (Vũ Tiễn Huấn?) to Secretary of State for the Interior, January 4, 1962. Folder 17653: Tài liệu của văn phòng BT về các hoạt động văn hóa năm 1962 [Documents of the Secretary of State about cultural activities, 1962], PTTDIC, NAII. See also Vu Văn Mẫu to the Director of the budget and foreign aid, 9 January 1962. Folder 17653: Tài liệu của văn phòng BT về các hoạt động văn hóa năm 1962 [Documents of the Secretary of State about cultural activities, 1962], PTTDIC, NAII.
full circle of the horizon” for Vietnam’s enemies. The goal of all Vietnamese patriots, she continued, was “the defense of Viet Nam against all invasions and oppressions, no matter from whence [sic] they come.”

Madame Nhu’s subtle critique of the United States quickly changed into a scathing indictment of South Vietnam’s supposed allies:

Aside from the howling of the Communist wolves, we are really surprised to see a section, reputedly serious, of the people of the Free World continue to mouth certain sermons of pseudo-liberalism which indeed are an insult to the democratic principles of Free Viet Nam.

Although the speech was intended to honor the sacrifices of the Trưng sisters, the subtext was that it was for the glory of Madame Nhu and the ruling clique of South Vietnam. She heralded the steadfast and resolute commitment of South Vietnam’s leadership, explaining that

it is weak and it is childish to waste one’s time, especially now, in defaming without foundation the leaders who refuse any compromise and who have decided to give their lives for the country.

Madame Nhu also noted the South Vietnam’s great achievements during seven years of Diệm’s leadership. Recalling these accomplishments, the people of South Vietnam “shall understand that in doing our utmost we shall achieve the ideal of the Trưng Sisters thanks to ourselves, their proud descendents.”

360 Madame Nhu (Tran Le Xuan), “Vietnamese Women’s Day address at the commemorative Ceremony honoring the Trưng Sisters, National Heroines.” Roy Jumper and Nguyen Thi Hue, Notes on the Political and Administrative History of Viet Nam, 1802-1962 (Saigon, 1962), 202-203.

361 Madame Nhu (Tran Le Xuan), “Vietnamese Women’s Day address at the commemorative Ceremony honoring the Trưng Sisters, National Heroines.” Roy Jumper and Nguyen Thi Hue, Notes on the Political and Administrative History of Viet Nam, 1802-1962 (Saigon, 1962), 202-203.
It was not only Madame Nhu’s words that served to glorify the regime. The statue itself was a clear effort to lionize Madame Nhu. She had taken responsibility for building the monument, a fact that she noted in the beginning of her speech. Furthermore, the appearance of the Trưng sisters in the statue seemed familiar to many observers. Madame Nhu claimed that the sculptor had designed two “typically” Vietnamese women by looking at women in villages and towns around Vietnam. In fact, the face on one of the sisters bore a striking resemblance to Madame Nhu herself. Several descriptions of the statue note that Madame Nhu served as the model for at least one of the sisters.

The Trưng sisters’ memorial illustrated both the promise and failure of Diệm’s attempts to use history to strengthen his legitimacy. Throughout his regime, he pointed to the great sacrifices of Vietnamese heroes who had fought for independence and unification. Diệm tried to adopt this legacy, portraying himself as a patriot continuing the struggle for independence. This strategy could have been fruitful for Diệm. His points of reference were familiar to Vietnamese people everywhere; indeed, he invoked the same heroes who had been celebrated for centuries. Many commentators attribute Hồ Chí Minh’s popularity, in part, to his ability to claim the mantle of historic resistance for North Vietnam and the Vietnamese communists. Diệm, however, was tarnished by the disconnect between his rhetoric and the conditions in South Vietnam. By the early 1960s, any legitimacy he had earned as a patriot and nationalist had been undermined by unpopular policies and especially the megalomania of Nhu and his wife.

While most of the population was exposed to South Vietnamese propaganda in one way or another, it is difficult to determine their reactions to Diệm’s message.
Without the benefit of free elections or accurate public opinion polling, one must judge popular support for Diệm using other criteria. The 1963 coup, and the public demonstrations that preceded and followed it, proves a strong animosity toward Diệm and Nhu by summer 1963. But this explanation is not entirely fulfilling. It does not explain, for example, why Diệm was able to remain in power for almost a decade. American support and a strong internal security force were not enough for Diệm to hold the presidency. Until the late 1950s, at least, Diệm apparently enjoyed at least moderate support from the population.

Diệm’s propaganda campaign may have been partly responsible for fostering public support and confidence after 1956. It is also possible that cultural programs had a negligible effect; that support for Diệm, if it existed at all, grew out of other factors. But Diệm’s cultural program, considering its breadth and its centrality to his idea of creating a nation, cannot be ignored. Its ambitious content, in fact, may have contributed to growing discontent at the end of the 1950s, when it became clear that Diệm’s rhetoric provided few benefits to the public.

