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## War Stories: The Taylor-Buzzanco Debate and How We Think about the Vietnam War

In 1983, eight years after the fall of Sài Gòn, the journalist Fox Butterfield published an article in the *New York Times Magazine* about trends in scholarship on the Vietnam War. As a correspondent who had covered Vietnam during the late 1960s and early 1970s, Butterfield knew well the passion and bitterness with which Americans had debated the conflict. In the course of researching the article, however, he made a surprising finding. Vietnam, he wrote, “is sparking renewed interest—though without the explosive rancor” of the war years. Scholars had begun to look at the war from a more dispassionate perspective; their goal, according to Butterfield, was no longer to make moral judgments about the conflict but “to find out what really happened and why.” The results of the new research promised to overturn the old arguments made both by the war’s supporters and by its critics. “The picture of the Vietnam conflict that is emerging from the new research shows a war that was more complex, more morally ambiguous, than either the doves or the hawks had maintained,” he declared.<sup>1</sup>

From the vantage point of 2006, Butterfield’s article makes for fascinating reading. His interview list included the authors of many of the most influential books on the war and on modern Vietnamese history published during the 1980s and 1990s. He also accurately reported on many key interpretive developments in Vietnam War studies, and he noted that a growing number of US colleges and universities were offering courses on the war. In retrospect,

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the article was quite prescient on these points. Yet Butterfield appears much less prescient in forecasting the advent of “morally ambiguous” interpretations of the war. The past quarter century has seen a great many developments in scholarship on the Vietnam War, but an overall decline in the propensity of historians to make moral judgments about the conflict is not among them.

This essay examines a contemporary strand of scholarly discourse about the war in which moral issues have featured especially prominently: a debate between the historians Keith Taylor and Robert Buzzanco. This debate still appears to be in its early stages; nonetheless, it has already attracted a good deal of attention, especially in academic circles.<sup>2</sup> This attention stems not only from the fact that the debate touches on questions about the war that are still highly contested, but also from the fact that both participants seem to be writing with contemporary events (especially the war in Iraq) in mind. In addition, interest in the debate has been fueled by the intensely personal quality of the arguments made by each author. In the article that sparked the controversy, Taylor presented his views autobiographically and in terms usually reserved for accounts of religious conversions. In his response to Taylor, Buzzanco was less spiritually minded but equally emotional, and he suggested that Taylor’s claims were not merely wrong but dangerous. The Taylor-Buzzanco exchange suggests that, contrary to Butterfield’s expectation in 1983, the last two decades have not produced a ratcheting down of the moral and emotional content of academic writing about the Vietnam War. For American historians, as for many of their fellow citizens, the old questions and the old feelings about Vietnam are as salient today as they have ever been.

### **Terms of Debate: Exceptionalism, Materialism, and the Cold War**

The Taylor-Buzzanco debate can be read as the collision of two subfields of historiography that have traditionally had little to do with each other: American diplomatic history and Vietnamese history. Buzzanco—who describes himself as “one of the nation’s leading experts on the Vietnam War and the dynamics that accompanied this time period”<sup>3</sup>—is an Americanist and a specialist in the history of US foreign relations. Like many of the US scholars who have written about the war, he has focused mainly on questions having

to do with American decisions, American strategies, and American sources. As we will see, Buzzanco does not ignore the Vietnamese groups and the other non-American parties who were involved in the war. Still, the ideas, motives, and experiences of Americans are his primary concern.<sup>4</sup> Taylor, in contrast, hails from a very different neck of the academic woods. He is a highly regarded scholar of premodern Vietnam and has published extensively on topics such as Buddhism, Confucianism, kingship, Hán-Nôm poetry, and early modern regionalism. More recently, he has extended his analyses of many of these topics into the twentieth century. His scholarship shows that he is an accomplished philologist who has mastered multiple linguistic and literary traditions, including *quốc ngữ*, Classical Chinese, and the premodern Vietnamese script *Nôm*.<sup>5</sup>

The Taylor-Buzzanco debate hardly marks the first time that Vietnam history specialists and US diplomatists have not seen eye-to-eye. During the 1970s and 1980s, Vietnam historians often criticized their Americanist counterparts for writing about the Vietnam War without paying attention to Vietnamese historical realities. In response, the diplomatists complained that Vietnam specialists were preoccupied with pre-1945 history, and that they had produced little actual research on the war. Prior to the 1990s, each group's criticism of the other had considerable validity. In recent years, however, the old complaints increasingly have been rendered moot by a new wave of scholarship on the war. For example, Vietnam specialists such as David Elliott, Kim Bao Ngoc Ninh, Sophie Quinn-Judge, Robert Brigham, Ang Cheng Guan, Tran Thi Lien, Pierre Asselin, Balazs Szalontai, Christopher Goscha, and Liên-Hằng Nguyễn have revolutionized scholarly knowledge of Vietnamese politics, culture, and society during the war years.<sup>6</sup> Meanwhile, diplomatists like Fredrik Logevall, Mark Lawrence, Chen Jian, Qiang Zhai, and Ilya Gaiduk have displayed a new willingness to approach the study of the American intervention in Vietnam from an international perspective.<sup>7</sup> Particularly intriguing and pathbreaking contributions have been made by Mark Bradley and Philip Catton, both of whom have published books based on research in both American and Vietnamese archives.<sup>8</sup> It seems certain that the future of Vietnam War studies will be the exclusive province neither of Americanists nor of Vietnam specialists but will belong instead to those scholars who can move between and among

these and other subfields. From this perspective, the Taylor-Buzzanco debate—which pits an Americanist who does not read Vietnamese against an expert on premodern Vietnam—seems something of a throwback insofar as it recalls a time when the participants’ respective specialties had less in common than they do today.

Despite the retrospective qualities of this debate, it should not be dismissed as irrelevant to the present state of Vietnam War studies. Indeed, close examination of the Taylor-Buzzanco controversy can reveal some important insights about the field. However, these insights are not necessarily the particular conclusions that Taylor and Buzzanco are emphasizing. As I show below, each historian makes several valid observations about the existing scholarship on the war; each is particularly effective in pointing out specific points of weakness in the claims made by his opponent. Yet I also argue that both arguments suffer from a common analytical flaw that pervades almost all of the scholarly writing on the subject: a tendency to explain the origins, evolution, and outcome of the Vietnam War mainly by reference to the Cold War. For Buzzanco, the conflict in Vietnam resulted from Cold War economic imperatives and especially from the desire of US leaders to remake world order in a way conducive to their material interests. For Taylor, the conflict was part of an epic Cold War ideological struggle between Democracy and Communism. The obvious differences between these two approaches aside, their shared resort to the Cold War as an explanatory factor leads to remarkably similar errors. By casting the war in Vietnam as a “Cold War struggle,” Taylor and Buzzanco both end up rendering the motives and actions of the various parties who participated in the conflict (Vietnamese, Americans, and others) in simplistic and overdetermined terms. The Taylor-Buzzanco debate thus points to the limitations of the received ways of thinking about the war and especially to the problems with Cold War–centered modes of analysis.

As his 2004 article makes clear, Taylor’s first objective is to challenge what he sees as the antiwar orthodoxy in Vietnam War studies—in other words, he aims to be a gadfly who challenges the received thinking in the field. He aims in particular at three “axioms” upon which, he asserts, the bulk of Vietnam War scholarship has rested: “. . . that there was never a legitimate

noncommunist government in Saigon, that the US had no legitimate reason to be involved in Vietnamese affairs, and that the US could not have won the war under any circumstances.”<sup>9</sup>

There is no doubt that Taylor is correct about the dominance of antiwar views among US historians of the war. This is confirmed by Buzzanco himself, who approvingly notes that “most scholarly books on Vietnam have tended to be critical of US policy on many levels.” Moreover, by devoting the bulk of his response to Taylor to a vigorous and detailed defense of the three “axioms,” Buzzanco tacitly acknowledges that Taylor has indeed zeroed in on some of the core precepts of the conventional antiwar wisdom. That the tone of Buzzanco’s article is alternately apocalyptic and snide—he solemnly warns of the “peril” associated with Taylor’s revisionist claims and speaks gravely of the need “to repudiate them forcefully and quickly,” but then he sneeringly invokes a tag line from a *Saturday Night Live* comedy sketch<sup>10</sup>—is further evidence that Taylor has touched a nerve. Taylor has therefore succeeded in his ambition to be a gadfly; the proof is in the elephantine quality of the response he has provoked from Buzzanco.

