

America's Miracle Man in Vietnam Roundtable Review



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Author's Response by Seth Jacobs, Boston College

One of the advantages to conducting a roundtable like this long past a monograph's publication date is that the author will have achieved some distance, temporal and emotional, from his or her work. Ideally at least, he or she will be more receptive to criticism than might have been the case in the heady days after the book left the bindery. I am sure that if James Carter, Andrew Johns, Edward Miller, and Joseph G. Morgan had offered their thoughtful and incisive assessments of *America's Miracle Man* in late 2004 my response would have been defensive and even cranky. At a remove of nearly three years, and with another book on Ngo Dinh Diem published in the interval,¹ I find myself frequently nodding in chagrined agreement as I read my colleagues' reviews.

To begin with the most embarrassing—because they are so manifestly accurate—criticisms: Morgan is correct to point out that Francis Cardinal Spellman and Representative Clement Zablocki were absent from the pivotal 7 May 1953 luncheon where Diem made the acquaintance of Senator Mike Mansfield. I stand by my characterization of that meeting as “one of the most fateful encounters of the postwar era” (43)—Mansfield was, after all,

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He has also published *Cold War Mandarin: Ngo Dinh Diem and the Origins of America's War in Vietnam, 1950-1963* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), and "'No Place to Fight a War': Laos and the Evolution of U.S. Policy toward Vietnam, 1954-1963" in *Making Sense of the Vietnam Wars: Local, National, and Transnational Perspectives*, Mark Philip Bradley and Marilyn B. Young, eds. (Oxford University Press, 2007). His current project is *The Universe Unraveling: United States Policy toward Laos, 1954-1962* (Cornell University Press, forthcoming).

¹ Seth Jacobs, *Cold War Mandarin: Ngo Dinh Diem and the Origins of America's War in Vietnam* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006).

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instrumental in keeping Diem in office during the subsequent Battle for Saigon—but Spellman and Zablocki did not attend. Miller is likewise on target in his observation that Bao Dai was no longer Vietnam's emperor in 1954, having presented the imperial sword and sash to representatives of the Viet Minh almost a decade earlier and formally abdicated; when he returned to power in 1949 at Paris's behest, it was as "chief of state," even though Washington officials and the American media still referred to him as "emperor." I'll confess another mortifying gaffe, unnoticed by the reviewers but caught by one of my graduate students: in my list of nonwhite television stars of the 1950s, I lumped "Ricky Ricardo" together with Ossie Davis and Sidney Poitier (104). Davis and Poitier were, of course, real people, while Ricky Ricardo was a fictional character on the *I Love Lucy* Show. My apologies to Desi Arnaz.²

Johns raises a more profound and troubling issue. Characteristically, he does so in the gentlest way, at the end of a generous review, when he notes that "the reader can be forgiven for asking where Diem is." Miller is more strident on this point. Indeed, it forms the gravamen of his commentary. Diem, he declares, "is all but absent from key parts of Jacobs' narrative." Miller objects to my "casting choices," which do not allow "Vietnamese actors" to enjoy top billing. Even Diem is permitted to play "only a bit part" while the "starring roles" in the "drama" go to Mansfield, Spellman, Dwight Eisenhower, John Foster Dulles, Thomas Dooley, Joseph Buttinger, and those other Americans who saw in Diem the ideal mix of anticommunism and anticolonialism and who used their influence both to elevate him to South Vietnam's highest office and keep him there for nine years. (Because I like theatrical terminology, and because I recently reread the *Eumenides* to help my eldest daughter prepare for a class presentation, I'll press Miller's simile further and designate J. Lawton Collins the Greek Chorus of my tragedy: prophetic, empathetic, interacting intermittently with the other characters onstage, but ultimately unable to thwart the workings of fate.) I concede the accuracy of Miller's claim that my approach to the so-called "Diem experiment" is "American-centric." All of the archives I draw upon are in the United States; every one of my scholarly, journalistic, and pop-culture sources is in English; and I neither speak nor read Vietnamese. If ever a book deserved the label "American-centric," mine does.

