Introduction

On November 17, 1956, one thousand government cadres were transferred to the Special Commissariat for Civic Action (*Đặc Ủy Phủ Công Dân Vụ* or CDV) with great fanfare in Sài Gòn.[1] Presiding over the event was the Secretary of State for the Office of the Presidency, Nguyễn Hữu Châu. In his remarks commemorating the occasion, he placed these cadres at the vanguard of the government's plan to "bring together the whole population in a revolutionary spirit" by charging them with carrying out "the mission of the Constitution of the Republic." He proclaimed that they would return "democracy in every aspect, throughout the region" and ensure that "every Vietnamese person" would become "a modern citizen."[2]

This statement neatly encapsulates the various objectives that lay at the heart of South Vietnamese President Ngô Đình Diệm's ambitions for nation-building during the nine tumultuous years of his leadership. Throughout, he aspired to create a viable nation in the southern half of Vietnam that would be capable of standing independently among the other nations of the so-called "free world."[3] It would be founded on the

[1] Lễ Chuyển Giao Cán Bộ của các Bộ sang Đặc Ủy Phủ Công Dân Vụ [Transfer Ceremony for Cadres of the Ministries sent to the Special Commissariat for Civic Action], November 17, 1956, Folder 16068, Phủ Tổng Thống Đệ Nhất Cộng Hòa [Office of the President of the First Republic] (hereafter PTTĐICH), Trung Tâm Lưu Trữ Quốc Gia II [National Archives 2] (hereafter TTLTQG2).

[2] Điện Văn của Ông Bộ Trưởng Nguyễn Hữu Châu, Đại Diện Dai Tổng Thống [Address of Secretary Nguyen Huu Chau, Speech for the President], November 17, 1956, Folder 16068, PTTĐICH, TTLTQG2.

[3] Presidency of the Republic of Vietnam, *Toward Better Mutual Understanding*, Vol. 1, *Speeches Delivered by President Ngo Dinh Diem during his State Visits to Thailand,*

backs of a new civic-minded populace that was aware of its obligations to one another, the community and the nation at large.[4] It would be democratic insofar as it assured to "all citizens the right of free development and of maximum initiative, responsibility and spiritual life."[5] And it would be realized by a national and social revolution propagated at the grassroots. Beginning in 1957, the Special Commissariat for Civic Action would be charged with fomenting this revolution across the South Vietnamese countryside.

The Special Commissariat for Civic Action was a rural development initiative intended to enlist the support of the peasant population of southern Vietnam in both the physical and ideological construction of Ngô Đình Diệm's South Vietnamese nation. It had its origins in a December 1954 National Security Action Plan drafted with the assistance of the Central Intelligence Agency to fill the administrative vacuum that emerged in parts of the countryside following the withdrawal of the Việt Minh at the end of the First Indochina War. Officially launched in the spring of 1955, the CDV employed teams of young cadres to go down to the village level, live amongst the peasantry and mobilize them to voluntarily work together to modernize their local institutions and infrastructure to improve their overall welfare. The Civic Action cadres would be a vital link between Sài Gòn and the countryside through which Diệm could disseminate propaganda and build local support for his government. Initially, this effort was intended to win enough adherents to enable Diệm to defeat Hồ Chí Minh's communist regime in Hà Nội in national elections slated for 1956 to determine the political future of a newly independent Vietnam. The national elections were never held and the mission of the Special Commissariat was significantly altered.

This book traces the development of Ngô Đình Diệm's revolution through the lens of the Special Commissariat for Civic Action. The revolution itself was rooted in the humanist philosophy of Personalism which emerged from the French-Catholic left during the interwar period. It was adapted by Diệm's brother, Ngô Đình Nhu, to contend with what he perceived to be the inadequacy of the existing social, cultural and political

Australia, Korea, 2nd ed. (Saigon: Presidency of the Republic of Vietnam, Press Office, 1958), 20, 30 and 35.

[4] John C. Donnell, "Politics in South Vietnam: Doctrines of Authority in Conflict," Ph.D. diss. (University of California, Berkley, CA, 1964), 118–121; and Philip E. Catton, *Diem's Final Failure: Prelude to America's War in Vietnam* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2002), 49–50.