Diệm’s precarious position in the early 1960s altered his informational strategy in the United States as well. In a report to the Ambassador of Vietnam, the Oram firm explained the changing contingencies in South Vietnam and the United States that led to a change in public relations strategies. In the early years of the Diệm regime, the Oram firm used “simple anti-communist” materials to encourage support for Diệm’s regime.\(^{362}\)

\(^{362}\) Report on Oram activities, no date (circa 1959-1960), p. 5. Folder 8982: Tài liệu của Bộ Tổng PTT v/v thiết lập và hoạt động của các Tòa đại diện VN ở ngoài quốc năm 1960 [Documents of the Secretary of
By 1960, however, Americans were more aware of events in Vietnam, partly as a result of South Vietnam’s PR campaign. As a result, the Oram firm insisted that it would have to create informational materials that not only raised the specter of communism spreading to South Vietnam, but also highlighted specific achievements of the Diệm regime. The AFV, according to an Oram employee, was “far too busy” to prepare these materials, meaning the burden for a growing informational campaign would fall to the PR firm. The increased effort promised positive results: activities “emphasizing the client’s positive achievements in authoritative journals by respected writers . . . will maintain the degree of support achieved earlier.”

In early 1961, Diệm announced a series of reforms in the hopes that they would translate to greater satisfaction in South Vietnam and, by extension, encourage Diệm’s supporters in the United States. Jonas used Diệm’s 1961 reforms in his public relations activities after the November coup. In March he wrote to the editors of *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *Life* inquiring about their lack of coverage of Diệm’s February 14th announcement of reforms in South Vietnam. According to Jonas, space constraints precluded reporting on the reforms, but the magazines planned in-depth coverage to correspond with the April 9th elections in South Vietnam.

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363 Report on Oram activities, no date (circa 1959-1960), p. 5. Folder 8982: Tài liệu của Bộ Tương PTT v/v thiết lập và hoạt động của các Tòa đại diện VN ở ngoài quốc năm 1960 [Documents of the Secretary of State at the Presidency regarding the establishment and activities of Vietnamese representative offices in foreign countries, 1960], NAII HCMC.

364 Letter from Jonas to Nguyen Phu Duc, 13 March 1961. Folder 8982: Tài liệu của Bộ Tương PTT v/v thiết lập và hoạt động của các Tòa đại diện VN ở ngoài quốc năm 1960 [Documents of the Secretary of State at the Presidency regarding the establishment and activities of Vietnamese representative offices in foreign countries, 1960], NAII HCMC.
The importance of the election to Vietnam’s public relations campaign in the United States came up in other correspondence between Jonas and the South Vietnamese embassy. Jonas explained to embassy officials that the upcoming election and Đệм’s announcement of reforms significantly improved American opinion of South Vietnam after the November coup attempt. Jonas’ assessment of the elections was surprisingly frank. He conceded that the elections served nothing other than a symbolic purpose, and indicated that he understood that Đệм would rig the results. “[I]f the elections are reasonably free,” Jonas asserted, “the forward momentum will have been sufficiently established” to rebuild the support that was lost in November. Jonas went so far as to suggest the actual percentage of the vote that Đệm should receive for the best public relations value: “70% or so.”

Throughout the early months of 1961, South Vietnamese officials in Saigon, Ambassador Chuong, and Gilbert Jonas formulated a new, aggressive, and covert PR campaign in the United States. In January 1961, Chuong wrote a letter to South Vietnamese Foreign Minister Vũ Văn Mẫu raising concerns about Vietnam’s propaganda methods in the United States. Chuong stated that the Vietnamese Embassy in the United States could be “useful and influential” [ich và anh hưởng] in basic information capacities in the U.S. The Embassy, Chuong suggested, could serve as a clearinghouse for information about South Vietnam. Every day, Chuong explained, professors, students, tourists, and businessmen wrote letters to the Embassy requesting information.

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365 Jonas to Duc, 13 March 1961. Folder 8982: Tài liệu của Bộ trưởng PTT v/v thiết lập và hoạt động của các Tòa đại diện VN ở ngoại quốc năm 1960 [Documents of the Secretary of State at the Presidency regarding the establishment and activities of Vietnamese representative offices in foreign countries, 1960], NAILI HCMC.
on Vietnam. Journalists and writers sent manuscripts to the Embassy for fact-checking. By answering these requests, the Embassy could gradually gain influence over Americas’ views of South Vietnam. If the Embassy failed to answer these inquiries, or responded too slowly, people would look elsewhere for information on Vietnam. Chưởng was presumably referring to the American press, which was printing more negative assessments of the situation in South Vietnam.