On the other hand, Taylor is not content *only* to be a gadfly. He aims to do more than just raise questions about specific claims made by antiwar historians. For Taylor, the antiwar interpretation is not merely flawed; it is also dysfunctional. The entire antiwar position, Taylor asserts, results from the guilt that many Americans felt due to US actions in Vietnam. Rather than see the American defeat as the result of poor tactical and strategic decisions, antiwar activists imagined that it was the result of American imperial arrogance. Since Taylor believes that the notion that America was pursuing empire in Vietnam is self-evidently false—the claim that the United States was or is an imperialist power is manifestly “baseless,” in his view<sup>11</sup>—he concludes that any Americans who criticize the US intervention in Vietnam on anti-imperialist grounds are really just expressing feelings of “self-loathing.” According to Taylor, historians who want to uncover the true motives for the US intervention in Vietnam must begin by disavowing these feelings: “I am not a self-hating American who, shrinking from responsibility, would rather indulge in guilt for mistakes made than in daring to work against the global entropy of suffering and chaos.”<sup>12</sup>

The problem with this particular argument of Taylor's is that it is not really an argument at all. Having criticized antiwar historians for eschewing "evidence and logic" in their writings, Taylor ends up neglecting both as he puts forward his own views. The connection between antiwar activism and "self-loathing" is, at best, unsubstantiated. As Buzzanco dryly observes, "[I]t is quite a leap to say that virtually an entire nation, an entire generation, hated America and hated themselves."<sup>13</sup> The American antiwar movement, Buzzanco notes, was highly diverse, and its participants had disparate motives. On what grounds can all of them be said to have been animated by anti-Americanism? On this point, therefore, Buzzanco's complaint that Taylor is offering "emotions without evidence" seems justified. Evidentiary problems aside, there also appears to be a logical flaw lurking within Taylor's claims about "self-loathing." As Taylor himself acknowledges, American leaders made mistakes in Vietnam. Pursuing an explanation of those mistakes must therefore be a legitimate and worthwhile objective of historical inquiry. But why should it be the case that any attempt by American authors to explain those mistakes by reference to imperialism is, *ipso facto*, an example of "self-loathing"? By what logic does an assertion that US leaders pursued empire in Vietnam *necessarily* imply hatred of America (or hatred of one's own identity as an American)?

In rejecting all arguments having to do with American empire, Taylor has inadvertently revealed one of his own "axioms" about the history of the Vietnam War. This axiom has to do with the notion of American exceptionalism. As many scholars have noted, destinarian ideas about America's special role as a champion of liberty—ideas that express, as Michael Hunt puts it, "the stunning possibility of Americans reinvigorating a gray, spent world"—date back to the seventeenth century.<sup>14</sup> However, in the historiography of US foreign relations, the concept of American exceptionalism has tended to have a distinctive meaning, especially when it is applied to the problem of American empire.

The diplomatist who is most closely associated with exceptionalism is Samuel Flagg Bemis (1891–1973), one of the most prolific scholars in the field during the middle decades of the twentieth century. For Bemis, the history of America's involvement with the world was defined above all else by its benign promotion of what he described as "the congenital Blessings of Liberty."<sup>15</sup>

According to this view, the United States has consistently promoted individual freedom and opposed tyranny since its founding. Not surprisingly, Bemis was dismissive of arguments positing the existence of an American empire; for him, the United States was exceptional precisely because it had refrained from imperialism.<sup>16</sup> In this respect, Taylor's views seem to comport very well with Bemis'. Indeed, some of Taylor's remarks—such his reference to “the importance of defending and nurturing baby democracies in a world awash with tyranny,” or his description of the United States as “still the best hope for humankind”—sound positively Bemis-esque.<sup>17</sup>

Taylor's embrace of American exceptionalism is of more than incidental importance to his understanding of the relationship between the Vietnam War and the Cold War. By portraying the United States as a champion of democracy in the face of tyranny, Taylor implicitly depicts the Cold War as fundamentally ideological in nature—that is, as a great epic clash between Democracy and Communism. This way of representing the Cold War, in turn, spills over into his analysis of the conflict in Vietnam. Taylor explicitly acknowledges that the agendas of Vietnamese groups during the war were not always determined by Cold War imperatives. Nonetheless, he comes eventually to conclude that the conflict in Vietnam was ideologically congruent to the larger Cold War struggle. In Taylor's view, Vietnamese communist behavior during the war is explainable as the single-minded pursuit of conquest and domination; the South Vietnamese, in contrast, are represented as having “fought for the hope of democracy in their land.” Of course, this depiction of Vietnamese motives comports well with Taylor's exceptionalist view of the United States and the “noble cause” for which it fought in Vietnam.<sup>18</sup>

Recognizing the centrality of exceptionalism and ideology in Taylor's thinking is useful because it helps to illustrate a key point of contrast between his perspective and Buzzanco's. Eschewing Bemis-style exceptionalism, Buzzanco instead embraces the New Left school of the history of US foreign relations. In this regard, he places himself in the train not of Bemis, but of William Appleman Williams, whose 1959 book *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy* was one of the most influential works of diplomatic history ever written. Williams' “Open Door thesis”—the idea that US diplomatic history could be explained in structural and economic

terms as an ongoing search for export markets and investment opportunities — took the subfield by storm and inspired a wave of revisionist scholarship between the 1960s and the 1980s.<sup>19</sup> As Buzzanco candidly admits, the New Left school is currently viewed as “something of a relic.” Nonetheless, he gamely avers that the old materialist explanations ought to be dusted off and put back into intellectual service. “Historians should return to the foundation of politics among nations,” he argues, “namely economic material interests.” As a self-professed enthusiast for Marxist and Leninist theory, Buzzanco believes that “property relations between classes in a particular state, or between classes in different nations, will determine the nature of a society’s relations with the rest of the world.” Since he sees American diplomacy as the expression of the economic dominance of one class over another (or of one set of classes over another set), his writings are overwhelmingly critical of virtually all aspects of US foreign policy. In his fierce preference for materialist over ideological explanations, Buzzanco could not be more different from Taylor.<sup>20</sup>

Significantly, Buzzanco’s determination to interpret international relations by reference to material interests does not lead him to discount the influence of the Cold War. On the contrary, Buzzanco sees all of post-1945 international relations as derivative of the global struggle between the United States and the USSR for economic primacy. For Buzzanco, the Cold War is not merely an important factor in the history of the Vietnam War but the root cause of the conflict:

... Vietnam was part of a larger struggle, a pawn, as it were, in a geopolitical chess game. The major powers each saw in Vietnam a country that could be used to promote their own interests or those of important allies. . . . [After World War II,] US officials were trying to reestablish a stable world system but at the same time restructure it according to US needs. . . . In this effort to create a new world (liberal) order, smaller countries, like Vietnam, became objects of interest. Future economic prosperity, if not hegemony, would depend on creating an integrated world market.<sup>21</sup>

Buzzanco’s determination to analyze the Vietnam War as a conflict that sprang from Cold War economic imperatives has profound implications for how he views the motives of the parties who participated in that conflict. This is especially apparent in his treatment of Hồ Chí Minh and the Vietnamese

communists. Hồ Chí Minh, according to Buzzanco, was a pragmatic and ideologically flexible practitioner of Realpolitik who would not have pursued war in South Vietnam if he had not been provoked by US aggression there. The leaders of South Vietnam, conversely, appear in Buzzanco's account as craven, grasping, and incompetent rulers who remained in power only because they facilitated America's broader plans to establish "an integrated world market." For Buzzanco, the antipathies between and among Vietnamese leaders had little to do with ideology; in any case, he does not see those antipathies as the root cause of the war in Vietnam. From Buzzanco's point of view, Vietnamese intergroup rivalries seem historically unimportant, except insofar as they may have intersected with larger Cold War economic forces.

The Taylor-Buzzanco debate thus features two ways of thinking about the history of the Vietnam War that are strikingly different from each other, but that nonetheless also share a key conceptual tenet. On the one hand, the debate is a clash between Taylor's preference for ideological explanations and Buzzanco's focus on material and class considerations. On the other hand, Taylor and Buzzanco are similar in that they are both inclined to view the Vietnam War first and foremost as an episode in the Cold War. At first glance, it might appear that the latter point is not important—after all, the Cold War has long been assumed to be the defining feature of post-World War II international relations in general and of the Vietnam War in particular. Recently, however, some scholars have challenged this assumption. The idea that the Cold War was the driving force in international history after 1945 appears particularly problematic when it is applied to postcolonial Africa and Asia. That the Cold War affected the wars fought in Vietnam and elsewhere in the "third world" seems obvious; still, the impact of the Cold War may have been rather more limited and contingent than the conventional historiographical wisdom would have it. From this perspective, the Taylor-Buzzanco debate may reveal more about how the Vietnam War has been studied in the past than it tells about how the war will be studied in the future.