[5] Quoted in Clive J. Christie, Ideology and Revolution in Southeast Asia, 1900–1975: Political Ideas of the Anti-Colonial Era (Richmond, UK: Curzon, 2001), 150.

means of organizing a new national community in the wake of the French colonial experience. But Diệm's nationalism was more than just a means of uniting a community based on the concept of the nation, it was, as Nicholas Tarling contends, a way of organizing the people to interact in the global community.[6]

At the midpoint of the twentieth century, the global community was fast becoming a world of nation-states as many of the African and Asian states which collectively made up the Third World – in contrast to the First and Second Worlds of nations that fell into the American and Soviet-led camps respectively – were emerging from a century or more of colonialism.[7] The leaders of these developing states were each looking for a means to transfer to their respective nations "the political loyalty which they previously gave to some other structure."[8] In the postcolonial world, however, this structure was supposed to guarantee some form of popular sovereignty that would protect these new polities from the ebb and flow of the competing interests of the more developed powers. The trick for the Ngôs, as it was for many other Third World nationalists, was to get the Vietnamese people to embrace the nationalist structure they were proffering. In this sense Civic Action, and the broader Personalist Revolution, to which it was attached, may be seen as an example of what Benedict Anderson refers to as "bound seriality": a means to create a distinct set of individuals who were self-aware, loyal and productive citizens of the Vietnamese nation that Diệm envisioned.[9] In other words, this would be a community of Vietnamese people who lived within the territorial boundaries of the Republic of Vietnam and recognized this, dutifully adhered to the laws laid down by the government in Sài Gòn, and worked toward building a strong and viable nation. The difficulty he faced, of course, was that in attempting to build *his* nation, he was competing with a rival state entrenched in the northern half of Vietnam that was offering an alternative vision of a modern Vietnamese nation that had its own set of adherents in the South. Not to mention the countless other members of the South Vietnamese populace with their own distinct notions of what a modern Vietnamese nation should provide.

[6] Nicholas Tarling, *Nationalism in Southeast Asia: "If the People are with Us"* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004), 5–10.
[7] Vijay Prashad, *The Darker Nations: A People's History of the Third World* (New York: The New Press, 2007), xv–xvi.
[8] F.H. Hinsley quoted in Tarling, *Nationalism in Southeast Asia*, 6.
[9] Benedict Anderson, *The Spectre of Comparisons: Nationalism, Southeast Asia and the World* (London: Verso, 1998), 36–45.

This book sits at the cusp of a historiographic shift in the scholarship of the Vietnam War. Most early accounts rely primarily on American sources and situate the conflict firmly within a Cold War framework. Much of their focus has been devoted to explaining why American and South Vietnamese efforts failed to staunch the communist-led insurgency. As vast as this body of literature is, it has tended to revolve around the needs of American scholarship, trying, in effect, to explain that nation's fateful immersion in a long and bloody quagmire. These studies inevitably – and understandably – privilege the American perspective of the conflict which considers Southeast Asia as a vital Cold War battleground and South Vietnam as an American-created bulwark against communist expansion.[10] One consequence of this is that the national hopes and aspirations of South Vietnamese actors have been largely ignored.

Ngô Đình Diệm's regime is a particular case in point. In much of the literature he is depicted as either a hopelessly inept and autocratic leader, notoriously unwilling to accept US advice or a staunch nationalist driven by a knee-jerk anticommunism who was ultimately sold out by his American patrons.[11] With the opening of archives in Hà Nội and Hồ Chí

[10] See for example Robert Shaplen, *The Lost Revolution: The U.S. in Vietnam, 1946–1966*, rev. ed. (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1966); George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950–1975* (New York: Wiley, 1979); Marilyn B. Young, *The Vietnam Wars, 1945–1990* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991); James S. Olson and Randy Roberts, *Where the Domino Fell: America and Vietnam, 1945 to 1990* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991); and James R. Arnold, *The First Domino: Eisenhower, The Military and America's Intervention in Vietnam* (New York: W. Morrow, 1991); Robert Schulzinger, *A Time for War: The United States and Vietnam, 1941–1975* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); and David Kaiser, *American Tragedy: Kennedy Johnson, and the Origins of the Vietnam War* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2000).