Is this a weakness? It certainly would be if I had set out to write a biography of Diem or an account of Vietnamese political and social movements in the early Cold War era. But I did not undertake any such project. (I am sure Miller will agree that I lack the language skills to do so.) This is a book about American ideology and how it influenced policy decisions, how it condensed a complex, baffling geopolitical challenge into an easily understood formula and thereby enabled statesmen like Eisenhower and Dulles to craft policy in the

² This slip-up was corrected when *America's Miracle Man* went into its second printing.

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belief that they knew what they were doing. My subject is not Diem himself but the manner in which he and his country were perceived in the United States. That is why I titled the book *America's Miracle Man in Vietnam* and why chapter three bears the subtitle "America's 'Asia' at Midcentury." Note that "Asia" is in quotations: most Asian countries in the Eisenhower years, including Vietnam, were a blank slate experientially for all but a few Americans. Yet, as Harold Isaacs so brilliantly demonstrates in *Scratches on Our Minds*, Americans had a number of "ideas, notions, and images . . . in their heads" about Asia, and these made up the universe within which U.S. government officials weighed options and fashioned strategies.³ I endeavor to show how American ideas, notions, and images—specifically racist and religious ones—led policymakers to conclude that Diem was the perfect viceroy to prevent South Vietnam's absorption by the red empire. I also try to explain why these long-implanted biases enabled Washington officials to ignore or reject the accumulating evidence that their policy was not working.

Does such a methodology perpetuate what Miller calls "the puppet thesis"? Do I "discount Diem's agency" and lay aside the "possibility that American decisions might have been influenced by Vietnamese actors"? This charge is a bit overstated. I give Diem credit for being an effective networker: "[L]ike most politicians, he cultivated the support of influential patrons by seeking out their company and telling them what they wanted to hear" (25). Diem was shrewd enough to understand that American cold warriors came in different stripes and responded to different overtures; thus he emphasized his devoutness when lobbying conservative Catholics like Spellman and played the "third force" card to great effect with liberals like Kennedy, Mansfield, and Buttinger. More important, Diem had the perspicacity to build a power base in the United States. While other anticommunist Vietnamese like Phan Huy Quat, Tran Van Huu, and Nguyen Van Tam conducted their campaigns for the premiership either in their native land or with Bao Dai on the French Riviera, Diem concentrated for the most part on winning over American government officials and influential private citizens. He recognized that Washington, not Paris or Saigon, would have the final say in determining who occupied the Norodom Palace. Granted, I could have devoted more space to this subject—I compensate in my second Diem book—but *America's Miracle Man* does not portray Diem as a puppet.

That said, it is true that I consider the "Diem experiment" essentially America-driven and that I would not change a word of the statement Miller finds so offensive: i.e. "From the beginning, Diem's government was an American creation" (26). This does not mean that I subscribe to a fantasy of American omnipotence or that I view the world beyond the United

³ Harold Isaacs, *Scratches on Our Minds: American Images of China and India* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1958), 11.

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States as pliable and helpless, its destiny determined by verdicts arrived at in Washington. I simply acknowledge power realities. At the time of Diem's investiture as South Vietnamese premier, America was the wealthiest and strongest country in history, projecting its influence into every time zone and inhabited latitude. Its economy was the engine of global growth. Its military was mightiest on earth by every index available, except for that of men in arms. The Eisenhower era marked the high tide of American hegemony. By contrast, South Vietnam barely existed in 1954. Created by the Geneva conferees as a temporary political convenience with a two-year expiration date, it lacked almost all of the criteria of nationhood. A bewildering variety of ethnic, religious, economic, and political groups competed for control in Saigon and the provinces. Much of the arable land lay fallow. Transportation and communications systems were in disrepair. French businessmen, consumers, and capital fled the country, plunging it into economic free-fall. Once the Geneva-imposed ceasefire took effect, the Vietnamese National Army disintegrated. Politically, economically, and militarily, South Vietnam was about as weak as a nation could get, and the one factor keeping it afloat was Washington's determination to deny it to the communists. Meanwhile, Ngo Dinh Diem, alone among anticommunist Vietnamese politicians, had worked tirelessly to ingratiate himself with the right people in the United States, telling Americans from Georgetown to Manhattan to East Lansing that only a leader like himself who had not collaborated with either the communists or the French could keep South Vietnam from retiring behind the iron curtain. Given the strategic importance that Eisenhower, Dulles, and other elite statesmen assigned South Vietnam, and in view of that nation's utter dependence upon America for its existence, I would argue that the least controversial, most self-evident statement in my book is my assertion that "Diem never would have been named premier had he not been Washington's candidate" (53).

