14

Ngô Đình Diệm and the Birth of the Republic of Vietnam

PHI-VÂN NGUYEN

Introduction

On June 24, 1954, Ngô Đình Diệm landed in Saigon, ending nearly four years of foreign exile. He had returned to begin his tenure as the newly appointed prime minister of the State of Vietnam (SVN). American accounts of his arrival gave the impression of a political leader who was reluctant to mingle with the crowd and only shook a few hands before leaving in a car.[1] This led many to question why this man, who was supposed to lead noncommunist Vietnam at such a crucial time, seemed indifferent to popular support, and showed no interest in engaging the people he would soon govern. Recent research shows, however, that Diệm's hasty departure from the airport was in fact carefully planned. He headed straight to Gia Long Palace in downtown Saigon, where a large crowd, including several political leaders and representatives of ethnic minorities and other groups, had gathered to cheer his arrival as the new prime minister.[2]

Many historians have cited the story of Diệm's 1954 arrival as a way of raising important questions about him and the Republic of Vietnam (RVN), the state that he would go on to establish in 1955.[3] Was Ngô Đình Diệm the right man to lead "Free Vietnam"? What were American expectations for South Vietnam and its new political leader? When Diệm returned from exile in 1954, was he an unknown political outsider or was he representative of Vietnamese

1 Edward G. Lansdale, *In the Midst of Wars: An American Mission to Southeast Asia* (New York, 1972), 156–7.

2 Edward Miller, *Misalliance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States and the Fate of South Vietnam* (Cambridge, MA, 2013), 1–5.

3 Denis Ashton Warner, *The Last Confucian: Vietnam, South-East Asia, and the West* (London, 1964), 90; Joseph Buttinger, *Vietnam: A Dragon Embattled* (New York, 1967), 850–1; Georges Chaffard, *Indochine: Dix ans d'indépendance* (Paris, 1964), 32–4; Philip Catton, "'It Would Be a Terrible Thing if We Handed These People over to the Communists': The Eisenhower Administration, Article 14(d), and the Origins of the Refugee Exodus from North Vietnam," *Diplomatic History* 39 (2) (2015), 22.

nationalism? Did the republic he founded ever offer a viable anticommunist alternative to Hồ Chí Minh and the communist-led Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRVN)?

The Republic of Vietnam occupies a crucial place in Vietnam War scholarship because Diệm's attempt to build a strong nation-state in South Vietnam was the last and most sustained effort to counter communist expansion in Vietnam through peaceful means. Because the eventual failure of Diệm's nation-building project created the preconditions for the intervention of US armed forces in Vietnam, the political legacy of his "first" Republic of Vietnam has generated polarized interpretations. To his admirers, Ngô Đình Diệm was a forward-thinking hero who was betrayed by his American allies; to his critics, he was a creature invented by US foreign policy.[4] Scholars in the former group have depicted Diệm and the republic he founded in tragic terms as a "triumph forsaken" or a "lost victory."[5] Meanwhile, those in the latter camp sarcastically reproduce the sensational 1950s American media portrayals of Diệm as "America's Miracle Man" in Vietnam.[6] In both cases, the interpretations of Diệm and the RVN are framed within larger arguments about the causes and eventual outcome of the Vietnam War – even though that conflict only began during the last years of Diệm's rule and was not transformed into a major international conflict until after his death in 1963.

Since the 1990s, improved access to Vietnamese archives has opened new possibilities for moving beyond the old binary debates between "revisionist" and "orthodox" positions. The newer scholarship, which incorporates Vietnamese and European sources as well as American archival materials, has questioned the older arguments in three important ways. First, the incorporation of Vietnamese archives and perspectives challenges the idea that US Cold War foreign policy unfolded across the globe unhindered by local circumstances. By taking Vietnamese agency seriously, the recent work shows how American power was mediated on the ground in Vietnam.[7] Contrary to

4 Philip E. Catton, "Refighting Vietnam in the History Books: The Historiography of the War," *OAH Magazine of History* 18 (5) (2004), 7–11.

5 Mark Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken, The Vietnam War 1954–1965* (Cambridge, 2006) or William Colby and James McCargar, *Lost Victory: A Firsthand Account of America's Sixteen-Year Involvement in Vietnam* (Chicago, 1989).