### **Puppet or Sage? Interpreting Ngô Đình Diệm**

In 2001, the historian Matthew Connelly published a provocative article on the prospects for applying insights gleaned from postcolonial studies to the study of US diplomatic history. Noting that the two fields had previously had

little to do with one another, Connelly suggested that they might both benefit if “the ongoing critique of orientalism were to recover its original focus on the exercise of state power.” However, as Connelly pointed out, applying such an approach to the study of post-1945 international history would require scholars to revise long-held assumptions about American policymakers’ views of the world. Specifically, the diplomatists would have to discard the notion that those views were defined largely or exclusively by an “East-West, Cold War dichotomy.” In fact, Connelly argued, discourses about human difference—racial, religious, cultural, and demographic—figured at least as prominently as the Cold War did in American thinking. This was particularly true with respect to the ways that US leaders thought about newly independent countries in Asia and Africa. Conversely, Connelly argued, the Cold War by itself explained little about the behavior and thinking exhibited by Asians and Africans in their dealings with Americans and Europeans. Connelly persuasively illustrated this argument with multi-archival research he conducted on the interactions among the United States, France, and Algerian revolutionaries during the Algerian war for independence. The upshot, Connelly declared, is that scholars needed to “take off the Cold War lens” through which they had long viewed the events of post-1945 international history.<sup>22</sup>

If Connelly is right about the tendency of international historians to rely too exclusively on the Cold War when interpreting post-1945 developments in the “third world,” then Taylor’s and Buzzanco’s arguments ought to be re-evaluated in light of this tendency. In my remarks below, I suggest that the “Cold War lenses” through which Taylor and Buzzanco view the Vietnam War have indeed led them to distort key aspects of the conflict. This distortion, I argue, is particularly apparent in their overly simplistic representations of the motives and actions of key players in the Vietnam War drama. To illustrate this contention, I analyze Buzzanco’s and Taylor’s representations of Ngô Đình Diệm, the founding president of the Republic of Vietnam (RVN).<sup>23</sup> As the remarks below indicate, I disagree with Buzzanco’s critical representation of Ngô Đình Diệm as a craven American stooge who had no agenda other than self-aggrandizement and who ruled only at the pleasure of US leaders. Yet I also take issue with Taylor’s suggestion that Ngô Đình Diệm was a sagacious and shrewd ruler who was on the verge of “stabilizing” South

Vietnam when he was killed in 1963. Instead, I see Ngô Đình Diệm as being motivated by a distinctive vision of how South Vietnam could and should become a modern nation. Ngô Đình Diệm's determination to pursue this vision, I argue, made him much more independent of the United States than Buzzanco realizes; it also made Ngô Đình Diệm much more responsible for the ultimate failure of his government than Taylor acknowledges.

Since Buzzanco sees the Vietnam War as the consequence of the US bid for worldwide economic hegemony, it is not surprising that he explains the actions of Vietnamese groups and individuals mainly by reference to this American hegemonic project. For example, he views Hồ Chí Minh's endorsement of a return to armed struggle in South Vietnam after 1959 as resulting from the perception of a new opportunity to strike a blow against US imperialism.<sup>24</sup> Buzzanco's representation of Ngô Đình Diệm is precisely the opposite of his depiction of Hồ Chí Minh: instead of a hero who resisted America's neocolonial schemes, Ngô Đình Diệm appears in Buzzanco's account as a craven instrument of US interests. According to Buzzanco, Ngô Đình Diệm had been "hand-picked" by Washington to lead South Vietnam, and indeed had been "designated" for that role by a cabal of American officials prior to taking power in 1954. To show that Ngô Đình Diệm was beholden to the United States, Buzzanco cites the comments of Wesley Fishel, an American political scientist and advisor to the South Vietnamese leader, who remarked in the summer of 1954 that the new government was "shaky as all hell." Buzzanco denies that Ngô Đình Diệm had any ideological or political agenda other than increasing his and his family's wealth and power. As evidence, Buzzanco notes the harsh repression that Ngô Đình Diệm meted out to communists and other rivals and his failure to carry out land reform. In Buzzanco's estimation, Ngô Đình Diệm was particularly uninterested in modernization. This was reflected, Buzzanco asserts, in the relatively small amount of US aid devoted to "the 'stuff' of modernization." The South Vietnamese leader's antimodern and authoritarian policies must have suited America's larger aims in Vietnam, Buzzanco reasons, since Washington continued to supply Ngô Đình Diệm's government with huge amounts of aid.<sup>25</sup>

By depicting Ngô Đình Diệm as a creature of American policy and as an opponent of modernization, Buzzanco is repeating claims that have been made about the RVN leader for decades. Yet recent research has demonstrated

conclusively that these claims have little or no basis in the historical record. The American politicians and clerical leaders who met Ngô Đình Diệm during his exile in 1950–1953 did not “hand-pick” him to become leader of South Vietnam. While some of these Americans did profess admiration for Ngô Đình Diệm, there is no credible evidence that they had anything to do with his elevation to prime minister of the State of Vietnam in 1954. Conversely, there is a great deal of evidence that shows that Ngô Đình Diệm secured the post through his own lobbying efforts and through the skillful political maneuvering of his brother Ngô Đình Nhu, who had remained behind in Indochina while Ngô Đình Diệm was in exile.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, while it is certainly true that Ngô Đình Diệm’s government was “shaky as all hell” when it was established in the summer of 1954, it does not necessarily follow from this that the subsequent survival of the regime was accomplished solely (or even primarily) because of American efforts on Ngô Đình Diệm’s behalf. As I have argued elsewhere, Ngô Đình Diệm and his brothers succeeded in consolidating their power during 1954–1956 mainly by pursuing their own plans to divide and conquer their rivals, not by following US instructions.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, during his first year in office, Ngô Đình Diệm so consistently resisted US advice—including the advice offered by Wesley Fishel and the other Americans who claimed to have influence with the new premier—that in April 1955, the US ambassador in South Vietnam sought and received permission from President Eisenhower to arrange for Ngô Đình Diệm’s ouster. That Ngô Đình Diệm was subsequently able to preempt this move with his unexpected triumph in the Battle of Sài Gòn hardly made him more inclined to listen to American advice thereafter.<sup>28</sup>

Buzzanco’s claim that Ngô Đình Diệm was hostile to modernization is similarly undermined by a wealth of evidence to the contrary. The harsh nature of Ngô Đình Diệm’s rule is not *ipso facto* evidence of any opposition to modernization. As even a casual student of twentieth-century history knows, modernizing visions are often pursued in heavy-handed ways. The vision that Ngô Đình Diệm fashioned for South Vietnam was known as “Personalism” [*chủ nghĩa Nhân Vị*]. This doctrine was both syncretic and highly idiosyncratic, but it was hardly antimodern. According to Ngô Đình Diệm, Personalism eschewed both communist and liberal routes to modernity—but not because it favored a return to the premodern past.

Instead, Personalism purported to offer a “third path” based on communitarian model in which neither Marxist collectivism nor liberal individualism would predominate. This interest in communitarianism informed all of Ngô Đình Diệm’s nation-building programs.<sup>29</sup> For example, Ngô Đình Diệm’s lack of interest in American land reform prescriptions in the 1950s sprang not from any reactionary cast of mind but rather from his preference for an alternative plan for rural reconstruction known as the Land Development [*Dinh Điền*] Program. Instead of redistributing land, Ngô Đình Diệm wanted to redistribute people; thus, tens of thousands of peasants were transported to “Land Development Centers” in lightly populated areas of the Central Highlands and the Mekong Delta. As Ngô Đình Diệm and his officials made clear, these centers were intended not only to provide land to the landless but also to serve the government’s broader modernizing objectives.<sup>30</sup> As it happened, the Land Development Program was mere prelude to what was to come later. Ngô Đình Diệm’s pursuit of the “Personalist Revolution” on an ever broader scale is amply documented by Philip Catton in his study of the regime’s Strategic Hamlet Program, the last and most grandiose of Ngô Đình Diệm’s modernizing projects.<sup>31</sup>