Still, it may be objected, any account of a major policymaking initiative that restricts itself to American sources will inevitably present a skewed picture of the environment in which key decisions were reached. Doesn't thorough understanding of U.S. foreign policy require language skills and archival research in the country being engaged? Isn't Johns right to contend that incorporating South Vietnamese perspectives "would only serve to enhance the analysis"? Not necessarily. Diplomatic historians have celebrated the trend toward utilizing multiarchival research to place national policy in a larger regional or global context, but there are pitfalls to such an approach. Fredrik Logevall identifies one in his prizewinning (and multiarchival) analysis of Lyndon Johnson's Vietnam policy, noting that the historian's excitement at having discovered new primary sources in a foreign archive may lead him or her to place too great an emphasis on those materials. "An international history of the war . . . that made Washington just one of several major players," Logevall contends, "would run the danger of distorting history by giving greater influence to some of

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them than they in fact deserve.”⁴ This, I submit, is the trap into which Miller and other young historians—Jessica Chapman and Philip Catton come most readily to mind—have fallen: in their zeal to revise the record by incorporating South Vietnamese voices, they have lost sight of the fact that Washington ultimately held the purse strings and the whip hand. Miller makes a valuable contribution to Vietnam War scholarship by documenting how Diem mobilized support among non-communist Vietnamese in the early 1950s, and I admit that I was surprised to learn about such episodes as the Unity Congress and subsequent National Congress (or “October Congress”)⁵; even so, the suggestion that these tactics were more decisive than American pressure in compelling Bao Dai to offer the premiership to Diem is preposterous. Does Miller honestly believe that Diem would have become premier if the Eisenhower administration had *opposed* his appointment and insisted that Bao Dai designate someone else? Or, to construe Miller’s position less extravagantly, does he think that Washington did not care much about what happened to South Vietnam after the French left, and that the Americans would have accepted whomever Bao Dai appointed, regardless of that candidate’s apparent ability or willingness to battle the communists? The first assumption is, of course, counterfactual and impossible to disprove, but I consider it highly dubious; the second is demonstrably false even for those of us who only labor in American archives.

Diem owed his elevation to high office to the United States. He moreover depended upon Washington to sustain him in that office, as became blindingly obvious in 1963 when the Kennedy administration withdrew its support and Diem’s government collapsed. To state these facts does not disempower Diem or reduce him to a “caricature.” It simply recognizes that he, like any other historical actor, operated under certain constraints, and that one of these was his neocolonial relationship with the United States, a relationship he resented—he often snubbed American advice in order to prove his independence—but one that he was never able to throw off.

Apart from the question of how much countervailing power Diem possessed in his role as America’s South Vietnamese strongman, the reviewers raise other important issues. Johns and Carter correctly note that my use of race as a category of analysis is not original. I don’t know that I would go as far as Carter in labeling this approach “fashionable,” but I am

⁴ Fredrik Logevall, *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), xv.

⁵ Edward Miller, “Vision, Power, and Agency: The Ascent of Ngo Dinh Diem, 1945-1954,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 35.3 (October 2004): 433-458; *idem*, “Grand Designs: Vision, Power, and Nation Building in America’s Alliance with Ngo Dinh Diem, 1954-1960” (Ph.D. Dissertation: Harvard University, 2004), 84-89.