6 Seth Jacobs, *America's Miracle Man in Vietnam: Ngo Dinh Diem, Religion, Race and US Intervention in Southeast Asia, 1950–1957* (Durham, NC, 2005).

7 Philip E. Catton, *Diem's Final Failure: Prelude to America's War in Vietnam* (Lawrence, KS, 2002); Miller, *Misalliance*; Jessica Chapman, *Cauldron of Resistance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and 1950s Southern Vietnam* (Ithaca, 2013); Geoffrey C. Stewart, *Vietnam's Lost Revolution: Ngô Đình Diệm's Failure to Build an Independent Nation, 1955–1963* (Cambridge, MA, 2017).

what some defenders of the orthodoxy have alleged, these new studies do not simply replace American agency with Vietnamese autonomy.[8] Instead, they analyze how the two both reinforced and undermined each other.

Second, the adoption of global approaches to the history of the Vietnam Wars has enabled a new focus on multidimensional, multi-institutional, and *longue durée* connections. The history of the US–South Vietnam alliance was not defined exclusively by relations between the two states and their official representatives. It was also profoundly shaped by the transnational mobilization of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), think tanks, and religious organizations that joined the struggle against communist expansion in Vietnam.[9] By highlighting these mobilizations, scholars have shown that the Cold War was much more than the sum of rivalries and relations among states. It was also deeply shaped by global economic, social, and cultural networks that transcended political boundaries.

Finally, this new scholarship incorporates a fundamental insight of empire studies: the notion of circularity and the idea that the imperial center is always being transformed by its domination of the peripheries. No matter how great American power might have been in comparison to that of the Republic of Vietnam, no American decision or initiative could be implemented without Vietnamese and other local partners, who in turn influenced their powerful allies.[10] Understanding American and Vietnamese partnership

8 For the claim that recent scholarship on the Vietnam War has discounted the role of the United States, see Daniel Bessner and Fredrik Logevall, "Recentering the United States in the Historiography of American Foreign Relations," *Texas National Security Review* 3 (2) (Spring 2020), 38–55.

9 On the transnational mobilization of private voluntary aid through NGOs, see Jessica Elkind, *Aid Under Fire: Nation Building and the Vietnam War* (Lexington, KY, 2016); Elkind, "'The Virgin Mary is Going South': Refugee Resettlement in South Vietnam, 1954–1956," *Diplomatic History* 38 (5) (2014), 987–1016; Delia T. Pergande, "Private Voluntary Aid and Nation Building in South Vietnam: The Humanitarian Politics of CARE, 1954–1961," *Peace and Change* 27 (2) (2002), 165–97; Christopher J. Kauffman, "Politics, Programs, and Protests: Catholic Relief Services in Vietnam, 1954–1975," *The Catholic Historical Review* 91 (2) (2005), 223–50; Scott Flipse, "To Save 'Free Vietnam' and Lose Our Souls: The Missionary Impulse, Voluntary Agencies, and Protestant Dissent against the War, 1965–1971," in Daniel H. Bays and Grant Wacker (eds.), *The Foreign Missionary Enterprise at Home: Explorations in American Cultural History* (Tuscaloosa, AL, 2003); Phi-Vân Nguyen, "Victims of Atheist Persecution: Transnational Catholic Solidarity and Refugee Protection in Cold War Asia," in Peter Van der Veer and Birgit Meier (eds.), *Refugees and Religions. Ethnographic Studies of Global Trajectories* (London, 2021). For the work of think tanks, John Ernst, *Forging a Fateful Alliance: Michigan State University and the Vietnam War* (East Lansing, MI, 1998).

10 On how American power is mediated overseas, see 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) (2000), 739–69.

as a dialectical relationship, rather than one of straightforward subordination, helps us understand how local developments influenced American foreign policy. In this respect, Ngô Đình Diệm's ascent from the position of SVN prime minister to the presidency of the newly created Republic of Vietnam during 1954–6 allows us to unpack the most common misconceptions about South Vietnamese politics, and understand better the RVN's complex and ambiguous role in the history of noncommunist Vietnamese nationalism.