Chưởng also suggested that South Vietnam could effectively manipulate American press reports on Vietnam by facilitating or obstructing journalists’ activities in Vietnam. In February 1961, Chưởng met with Jonas to discuss American journalists’ coverage of Ngô Đình Diệm and the Republic of South Vietnam. The problem, according to Jonas and Chưởng, was that “virtually all the news dispatches emanating from Saigon” after the coup of November 1960 were “of a critical or negative nature.” Furthermore, the news dispatches from Saigon constituted the “overwhelming majority” of news coverage on Vietnam. The solution, Jonas and Chưởng agreed, was to influence news coverage by facilitating visits to Vietnam by “competent and objective” American reporters. In early 1961, South Vietnam began arranging for “friendly” reporters to return to Vietnam. Jonas lamented that “[o]ur more understanding and informed friends” had not reported from Vietnam in at least a year, and sometimes two or three. Return visits to Vietnam would raise their credibility and help them publish articles in American

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366 Chưởng to Mậu, 15 January 1961. Folder 9211: Hồ sơ v/v quan hệ giữa Việt Nam với Mehico, Brazil, Mỹ năm 1961 [Files about relations between Vietnam and Mexico, Brazil, and the United States, 1961], PTTDICH NAII.
newspapers and magazines.\textsuperscript{367} In a January letter to the Vietnamese foreign minister, Chuong mentioned that the Embassy had arranged for a Time-Life reporter to go to Vietnam to produce an article and a film on Vietnam.

The Diệm government also discouraged “unfriendly” journalists from reporting on Vietnam. A minor scandal erupted over the RVN’s decision of October 1960 to expel Associated Press reporter Rene Inagaki from South Vietnam. In the winter of 1960-1961, the Associated Press lodged a complaint with the RVN. In a series of letters to Nguyễn Phu Đúc, the legal counselor of the Vietnamese embassy in Washington, Gilbert Jonas of the Oram group expressed concern over the manner in which the RVN was handling the affair. Jonas cautioned Đúc that the Associated Press was not satisfied with South Vietnam’s explanation for the reporter’s dismissal, namely that he was inaccurate and unobjective. He also relayed the decision of the General Manager of AP to publicize its dispute with South Vietnam and lodge a complaint to the U.S. State Department.

The Inagaki affair illustrated several important elements of the Diệm’s public relations activities. First, it shows that Diệm’s aggressive public relations activities sometimes resulted in negative press for the Republic of Vietnam. As Gilbert Jonas pointed out, the dispute with the Associated Press would alienate other American media outlets, “thereby further harming Viet-Nam’s image and prestige here [in the United States].” Furthermore, the episode demonstrated that the Republic of South Vietnam determined the direction of its informational campaign in the United States. Although the RVN hired the Oram firm for its public relations in the United States, the Diệm

\textsuperscript{367} Memo, Jonas to Chuong, 7 February 1961. Folder 9211: Hồ sơ v/v quan hệ giữa Việt Nam với Mehico, Brazil, Mỳ nam 1961 [Files about relations between Vietnam and Mexico, Brazil, and the United States, 1961], PTTDICH NAII.
government made the final decision on important matters. Gilbert Jonas certainly had a better sense of the damage the Inagaki affair could do to the RVN, but he was forced to acquiesce to Diệm’s wishes.\textsuperscript{368}

The Oram firm’s intensified public relations campaign in the early 1960s paid some dividends for Diệm and the Republic of Vietnam. In early March 1961 Gilbert Jonas arranged for Wesley Fishel, Michigan State professor and confidant of Ngô Đình Diệm, to grant several interviews to discuss conditions in South Vietnam. On March 6, 1961, Fishel appeared on “Dialing the News,” a television program broadcast from Newark, New Jersey. Later that evening he gave an interview on the “Barry Gray Show” in New York, the program with the largest nighttime audience of any New York radio show.\textsuperscript{369} In the interview, Fishel had the opportunity to explain the successes of the Republic of Vietnam, and to justify America’s economic commitment to the Diệm regime. While Fishel and the show’s host agreed that American funds had been misappropriated in Laos, Fishel asserted that “in Vietnam the situation is exactly the opposite. The aid the United States has given to Vietnam has been enormously successful.”\textsuperscript{370}

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\textsuperscript{368} Jonas to Duc, 5 January, 1961. Folder 9211: Hồ sơ v/v quan hệ giữa Việt Nam với Mehico, Brazil, Mỹ năm 1961 [Files about relations between Vietnam and Mexico, Brazil, and the United States, 1961], PTTDICH NAI.

\textsuperscript{369} Jonas to Duc, 13 March 1961. Folder 8982: Tài liệu của Bộ Tưởng PTT v/v thiết lập và hoạt động của các Tòa đại diện VN ở ngoài quốc năm 1960 [Documents of the Secretary of State at the Presidency regarding the establishment and activities of Vietnamese representative offices in foreign countries, 1960], NAI HCMC.