The evidence of Ngô Đình Diệm’s interest in modernization is thus nothing short of overwhelming. Yet Buzzanco ignores all of it. Instead, he provides misleading figures about the amount of American aid devoted to modernization-related projects. Buzzanco cites the fact that just 2 percent of US aid during 1956–1960 was devoted to “health, housing or welfare programs” as proof of Ngô Đình Diệm’s disinterest in the “stuff” of modernization. Yet Buzzanco neglects to mention US aid expenditures on other modernization-related areas such as transportation, agriculture, public administration, education, and industrial development. American funding for these categories during 1956–1960 exceeded US spending on the areas that Buzzanco mentions by approximately eight to one.<sup>32</sup> Buzzanco also seems unaware that Ngô Đình Diệm chose to pay for some of his modernization programs—including his ambitious initiative to build “Agrovilles” in the Mekong Delta during 1959–1960—from sources other than US aid funds.<sup>33</sup>

Of all the claims that Buzzanco makes about Ngô Đình Diệm, perhaps the most breathtaking is his insistence that the South Vietnamese state over which Ngô Đình Diệm presided was not “real.” He declares that: “[T]here was

never a *real* state below the seventeenth parallel, one that could exist on its own without massive infusions of American military and economic aid, without Americans building both a political and physical infrastructure, creating a currency, covering up for the defects of its leaders, staging phony elections, dropping 4.6 *million tons* of bombs on an area the size of New Mexico, and so forth” [emphasis in original].<sup>34</sup>

To say that this claim is problematic is something of an understatement. Buzzanco’s insistence that the RVN state was “never” real strongly suggests that he intends this characterization to apply to South Vietnam during the period of Ngô Đình Diệm’s rule. Yet almost all of the evidence that he supplies in support of this claim is not relevant to the 1954–1963 period. There is no persuasive evidence that the United States created any currencies, staged any elections (phony or otherwise), or dropped any bombs in South Vietnam while Ngô Đình Diệm was in office.<sup>35</sup> It is true, of course, that the United States did provide large amounts of military and economic aid to Ngô Đình Diệm’s government, and that some of this aid was used for infrastructure projects such as roads, rural electrification programs, and army bases. However, it is difficult to see how the mere fact of this aid disproves the “reality” of RVN statehood. The United States provided similarly massive amounts of aid to dozens of other countries in the world in the post–World War II era. Did Britain, France, and the other states of Western Europe become less real after they received Marshall Plan aid? At what point does foreign aid transform a real state into one that is not real?

In fact, there is no doubt that the South Vietnamese state that Ngô Đình Diệm ruled was very real. Ample evidence of this exists in the collections of RVN government documents held at the Vietnam National Archives II (VNA-II) in Hồ Chí Minh City.<sup>36</sup> These documents show clearly that the South Vietnamese state levied and collected taxes, organized elections, pursued rural reconstruction, recruited and trained civil servants, drafted and promulgated a constitution, established and maintained diplomatic relations with dozens of other states, and developed and implemented five-year economic plans. These documents also show that the Ngô Đình Diệm government placed a high priority on the defense of South Vietnam against communist subversion; that it constructed a complex internal security apparatus involving multiple police, military, and intelligence agencies; that it

often resorted to coercion when mobilizing its citizens; and that it frequently used harsh and authoritarian measures to suppress political and military opposition to Ngô Đình Diệm's rule. Of course, the documents at VNA-II confirm that American civilian and military officials frequently sought to influence the crafting and implementation of RVN government policies; yet the documents also show that these American efforts usually failed to have the desired effect on RVN plans and policies, especially when American ideas conflicted with those of Ngô Đình Diệm. Indeed, the documents demonstrate that the Ngô Đình Diệm government, despite huge amounts of US aid and thousands of American military and civilian advisors, displayed remarkable independence—one might say *real* independence—of thought and action. The materials at VNA-II thus severely undermine Buzzanco's claims about the "fictive" nature of the RVN state during 1954–1963, as well as his representation of Ngô Đình Diệm as an abject tool of US interests.

Buzzanco's caricature of Ngô Đình Diệm as a US puppet stands in sharp contrast to the laudatory view that Taylor endorses. Taylor specifically rejects the notion that Ngô Đình Diệm was an American lackey, pointing out that the 1963 US decision to support his ouster hardly supports this view. Taylor also takes issue with the view that Ngô Đình Diệm was incompetent. He asserts that Ngô Đình Diệm "effectively defeated rural insurrections twice, in 1956 and again in 1958." It was precisely because of these early successes, Taylor argues, that Communist Party leaders launched a new insurgency against the RVN regime in 1959. Officials in Hà Nội took this step "because they decided that they could not afford to wait any longer without losing the chance to prevent stabilization of a non-communist government in the south." Taylor stops short of saying that Ngô Đình Diệm was on the verge of victory in his war against the communist-controlled National Liberation Front at the time he was "betrayed" by the United States in 1963. But he clearly implies that Ngô Đình Diệm represented the best hope for the cause of freedom in South Vietnam: "[Ngô Đình Diệm] understood what was necessary to enable his young country to survive much better than did his eager but misguided American advisers."<sup>37</sup>

As my remarks above suggest, I agree with Taylor that Ngô Đình Diệm was much more competent and successful than many historians have realized—especially during the early years of his rule, when he displayed

impressive political skill. However, this success was more circumscribed and contingent than Taylor suggests. It is certainly true that by 1956 Ngô Đình Diệm had defeated the loose coalition of sectarian warlords that had previously opposed him; it is also true that he came close to wiping out the Communist Party apparatus in many parts of South Vietnam in 1958. These were no mean achievements. However, compared to the resistance movements that Ngô Đình Diệm would face in later years, neither of these “insurgencies” was particularly formidable. The Bình Xuyên, Cao Đài, and Hòa Hảo warlords who resisted Ngô Đình Diệm during 1954–1956 were animated at least as much by suspicion and hatred for each other as they were by resentment of him. Ngô Đình Diệm’s triumph over these rivals lay not in any genius for counterinsurgency, but rather in his ability to exploit divisions among the chieftains and in his skillful mix of co-optation, manipulation, and intimidation.<sup>38</sup>

The near-destruction of the southern communists was comparatively more impressive, since it was achieved by concerted and vigorous action by RVN officials against veteran, disciplined cadres. Yet these cadres had become badly demoralized by 1958; this was due both to the passing of the Geneva-mandated 1956 deadline for national reunification elections (which they had expected to win) and to the party’s reluctance prior to 1959 to authorize a return to armed struggle. Although some cadres did take up arms on their own initiative during 1957–1958, these unauthorized uses of violence were mostly isolated and uncoordinated and relatively easily contained by RVN forces. The relative weakness of the 1958 insurgency aside, Taylor’s claims about Ngô Đình Diệm’s success in this case also should be qualified by an acknowledgement of the long-term costs that resulted from the government’s use of brutal and indiscriminate tactics. These tactics eventually produced a backlash among the rural population, which the Communist Party would exploit to great effect after 1959. As he was shattering the party’s apparatus in South Vietnam, Ngô Đình Diệm was also creating the conditions necessary for its comeback.<sup>39</sup>

This last point is particularly important because it points to a larger trend in the history of the Ngô Đình Diệm regime that Taylor neglects: as Ngô Đình Diệm pursued his vision of modernization on an increasingly grandiose scale, the implementation of his policies by his officials became less efficient and more arbitrary and heavy-handed. The resentment that this

produced in many sectors of South Vietnamese society greatly facilitated the efforts of those in South Vietnam—communists and noncommunists alike—who wanted to promote alternative modernizing visions. This is *not* to suggest that Ngô Đình Diệm was solely responsible for the rebellions that arose in South Vietnam after 1959, or that his authoritarian style of rule made his ouster inevitable. In retrospect, it is clear that the decisions by various groups and leaders to take up the anti-Diệmist cause were not foregone conclusions. (Again, the fierce debate that attended the 1959 decision by North Vietnamese leaders to return to a policy of armed struggle in the South is the outstanding example of this.) On the other hand, there is abundant evidence that Ngô Đình Diệm’s policies were implemented in ways that fueled popular frustration, and that those with alternative modernizing agendas were able to exploit that frustration. By ignoring this evidence, Taylor overlooks the ways in which the champions of the Personalist Revolution sowed the seeds of their own destruction.

