

Thai Party (pp. 4–6, 222–3) is not entirely convincing. If middle-income peasants are sharply divided in their assessment of Thaksin and his Thai Rak Thai Party (pp. 205–14) — this is another valuable part of the book that challenges the received wisdom that Chiang Mai is Thaksin's stronghold — why can't we logically expect them to be equally divided over the redshirt movement and the Phuea Thai Party? Walker's analysis here contradicts his other assertions that 'local social life is simply too complex for it to be used as a one-dimensional template for political action' (p. 198) and that '[t]here is no ready-made social basis for political mobilisation' (p. 218).

These quibbles aside, Walker's book will most likely change the way many specialists and observers of Thailand look at Thai peasants and stimulate much-needed serious intellectual debate on the Thai peasantry. This is a valuable addition to the literature indeed.

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#### Vietnam

*Misalliance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and the fate of South Vietnam*

By EDWARD MILLER

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Southeast Asia endured a turbulent political transition from the colonial to the postcolonial order. Nowhere was that turbulence bumpier than in Vietnam. Current Vietnamese orthodoxy defines the conflict the rest of the world calls the Vietnam War as a struggle for national independence from foreign domination that ran from 1930 to 1975. During that protracted conflict, something happened that did not occur anywhere else in the region: a state disappeared from the regional system. Some postcolonial states were artificially forged, i.e. Malaysia. Some were created by irreconcilable differences, vis. the Republic of Singapore. But only the Republic of Vietnam, more commonly known as South Vietnam, did not survive the Cold War and decolonisation periods to take a place in the Southeast Asia of ASEAN. English-language studies of the Vietnam War remain focused, by a large majority, on various aspects of the American experience of that war. It would be wrong to say they ignore the destruction of their ally, but fair to argue that many scholars tended, for a long time, to dismiss South Vietnam in terms that often approached caricature. But times change, passions fade, new generations pose new questions. Literatures evolve. Recent scholarship, challenging an orthodox American interpretation that, broadly speaking, denounced every aspect of the Vietnam experience as avoidable disaster, is now at last complicating our understanding of the Republic of Vietnam. A focal point for that trajectory is the man who created the state, and whose overthrow and assassination marked, to many, the most significant turning point in its story: Ngo Dinh Diem, founding president of the Republic of Vietnam.

Edward Miller takes up the challenge to revisit both Diem and the state he led in a volume that, refreshingly, lives up very diligently to its title. This is a critical and admirably dispassionate analysis of Diem and his family, their all-important relationship with the United States and its various agents, and their combined failure to build an effective alliance. One of the few criticisms to make is that the author goes too far in explicitly devoting so much of his main text, and so many citations, to direct rebuttals, or responses, to interpretations, general and particular, presented by both memoirs and historians. This sometimes veers close to distracting the reader from Miller's own argument; admittedly however, some interplay with the literature was necessary. Miller positioned this study as an effort to navigate through controversies that are indeed polarising. Miller rejects familiar arguments that Diem was a fish out of water, running a hopelessly corrupt government with neither legitimacy nor prospects, at any time on any level. He also rejects generally more recent arguments that Diem was in fact an effective strongman winning his war, and his overthrow was a definitive American blunder. Instead Miller presents a nationalist with a broad agenda, one that he had thought through over a long period of time, and that represented a determined effort to blend past and present. The central theme in Miller's thesis is that the Republic of Vietnam was, for both the government that led it and the American ally that tried to sustain it, above all else a project in nation-building, one approached through contending understandings of development. That project, not the war which derailed it, drove the alliance. Accepting the influence and agency of personalities and personality clashes, institutional rivalries, political and ideological differences, Miller insists nevertheless that both Diem and the American governments he worked with developed their own broad concepts of how to develop a modern Vietnamese nation-state, and that these concepts shaped their policies, decisions, and disagreements.

Drawing on a wide range of Vietnamese, American, French, and other primary sources, bolstered by a solid grasp of the literature, Miller teases out continuities that shaped this rocky relationship from start to finish. American policy, from Eisenhower through Kennedy, was broadly shaped by a fractious discourse between a development strategy based on theories of high modernisation, stressing the need to develop the physical environment first in order to foster changes in the social and political sphere, and a strategy based on contrasting theories of low modernisation, arguing for change from below, concentrating first on social and psychological development. This discourse both pre-existed and ranged beyond Vietnam, but consistently defined American policy there. American efforts, always plural and contested, failed to effectively align with Diem's vision of a modern Vietnam building itself from the ground up, finding its own middle way between communism and consumer capitalism. However, that does not mean we should simply replace the older 'Cold War blunder' narrative for a development grand strategy story; Miller stresses the importance and repeated impact of contingency, an insight that helps him explain why Diem failed, time and again, to communicate his vision effectively to those he needed to persuade. Miller does not present Diem as a discarded hero, but does overturn older Orientalist pictures of him as a tradition-bound despot with neither plan nor idea. Diem had both, but could not sell either to his American allies or, even more important, to other groups in Vietnamese society that could not understand the Diem

family vision of modernisation, and lost patience with the regime's Machiavellian manipulation and often brutal repression. Most surprising to many readers will surely be Miller's argument for a confident Diem, who 'accepted U.S. aid and advice as a necessary risk', but one he was sure he could manage, right to the end. Miller historicises Diem and his efforts to build a nation-state, doing for both what Andrew Wiest did for the army that toppled him: explaining failure through the evidence, instead of just writing it off as inevitable on ideological grounds.

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*Heroes and revolution in Vietnam*

By BENOÎT DE TRÉGLODÉ; translated by CLAIRE DUIKER

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The concept of the 'body politic' has its historical origins in Western medieval political theology and it minimised the distinction between the political body (the state) and the physical one (the king). Antoine de Baecque, using an impressive array of textual sources, detailed the role corporeal metaphors played in efforts to decouple these two bodies in eighteenth-century revolutionary France. The political intent behind these metaphors, de Baecque argues, was to delegitimise the old regime and legitimise a new one by representing subjects as citizens, narrating national rather than dynastic histories, and devising rituals to commemorate popular sovereignty (i.e. government created by and subject to the will of the people). Benoît de Tréglodé explores similar issues in his book, but with an important difference. He documents the extent to which the Vietnamese Communist Party relied upon pre-revolutionary understandings of heroism to mobilise rural populations to build a 'new society' in the post-revolutionary one.

In the course of doing so, de Tréglodé provides a nuanced account of the important yet overlooked role 'heroic exemplarity' played in the the creation of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and the Communist Party's subsequent consolidation of state power (c. 1948–64). But, unlike de Baecque, he directs sustained attention to the paradox at the centre of this process. The Communist Party urgently needed to rupture ties with the past yet retain selected aspects of it to legitimise its growing control over political, economic, and cultural affairs. This tension, as other scholars have noted, takes its clearest form in official discourse, which represents the Communist Party as the leading agent of radical change *and* the latest in a long line of patriots that defended the nation against foreign aggression. The heroic individuals featured in the book, de Tréglodé asserts, embodied both.

The book can be divided into two sections. The first half, which draws extensively on documents held in State Archive No. III in Hanoi, provides a genealogical account of heroism in the Vietnamese context (Chapters 1–4). The second half traces the