[11] For the former view see, for example, Frances Fitzgerald, *Fire in the Lake: The Vietnamese and the Americans in Vietnam* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1972); William J. Rust and the Editors of U.S. News Books, *Kennedy in Vietnam* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1985); George McTurnan Kahin, *Intervention: How America Became Involved in Vietnam* (New York: Knopf, 1986); Neil Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 1988); David L. Anderson, *Trapped by Success: The Eisenhower Administration and Vietnam, 1953–1961* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991); David Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest*, twentieth anniversary ed. (New York: Ballantine Books, 1992); Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History*, 2nd rev. ed. (New York: Penguin, 1997); Gary R. Hess, *Vietnam and the United States: Origins and Legacy of War*, rev. ed. (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1998); Seth Jacobs, *Cold War Mandarin: Ngo Dinh Diem and the Origins of America's War in Vietnam* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2006); and James M. Carter, *Inventing Vietnam: The United States and State Building, 1954–1968* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008). For the latter perspective see, for example, Denis Warner, *The Last Confucian: Vietnam, Southeast Asia and the West* (New York: Macmillan, 1963); Anthony Bouscaren, *The Last of the Mandarins: Diem*

Minh City and an increased emphasis on interdisciplinarity and internationalizing the study of American foreign relations scholars are beginning to move away from the Cold War paradigm in trying to understand the Vietnam Conflict. They are drawing from area studies, postcolonial theory and global history in their analysis. This has had the effect of revealing the agency of Vietnamese actors and reframing the war as part of a long drawn-out struggle for national independence and unity. Such new and exciting works provide richer and more nuanced analyses of the war in which internal struggles over national identity, self-determination and even modernity itself are central.[12]

This study follows the lead of scholars like Matthew Connelly, Odd Arne Westad and Heonik Kwon by starting to take the "Cold War lens" off of our view of the Vietnam Conflict.[13] By decentering the Cold War in our field of view, Matthew Connelly has demonstrated

of Vietnam (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1965); Ellen J. Hammer, *A Death in November: America in Vietnam 1963* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987); Francis X. Winters, *The Year of the Hare: America in Vietnam, January 25, 1963–February 15, 1964* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1997); and Mark Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954–1965* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

[12] Robert Brigham, *Guerrilla Diplomacy: The NLF's Foreign Relations and the Viet Nam War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999) and *ARVN: Life and Death in the South Vietnamese Army* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2006); Mark Bradley, *Imagining Vietnam and America: The Making of Postcolonial Vietnam, 1919–1950* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), and *Vietnam at War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Catton, *Diem's Final Failure*; Pierre Asselin, *A Bitter Peace: Washington, Hanoi, and the Making of the Paris Agreement* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), and *Hanoi's Road to the Vietnam War, 1954–1965* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2013); David W.P. Elliott, *The Vietnamese War: Revolution and Social Change in the Mekong Delta, 1930–1975* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2003); David Hunt, *Vietnam's Southern Revolution: From Peasant Insurrection to Total War* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2008); Matthew Masur, "Exhibiting Signs of Resistance: South Vietnam's Struggle for Legitimacy," *Diplomatic History* 33(2) (April 2009): 293–313; Geoffrey C. Stewart, "Hearts, Minds and Công Dân Vụ: The Special Commissariat for Civic Action and Nation-Building in Ngô Đình Diệm's Vietnam, 1955–1957," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 6(3) (Fall 2011): 44–100; Lien-Hang T. Nguyen, *Hanoi's War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2012); Jessica Chapman, *Cauldron of Resistance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and 1950s Southern Vietnam* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013); Edward Miller, *Misalliance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and the Fate of South Vietnam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013); and Nhu-An Tran, "Contested Identities: Nationalism in the Republic of Vietnam (1954–1963)," Ph.D. diss. (University of California, Berkley, CA, 2013).