\textsuperscript{370} Transcript of Barry Gray program, WMCA, New York. Folder 9211: Hồ sơ v/v quan hệ giữa Việt Nam với Mehico, Brazil, Mỹ năm 1961 [Files about relations between Vietnam and Mexico, Brazil, and the United States, 1961], PTTDICH NAI. Jonas to Duc, March 9, 1961. Folder 9211: Hồ sơ v/v quan hệ giữa Việt Nam với Mehico, Brazil, Mỹ năm 1961 [Files about relations between Vietnam and Mexico, Brazil, and the United States, 1961], PTTDICH NAI.
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Jonas was also active in promoting South Vietnam’s cause in the print media. In addition to the radio and television interviews, Jonas arranged an interview between a United Press International (UPI) reporter and Wesley Fishel. As Jonas explained to Ambassador Chuong, this interview was particularly important because UPI provided material to all the Scripps-Howard newspapers in the United States. As part of a new propaganda strategy of having respected writers publish articles in “authoritative journals” such as academic publications, Jonas helped Fishel write an article on South Vietnam and Ngô Đình Diệm that appeared in *Asian Survey* in 1961. This article, while appearing in an academic journal, was a partisan attempt to promote Diệm’s achievements as president of South Vietnam. Written in the months after the abortive coup against Diệm in 1960 and published to correspond with the presidential elections in April 1961, the article read as a strong defense of Diệm’s accomplishments as president and an endorsement of his continued rule in South Vietnam.

Fishel’s article began by describing Diệm’s successes as leader of South Vietnam. “It is well known” and a “matter of record,” Fishel argued, that Diệm promoted national unity, brought stability to South Vietnam, and eliminated the vestiges of colonialism. Fishel asked incredulously, “[w]hy should anyone have attempted to overthrow this constructive nationalist government?” In answering this question, Fishel and Jonas mounted a strong defense of Diệm’s policies in South Vietnam. The American press, they claimed, had paid little attention to South Vietnam’s economic advances during

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371 Report on Oram activities, no date (circa 1959-1960), p. 5. Folder 8982: Tài liệu của Bộ Trưởng PTT v/v thiết lập và hoạt động của các Tòa đại diện VN ở ngoài quốc năm 1960 [Documents of the Secretary of State at the Presidency regarding the establishment and activities of Vietnamese representative offices in foreign countries, 1960], NAII HCMC.
Diệm’s presidency. Americans also knew little of the important agricultural reforms undertaken by the Diệm regime. Fishel, using statistics provided by Jonas, argued that South Vietnam “has made significant economic progress.

Fishel contended that Americans also held flawed views of political and social conditions under Diệm. News of domestic opposition to Diệm’s rule, for example, convinced Americans that Diệm was lacking in public support. Fishel argued that the non-communist domestic opposition to Diệm was actually a very small group and that “their interests are not always identical with those of the mass of the people.” Of course, the November 1960 coup against Diệm called into question Fishel’s assessment of anti-Diệmist sentiment in South Vietnam. Fishel addressed the coup directly, pointing out that “98 per cent of the armed forces, plus the entire police force, remained loyal [to Diệm]. Furthermore, neither the civilian ‘opposition’ nor the general public joined the uprising.”

Fishel concluded the article by showing that Diệm was initiating more political reforms and liberalizing his regime. South Vietnam was scheduled to hold presidential elections on April 11, 1961. Fishel assured readers that the elections would be fair and would reflect popular will in South Vietnam. Diệm and his running mate, Nguyễn Ngọc Thơ, were facing two opposition tickets. A committee was formed to oversee the election and insure fair campaigning and voting. With these measures insuring a proper election, the results would illustrate the level of Diệm’s popular support and the extent to which he had implemented democratic reforms in South Vietnam. Fishel wrote as if the outcome of the outcome was in doubt, but, like Diệm’s first election to the presidency,

the election of 1961 would be a farce. Nonetheless, as far as Fishel and the Diệm government were concerned, the elections were the pinnacle of Diệm’s democratic reforms.

Jonas worked aggressively to improve Diệm’s image in the American media. He provided *New York Times* reporter Tillman Durdin with statistics for an editorial comparing progress in North and South Vietnam.373 On another occasion, Jonas contacted Walter Lippmann after he had written a column criticizing the South Vietnamese government. Jonas arranged for Wolf Ladejinsky, an agricultural advisor for South Vietnam, to meet with Lippmann and plead the government’s case. In October 1961, *National Geographic* published a positive article on South Vietnam. Peter White, the author, was an AFV member who had worked with Jonas on South Vietnamese public relations activities.374

Jonas’ attempts to manipulate American press coverage of events in South Vietnam reflected the new strategy of trying to mask Oram’s public relations activities. In a letter to Vũ Văn Mậu, Chüng also explained his desire to conceal the role of the RVN in the PR activities of the Oram group and the American Friends of Vietnam. Chüng cited an article in *The Reporter* that cast doubt on the effectiveness of certain public relations techniques employed by foreign governments, agreeing with the author’s assessment that public relations were most successful when the audience did not know the source of the information. Chüng’s concern that Americans would dismiss

373 Jonas to Duc, March 9, 1961. Folder 9211: Hồ sơ v/v quan hệ giữa Việt Nam với Mehico, Brazil, Mỹ năm 1961 [Files about relations between Vietnam and Mexico, Brazil, and the United States, 1961], PTTDICH NAII.
information coming to a group with clear ties to the Vietnamese government had led him to overrule the Oram firm and the AFV in 1959 when they proposed inviting high-ranking Vietnamese government officials to participate in a conference in the United States.