A telling example of how the Ngô Đình Diệm government unwittingly helped to boost the fortunes of its rivals can be found in its relations with Vietnamese Buddhists. Contrary to the conventional wisdom, Ngô Đình Diệm did not have poor relations with Buddhist groups in the early years of his rule, nor did he display any desire to discriminate against or persecute them. In fact, Ngô Đình Diệm personally cultivated Buddhist leaders, and he even supported the efforts of Buddhist reformers to build new national clerical and lay organizations. These reformers were ardent nationalists who believed that Vietnam’s modern fate depended on the cultivation of its Buddhist heritage and on the continuation of the “revival” of Vietnamese Buddhism that had begun during the 1930s.<sup>40</sup> Ngô Đình Diệm’s conciliatory attitude made Buddhist leaders optimistic that they would be able to pursue their reformist objectives under his rule. By the early 1960s, however, the earlier feelings of goodwill toward the government were rapidly evaporating. Many Buddhist leaders became resentful of the government’s intensifying efforts to indoctrinate them in the finer points of Personalism, which they had come to view as a Catholic doctrine and as antithetical to their reformist ambitions. They also complained that many of the government’s policies—including its modernization programs—were being implemented by RVN officials in ways that discriminated against Buddhism. Buddhists in Central Vietnam directed

their ire specifically against Ngô Đình Diệm's brother Ngô Đình Thục, a Catholic prelate who had headed the regime's "Personalist Training Center" prior to becoming archbishop of Huế in 1960. Ngô Đình Thục's blatant manipulation of the regional government on behalf of the Catholic Church fueled fears among the Buddhist laity of a government-backed conspiracy to Christianize the country.<sup>41</sup> By 1963, these fears were being exploited by monks who believed that their ambition to fuse Vietnamese Buddhism with Vietnamese nationalism was best advanced through confrontation with the Ngô Đình Diệm government. Thus, by the time of the infamous killings of Buddhist protestors by government security forces in Huế on May 8, 1963, the Ngô Đình Diệm regime had already played a direct (if sometimes unwitting) role in the creation of the incipient "Buddhist crisis."

Seeing the Buddhist movement as a clash of modernizing visions points out the flaws in the views of Ngô Đình Diệm presented by both Taylor and Buzzanco. Taylor correctly represents Ngô Đình Diệm as a modernizer and a visionary. However, Taylor overstates Ngô Đình Diệm's success in building popular support for his vision. Taylor also discounts the possibility that Ngô Đình Diệm's downfall was caused by his failure to accommodate the modernizing aspirations of other South Vietnamese and instead attributes the destruction of the regime merely to American inconstancy. Buzzanco, on the other hand, caricatures Ngô Đình Diệm as an American puppet who was disinterested in modernization altogether, and who did not even lead a "real" state. Thus, Taylor and Buzzanco both fail to realize the extent to which modernization was a contested concept both in the history of the Ngô Đình Diệm regime and in the larger history of the Vietnam War. In the end, neither Taylor nor Buzzanco sees Ngô Đình Diệm as a leader who was undone by the shortcomings of his modernizing vision. They instead explain his demise as resulting simply from the exercise of American power. This is a revealing shortcoming, and one that is not unrelated to Taylor and Buzzanco's shared tendency to view the events of the Vietnam War through a "Cold War lens."

### **Modernizing Visions and the History of the Vietnam War**

None of the preceding arguments is offered by way of suggesting that the Cold War was unimportant in the history of the Vietnam War. Indeed, there is a surfeit of evidence that the Cold War figured prominently in the thinking

of the leaders (both Vietnamese and non-Vietnamese) whose decisions helped to shape the course and outcome of the war. Ngô Đình Diệm himself is a case in point. As a die-hard anticommunist, he repeatedly invoked the Cold War and the specter of “red colonialism” in both his public speeches and his private conversations. Nevertheless, as the evidence presented above demonstrates, the Cold War was far from the *only* thing that affected Ngô Đình Diệm’s thinking, and many of his actions and policies cannot be explained by reference to Cold War imperatives. In other words, the Cold War is necessary to explain the history of the Vietnam War, but it is not sufficient. What, then, is the alternative to the Cold War–centered frameworks favored by Taylor, Buzzanco, and other Vietnam War scholars? How can historians conceptualize the Vietnam War in a way that gives the Cold War its due and yet also avoids the distorting effect of the “Cold War lens”?

The arguments and evidence presented in this paper suggest one way of answering these questions. Instead of explaining the Vietnam War as a conflict that was driven exclusively or primarily by the Cold War, historians should think about the war as a multifaceted contest among several different ways of thinking about modernity and modernization. Since the war has long been thought of as a Cold War struggle—and indeed, since it was perceived that way at the time by many of the people who participated in it—such an approach may seem counterintuitive. Nonetheless, I believe there are several reasons why historians should reconceptualize the war as a clash among multiple modernizing visions. A full explication of this approach is beyond the scope of this essay, but a few general observations about it and the advantages that it offers can be hazarded.<sup>42</sup>

First, by examining contests over the meaning and substance of modernization, scholars of the war will be better able to understand conflicts and rivalries among Vietnamese groups. For too long, historians of the war have explained intra-Vietnamese conflicts in dyadic terms—that is, they have interpreted Vietnamese politics by invoking binaries such as nationalism/communism, revolutionary/counterrevolutionary, democracy/socialism, and so on. At first glance, these Cold War–derived binaries seem to have a degree of interpretive utility, insofar as they purport to explain the political and military conflict between communist North Vietnam and anticommunist South

Vietnam. On closer inspection, however, politics in both Vietnams appear far too complex to be depicted merely as an inexorable struggle between communists and anticommunists. For example, recent research suggests that North Vietnam's policies and strategies during the war were not forged merely in response to the actions and provocations of Hà Nội's anticommunist entities. Instead, the key decisions in the North were defined by fierce internal struggles among factions within the party's top leadership—that is, by struggles *among* communists. These struggles were born not merely of disagreements over tactics but also of profound ideological differences over the path by which the party would lead Vietnam to its modern destiny.<sup>43</sup>

It is equally difficult to see how political developments in South Vietnam can be reduced to a single, all-encompassing struggle between communism and anticommunism. Some of the most consequential political developments in South Vietnam during the war resulted from conflicts among noncommunist groups. These conflicts, moreover, were driven by more than mere cravings for power; they were also shaped by disagreements over how modernity should be defined and pursued. We have already noted how the 1963 crisis was born of a clash between Ngô Đình Diệm's Personalist Revolution and the sectarian brand of nationalism promoted by the leaders of the Buddhist movement. Yet the Buddhists were just one of many groups that drew connections between religious identity and ideas about national development.

Many Vietnamese Catholics and members of the Hòa Hảo and Cao Đài sects were intensely interested in how their respective religious traditions might be applied to the problems of modernization.<sup>44</sup> At the same time, the members of secular political parties such as the *Đại Việt Quốc Dân Đảng* [Greater Vietnam Nationalist Party] and the *Việt Nam Quốc Dân Đảng* [Vietnamese Nationalist Party] were pursuing their own highly sophisticated (if also rather authoritarian) modernizing agendas.<sup>45</sup> Yet another noncommunist alternative was offered in the activism of Trần Quốc Bửu's Vietnamese Confederation of Labor [*Tổng Liên Đoàn Lao Động Việt Nam*], an alliance of labor unions that drew inspiration from European Christian Democracy.<sup>46</sup> This profusion of modernizing visions in South Vietnam was a key part of the political context in which the National Liberation Front formulated its ideas and strategies. However one might interpret the NLF and

its activities, it cannot be said that it had a monopoly on discourse about modernity and modernization in South Vietnam.

A second advantage of studying the Vietnam War as a collision of competing agendas for modernization has to do with analyzing the involvement of foreign powers in the conflict. Four foreign powers—France, the United States, the People’s Republic of China, and the Soviet Union—undertook massive interventions in Indochina in the years after 1945; these interventions all involved large expenditures of blood, treasure, and/or national prestige. Yet the behavior of these four powers vis-à-vis each other contradicts the suggestion that they were acting solely (or even primarily) because of Cold War imperatives. For example, the US-France alliance in Indochina, though born of Cold War considerations during the early 1950s, was plagued from the start by clashing approaches to the issue of Vietnamese independence.<sup>47</sup> By 1955–1956, moreover, the alliance had unraveled and US officials were scheming to get the French out of Indochina.<sup>48</sup> In 1963, French President Charles De Gaulle sought to repay the Americans in kind by calling for the neutralization of South Vietnam—a move that was aimed more at curbing Washington’s power in France’s former colony than at any Cold War strategic objective.

Ironically, the demise of Franco-American cooperation in Indochina was paralleled by an intensification of the Soviet-Chinese rivalry there. As the Sino-Soviet split widened after 1960, the USSR and the PRC competed fiercely for Hà Nội’s ideological fealty. This competition had at least as much to do with the antipathy between the communist powers as with concerns about US moves in South Vietnam. By the early 1970s, the disconnect between Cold War strategic logic and Indochina diplomacy was made manifest by US President Richard Nixon, who actually sought Mao Zedong’s help in extracting the United States from the war. In general, therefore, the Cold War provides an unsatisfactory framework in which to understand great power motives and decisions in Indochina after 1950.

