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Matthew Masur. "Exhibiting Signs of Resistance: South Vietnam's Struggle for Legitimacy, 1954-1960." *Diplomatic History* 33.2 (2009): 293-313. DOI: 10.1111/j.1467-7709.2008.00763.x. http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-7709.2008.00763.x .

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Review by **James M. Carter, Drew University**

In this article, the author is taking on what has become a substantial historical problem within the overall problem of the Vietnam War: the (non)existence of "South Vietnam" as a legitimate and sovereign actor. The argument addresses this issue by suggesting that the 1960 Smithsonian exhibit, "The Art and Archaeology of Viet Nam," represented a real effort by Ngo Dinh Diem to make himself and his regime appear to be legitimate in the eyes of American onlookers.

For Masur, the exhibit "captured many of the salient features of America's relationship with South Vietnam during the critical period up to the Vietnam War:" a relationship marked by collaboration and tension (293). Though the Americans and their Vietnamese partners often clashed, they shared "the goal of a stable, non-Communist South Vietnam." Masur goes on to offer an interpretation of the exhibit as part of Diem's effort to appropriate Vietnam's historical narrative of struggle against odds. The idea was simple: take this heroic narrative of national struggle and harness it to the regime's own ends and thereby deprive the enemy (North Vietnam) of this obviously useful and legitimizing past. If successful, it would make the regime being propped up by the United States seem real and even perhaps organic.

In the end, according to the author, the exhibit did not produce the desired effect; quite the opposite, it failed completely. The failure here is attributed in part to bad timing: Diem's support in Vietnam was falling off steeply at the time of the exhibit. Consequently, it ended up highlighting the regime's numerous shortcomings and failures in the eyes of Americans.

This argument is problematic on several levels. First is its ambivalence. Masur acknowledges early on that the United States "implemented a host of political, economic,

and military programs in a futile attempt to establish South Vietnam as a credible entity" (296-7). This of course means that "South Vietnam" never came into existence as a sovereign state despite the enormous patronage of the United States. Yet, the article everywhere refers to Diem's "government," and the "two countries" of the United States and "South" Vietnam, and so on, thus legitimizing its existence. This may seem like nit picking., and it would be for a review of a book on the Vietnam War, perhaps, but not for a review of an article with this issue at its center.

For decades since the war began, historians have both referred to "South Vietnam" and been decidedly ambivalent about it. There are good reasons for this ambivalence. It is historic. As historians, we must feel a tinge of the guilt felt by others who collaborate in distortions. We have merely adopted the language of policy makers and planners and have thus legitimized, at least tacitly, their agenda. Do we as academics really have to contend with the existence of "South Vietnam" simply because the French or the Americans announced it as an expedient, found a client, and declared him the new leader of this new state? It seems shameful that we have already given so much attention to a matter that, on one hand, is not that important, and on the other, was invented from the start by imperial/great power nations to subvert the rule of law and stymie independence for former colonies.

Furthermore, one of the main thrusts of the essay is to demonstrate that the Vietnamese, and Diem in particular, had agency, that they were active nation builders. The great mistake of the literature to this point apparently has been to suggest the Americans had overwhelming power to decide the fate of the southern half of Vietnam, to determine its leaders, to fix its economy, to build its police, its army, its air force, its civil service, to pave its roads, build its bridges, dredge its canals, construct its airports, and to supply its food and consumer goods. All of these things are undeniably true. The enormous historical record makes this perfectly clear. And, it is not as if Diem has been granted no agency as a player in this drama. His role has, however, been relatively circumscribed: he has been defined in the overwhelming majority of the literature as a power-hungry despot who cared not for the people of Vietnam, who saw himself as ordained to rule, and who had no real-world plan for how to do so. He is recorded as being venal, corrupt, and inept.[1]

In some way, I appreciate the effort to depict a real human being, all dimensions realized, and I believe there is another part of the historical record that can do that. This may come down to a question of degree. Diem can't now be turned into the very antithesis of what the overwhelming historical record demonstrates that he was. This reversal of

[1] Robert Buzzanco, *Masters of War: Military Dissent and Politics in the Vietnam Era*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996). George Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975*. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2001). George McT. Kahin, *Intervention: How America Became Involved in Vietnam*. (New York: Anchor Books, 1987). Seth Jacobs, *America's Miracle Man in Vietnam: Ngo Dinh Diem, Religion, Race, and U.S. Intervention in Southeast Asia*. (Duke University Press, 2005).

fortunes appears to animate much of Masur's argument. He finds Diem a man of "unique vision," and "modern sensibilities," who was the "very model of a modern politician" because he used "advertising" and the "rhetoric of liberalism." He possessed "savvy," "ambition," and "flexibility." Masur favorably quotes others who characterize Diem as "forward looking," an advocate of "change," and "economic development." He also "embraced modern methods of persuasion" (imprisonment and torture included?) (298, 300).