As Diệm’s presidency continued, the Republic of Vietnam looked for other ways to spread its message to Americans. In 1963, officials in the administration proposed using the television and radio broadcasts in the United States to create greater sympathy for South Vietnam among the American public. Phan Van Tao, the Director General of Information [Tổng Giám Đốc Thông-tin], suggested producing a film entitled “Vietnam’s Two Wars” for broadcast on National Educational Television (N.E.T.) in the United States. Distributing the film through N.E.T. would provide South Vietnam with a valuable audience in the United States. N.E.T., which was created in 1952, was a predecessor to the Public Broadcasting Corporation. It broadcast in-depth programs on important political, social, and cultural issues. N.E.T. was a good medium through which South Vietnam could spread its propaganda. It used eighty-four stations and another one hundred affiliates to reach a broad audience of Americans “scattered throughout the country.”

The N.E.T. audience, while broad, was also generally well-educated and could play an important role in shaping public opinion in the United States.

Tao’s proposal came at a time when South Vietnam faced a serious public relations challenge in the United States. By the summer of 1963, Americans had learned

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of the Buddhist revolts in South Vietnam and many questioned Diệm’s leadership.

Americans were growing concerned with the anti-democratic nature of Diệm’s regime. At the same time, the communist insurgency was growing stronger, raising questions about South Vietnam’s long-term future. At this time, Tao explained, it was important to initiate a campaign for public opinion in the United States. “Vietnam’s Two Wars” would help Americans “understand the important issues in the Republic of Vietnam” and simultaneously “recover from the poison distortions in the news which a stubborn group in the American press ordinarily spread.”376 The film, as the title suggested, would discuss two sides of the struggle in Vietnam. It would correct Americans’ misconceptions about the military struggle, showing the “undeniable achievements” of South Vietnam in undermining the communist rebellion. At the same time, the movie would demonstrate Vietnam’s successes in fighting “poverty, ignorance, and underdevelopment.”377

As conditions deteriorated in South Vietnam in 1963, various officials in Diệm’s government redoubled their efforts to improve Americans’ views of the Republic of Vietnam. Phan Van Tao continuously petitioned other members of the government to assist him in spreading positive news about South Vietnam. In a letter to the President’s

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375 Letter, Tao to Director of the President’s Office, July 3 1963. Folder 17940: Tài liệu của PTT, Bộ Thông Tin về các vấn đề liên quan tới Thông tin năm 1963 [Documents of the President’s Office, Ministry of Information about the problem of coordinating information, 1963], PTTDICH NAII.

376 Letter, Tao to Director of the President’s Office, July 3 1963. Folder 17940: Tài liệu của PTT, Bộ Thông Tin về các vấn đề liên quan tới Thông tin năm 1963 [Documents of the President’s Office, Ministry of Information about the problem of coordinating information, 1963], PTTDICH NAII.

377 Letter, Tao to Director of the President’s Office, July 3 1963. Folder 17940: Tài liệu của PTT, Bộ Thông Tin về các vấn đề liên quan tới Thông tin năm 1963 [Documents of the President’s Office, Ministry of Information about the problem of coordinating information, 1963], PTTDICH NAII.
Office, Tao explained that reporters always asked him for information about the government’s activities. He implored cabinet ministers to send him monthly reports of their ministries’ achievements in order to raise the prestige of the government and demonstrate to the world the struggle of the Vietnamese people.378

Tao also tried to minimize the damage of Diệm’s policies toward the press. In October 1962, South Vietnam had effectively prevented NBC reporter James Robinson from reporting in Vietnam by refusing to extend his permission to stay in the country. In June 1963, in the midst of the Buddhist crisis, Tao sent a secret letter to Ngô Dinh Nhu suggesting the South Vietnam invite Robinson to return. This action, Tao explained, would have positive consequences for international opinion of the Diệm government. In the nine months that Robinson had been absent, conditions in South Vietnam had improved significantly. The strategic hamlet program and campaigns to encourage communist defectors had raised public opinion and impressed the reporters stationed in South Vietnam. Robinson’s return would provide further positive press for the government of South Vietnam. If, however, he “stubbornly” continued his negative reporting, Diệm would be justified in expelling him once again. The public and the international press would find it difficult to blame [the government] and would have more sympathy” for Diệm in this eventuality.379

378 Letter, Tao to Director of the President’s Office, July 3 1963. Folder 17940: Tài liệu của PTT, Bộ Thông Tin về các vấn đề liên quan tới Thông tin năm 1963 [Documents of the President’s Office, Ministry of Information about the problem of coordinating information, 1963], PTTDIC NAI.

