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978-0-521-71690-1 - *Inventing Vietnam: The United States and State Building, 1954-1968*

James M. Carter

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I

INTRODUCTION: INVENTING VIETNAM

The country that is more developed industrially only shows, to the less developed, the image of its own future.

– Karl Marx

The great problem from now on out [is] whether we [can] salvage what the Communists had ostensibly left out of their grasp in Indochina.

– Secretary of State John Foster Dulles

I've never seen a situation like this [in southern Vietnam]. It defies imagination. . . . The government is shaky as all hell. It is being propped up for the moment only with great difficulty. Nothing can help it so much as administrative, economic, and social reforms. . . . The needs are enormous, the time short.

– Wesley Fishel, 1954

By early 1957, . . . it became evident the newly created nation [in Vietnam] would survive successfully the series of crises which threatened its existence at the outset.

– Michigan State University Vietnam Advisory Group (MSUG), *Final Report*

Although no MSUG member ever expected to find in newly independent Vietnam all the civil liberties firmly established among older western democracies, some members had misgivings lest the project's technical assistance might serve to strengthen an autocratic regime and retard the development of democratic institutions. Most members . . . believed our activities were valuable . . . in creating among the Vietnamese a critical attitude for seeking truth and knowledge through systematic research, promoting the study of social sciences from the western viewpoint, raising the general of educational standards, and implanting in the minds of government officials, police officers and teachers the ideas

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of responsibility and responsiveness to the public, individual dignity and other such concepts, the acceptance of which is a prerequisite for the eventual evolution of free institutions in Vietnam.

– MSUG *Final Report*, 1962

We are no longer dealing with anyone [in Saigon] who represents anybody in a political sense. We are simply acting to prevent a collapse of the Vietnamese military forces which we pay for and supply.

– Senator Mike Mansfield, June 1965

There is no tradition of a national government in Saigon. There are no roots in the country. . . . I don't think we ought to take this government seriously. There is no one who can do anything. We have to do what we think we ought to regardless of what the Saigon government does.

– Henry Cabot Lodge, July 1965

We would be occupying an essentially hostile foreign country.

– General William C. Westmoreland, January 1965, on the possibility of use of American troops in southern Vietnam

Despite all our public assertions to the contrary, the South Vietnamese are not – and have never been – a nation.

– General Victor Krulak, U.S. Marines, April 1966

Twelve years have elapsed since we began contributing economic assistance and manpower to . . . Vietnam. Yet, that nation continues to face political instability, lack a sense of nationhood, and to suffer social, religious, and regional factionalism and severe economic dislocations. Inflation continues to mount, medical care remains inadequate, land reform is virtually nonexistent, agricultural and education[al] advances are minimal, and the development of an honest, capable, and responsible civil service has hardly begun.

– Representative Donald H. Rumsfeld, 1966

I want to leave the footprints of America in Vietnam. . . . I want them to say when the Americans come, this is what they leave – schools, not long cigars. We're going to turn the Mekong into a Tennessee Valley.

– Lyndon B. Johnson, 1966

Vietnam itself is primarily an agricultural country; the only major port is Saigon. The deployment of large U.S. military forces, and other friendly forces such as the Korean division, in a country of this sort requires the construction of new ports, warehouse facilities, access roads, improvements to highways leading to the interior of the country and along the

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coasts, troop facilities, hospitals, completely new airfields and major improvements to existing airfields, communications facilities, etc.

– Robert S. McNamara, Secretary of Defense, 1966

The coordinated activities of the Facilities Engineering Command and RMK-BRJ have brought sweeping change to much of the tiny nation's [southern Vietnam] landscape. Hills have been planed down for air bases, and rivers and harbors dredged for ports. Deserted beaches have become busy waterfront depots. Paths have been replaced by highways, new hospitals have been built and old surgical facilities rehabilitated. Billets for tens of thousands of troops have sprung up where little existed before. Today, most of these widely diversified projects serve as support elements vital to the war effort. Tomorrow, many of the developments will help serve South Viet Nam in its peacetime pursuit of national betterment.