Instead of interpreting the actions of foreign powers in Indochina only by reference to the Cold War, historians ought to consider the distinctive visions of modernization that these powers sought to promote there. It seems more than coincidental that the four powers who became most deeply engaged in Indochina after 1945 were the heirs of the four great revolutions of the

modern era: the French, American, Chinese, and Russian revolutions. Of course, the greatness of a particular revolution often lies in the eye of the beholder. In this case, however, the designation seems justified by the propensity of the French, Americans, Chinese, and Russians to hold up their respective revolutions as models for other nations to emulate. At various times between the 1940s and the 1980s, each of these four nations sought to export its revolutionary model to Vietnam. In doing so, each was promoting a distinctive kind of modernization project. To describe French ambitions in Vietnam after 1945 as “revolutionary” might seem strange, given that these ambitions were deeply imbued with colonial ideology; however, the entire French effort in Indochina (including the “Bảo Đại solution”) can accurately be viewed as an attempt to reconcile colonial convictions with the republican brand of modernization represented by the French Union. American modernizing efforts in Vietnam were also inspired by a revolutionary mythos; this could be seen, for example, in the recurring US attempts to use land reform to transform South Vietnamese peasants into democratically minded freeholders. Interestingly, Chinese officials in North Vietnam during the 1950s also tried to use land reform to foster an agenda of revolutionary modernization. That particular project had imploded by 1956, but the setback did not lessen Beijing’s determination to steer the Vietnamese revolution according to the stars of China’s own experience. During the 1960s, Chinese leaders redoubled their efforts to act as revolutionary guides and tutors to their comrades in Hà Nội. In doing so, Beijing found itself in direct competition with Moscow, which was belatedly seeking to re-establish the revolutionary leadership that it had once wielded over the Vietnamese communist movement during the 1930s. Eventually, of course, Vietnam would move into a Soviet orbit. Yet the “success” of the Soviet model in Vietnam during the late 1970s and early 1980s would prove to be as transitory and as ephemeral as the triumphs proclaimed earlier by the other three powers. In retrospect, we can see that none of these four modernization projects was successful in the long run—indeed, all four eventually proved disastrous either for the sponsoring nation, for Vietnam, or for both. Nonetheless, the very scale of the disasters demonstrates the determination with which these four nations pursued their revolutionary and modernizing projects in Vietnam.

This last point suggests one more advantage that results from thinking about the Vietnam War as a contest over modernization: the possibility of more nuanced and more historically useful answers to the old questions about morality and moral responsibility for the war. Contrary to what the journalist Fox Butterfield suggested in 1983, it is difficult to imagine that historians will ever put aside their propensity for making moral judgments about the Vietnam War. Indeed, even if they could, it is difficult to see why they would want to do so. Even when measured on the awful scale of other twentieth-century wars, the war in Vietnam took a devastating toll on all the nations involved in it. It is therefore both understandable and appropriate that historians should continue to assign responsibility and blame, such as the evidence may warrant. This does not mean, however, that historians must necessarily render moral judgments in the same all-or-nothing manner that Buzzanco and Taylor do. Henry Kissinger once noted the tendency of his critics to see the Vietnam War as a “morality tale.” Such a view was misguided, Kissinger asserted, since “no one had a monopoly on anguish” during the conflict.<sup>49</sup> Like so many of the other things that Kissinger has said and written, these remarks were part of his efforts to avoid blame for the misguided and even reprehensible nature of the Vietnam decisions and policies that he crafted. Still, his statement does contain a kernel of historical truth. Instead of viewing the Vietnam War as a Cold War morality tale in which nations and leaders are typed as heroes, victims, and villains, historians should treat the problem of morality in the history of the war as a complex and contingent one. By studying the modernizing impulses that run through the history of the war, scholars will better understand how and why reasonable people on all sides of the conflict often made deplorable decisions and committed horrible acts in the name of progress. Once we adopt this approach, then perhaps we can indeed begin, as Butterfield put it, “to find out what really happened, and why.” ■

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper examines the recent debate between historians Keith Taylor and Robert Buzzanco over the interpretation of the Vietnam War and considers the implications of the debate for the future of Vietnam War studies. Miller analyzes Taylor and Buzzanco's differences over the origins and evolution of the war, and finds that both historians rely too heavily on the Cold War to explain the motives and actions of leaders and groups who participated in the conflict. The paper concludes with a proposal to reconceptualize the war as a contest among the multiple ways of thinking about modernization.*

KEYWORDS: Vietnam War, Ngo Dinh Diem/Ngô Đình Diệm, modernization

## Notes

1. Fox Butterfield, "The New Vietnam Scholarship," *New York Times Magazine*, Feb. 13, 1983.
2. The two key texts in the debate so far are K.W. Taylor, "How I Began to Teach about the Vietnam War," *Michigan Quarterly Review* 43, no. 4 (Fall 2004): 637–647; and Robert Buzzanco, "Fear and (Self) Loathing in Lubbock: How I Learned to Quit Worrying and Love Vietnam and Iraq," *Counterpunch*, April 16–17, 2005, <http://www.counterpunch.org/buzzanco04162005.html> (accessed March 15, 2006). The interest in the controversy among Vietnam War scholars was underscored by the decision of the editors of the newsletter of the Society of American Foreign Relations to reprint Buzzanco's article; see *Passport* 36, no. 3 (June 2005): 5–14.
3. University of Houston, Department of History, "Robert Buzzanco," <http://vi.uh.edu/faculty/profiles/buzzanco.html> (accessed March 29, 2006).
4. Robert Buzzanco, *Masters of War: Military Dissent and Politics in the Vietnam Era* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Robert Buzzanco, *Vietnam and the Transformation of American Life* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1999).
5. Keith Taylor, *The Birth of Vietnam* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1983); Keith Taylor, "Authority and Legitimacy in 11th Century Vietnam" in *Southeast Asia in the 9th to 14th Centuries*, eds. David Marr and A.C. Milner (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1986), 139–176; Keith W. Taylor, "Nguyen Hoang and the Beginning of Vietnam's Southward Expansion," in *Southeast Asia in the Early Modern Era: Trade, Power and Belief*, ed. Anthony Reid (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), 42–65;

- Keith W. Taylor, "Surface Orientations in Vietnam: Beyond Histories of Nation and Region," *Journal of Asian Studies* 57, no. 4 (November 1998): 949–978; K.W. Taylor, "Vietnamese Confucian Narratives," in *Rethinking Confucianism: Past and Present in China, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam*, eds. Benjamin A. Elman, John B. Duncan, and Herman Ooms (Los Angeles: UCLA, 2002), 337–369; Keith W. Taylor, "China and Vietnam: Looking for a New Version of an Old Relationship," in *The Vietnam War: American and Vietnamese Perspectives*, eds. Jayne Werner and Luu Doan Huynh (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1993), 271–286.
6. David Elliott, *The Vietnamese War: Revolution and Social Change in the Mekong Delta, 1930–1975* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2003); Kim Bao Ngoc Ninh, *A World Transformed: The Politics of Culture in Revolutionary Vietnam, 1945–1965* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2002); Sophie Quinn-Judge, "The Ideological Debate in the DRV and the Significance of the Anti-Party Affair, 1967–68," in *Cold War History* 5, no. 4 (2005): 479–500; Robert Brigham, *Guerrilla Diplomacy: The NLF's Foreign Relations and the Viet Nam War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999); Ang Cheng Guan, *Vietnamese Communist Relations with China and the Second Indochina Conflict, 1956–1962* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1997); Tran Thi Liên, "The Catholic Question in North Vietnam: From Polish Sources, 1954–1956" in *Cold War History* 5, no. 4 (2005): 427–449; also Tran Thi Liên, "Les Catholiques Vietnamiens dans la République du Viêt Nam (1954–1963) [The Vietnamese Catholics in the Republic of Vietnam, 1954–1963]," in *Du Conflit d'Indochine aux Conflits Indochinois* [From the Indochina Conflict to Conflicts in Indochina], ed. Pierre Brocheux (Brussels: Éditions Complexe, 2000), 53–80; Pierre Asselin, *A Bitter Peace: Washington, Hanoi, and the Making of the Paris Agreement* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); Balazs Szalontai, "Political and Economic Crisis in North Vietnam, 1955–1956," *Cold War History* 5, no. 4 (2005): 395–426; Christopher Goscha, *Thailand and the Southeast Asian Networks of the Vietnamese Revolution (1885–1954)* (Surrey, UK: Curzon Press, 1999); Christopher Goscha, "The Maritime Nature of the Wars for Vietnam (1945–75): A Geo-Historical Reflection," *War and Society* 24, no. 2 (November 2005), 53–92; Liên-Hằng T. Nguyễn, "The War Politburo: North Vietnam's Diplomatic and Political Road to the Tết Offensive," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 1, no. 1–2 (2006).
7. Fredrik Logevall, *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999); Mark Atwood Lawrence, *Assuming the Burden: Europe and the American Commitment to War in Vietnam* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005); Chen Jian, "China's Involvement in the Vietnam War,