379 Letter, Tao to Nhu, June 27, 1963. Folder 17940: Tài liệu của PTT, Bộ Thông Tin về các vấn đề liên quan tới Thông tin năm 1963 [Documents of the President’s Office, Ministry of Information about the problem of coordinating information, 1963], PTTDIC NAI.
By 1963, Diệm’s public relations efforts had failed to improve his standing, either among Vietnamese or Americans. Events early in the year only compounded Diệm’s problems. In January, ARVN forces engaged a battalion of Viet Cong soldiers at Ap Bac, about fifty miles outside of Saigon. The Viet Cong troops, despite being severely outnumbered, inflicted heavy casualties on the ARVN soldiers and killed three Americans advisors before withdrawing. American officials publicly declared the battle a victory, but it highlighted ARVN’s deficiencies and hinted at the need to bolster South Vietnamese forces.

An even greater blow to the Diệm government came a month later with the release of the Mansfield Report. In December 1962, Senator Mike Mansfield had led three other Senators on a fact-finding mission to Vietnam. In February, Mansfield released a report on his trip, and it did not paint a glowing picture of conditions in South Vietnam. Mansfield stated that Diệm was no more popular at the end of 1962 than he had been in 1955, and his government was no more secure. Defeating the NLF, Mansfield concluded, would require a considerable American military commitment.380

The Mansfield Report elicited a strong response in the American press, which Ambassador Trương relayed to Saigon. At the end of February, he sent two dispatches to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs summarizing relevant articles in American newspapers. The articles were almost universally critical of the Diệm government and wary of the possibility of greater American military and economic involvement. The St. Louis Post Dispatch noted the danger of the conflict in Vietnam becoming an American war. It also

380 For the battle of Ap Bac and the Mansfield Report, see Kahin, Intervention 142-147.
called the Diệm government “arbitrary, repressive and unpopular.” Other editorials called for the United States to withdraw its support from Diệm if he failed to liberalize his regime.381

Any possibility that the Diệm regime would regain the confidence of American officials and the American public was lost in the following months. In May, the Buddhist crisis erupted in Hue, starting what Joseph Buttinger labeled the regime’s “mad race toward disaster.”382 The crisis began when officials in Hue announced that they would enforce a ban on public displays of religious flags. A group of Buddhists, preparing to celebrate the anniversary of the Buddha’s birth, gathered to protest the ban. South Vietnamese troops fired on the gathering, killing nine people. In the following weeks, Buddhists staged demonstrations against the Diệm government and its repressive policies. On June 11, Thich Quang Duc, a monk from Hue, self-immolated at a busy intersection in Saigon. A photo of the burning monk became one of the iconic images of Diệm’s failed regime.

Duc’s self-immolation incited waves of protest, both in Vietnam and in the United States. Diệm and the Nhus, however, were unapologetic. They believed that communists were directing the protests in an attempt to discredit the regime. Throughout the summer, Buddhist protests continued, as did the governmental recriminations. Officials in the Kennedy administration encouraged Diệm to cut ties with the Nhus, but he remained loyal to his brother. By August, Diệm had alienated all but his most ardent supporters.

381 Chuong to Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, 28 February 1963, Folder 9379: Hồ sơ v/v quan hệ giữa Việt Nam và Mỹ năm 1961 [Files about relations between Vietnam and the United States, 1961], PTTDICH, NAII.

382 Buttinger, Vietnam, 464.
When South Vietnamese military officers began planning to overthrow Diệm and the Nhus, American officials refused to dissuade the plotters. On November 1, 1963, a group of officers initiated a coup, killing Diệm and Nhu. Madame Nhu was in the United States at the time, otherwise she likely would have been killed as well.383

Diệm’s regime, though apparently stable in the late 1950s, deteriorated in the early 1960s. Joseph Buttinger, a keen observer of events in South Vietnam, noted that “Diem’s temperament, social philosophy, and political behavior seemed to preclude any prospect of his ever becoming a popular hero.”384 But, as Buttinger himself conceded, success for South Vietnam, from the perspectives of the United States and of Diệm himself, did not require that the population embrace Diệm in the way Vietnamese loved Hồ Chí Minh.385 The United States was willing to accept a degree of unpopularity, as long as it did not threaten Diệm’s ability to guarantee the survival of a non-Communist South Vietnam. A combination of factors, including the failure of American and South Vietnamese cultural programs to create a strong sense of Vietnamese nationalism, precluded Diệm’s ability to withstand popular opposition in the early 1960s.