– “Viet Nam: Building for Battle, Building for Peace,”
The Em-Kayan, September 1966

How were the U.S. forces . . . to maintain thousands of miles of roads, hundreds of bridges, and thousands of culverts without stationing engineer units in compounds throughout the length and breadth of Vietnam? How were they to support a complex modern army of half a million men without ports and depots to receive, sort, and store supplies? Where would they house this army and in what kind of structures? . . . The very nature of the war required a military presence everywhere, and that simply meant dotting the countryside with fire-support bases, maneuver-element base camps, logistics support areas, heliports, and tactical airstrips. . . . Each base, airfield, and compound had to be joined to its neighbor in an ever-expanding network of primary and secondary roads.

– Lieutenant General Carroll H. Dunn, U.S. Army

The Americans came in like bulldozers.

– Former Ambassador to the United States Bui Diem

It is very clear that in many respects, much of Vietnam is today a nation of refugees.

– Leo Cherne, Chairman, International Rescue Committee

Hell, with half a million men in Vietnam, we are spending twenty-one billion dollars a year, and we're fighting the whole war with Vietnamese watching us; how can you talk about national sovereignty?

– Robert Komer, Special Assistant to the President

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It is still not unfair to say that there is no real government in Vietnam. . . .

It is . . . the result of a political structure still so fragmented and weak that division commanders can choose those orders they intend to obey, and Ministries can follow their own paths regardless of the desires of the Prime Minister.

– Richard Holbrooke, Assistant to Robert Komer, 1966

The people I talked to [in Vietnam] didn't seem to have any feeling about South Vietnam as a country. We fought the war for a separate South Vietnam, but there wasn't any South and there never was one.

– Paul Warnke, Former General Counsel for the
Defense Department

There are no more pyramids to build. We have just about completed the largest construction effort in history.

– John B. Kirkpatrick, Former General Manager, RMK-BRJ
Joint Venture Saigon, Vietnam¹

¹ Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critical Analysis of Capitalist Production* (New York: International Publishers, 1967), 1:8–9. Dulles quote is from Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS), *Memorandum of Discussion at the 207th Meeting of the National Security Council, Thursday, July 22, 1954* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of State, 1952–4), XIII:1869. Wesley Fishel to Edward Weidner, August 25 and September 4, 1954, Michigan State University Vietnam Advisory Group (MSUG) Papers, Vietnam Project Papers, Correspondence, Edward Weidner, 1954, box 628, folder 101. Next two quotes are from MSUG, *Final Report* (East Lansing: Michigan State University, 1962). Mansfield quoted in George M. Kahin, *Intervention: How America Became Involved in Vietnam* (New York: Anchor Books, 1987), 345. Lodge quote is from FRUS, *Vietnam* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of State, 1965), 3:193. Westmoreland quoted in Robert Buzzanco, *Masters of War: Military Dissent & Politics in the Vietnam Era* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 190. Krulak quoted in *ibid.*, 257. Rumsfeld quote is from *An Investigation of the U.S. Economic and Military Assistance Programs in Vietnam, 42nd Report by the Committee on Government Operations, October 12, 1966* (Washington, DC: Committee on Government Operations, 1966), 127. Johnson quoted in Doris Kearns, *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991), 267. McNamara quote is from Senate Committee on Armed Services, *Hearings before the Committee on Armed Services and the Subcommittee on Department of Defense of the Committee on Appropriations, 89th Cong., 2nd sess., S. Rep., 1966, 12*. Dunn quoted from *Base Development in South Vietnam, 1965–1970* (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 1991), 12. Bui Diem, *In the Jaws of History* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), 127. Cherne quote is from Senate Subcommittee on Refugees and Escapees of the Committee on the Judiciary, *Refugee Problems in South Vietnam and Laos, 89th Cong., 1st sess.* (1965), 56. Komer quoted in Lloyd Gardner, *Pay Any Price: Lyndon Johnson and the Wars for Vietnam* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1995), 303. Holbrooke quote is from *Vietnam Trip Report: October 26–November 18, 1966*. Warnke quoted in Christian Appy, *Patriots: The Vietnam War Remembered from All Sides* (New York: Penguin, 2003), 279. Kirkpatrick quote is from “End of Viet Nam Construction Program,” *The Em-Kayan*, June 1972.