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certainly not the first scholar to explore how racist beliefs rationalized and justified U.S. policy toward Vietnam. I do believe, however, that *America's Miracle Man* contributes to the salutary inclination among diplomatic historians to problematize simplistic notions of American anti-Asiatic racism.⁶ There was more subtlety to Washington's "Asia" than an unrelieved parade of TV and cinematic Orientalia—power-hungry despots, sensuous dragon ladies, helpless heathens, comical loyal servants, Confucius-quoting detectives, and the like—and policymakers never viewed Asia in monolithic terms. They may have mouthed the domino theory's rhetoric of interchangeability, but they did not believe that one Asian nation was much the same as any other. Rather, conceptualization of Asia in the White House, State Department, Pentagon, and CIA was complex, positing a hierarchy of "good" Asian states, like South Vietnam, which had a fighting chance to escape communism's clutches, and "bad" ones, like Laos, which might be doomed no matter what measures the United States took. In addition, while Eisenhower and the men who advised him unquestionably understood Asia in terms of stereotypical images, these images were neither static nor all-inclusive. American impressions of Asian countries changed over time, most dramatically in 1949, when communist victory in the Chinese Civil War demolished Pearl Buck-ish visions of a Christianizing and democratizing China and transformed America's erstwhile enemy Japan into a gallant outpost of freedom. Although I think my book unpacks policymakers' ethnocentrism in interesting and sometimes innovative ways, I do not claim to be a pioneer on this front. "Race" is decidedly the more conventional half of my thesis. If anyone is still reading *America's Miracle Man* five years from now—if professors are still assigning it to their students—it will be because of what the book has to say about religion.

Religion, I am pleased to note, has received increasing attention from diplomatic historians, although many still consider it disreputable.⁷ (The notion that we live in a country where politics and religion do not mix is remarkably impervious to contra-indications, even among scholars.) Andrew Preston's marvelous recent article arguing for "the enormous potential for religion within the new cultural diplomatic history" signals, I hope, that religion will soon join other broadly accepted interpretive categories like gender and race

⁶ See for example Mark Bradley, *Imagining Vietnam and America: The Making of Postcolonial Vietnam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Melani McAlister, *Epic Encounters: Culture, Media, and U.S. Interests in the Middle East* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

⁷ Some excellent recent works in this vein are Joseph M. Henning, *Outposts of Civilization: Race, Religion, and the Formative Years of American-Japanese Relations* (New York: New York University Press, 2000); Andrew J. Rotter, "Christians, Muslims, and Hindus: Religion and U.S.-South Asian Relations, 1947-1954," *Diplomatic History* 24.4 (Fall 2000): 593-619; *idem*, *Comrades at Odds: The United States and India, 1947-1964* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000), esp. ch. 6.

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as tools for explaining what drives U.S. foreign policy.⁸ It may even merit its own chapter in the next edition of Michael Hogan and Thomas Paterson's field-defining historiographical guide.⁹ As deployed in *America's Miracle Man*, however, it fails to convince Carter, who considers it less important than Diem's ability to "effectively wield power," and Miller, who doubts its causal utility. Carter refers specifically to the 1955 Battle for Saigon, in which Diem crushed his Binh Xuyen rivals and persuaded Washington at "the proverbial eleventh hour" to cancel plans for his replacement. The difficulty here seems to arise from Carter thinking I've written something that I haven't. At no point do I contend that Diem's victory had nothing to do with his continued sponsorship by the Eisenhower administration; in fact, I devote an entire chapter to the Battle for Saigon precisely *because* of its significance in enabling Diem to stave off dismissal. My argument is that the battle was "irrelevant to America's goal of containing communism in Southeast Asia" (173). The Binh Xuyen were not communists, after all, and Ho Chi Minh could hardly fail to have been delighted by the spectacle of Diem laying waste to his own capital because of an inability to compromise with powerful anticommunist factions. Likewise, Diem's persecution of the incontestably anticommunist religious sects Cao Dai and Hoa Hao hamstrung his, and America's, future attempts to knit together a strong, unified state capable of resisting the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong. Yes, Diem did win the take-no-prisoners shootout that tore Saigon apart in the spring of 1955, but it was an unnecessary, avoidable, and ultimately self-defeating triumph whose significance lay not in what it revealed about Diem's prestige in South Vietnam but, rather, in how it was refracted through the American press and seized upon by the Eisenhower administration to justify prolonging a disastrous U.S. foreign policy.