[13] Matthew Connelly, "Taking Off the Cold War Lens: Visions of North-South Conflict during the Algerian War for Independence," *The American Historical Review* 105(3) (June 2000): 739–769.

that a "diplomatic revolution" was at work in the international system, where non-state actors in the developing world used world opinion and international institutions like the United Nations to challenge the Cold War visions for world order held by the Great Powers.[14] In this light, Odd Arne Westad argues that the political and revolutionary struggles for decolonization in the developing world were equally as important for shaping the Cold War order as the actions of either of the dominant superpowers. The Cold War interventions of both the United States and Soviet Union, he argues, "shaped both the international and domestic framework within which political, social, and cultural changes in Third World countries took place."[15] Heonik Kwon contends that there was no singular Cold War. Rather, it was experienced in different ways throughout the globe which cannot be "forced into a single coherent conceptual whole."[16] To understand the Cold War on the periphery, we must consider the "postcolonial visions" of the newly emerging states.[17]

I situate the Vietnam War at the intersection of the Cold War international order with the phenomenon of decolonization. When examining the broad international forces at work in Southeast Asia at the midpoint of the twentieth century, it provides equal weight to the phenomenon of decolonization and the Cold War in shaping Ngô Đình Diệm's efforts to establish a viable independent state south of the seventeenth parallel. It considers the interaction of these forces as mutually constitutive in Vietnam. To paraphrase Kwon, I view the ideological divide between Ngô Đình Diệm's Personalist Revolution and the Marxist-Leninism vision that lay deep at the roots of the National Liberation Front's platform as different paths to "national liberation and self-determination" that, in the maelstrom of the Cold War, were "transformed into the ideology of civil strife and war, in which achieving national unity became equivalent to annihilating one or the other side from the body politic."[18]

This study relies extensively on South Vietnamese sources from Archives Number II in Hồ Chí Minh City as well as archives in the United States and Canada to examine Ngô Đình Diệm's effort to foment his

[14] Matthew Connelly, *A Diplomatic Revolution: Algeria's Fight for Independence and the Origins of the Post-Cold War Era* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 278–279.
[15] Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 3.
[16] Heonik Kwon, *The Other Cold War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 6–7.
[17] *Ibid.*, 89.
[18] *Ibid.*, 116.

Personalist Revolution at the grassroots. It uses these materials to reveal the agency of South Vietnamese actors in three important ways. First, it demonstrates the regime in Sài Gòn and its policies were more than simply the machinations of the Ngô family. Other individuals, like Kiều Công Cung, the head of the Special Commissariat for Civic Action, were integral in trying to interpret the wishes of the regime and formulating policy accordingly. Second, it places the nation-building effort, to which the Personalist Revolution was attached, in a transnational framework by exploring its connection to the global community development movement. This movement, which had its origins in New Deal urban renewal projects and a rural development scheme in the state of Uttar Pradesh in India came to the Republic of Vietnam by way of a variety of sources including American advisers working with the International Cooperation Administration and Michigan State University, Europeans working for the United Nations, and the literature of community development experts emerging from the Indian experience. It was based on the notion – what I refer to as the community development idea – that local human and material resources could be used for reconstruction projects aimed at satisfying the "felt needs" of a particular community.[19] Third, it contrasts American developmental prescriptions designed to fashion a state capable of meeting both the communist challenge from the North and the needs of the perceived revolution of rising expectations in the South with Diệm's efforts to create what he considered to be a modern and viable nation capable of exercising its international sovereignty to the best of its ability in the global arena. Though Diệm was as intent on nation-building as his US allies, he was determined to do it on his own terms.

This book develops the story of the Special Commissariat for Civic Action over six chapters. The opening chapter looks at the circumstances surrounding the establishment of the Special Commissariat for Civic Action, exploring how it was initially conceived as a temporary expedient for the Sài Gòn government to extend its reach down to the village level following the Franco-Việt Minh War. The chapter places particular emphasis on the national election scheduled to be held in the summer of 1956 to determine whether the Hà Nội government of Hồ Chí Minh or Diệm's government in Sài Gòn would preside over a unified Vietnam. It demonstrates that the South Vietnamese government hoped the cadres of the Special Commissariat could win support for Diệm in the electoral

[19] Daniel Immerwahr, *Thinking Small: The United States and the Lure of Community Development* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 71–75.

contest by helping to mitigate the effects of South Vietnam's social, political and economic dislocation on the morale of the peasantry following the French colonial experience and the subsequent war of decolonization.