Out of all of this, the author wishes to make the following point: "the story of the Smithsonian exhibit builds on these important studies [recasting Diem], reinforcing their characterization of Diem while also rounding out the picture" (298). Thus, for the purposes of this essay, it is essential that Diem played a role in the exhibit. And, indeed, the author has Diem onboard. He "signed off on" Vietnam's participation in the exhibit; he "strongly believed in overseas propaganda," and various pamphlets "outlined Diem's strong commitment to preserving and popularizing Vietnam's cultural traditions" (301).

Beyond these assertions, however, Diem is nowhere on record actually "strongly" supporting anything of the kind. The author takes quotes from the exhibit pamphlets (which he points out were for propaganda purposes) and then inserts those quotes strategically to make it appear that they represent the words, thoughts, and intentions of Diem. The documentary record does not support this supposition, nor has Masur provided convincing evidence. In fact, the essay is heavily loaded with untested assertions with little or no documentation. To wit: "In the struggle for national legitimacy, the perceptions of people outside Vietnam could be almost as important as the attitudes of the Vietnamese themselves." This conclusive statement requires further discussion and evidence. For starters, despite Masur's comments on p. 299, we do not know from this essay to whom Masur is referring. Also, "the South Vietnamese government recognized that it needed to shape the ways in which Americans thought of South Vietnam. Vietnamese officials believed that a reservoir of good will would help keep American financial support flowing into South Vietnam." Again, one wonders to whom Masur is referring. The documentary record indicates that there is not a single Vietnamese official who said this and Masur provides no footnote for this statement. Even when Diem is presented with the program for the exhibit by another member of his regime, the author writes that "he personally approved [the] plans." He is not on record here as having uttered a single positive word in response (302). That is, at the very least, odd. In the whole of the essay, I found Diem quoted exactly one time—a 1957 speech which, like all political speeches, contains the kind of vague and utterly embraceable language that can be put to any purpose.

Another of the motifs presented here is the idea that the exhibit would demonstrate the vibrancy and longevity of the "Republic of Vietnam," meaning Diem's regime, as opposed to highlighting Vietnam as a whole and, thus northern Vietnam also. The idea was basically that in appropriating the resistance narrative, viewers (Americans) would see Diem's regime as something that had been around a while. This element of the

argument, too, is confusing, not well sourced, and unconvincing. Masur has Vietnam "again fac[ing] the threat of foreign domination," and the resistance narrative is thus useful for Diem to resist "foreign domination" by showing that he is legitimate (307). As a matter of history, the threat of foreign domination came not from other Vietnamese, nor could it have. It came from the United States. And the cultivation and/or influence of any resistance narrative was injurious to the very relationship Diem needed to build and maintain.

The exhibit itself appears not to have highlighted a specific, independent southern state, but rather all of Vietnam. And when members of regime attempted to insert a more political message, this was rejected. Too often, the author seems to adopt the narrative of the propaganda and, at times, it becomes unclear where the propaganda ends and the analysis begins.

The real story here is that all of this (that is, the effort to invent this new non-communist state) is made up—a falsification aimed explicitly to convince people of something that wasn't. Ultimately, the whole thing failed anyway—and, Masur argues, so did the exhibit. But, the Americans continued and even increased aid to sustain the teetering regime. The point is this: if the United States takes the decision that this or that part of the world falls within its strategic interests, then no propaganda is needed. There can be little doubt that Diem and others after his assassination engaged in propaganda efforts. The 1960 Smithsonian exhibit was, it seems clear, a relatively small part of a larger effort. Any leader uses propaganda, rhetoric, various forms of coercion, alliances and networks, and employs powerful friends against weaker ones. This doesn't necessarily distinguish Ngo Dinh Diem from John F. Kennedy from Joseph Stalin from Genghis Khan.

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—Commissioned for H-Diplo by Edwin Martini, Western Michigan University