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Early in 2004, the Vietnamese government completed work on the first of a major three-phase highway building program. The highway, when completed in some fifteen years, will run along the route of the famous Ho Chi Minh Trail down the border with Laos. During the period of the American war in Vietnam, *Ho Chi Minh Trail* referred to an elaborate network of arteries that ran the gamut from mere footpaths to large roads able to accommodate heavy truck traffic. The trail ran through Laos, eventually farther south into Cambodia, and crossed the border into Vietnam at a number of strategic points. It was by all accounts an important supply system for the southern insurgency fighting against the Americans and their client regime in Saigon.²

This latest road project is to be much greater in scope and will serve a very different purpose. The Vietnamese government hopes the new road, named the Ho Chi Minh Highway, will open up the interior along the border with Laos and allow rural people access to faraway markets. It will also provide important transportation links between the countryside and the cities for a government looking to develop the dilapidated transportation infrastructure of the nation. Sections of the national road Highway 1 have not been updated since the end of the American war some thirty years ago. Near the ancient capital city of Hué, for example, the road shrinks to only one lane, and during the monsoon season, sections of it close completely for days at a time. Much of the rest of the nation's secondary road network also needs updating. The Ho Chi Minh Highway project is an important step in modernizing the nation's roads and in developing the nation's physical infrastructure.

The project has also, however, generated considerable criticism, mainly because the area under construction, in Quang Tri Province, was the most heavily bombed during the Vietnam War, and there remain some 3 million land mines and more than three hundred thousand tons of unexploded ordinance (UXO) littering many square miles of the country. Since 1975, this province alone accounted for more than sixty-seven hundred of the one hundred thousand total wounded and killed by UXO.³ Building the new highway will, critics argue, unearth some of

² John Prados, *The Blood Road: The Ho Chi Minh Trail and the Vietnam War* (New York: John Wiley, 1999).

³ See, e.g., "The Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund's Project Renew," Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund, <http://vvmf.org/index.cfm?SectionID=21>. David Lamb, "Perils of War Remain in the Soil of Vietnam," *Los Angeles Times*, April 26, 2004.

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this long-buried ordinance and place workers, travelers, and the people who live along the proposed roadway in harm's way unnecessarily. Nevertheless, the road building will likely continue. When completed, the Ho Chi Minh Highway will traverse this region and many more areas of the country also littered with UXO. The whole project, couched in terms of economic development, will eventually consist of eight lanes stretching from north to south and covering hundreds of miles of rugged, and mined, terrain. Observers have called it "the most ambitious road project ever in Asia."⁴ Whether this claim is true or not, this is certainly not the first time large-scale efforts have been launched to modernize Vietnam.

There is an interesting and insightful juxtaposition in the Vietnamese government developing the nation's system of modern roadways today and the earlier effort by the United States to transform the southern half of that nation through various economic, political, and military development initiatives. That the government is now building those roadways and other infrastructure through heavily bombed regions still scattered with mines and that saw considerable destruction during the Vietnam War also speaks volumes of that earlier effort.

During the period of direct American involvement beginning in 1954, the U.S. mission in Vietnam designed and implemented a range of far-reaching economic, political, and eventually military development projects in one of the most thorough and ambitious state-building efforts in the postwar period. The projects consisted of installing a president; building a civil service and training bureaucrats around him; creating a domestic economy, currency, and an industrial base; building ports and airfields, hospitals, and schools; dredging canals and harbors to create a transportation grid; constructing an elaborate network of modern roadways; establishing a telecommunications system; and training, equipping, and funding a national police force and a military, among others.

Between 1954 and 1960, the United States poured into the southern half of Vietnam nearly US\$1.5 billion to pay for its state-building program(s). Despite the enormity of these efforts, the project to build an independent state around Ngo Dinh Diem met with failure. By the early

⁴ Michael Sullivan, "Analysis: Ho Chi Minh Trail in Vietnam," National Public Radio, April 5, 2004.