Ngô Đình Diệm: A Coalition Leader

Perhaps even more than the founders of other twentieth-century states, Ngô Đình Diệm was the central figure in the First Republic of Vietnam. Born in 1901 into a family with deep connections to one of central Vietnam's oldest Catholic communities, Diệm grew up in a family defined by literacy, faith in God, and a career in the public service.[11] He served in the colonial administration, rose to the position of province chief in 1930, and then interior minister three years later, before resigning, due to French reluctance to restore a measure of autonomy to the Vietnamese court. By sacrificing his career for the sake of independence, Diệm became known as an uncompromising opponent of colonialism. Meanwhile, his repression of communist revolts in central Vietnam in the 1930s and the assassination of his oldest brother by cadres in 1945 secured his image as a fierce anticommunist.

But a closer look at Diệm's career during the 1930s and 1940s reveals a figure who was more politically flexible than his reputation suggested. After his departure from colonial service, Diệm emerged as the potential leader of large political coalitions. During Vichy's wartime rule of Indochina (1940–5), he was the presumed leader of the Vietnam Restoration League, an organization that aimed to gather Hòa Hảo, Cao Đài, Đại Việt, and Catholics in support of the return of Prince Cường Để from his exile in Japan.[12] But at the decisive moment in the spring of 1945, Japanese military leaders opted to stick with Emperor Bảo Đại as the head of the newly created Empire of Vietnam.[13] A few months later, during the August Revolution, Hồ Chí Minh

11 Miller, *Misalliance*, 22–4.

12 Trần Mỹ Vân, *A Vietnamese Royal Exile in Japan, Prince Cường Để (1882–1951)* (London, 2005), 166–72.

13 Masaya Shiraishi, "The Vietnamese Phuc Quoc League and the 1940 Insurrection," *Working Paper, Creation of New Contemporary Asia Studies* (2004), 34; Masaya Shiraishi, "La présence japonaise en Indochine (1940–1945)," in Paul Isoart (ed.), *L'Indochine française, 1940–1945* (Paris, 1982), 172.

asked Diệm to serve in the newly created Democratic Republic of Vietnam. Diệm refused, not because of his opposition to communism, but because he was not given the ministry of interior.[14]

After 1945, Ngô Đình Diệm repeatedly tried to revive the idea of a nationalist coalition made of Hòa Hảo, Cao Đài, and Đại Việt followers as an alternative to Hồ Chí Minh's DRVN. Such a coalition, he hoped, might gain recognition from the United Nations and support from the United States. These attempts ultimately foundered due to the creation of a separate anticommunist political solution, the French-backed Associated States of Vietnam headed by the now ex-emperor Bảo Đại.[15] But even after the launch of the SVN, Diệm continued to explore collaboration with the French or with Bảo Đại. He traveled to Hong Kong and advised the former monarch to refuse any proposition from the French unless they granted dominion status to Vietnam, similar to what India had obtained from the British empire. At the same time, he remained in contact with senior communist leaders. Thus, despite his reputation for intransigence, Diệm assiduously kept open the possibility of collaboration with all of the key actors in Indochinese politics.[16]

Diệm finally broke publicly with the communists and the DRVN in a political essay published in June 1949. But even as he did so, he offered two distinctive propositions. First, instead of merely declaring his opposition to communism, he promised a new political vision for Vietnam and declared his respect for the Việt Minh's contribution to the independence struggle. Second, he called for a different kind of social revolution.[17] Vietnam's independence could not be reduced to a political and administrative autonomy from French rule. The social inequalities created by colonial exploitation had to be eliminated. Moreover, the nature of the armed conflict was changing. From a war of decolonization, it was evolving into a civil war in which rival nationalist visions were colliding with the international Cold War.

14 Trần Thị Liên, "Les catholiques vietnamiens pendant la guerre d'indépendance (1945–1954) entre la reconquête coloniale et la résistance communiste," Ph.D. dissertation (Institut d'études politiques, Paris, 1996), 108; Philippe Devillers, *Histoire du Viet-Nam, 1940–1952* (Paris, 1952), 216; Miller, *Misalliance*, 33.

15 Trần Thị Liên, "Les catholiques vietnamiens et la RDVN (1945–1954): une approche biographique," in Christopher Goscha and Benoît de Tréglodé (eds.), *Naissance d'un État-part, le Viet Nam depuis 1945* (Paris, 2004), 269–72. For Ngô Đình Thục's contact with the southern branch of the Đại Việt, see François Guillemot, *Dai Viêt, indépendance et révolution au Viêt-Nam: L'échec de la troisième voie (1938–1955)* (Paris, 2012), 548. See also Liên, "Les catholiques vietnamiens pendant la guerre d'indépendance," 192, 200–1.