- 1964–1969,” *The China Quarterly*, 142 (June 1995): 357–387; Qiang Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars, 1950–1975* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Ilya Gaiduk, *Confronting Vietnam: Soviet Policy toward the Indochina Conflict, 1954–1963* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003).
8. Mark Bradley, *Imagining Vietnam and America: The Making of Postcolonial Vietnam, 1919–1950* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Philip Catton, *Diem’s Final Failure: Prelude to America’s War in Vietnam* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002).
  9. Taylor, “How I Began To Teach about the Vietnam War,” 637.
  10. Buzzanco, “Fear and (Self) Loathing in Lubbock.”
  11. Taylor, “How I Began to Teach about the Vietnam War,” 647.
  12. *Ibid.*, 643.
  13. Buzzanco, “Fear and (Self) Loathing in Lubbock.”
  14. Michael Hunt, *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987), 19. For a survey of American destinarian thinking from the seventeenth century to the twentieth, see Anders Stephanson, *Manifest Destiny: American Expansion and the Empire of Right* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1995).
  15. Samuel Flagg Bemis, “American Foreign Policy and the Blessings of Liberty” (AHA Presidential Address), *American Historical Review* 67, no. 2 (January 1962): 291–305.
  16. Significantly, Bemis’ resistance to the notion of an American empire was apparent even in his treatment of what was arguably the most transparently imperialist episode in US history: the annexation of the Philippines, Puerto Rico, and other Spanish colonies following the War of 1898. Bemis described the imperialism of 1898 as “a great national aberration” in the US tradition of anti-imperialism—in other words, he presented it as the exception that proved the rule of American exceptionalism. Samuel Flagg Bemis, *A Diplomatic History of the United States* (Washington: US Government Printing Office, 1935), 475.
  17. Taylor, “Why I Began to Teach about the Vietnam War,” 642, 647. By comparing Taylor’s writings to Bemis’, I do not mean to imply that Taylor’s ideas are necessarily out of step with contemporary scholarship on the history of US foreign relations. Long dismissed as an apologist for US power, Bemis now appears to be undergoing a rehabilitation. For a perspective that leavens the established critique of Bemis with appreciation for his enduring contributions to the field, see Mark T. Gilderhaus, “Founding Father: Samuel Flagg Bemis and the study of U.S.–Latin American Relations,” *Diplomatic History* 21, no. 1 (Jan. 1997): 1–13. For a more unreservedly admiring view of Bemis, see John Lewis Gaddis, *Surprise, Security and the American Experience* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), especially 31–33.
  18. Taylor, “How I Began to Teach about the Vietnam War,” 646.

19. William A. Williams, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy* (Cleveland: World Publication Co., 1959). The many New Leftist works published after the 1970s include several books on the Vietnam War; see Gabriel Kolko, *Anatomy of a War: Vietnam, the United States and the Modern Historical Experience* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985); Lloyd Gardner, *Approaching Vietnam: From World War II through Dien Bien Phu, 1941–1954* (New York: Norton, 1988); Andrew Rotter, *The Path to Vietnam: Origins of the American Commitment to Southeast Asia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987); Marilyn Young, *The Vietnam Wars, 1945–1990* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991).
20. Robert Buzzanco, “What Happened to the New Left? Toward a Radical Reading of American Foreign Relations,” *Diplomatic History* 23 no. 4 (Fall 1999): 575–607. For Buzzanco’s admiration of Marxist and Leninist theory, see pp. 600–602.
21. Robert Buzzanco, “The United States and Vietnam, 1950–1968: Capitalism, Communism, and Containment,” in *Empire and Revolution: The United States and the Third World since 1945*, eds. Peter Hanh and Mary Ann Heiss (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2001), 94–120.
22. Matthew Connelly, “Taking Off the Cold War Lens: Visions of North-South Conflict during the Algerian War for Independence,” *The American Historical Review* 105, no. 3 (June 2000): 739–769. Connelly expands on these ideas in his *A Diplomatic Revolution: Algeria’s Fight for Independence and the Origins of the Post-Cold War Era* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2002).
23. My decision to focus here on Ngô Đình Diệm is based on the following considerations: (1) Taylor and Buzzanco both see him as a key figure in the history of the Vietnam War; (2) I have studied Ngô Đình Diệm extensively and have written about him elsewhere; and (3) Buzzanco has mischaracterized my views on the subject. Regarding this last point: Buzzanco describes my conclusions about Ngô Đình Diệm as follows: “America’s hand-picked leader in southern [sic] Vietnam, Ngo Dinh Diem, was actually a capable leader and his ouster and death, sanctioned by the U.S., was a major mistake in retrospect for he was developing a stable regime below the seventeenth parallel” (Buzzanco, “Fear and (Self) Loathing in Lubbock”). As I will argue in a forthcoming book, Ngô Đình Diệm was indeed much more capable and successful in the early years of his rule than Buzzanco and other anti-Diemist historians have realized; however, I have never endorsed—in print or otherwise—the view put forward by some pro-Diemist authors that Ngô Đình Diệm “was developing a stable regime” when he was ousted in 1963. (For the record: he was not.) Buzzanco also incorrectly associates me with other scholars who have argued “that the war was indeed a noble cause, that Vietnam below the seventeenth parallel was a viable and stable state, that the war was not fought disproportionately by the

poor, that the US military won in the field but was undermined at home, and that poor decisions and leadership in the United States—not the skills and appeal of the Vietnamese communists—were the main reason for American failure.” I have never argued in favor of any of these claims, since I do not believe them to be true. In addition to blatantly misrepresenting my views, this particular claim of Buzzanco’s ironically reveals his reliance on attribution theory—a concept that Buzzanco himself invokes to explain Taylor’s critique of the antiwar movement. Buzzanco derides the logic of Taylor’s argument as follows: “If ‘we’ don’t like a particular group, then ‘they’ are ‘disposed’ to act against ‘our’ interests . . . .” Given Buzzanco’s penchant for first lumping diverse scholarly opinions together and then glossing them as a uniform mass of “dangerous” revisionist opinion, this is at best a case of the pot calling the kettle black.

24. Buzzanco, “The United States and Vietnam,” 101–102. Recent research suggests that the 1959 decision to support insurgency in the South was not simply a response to changing circumstances there, nor does it appear to have been precipitated by any change of heart on the part of Hồ Chí Minh. Instead, the shift reflected the rising influence in Hà Nội of Lê Duẩn, who had been agitating for such a policy since at least 1957. See Elliott, *The Vietnamese War*, 1:227–230.
25. Buzzanco, “Fear and (Self) Loathing in Lubbock.”
26. On the lack of evidence for an American pressure campaign on Ngô Đình Diệm’s behalf in spring of 1954, see David Anderson, *Trapped by Success: The Eisenhower Administration and Vietnam, 1953–1961* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 52–54. On the Ngô brothers’ successful bid to persuade the ex-emperor Bảo Đại to appoint Ngô Đình Diệm, see Edward Miller, “Vision, Power and Agency: The Ascent of Ngô Đình Diệm, 1945–1954,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 35, no. 3 (October 2004): 433–458.
27. Edward Miller, “Grand Designs: Vision, Power and Nation Building in America’s Alliance with Ngô Đình Diệm, 1954–1960” (PhD dissertation, Harvard University, 2004), 93–211.
28. *Ibid.*, 183–192. See also Anderson, *Trapped by Success*, 109–116.
29. For an overview of the origins of Diemist Personalism and analysis of how it shaped Ngô Đình Diệm’s view of the world, see Edward Miller, “The Diplomacy of Personalism: Civilization, Culture and the Cold War in the Foreign Policy of Ngô Đình Diệm,” in *Connected Histories: Decolonization and the Cold War in Asian International History, 1945–1962*, eds. Christopher Goscha and Christian Ostermann (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, forthcoming 2007).
30. The modernizing rationale of the Land Development Program is presented in *Công Cuộc Đình Điền tại Việt Nam đến 30.6.1959* [The Task of Land Development in Vietnam through 30 June 1959] (Sài Gòn: Office of the Commissioner