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1960s, the United States began responding to the project's failings and to a growing chorus in Vietnam opposing the effort with greater levels of military and police force to protect its client regime in Saigon. Ultimately, and almost imperceptibly, U.S. officials glossed over the fact that the state-building project was deeply troubled and failing and instead began justifying greater military involvement and authorizing greater use of force by the regime in order to stamp out the Vietnamese resistance to that effort as well as to mask its deficiencies. At the same time, nearly all American officials began referring to southern Vietnam exclusively as "South Vietnam," as though the state had existed and now compelled defense from outside aggressors bent on conquest. That fiction perpetuated the powerful and politically successful idea that the effort in Vietnam was about combating aggression and that the problem stemmed from North Vietnamese aggression against a putatively independent South Vietnam. In reality, the war in Vietnam resulted not from outside aggression, but from the failure of the six-year effort to build a viable state infrastructure around the regime in Saigon.

Throughout the decade of the 1960s, the United States escalated its presence in Vietnam, began waging a war, expanded its aid program, and launched a military construction effort of unprecedented scale. The war itself brought the most far-reaching changes the region had witnessed so far. Over the course of the fourteen years from 1954, the United States transformed much of the southern half of Vietnam numerous times as part of its effort to build and/or salvage a state below the seventeenth parallel. These transformations were the product of the array of state-building projects, resettlement schemes, commodity/economic aid and cultural transmission, as well as the more obvious effects of military aid, warfare and destruction, and political manipulation. Moreover, the changes brought to Vietnam undulated according to and were a product of the particular agendas of the different American presidential administrations. The differing programs and plans for southern Vietnam are a good barometer of the crisis each administration perceived that it faced in Southeast Asia.⁵

⁵ The relationship between the war in Vietnam and individual administrations and presidents is an established trend in the historical literature as well. See, *inter alia*, William Rust, *Kennedy in Vietnam: American Vietnam Policy, 1960-1963* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1985); Lawrence Freedman, *Kennedy's Wars: Berlin, Lao, Cuba, and Vietnam* (New

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The administrations of Dwight D. Eisenhower, John F. Kennedy, and Lyndon B. Johnson, in particular, outlined and implemented an array of short- and long-term policy objectives for Vietnam. Meeting these objectives involved considerable resources from the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), the U.S. military, the Agency for International Development (AID), Michigan State University (MSU), many private corporations specializing in hundreds of different tasks, religious organizations, private sector economists and bureaucrats, and much more. By the early 1960s, the costs of the project grew to an average of \$1 million each day.

Despite this unprecedented effort, the project achieved limited and fleeting success. Oftentimes, failure in one area offsets success in another, such as the public political rehabilitation of Ngo Dinh Diem by the late 1950s, while the resistance to his rule grew into the National Liberation Front by 1960. Efforts to legitimize the regime in Saigon and to spread its influence beyond that city also failed repeatedly, and planners resorted to the use of force simply to keep it in place. In the realm of land reform, industrialization, currency stabilization, encouraging domestic savings, creating a tax base, and opening up the political system to other parties, the overall effort met with unmitigated long-term failure.

Providing evidence of the effort's success, however, received a great deal of emphasis throughout the period. This pressure to demonstrate success in Vietnam (and in the Cold War) led ultimately to the sharp bifurcation between the official story from government sources and the story as told by others on the ground in Vietnam. It also led a majority of U.S. officials to accept, after many years of effort, some of the most important and erroneous assumptions concerning the state of affairs in southern Vietnam. At times, officials both in Washington and in Saigon seemed to will away evidence of failure, excess, waste, fraud, and flawed planning. They did this for a variety of reasons, from individual survival within a particular administration to agency/institutional territoriality, inertia, individual and collective credibility, or some combination of these factors. This is not to suggest that all officials viewed the situation in Vietnam in the same way, nor am I suggesting that their varied criticisms were unimportant. Successive administrations did achieve a

York: Oxford University Press, 2002); Larry Berman, *Lyndon Johnson's War: The Road to Stalemate in Vietnam* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1989); Gardner, *Pay Any Price*; Jeffrey Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998).