16 Edward Miller, "Vision, Power and Agency: The Ascent of Ngô Đình Diệm, 1945–1954," *Journal of Southeast Asian History* 35 (3) (2004), 439–40.

17 For an analysis, see Miller, *Misalliance*, 35–6. For the original text, see *Major Policy Speeches by President Ngo Dinh Diem* (Saigon, 1956), 41–2.

Diệm's hopes for leveraging the 1949 manifesto into a new surge of political support were quickly dashed. After the Việt Minh ordered his assassination, he left Indochina on a long overseas trip with his brother, Bishop Ngô Đình Thục. They started in Japan, then visited Catholic contacts in Rome, France, and Belgium, before Diệm opted to settle in for a longer stay in the United States.[18] While the brothers were traveling in Belgium, two articles published in a Catholic periodical analyzed the political crisis in Vietnam. Commenting on the recent creation of the SVN, the author, who remained anonymous for fear of reprisal from French authorities, concluded that this political solution would not succeed unless it elaborated its own ideology. Because the survival of the nation was threatened by both communist materialism and colonialism, a common opposition to communism was insufficient. Only a spiritually minded doctrine could unleash the potential of the Vietnamese people and support the historical mission of the nation.[19]

In their zeal to denounce the "family rule" (*gia đình trị*) of the Ngô, historians have depicted Diệm as relying on a closed circle of confidants. But the regime's nepotism should not lead us to conclude that the Ngô brothers were isolated from the broader currents of Vietnamese society. In reality, Diệm and his brothers engaged extensively with mainstream Vietnamese political trends and actors during the 1940s and 1950s. Indeed, Diệm's rise to the premiership and the survival of his government after 1954 depended on the family's political acumen.

Ngô Đình Khôi, the eldest of the six Ngô brothers, was assassinated by the Việt Minh in 1945.[20] Ngô Đình Luyện, the youngest brother, stayed overseas and was relatively uninvolved in Vietnamese politics after 1954. Ngô Đình Cẩn, another brother junior to Diệm, is often depicted as a lord ruling over his fiefdom in central Vietnam, where his clique controlled much of the political and economic activity. Historical evidence suggests, however, that Cẩn was no traditionalist. He promoted constitutional monarchism in central Vietnam in the 1940s and later headed the central branch of the pro-regime Cần Lao Party, which sometimes clashed with the southern branch.[21] But Cẩn's influence was ultimately eclipsed by that of Ngô Đình

18 Mỹ Vân, *A Vietnamese Royal Exile in Japan*, 212–14; Miller, *Misalliance*, 441–7. On his stay in Belgium, see Liên, "Les catholiques vietnamiens pendant la guerre d'indépendance," 359–62.

19 Anonyme, "Les catholiques du Viet-Nam dans la lutte pour l'indépendance nationale," *Église vivante* 2 (3) (1950), 290–306.

20 Miller, *Misalliance*, 42–3.

21 Liên, "Les catholiques vietnamiens pendant la guerre d'indépendance," 210–11.

Thục and Ngô Đình Nhu, who represented larger and broader political and cultural movements.

Ngô Đình Thục was a pioneer member of a new generation of Vietnamese Catholic clergy. Unlike his father, Thục studied religion not in seminaries in Southeast Asia but in Rome, where he traveled for the first time in 1919. Emboldened by new programs and empowered by his direct connection to the Vatican, he was emblematic of a Vietnamese church that aimed for a double decolonization: the creation of a Church free from the control of foreign missionaries, and the establishment of a Vietnamese state independent from colonial rule. His 1938 ordination as bishop of Vĩnh Long diocese reflected his efforts to help other Vietnamese priests gain training in Europe, as well as his mobilization of the Catholic laity in youth and workers associations.[22] Thục had a keen appreciation of lay Catholics' interest in the cause of independence, and he understood their conflicted feelings about whether to lend support to the Việt Minh.[23] This transformation of the Catholic faith was not an isolated event in Vietnam. Buddhist revivalism also gave rise to a religious form of Vietnamese nationalism, and many Buddhists also wrestled with the question of whether to support, oppose, or remain neutral on the question of communism.