383 For the Buddhist crisis and the coup, see Kahin, Intervention 147-181 and Buttinger, Vietnam 464-474.
384 Buttinger, Vietnam, 385.
385 Buttinger, Vietnam, 438.
CHAPTER 9

CONCLUSION

The historical literature on the Vietnam War is extensive. During the war, journalists, historians, and political theorists debated American involvement in Vietnam. In the quarter century since the war ended, Vietnam has remained a fertile area of study for military and diplomatic historians. A large number of these works focus on two related questions: why did the U.S. commit itself to a military struggle in Vietnam, and why was the U.S. eventually defeated in this struggle? In spite of recent attempts to broaden the field of diplomatic history, much of the scholarship on the Vietnam War continues to address these “traditional” diplomatic and military issues.\(^{386}\)

By studying the roots of U.S. involvement and the reasons for America’s defeat, historians have improved Americans’ understanding of the war in Vietnam. They have

also, however, obscured other important issues about American-Vietnamese relations from the 1950s to the 1970s. The focus on traditional military and diplomatic topics has come at the expense of cultural studies of the Vietnam War. My dissertation addresses this omission by combining two recent trends in diplomatic history: I explore the cultural dimensions of foreign relations and I “internationalize” my dissertation by examining the motivations, decisions, and experiences of Vietnamese actors. Since the early 1980s, the field of diplomatic history has witnessed two dominant historiographical trends. In 1980, Charles Maier criticized scholars for failing to adequately internationalize the field of American diplomatic history. He noted that historians of American foreign relations were largely parochial and inward-looking and that they showed an incomplete knowledge of the rest of the world. This critique encouraged a generation of American diplomatic historians to pay greater attention to the influence of outside forces on American foreign policy. Over the next decade, Michael Hunt, Bruce Cummings, Akira Iriye, and others showed the benefits of looking outside the United States in the study of foreign relations.

Around the same time as Maier’s critique of the provincialism of American diplomatic historians, the field came under attack from those who believed that it was too traditional in its methodology. These critics accused diplomatic historians of paying inordinate attention to the actions and decisions of elite actors, most often white men.


They also suggested that the field of diplomatic history stagnated by asking old questions and failing to consider new ways of viewing foreign relations. Borrowing from trends in other historical fields, anthropology, and comparative studies, these critics implored diplomatic historians to consider the role of culture in the creation and implementation of foreign policy. Diplomatic historians responded with studies on the roles of race, class, and gender in international relations. What has often been called the “new” diplomatic history is now a vibrant and integral part of the field, with no signs of disappearing.

The two predominant trends in diplomatic history in the 1980s—the internationalizing and cultural movements—often remained separate and distinct. Some of the most influential works in the field, however, skillfully joined the international and cultural elements of foreign relations. John Dower’s War without Mercy was an early and effective example of this type of study. In it, Dower mines American and Japanese sources to explore how each side viewed the other (and the “other”) during World War II. Importantly, Dower showed how these cultural attitudes affected the prosecution of the war and the administration of the peace in the Pacific. Dower’s book created a standard against which future cultural-international studies would be judged.\(^{389}\)

Other historians wrote comparable stories of the cultural and international dimensions of American foreign policy. Michael Hunt’s Ideology and American Foreign Policy pushed these studies into the nineteenth century. Akria Iriye convincingly showed how examinations of culture did not have to sacrifice the traditional attention to diplomacy, economic forces, and balance-of-power concerns. With Awkward Dominion, Frank Costigliola expanded the cultural terrain that came under the purview of diplomatic

\(^{389}\) Dower, War without Mercy.
In the 1990s, diplomatic historians such as Andrew Rotter, Mark Bradley, Piero Gleijeses, Reinhold Wagnleitner, and Jessica Gienow-Hecht continued to find a balance between culture, internationalism, and traditional aspects of U.S. foreign policy. This trend continued with important works by Nathan Citino, Matt Connelly, and Jeremi Suri.

My dissertation extends the cultural-international focus to South Vietnam during the Diệm period. Through access to official government sources at the National Archives in Hồ Chí Minh City, I paint a picture of the domestic and foreign policy decisions of the Diệm government. I also approach the period through the lens of culture, thus asking different questions about the Diệm era. Other historians of the period have tended to focus on the question of why the United States committed its resources to defending South Vietnam. I have chosen, however, to focus on how the United States and the Republic of Vietnam tried to fulfill the cultural requirements of nationhood in the years after Geneva.

As Prime Minister and then President, Diệm created the mechanisms necessary to reach the public with his vision of a Personalist republic. The tenets of Personalism, at

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least as Diệm presented them to the citizenry, were used to win allegiance for Diệm’s regime and its anti-communist policies. During this period, the United States used information and propaganda to cultivate an image of Diệm as an effective leader and South Vietnam as a stable nation. By the end of 1956, it appeared that Diệm had indeed created a nation that could survive as independent and non-communist.

The period from 1957 to 1960 represented the peak of Diệm’s power in South Vietnam. Having built the state apparatus of South Vietnam, he focused on creating the historical and cultural foundations for the nation. After 1957, South Vietnam’s information facilities expanded rapidly. The Ministry of Information used radio broadcasts, print media, libraries, cultural centers, and exhibitions to reach the people with its message. Diệm continued to rely on anti-communist messages in South Vietnamese propaganda and information, but he also expanded cultural programs in order to demonstrate that the Republic of Vietnam was neither a novel state nor a puppet nation. Through public ceremonies, educational reforms, and historical preservation, Diệm tried to join the Republic of Vietnam to the long history of Vietnamese civilization.