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consensus on perhaps the most fundamental issue related to U.S. policy toward southern Vietnam: that there existed an independent, noncommunist state south of the seventeenth parallel that compelled American aid and defense.

This assumption is also reflected, either implicitly or explicitly, in the historical literature on U.S. policy in Vietnam. Historians have not probed what were fundamental problems and obstacles to the achievement of success in Southeast Asia through the lens of this state-building enterprise. This pattern has obscured the tremendous effort, preceding and paralleling the start of major warfare, of building a physical infrastructure in southern Vietnam. The planners who began the effort to build the new state infrastructure clearly recognized that the state as they imagined it did not exist. They saw themselves as building something completely new in southern Vietnam. They then had to rebuild numerous aspects of state infrastructure over again as the objectives and realities in Vietnam shifted. From the outset, American experts and advisors in Vietnam saw themselves engaged in a thoroughgoing campaign to create a modern state out of southern Vietnam. At the same time, security measures such as the creation of a police network, the Vietnamese Bureau of Investigation, and an army paralleled an expanding state-building program carried out by the U.S. Operations Mission (USOM) and specialists from Michigan State University. The two facets of the overall mission, military preparedness and the physical processes of state building, competed for resources and emphasis over the next several years. As the resistance movement grew and security concerns moved front and center, the U.S. mission responded by hurriedly putting in place a vast modern military infrastructure. By the mid-1960s, this military buildup overwhelmed all other efforts in Vietnam. But those efforts did not simply go away; they now took on different meaning and served the purpose of sustaining the wartime economic and political structures that had already been put in place in Saigon. This process of building and rebuilding, of inventing and reinventing, continued over the whole of American involvement from 1954 forward.

The process also disrupted Vietnamese society, created an unstable political environment, and kept the economy in a constant state of shock. As the American role increased dramatically in the 1960s, so too did the level of monetary aid, goods imported into Vietnam, the construction programs, the presence of military personnel, and the pressure

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on the fragile political structure and economy to accommodate the changes. Meanwhile, the increasing level of warfare turned hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese out as refugees and disrupted Vietnamese rural life and the subsistence agricultural system. A large mobile refugee population and the destruction of warfare also created a grave public health crisis as the urban population swelled and overtaxed an already inadequate public health/medical infrastructure.

The regime in Saigon consistently lacked the ability to mitigate any of these serious problems. It simply did not have the capability (nor, at times, the will) to deal with the needs of the people. It had not been able to reach out to those in the countryside and make itself legitimate during the relative peace of the late 1950s, much less during the full-scale war that existed by the mid-1960s. It also lacked any appreciable means of generating revenue outside the American aid program. It was, as members of the aid mission frankly admitted at the time, singularly dependent upon continued American aid. Its tax base remained tiny and politically sensitive. Its overall decision-making capability was also limited by the realities of war and by the considerable power differential between the regime and the United States. The latter had made a commitment to wage war and defeat the enemy, an increasingly audacious and decades-long revolutionary movement, and had structured the entire aid program toward that end. Vietnamese officials well understood that their own survival also hinged on meeting that objective. Many of them also directly benefited from loopholes and excesses that were a part of the U.S. aid program. Amid growing security concerns and escalating violence and warfare, state building fell out of favor as impractical and untimely. These efforts would have to wait until southern Vietnam could be made secure. Nevertheless, both Vietnamese and American officials continued to assert the existence of “South Vietnam.” This assumption papered over considerable failings and future obstacles to progress. These obstacles became further ingrained as the aid program shifted its focus away from ameliorating social misery caused by the war and toward greater energy, money, and other resources for the war effort.

Historians of U.S. involvement in Vietnam have not begun to grapple sufficiently with these matters. In some works the regime in Saigon is recognized as dependent on American aid and an evolving experiment in state building. Historian David Anderson, for example, has written in his study of early U.S. involvement in Vietnam that “there was no