While Thục epitomized the emancipation of the Vietnamese Church, Ngô Đình Nhu personified the emergence of a noncommunist intelligentsia, one that was primarily but not exclusively composed of lay Catholics, and deeply concerned about the crises threatening Vietnam. Politically, these intellectuals worried that the communists planned to use the Việt Minh front to take

22 Charles Keith, *Catholic Vietnam: A Church from Empire to Nation* (Berkeley, 2012), especially 155–61.

23 Claire Trần Thị Liên,"De la notion loyauté/déloyauté à la notion d'engagement politique: les catholiques vietnamiens en période coloniale" (paper presented at Réseau Asie, Atelier 37, Entre loyauté et déloyauté: la complexité du choix en contexte colonial en Indochine, Paris, March 2009). Copy of the paper in the possession of the author; Keith, *Catholic Vietnam*, 208–41. On the dioceses of Bùi Chu and Phát Diệm, see Ronald H. Spector, "Phat Diem: Nationalism, Religion, and Identity in the Franco-Viet Minh War," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 15 (3) (2013). On Catholic nationalism during the French Indochina War, see Phi-Vân Nguyen, "A Secular State for a Religious Nation: The Republic of Vietnam and Religious Nationalism, 1946–1963," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 77 (3) (2018), 743–6. On the departure of many Catholics to the South after 1954, see Peter Hansen, "Bắc Di Cư: Catholic Refugees from the North of Vietnam, and Their Role in the Southern Republic, 1954–1959," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 4 (3) (2009), 171–211; Hansen, "The Virgin Heads South: Northern Catholic Refugees and their Clergy in South Vietnam, 1954–1964," in Thomas David DuBois (ed.), *Casting Faiths, Imperialism and the Transformation of Religion in East and Southeast Asia* (Basingstoke, 2009); Phi-Vân Nguyen, "Fighting the First Indochina War Again? Catholic Refugees in South Vietnam, 1954–1959," *SOJOURN* 31 (1) (2016), 207–46.

over the country. Socially, they were committed to find a solution to poverty and social inequalities resulting from decades of colonial exploitation. Many of these intellectuals embraced personalism, a doctrine elaborated by the French philosopher Emmanuel Mounier during the 1930s.[24] Contrary to later portrayals, Mounier did not depict personalism as standing midway between capitalism and communism. Indeed, the doctrine was similar to communism in its criticism of capitalist modes of production and in its determination to overturn existing labor practices. At the same time, personalism denounced the emphasis on materialism shared by capitalism and communism. It asserted instead that the person (as opposed to the individual) was a spiritual being whose freedom was circumscribed within the frame of the community. Personalism thus advocated for a revolution that would overthrow existing forms of economic or social relationships. It also rejected what Mounier saw as illusory forms of democracy based on individual liberties, rule of law, and parliamentary rule.[25]

Ngô Đình Nhu spent much of the 1930s in Paris, where he participated in the Action Sociale Indochinoise, a lay Catholic organization that grappled with social and political issues related to colonial rule in French Indochina.[26] Nhu was only one of several students who brought his interest in personalism back to Vietnam from France. Upon his return, he discovered that many of his fellow intellectuals in Vietnam shared his interest in reconciling Western and Eastern philosophical thought. The work of Russian philosopher Nikolai Berdiaev and the existentialist writings of French intellectual Jacques Maritain were already circulating in Indochina during the early 1940s. These came via the teachings of missionaries who introduced Western philosophical thought using Asian references, such as Confucian writings or the annals of the Vietnamese imperial dynasties. Discussion of these ideas took place in student associations such as the Dominican missionaries' Cercle de la Renaissance, which organized conferences

24 Duy Lap Nguyen, *The Unimagined Community, Imperialism and Culture in South Vietnam* (Manchester, 2020), chapter 2. For other explanations of Vietnamese personalism, see John C. Donnell, "Politics in South Vietnam, Doctrines of Authority in Conflict," Ph.D. dissertation (University of California, Berkeley, 1964), chapter 4; Catton, *Diem's Final Failure*, 41–7; Miller, *Misalliance*, 46–8; Charles Keith, "Catholic Vietnam: Church, Colonialism and Revolution, 1887–1945," Ph.D. dissertation (Yale University, 2008), 196; François Guillemot, "Penser le nationalisme révolutionnaire au Viêt Nam: Identités politiques et itinéraires singuliers à la recherche d'une hypothétique 'Troisième voie,'" *Moussons* 13–14 (2009), 156–7.