Diệm’s attempts to claim the mantle of Vietnam’s past coincided with a change in American cultural strategies. With Diệm’s successful election to the presidency and the adoption of the South Vietnamese Constitution, American officials reconsidered the emphasis of Diệm’s presidency in informational activities. USIS-Saigon chose instead to elevate the presence of American culture, as seen in libraries, movie distribution, and events bringing attention to the American political system. These programs appeared to have the desired effect of increasing public awareness of, and admiration for, American culture. They also, however, ran counter to Diệm’s policies of the same period. While
Diệm called on all South Vietnamese to sacrifice for the cause of Vietnamese independence, the United States suggested that everyone in a capitalist society could be wealthy and happy.

Contradictory messages were not the only obstacles to cultural nation-building in South Vietnam. Many of Diệm’s social and economic policies alienated the populace. By the late 1950s, signs of growing rural unrest were emerging in South Vietnam. From 1961-1963, opposition to Diệm spread rapidly throughout the country. Diệm’s propaganda campaign in the United States could not hide the unpopularity of Diệm, Ngô Đình Nhu and Madame Nhu. By the summer of 1963, the Buddhist crisis all but guaranteed Diệm’s ouster, which followed that November.

A cultural-international approach has allowed me to demonstrate the extent of South Vietnamese participation and direction in the nation-building process. Some scholars of the Diệm period have downplayed Diệm’s role in formulating and directing nation-building programs. Diệm’s position has been minimized for at least two reasons. First, most historians rely on American documents to tell the story of the Diệm government; as a result the actions of American actors are almost always predominant. Second, historians have often paid close attention to the areas of nation-building that are most closely related to state power. It is not surprising, for example, that studies of economic aid to South Vietnam create the impression of the United States in a position of undisputed control over the Diệm government.

But while Diệm’s regime could not match the United States in economic power or military strength, it did find other areas where it could dictate elements of the nation-building process. When it came to formulating an ideology around which the state would
be formed, Diệm had as much influence as American officials. Similarly, South Vietnamese policies showed that Diệm’s government could determine, to some extent, the propaganda and cultural messages that were disseminated in the country.

While this dissertation places Diệm and other South Vietnamese actors in positions of greater importance in the 1950s and 1960s, it should not suggest that Diệm’s regime needs to be viewed more favorably or gauged as a success. Highlighting Diệm’s actions is not the same as endorsing them. Historians have long criticized Diệm for failing to create a true South Vietnamese nation, and these assessments are accurate. Diệm’s rather rapid decline in the early 1960s illustrates the fundamental weaknesses in his regime. While a concerted cultural campaign may have prolonged his reign, it was not enough to ensure his long-term success.

The manner in which Diệm’s regime crumbled provides a vivid illustration of his failed cultural strategy. In November 1960, Diệm had weathered a serious political challenge. Although Diệm survived the 1960 coup attempt, it raised serious concerns about the future of his regime. For the next three years, Diệm faced growing opposition from a rural insurgency and from American officials who had soured on his leadership. In the face of these challenges, the Republic of Vietnam continued to pursue cultural programs, both in South Vietnam and in the United States. Diệm altered his messages to conform to new political realities, but without success. When Buddhist monks joined the growing anti-Diệm chorus in 1963, it was only a matter of time before Diệm lost his grip on power.

If a single event encompassed the bankruptcy of the Diệm regime in 1963, it was Thich Quang Duc’s self-immolation. Malcolm Brown’s photo of the burning monk
became the iconic image Diệm’s bankrupt regime. This event, and the effect it had on support for Diệm’s government, shows the importance of public perceptions in U.S.-South Vietnamese relations in the early 1960s. Duc’s self-immolation did not create unrest in South Vietnam. The monk’s decision to commit suicide in such a public manner grew out of his strong opposition to Diệm’s policies, an attitude shared by many South Vietnamese citizens. It is impossible to speculate about Diệm’s fate in the absence of Duc’s protest, but there is little doubt that the striking image accelerated the loss of confidence in Diệm’s leadership.

Throughout his presidency, Diệm had tried to employ the use of imagery and public displays to strengthen his regime. Obviously, Diệm’s policies differed considerably from Duc’s immolation, but they were based on the same fundamental assumption that one can manipulate and channel public attitudes. Diệm enacted programs to foster national pride and a sense of community in South Vietnam. He tried to use these attitudes to strengthen support for his position as South Vietnam’s head of state. But Diệm was fighting an uphill battle. The messages in his programs often contradicted the public’s existing attitudes. For example, Diệm might be able to convince people in South Vietnam to admire and emulate historic national heroes. He could not, however, convincingly present himself as one of these heroes in the face of his inegalitarian rule. Duc’s action had the opposite effect: he simply confirmed the attitudes widely held in the public.
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