Miller's objection is more far-reaching, and I suspect that I will not be able to respond in a manner that will satisfy him. He claims that I fail to "establish causal linkages between particular cultural phenomena and particular U.S. policy decisions." He points out, correctly, that "ideas about race and religion are invariably unstable, contested, and subject to redefinition," which presents a serious methodological obstacle for any historian attempting to link cause and effect. How can I argue that race and religion were the master variables impelling Washington to embrace Diem when one statesman, John Foster Dulles, employed derisive stereotypes of Asians and Buddhism to advocate sticking with the "Diem experiment" and another, J. Lawton Collins, did the same thing in pleading for Diem's deposal? I have two replies to this challenge, both, I fear, insufficient. First, as I note in my introduction, ideology is not totalizing and does not prohibit agency. The very internal

⁸ Andrew Preston, "Bridging the Gap between the Sacred and the Secular in the History of American Foreign Relations," *Diplomatic History* 30.5 (November 2006): 798.

⁹ Michael J. Hogan and Thomas G. Paterson, *Explaining the History of American Foreign Relations*, Second Edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

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contradictions that Miller identifies enable some people to negotiate and subvert ideological premises, even though they cannot escape ideology altogether. In fact, I single out Collins as one of those people: “[H]e managed to bend the terms of hegemonic ideological notions about ‘the Orient’ and ‘non-Western faiths’ to argue against America’s investment in Diem” (20). Collins, however, was one of the very few to display such resourcefulness; the vast majority of geopoliticians, press lords, pundits, and academics in Eisenhower’s America thought the way Dulles did. Miller is right to assert that racist and religious ideas “can be different things to different people,” but for the greater part of Diem’s tenure in office they were effectively the same thing to those Americans responsible for crafting Washington’s policy toward Vietnam.

Second, I think that Miller has detected an unavoidable feature of cultural and social history, one that Robert Buzzanco famously lambasted in his “Where’s the Beef?” article and that I am sure will come in for greater denunciation as more and more diplomatic historians take the cultural turn.¹⁰ When dealing with ideas, values, feelings, perceptions, predispositions and all of the other factors that are essential to the unfolding of American foreign policy but that nonetheless fall outside the bounds of rationally maximizing economics or balance-of-power strategy, it is not possible to pinpoint causation with the precision that Marxists or structuralists would like. This is just the nature of the beast. It should not lead us to conclude that race, religion, gender, etc. have no causal force (common sense cries out against such an inference), or that they are wholly dependent on the operation of firmer processes like class struggle or the security dilemma. It should inspire us to more explicit formal systematization and greater methodological rigor. The best recent work in diplomatic history applying modes of analysis borrowed from other disciplines and fields—Paul Kramer with race, Robert Dean with gender, Andrew Rotter with religion—acknowledge the internally contradictory nature of their subjects but manage, through inventiveness and sophistication, and often by drawing upon the kind of evidence more conservative scholars find reliable, to show a persuasive correspondence between cultural constructs and diplomatic events.¹¹ I attempt to do the same in *America’s Miracle Man*. Whether I succeed or not depends upon the reader.

A final word before I conclude what has become an awfully long-winded response. I’ve always hoped that my work would generate controversy and inspire strong reactions. Books like that make for the best seminar discussions. They also spend minimal time

¹⁰ Robert Buzzanco, “Where’s the Beef? Culture without Power in the Study of U.S. Foreign Relations,” *Diplomatic History* 24.4 (Fall 2000): 623-632.

¹¹ Paul A. Kramer, *The Blood of Government: Race, Empire, the United States, and the Philippines* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006); Robert Dean, *Imperial Brotherhood: Gender and the Cold War* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001); Rotter, *Comrades at Odds*.

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gathering dust on library shelves. To judge from these spirited reviews, especially Miller's, I have cause for optimism.