The second chapter examines the origins of Ngô Đình Diệm's revolution in the context of his efforts to consolidate his hold on power during his first year in office. In addition to clandestine communist agents loyal to the Hà Nội government, Diệm was faced with a host of enemies ranging from dissident generals to politico-religious sects and an organized crime syndicate to holdovers from the French colonial apparatus all vying for influence. Branding them enemies under a formula which identified communists, feudalists and colonialists as opponents of the government, Diệm began to define his vision of a postcolonial Vietnamese nation in opposition to what he saw as the retrograde qualities of these adversaries. At the same time, Diệm elected to make the Special Commissariat for Civic Action a permanent arm of the government. Once Diệm had elected not to hold the 1956 election on unification, Civic Action's mandate was significantly broadened to promoting the ideals behind his national vision. Under the twin concepts of "Raising the People's Intellectual Standards" and "Welfare Improvement" the Civic Action cadres mobilized the rural population to both identify the enemies of the regime and actively participate in the modernization of their village institutions and infrastructure. The regime's intent was to foster a sense of solidarity between the people and the Sài Gòn government by instilling them with the virtues of good citizenship while bringing material improvement to their standard of living. Unfortunately, the Special Commissariat suffered from a perennial lack of funding and the efforts of its Commissioner, Kiều Công Cung, to solicit assistance from the United States Mission in Sài Gòn ran afoul of the prejudices and bureaucratic rigidity of the American organization.

The third chapter examines the Ngôs' Personalist Revolution and how the palace wanted to use it as a guide for nation-building. Personalism's emphasis on personal sacrifice for the common good jibed with the voluntarism and spirit of self-help that underpinned the Welfare Improvement work. It also meshed with the principle of community development which had been filtering into South Vietnam through a variety of sources. This made community development a perfect fit for the palace's ambitious nation-building agenda. The Republic of Vietnam's community development plan, however, was decidedly at odds with Washington's developmental designs, particularly the Ngôs' decision to entrust it to the Special Commissariat for Civic Action. This sparked deliberations on whether or not to support it that were informed by the Eisenhower administration's

perception of colonialism and the global south as well as the fiscal conservatism of its New Look foreign policy. In the end, these policymakers concluded that Sài Gòn's community development plan was beyond the scope of what was an acceptable enterprise to support financially.

Chapter 4 explores Kiều Công Cung's efforts to make South Vietnam's community development plan his own. Though the Special Commissariat for Civic Action was to be the organ to administer the plan, community development was to be kept independent from Civic Action with creation of separate community development teams. For two years Cung worked to bring the community development effort into the fold of the Special Commissariat in order to keep it in line with what he perceived to be the revolutionary aims of the Diệm regime. In the process, he transformed the mission of the Special Commissariat from "Welfare Improvement" to "Bettering the People's Conditions of Existence" – which, in his mind, was synonymous with community development – and drafting his own community development plan, complete with a National Community Development Training Centre. By the start of 1959, Cung anticipated all of the Civic Action cadres being converted to community development cadres over the course of the following year.

Chapter 5 looks at the origins of the southern insurgency and the challenges this posed for the Special Commissariat for Civic Action just as it reached its apotheosis as a community development organ for Kiều Công Cung. It accepts the argument that the insurgency was a southern phenomenon born of the alienation elements of the southern population felt towards the more nefarious aspects of the Sài Gòn regime such as the most insidious component of the "three enemies" formula, the (*Tố Cộng*) communist denunciation campaign, a brutally effective means to weed out suspected communists from the villages. Chronically underfunded and short of manpower, the CDV struggled to stay ahead of the insurgency as southern communists were able to exploit the disaffection of the peasantry to organize a sustained campaign of violence against the Sài Gòn government.

The final chapter looks at the formation of the National Liberation Front (NLF) at the end of 1961 and the implications this had for Diệm's revolution. As this was occurring it became apparent that the CDV was incapable of meeting this new challenge. The cadres' activity became more reactionary, shifting away from community development to population control and, in some cases, armed propaganda campaigns. No longer capable of using the Civic Action cadres to foment the Personalist Revolution at the local level, the palace adopted the Strategic Hamlet

Program as a means to continue this work in an ostensibly more secure environment. Though it showed some signs of progress in countering the insurgency from 1962 to 1963, the Strategic Hamlet Program was ultimately incapable of inculcating the peasantry with the revolutionary ardor the palace hoped it could. When the Diệm government was overthrown in November 1963, the whole program collapsed under its own weight. The book concludes with a brief discussion of the shortcomings of the Personalist Revolution and an explanation of why it failed to resonate with the South Vietnamese people.