- of Land Development, 1960). See also Vu Van Thai, "Vietnam's Concept of Development," in *Problems of Freedom: South Vietnam since Independence* (New York: Free Press of Glencoe, 1961), 69–73.
31. Catton, *Diem's Final Failure*. As the title of Catton's book suggests, he is no admirer of Ngô Đình Diệm. On the contrary, he argues that the Strategic Hamlet program was deeply flawed in both theory and practice, and that its shortcomings helped bring about the collapse of Ngô Đình Diệm's government in 1963. Amazingly, Buzzanco characterizes Catton as a Ngô Đình Diệm apologist and chides him for arguing that Ngô Đình Diệm "was developing a stable regime below the seventeenth parallel" when he was killed! (Buzzanco, "Fear and (Self) Loathing in Lubbock").
  32. Buzzanco's statement is based on figures provided by David Anderson, who indicates that two percent of all American aid during 1956–1960 was devoted to "health, housing and community development." Anderson, *Trapped by Success*, 133. Anderson's conclusion, in turn, is based on figures provided by Robert Scigliano, who reported in 1963 that the two budgetary categories of "health and sanitation" and "community development, social welfare and housing" together accounted for about 10 percent of the nonmilitary portion of the US aid budget, or approximately 2.1 percent of the total aid budget. Yet Scigliano's data also showed that the nonmilitary aid to South Vietnam also included programs in transportation (40 percent), agriculture (17 percent), public administration (11 percent), education (7 percent), and industrial development and mining (6 percent). When these categories are combined with the ones that Buzzanco notes, it is clear that modernization-related programming accounted for at least 90 percent of the nonmilitary portion of US aid, or about 19 percent of the total aid budget. Even if we allow for the diversion of some of this nonmilitary aid to military tasks, it is clear that Buzzanco substantially underestimates US spending on modernization projects. Robert Scigliano, *South Vietnam: Nation under Stress* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1963), 112–115.
  33. The Agroville Program was financed by a lottery and other sources of RVN government revenue; see Telegram no. 426, Durbrow to Dep State, June 6, 1960, printed in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1958–1960: Vietnam* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1986), 1:486. Ngô Đình Diệm did not seek US funding for this program because he feared—correctly—that the Americans would object to the heavy-handed way in which it was implemented. See Catton, *Diem's Final Failure*, 67.
  34. Buzzanco, "Fear and (Self) Loathing in Lubbock."
  35. Some historians have alleged that the United States organized the October 1955 referendum in which Ngô Đình Diệm ousted Bảo Đại and proclaimed himself RVN president. In fact, US State Department sources show conclusively that

- the idea for the referendum originated within Ngô Đình Diệm's government, and that US officials vainly advised him against it. See Miller, "Grand Designs," 204–206.
36. For an overview of the RVN materials held at the Vietnam National Archives II, see Matthew Masur and Edward Miller, "Back to Saigon: Researching South Vietnam's Republican Era (1954–1975) at Archives and Libraries in Ho Chi Minh City," The Cold War International History Project Working Paper, <http://www.cwihp.org> (forthcoming Fall 2006).
  37. Taylor, "Why I Began to Teach about the Vietnam War," 641–642.
  38. Of the motley assortment of warlords who were in opposition to Ngô Đình Diệm during 1954–1956, most were eventually persuaded to rally to the government or to lay down their arms. The Cao Đài dissident General Trịnh Minh Thế famously rallied to Ngô Đình Diệm prior to the Battle of Sài Gòn in May 1955, as did his fellow sectarian Nguyễn Thanh Phương and the Hòa Hảo commander Nguyễn Giác Ngộ; all three were well paid. The Hòa Hảo warlords Trần Văn Soái and Lâm Thành Nguyên surrendered later in exchange for being allowed to go into retirement. Among the top sectarian leaders, only the Bình Xuyên commander Lê Văn Viễn (alias Bảy Viễn) and the Hòa Hảo firebrand Lê Quang Vinh (alias Ba Cụt) were not offered quarter by Ngô Đình Diệm; the former escaped to foreign exile, and the latter was captured, tried, and executed in 1956.
  39. Elliott, *The Vietnamese War*, 1:181–208.
  40. Nguyễn Thế Anh, "L'engagement politique du Bouddhisme au Sud Viêt-Nam dans les années 1960 [Buddhist Political Engagement in South Vietnam during the 1960s]," in *Bouddhismes et Sociétés Asiatiques: Clergés, sociétés et pouvoirs* [Buddhism and Asian Societies: Clergy, Power and Society], eds. Alain Forest et al. (Paris, 1990), 111–124. Ngô Đình Diệm's gestures of support for the Buddhists included provision of funds to support the construction of Xá Lợi pagoda, which was built specifically to serve as the headquarters of a new national Buddhist umbrella organization. See Cao Văn Luận, *Bên-Giòng Lịch-Sử Việt Nam, 1940–1975* [In the Stream of Vietnamese History, 1940–1975] (Sacramento, CA, 1983), 235.
  41. The increasing tensions between Buddhists and the regional government in Huế were described by a Buddhist leader to an American interviewer as early as 1961; see "The Buddhist Movement in Vietnam and Its Difficulties with the Present Government," April 1961, Folder 01, Box 06, John Donnell Collection, The Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University.
  42. In proposing that ideas about "modernity" and "modernization" become the center of scholarly analysis of the Vietnam War, I am drawing on the insights of postcolonial scholars who have underlined the constructed, contingent, and

- contested qualities of these ideas. As Frederick Cooper has argued, “modernity” is most usefully studied neither as an epoch, nor as a by-product of capitalism, nor even as a plural phenomenon with both “Western” and “non-Western” variants; instead, historians should focus on the ways in which humans “specifically fight their battles on the turf of modernity, engaging a vision that represented itself as modernizing, and proposing an alternative to it.” Fredrick Cooper, *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005), 130. See also Connelly, “Taking Off the Cold War Lens,” especially 741n8; and Nick Cullather, “Development? Its History,” *Diplomatic History* 24, no. 4 (Fall 2000), 641–653. For evidence that scholars are already applying historicized ways of thinking about modernization to the study of the Vietnam War, see Christopher T. Fisher, “Nation Building and the Vietnam War: A Historiography,” *Pacific Historical Review* 74, no. 3 (2005), 441–456.
43. Quinn-Judge, “The Ideological Debate in the DRV”; Szalontai, “Political and Economic Crisis in North Vietnam”; Nguyễn, “The War Politburo.”
44. On Catholic political activism in South Vietnam after 1954, see Tran Thi Liên, “Les Catholiques Vietnamiens dans la République du Viêt Nam (1954–1963).” On the connections between the millenarian vision of Hòa Hảo founder Huỳnh Phú Sổ and the sect’s political and military activities, see Hue-Tam Ho Tai, *Millenarianism and Peasant Politics in Vietnam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983). For accounts that portray the Cao Đài leader Trịnh Minh Thế as a visionary and an aspiring nationalist leader, see Sergei Blagov, *Honest Mistakes: The Life and Death of Trinh Minh The (1922–1955), South Vietnam’s Alternative Leader* (Huntington, NY: Nova Science Publishers, Inc., 2001); also Nhị Lang, *Phong Trào Kháng Chiến Trịnh Minh Thế* [The Resistance Movement of Trịnh Minh Thế] (Boulder, CO: Lion Press, 1989).
45. On the Đại Việt, the outstanding account is François Guillemot, “Révolution Nationale et Lutte pour L’Indépendance au Viêt-Nam: L’Échec de la Troisième Voie ‘Đại Việt,’ 1938–1955 [National Revolution and the Struggle for Vietnamese Independence: The Failure of the ‘Đại Việt’ Third Way]” (PhD dissertation, École Pratiques Des Hautes Études, Paris, 2003). The activities of the Việt Nam Quốc Dân Đảng (VNQDD) in South Vietnam remain mostly unexplored by scholars; see, however, the account of the unhappy fate of the one-time VNQDD activist Nguyễn Tường Tam (Nhất Linh) in Neil Jamieson, *Understanding Vietnam* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991), 176–181, 191–203, 210–212, 241–244.
46. On the relations between the Confederation and American union activists, see Edmund Wehrle, *Between a River and a Mountain: The AFL-CIO and the*

- Vietnam War* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005). For Trần Quốc Bửu's ties to Christian Trade Unions in Europe, see pp. 34–41.
47. Lawrence, *Assuming the Burden*.
48. Kathryn Statler, “From the French to the Americans: Intra-Alliance Politics, Cold War Concerns and Cultural Conflict in Vietnam, 1950–1960” (PhD Dissertation, University of California, Santa Barbara, 1999).
49. Henry Kissinger, *White House Years* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1979), 230.