25 John Hellman, *Emmanuel Mounier and the New Catholic Left, 1930–1950* (Toronto, 1981); Hellman, *Knight-Monks of Vichy France* (Montreal/Kingston, ON, 1993).

26 Keith, "Catholic Vietnam," 196–7; Scott McConnell, *Leftward Journey: The Education of Vietnamese Students in France, 1919–1939* (London, 1988), 91–2.

at the University of Hanoi, open to both Catholic and non-Catholics.[27] This "East meets West" framing helps explain why Vietnamese personalism explicitly incorporated Confucian values, as well as Ngô Đình Diệm's deep admiration for Confucianists such as Phan Bội Châu.[28]

Another emerging social movement with Christian intellectual overtones was the one focused on labor activism in Indochina. This movement was born of a collaboration between a French border agent named Gilbert Jouan and Trần Quốc Bửu, a labor activist who had previously been imprisoned in Poulo Condore. In 1951, the pair launched the Vietnamese Catholic Confederation of Labor, the country's first labor union. They also forged connections to the international Christian labor movement through ties to Gaston Tessier in France, and Gaston Ciceron in the French Caribbean.[29] As staunch anticommunists, Jouan and Bửu were determined that the Communist Party would not be the only organization seeking to advocate for the rights and well-being of Vietnamese workers.

Ngô Đình Nhu was an important figure in these emerging movements. While his lack of an official role in the First Republic has often led observers to see him as a gray eminence controlling a secret organization, his political reputation in Vietnam was first forged in intellectual and labor circles.[30] Beginning in the late 1940s, Nhu collaborated with French missionary Fernand Parrel to organize a series of conferences on rethinking the political, social, and cultural roles of the Church in Indochina. The events held in Hanoi, Huế, Đà Nẵng, and Saigon, in addition to the main seminar in Dalat, included discussions of personalism, Christian social doctrine, and the need to rethink labor and social relations. The gatherings were attended by ordained and lay Catholics, as well as non-Catholic intellectuals, and activists, such as Buddhist labor leaders.[31] The appeal of these conferences rested precisely on

27 Donnell, "Politics in South Vietnam," chapter 4; Anne Raffin, *Youth Mobilization in Vichy Indochina and its Legacies, 1940–1970* (Lanham, MD, 2005), 73; Phi-Vân Nguyen, "The Vietnamization of Personalism: The Role of Missionaries in the Spread of Personalism in Vietnam, 1930–1961," *French Colonial History* 17 (2017), 103–34.

28 For authors claiming that Diệm was backward-looking, Warner, *The Last Confucian*; Anthony T. Bouscaren, *The Last of the Mandarins: Diem of Vietnam* (Pittsburgh, PA, 1965); Jacobs, *America's Miracle Man in Vietnam*. On Diệm's admiration for Phan Bội Châu, see Miller, *Misalliance*, 137–40.

29 Edmund Wehrle, "'Awakening the Conscience of the Masses': The Vietnamese Confederation of Labour, 1947–1975," in Anita Chan (ed.), *Labour in Vietnam* (Singapore, 2011).

30 Ellen J. Hammer, *The Struggle for Indochina, 1940–1955* (Stanford, 1955), 305.

31 Miller, *Misalliance*, 44–7; Keith, "Catholic Vietnam," 195–200; Fernand Parrel, *De l'emploi des armes spirituelles ou 43 ans de vie missionnaire au Viet-Nam* (Paris: Unpublished manuscript, 1974), 96–7, 107–8.

the growing interest of noncommunist Vietnamese in the possibility of developing an alternative national doctrine. Nhu presented personalism as a new political solution that could rally support around the twin goals of ending colonial economic exploitation and establishing a genuinely democratic state.

Although Diệm had remained overseas for almost four years, he was well known and admired by many Catholic nationalists, noncommunist intellectuals, and labor activists. Still, he was only one among several Vietnamese political leaders who was viewed as a prospective leader of a postcolonial anticommunist state. It was only after the exposure of the State of Vietnam's political weaknesses that Diệm emerged as the political frontrunner.

In May 1953, Paris' unilateral devaluation of the piaster accelerated the rupture between France and Vietnam. By acting alone to change the value of the piaster, Paris violated a central principle of the Pau Agreements that had established Indochina as a federation of Associated States: Any decision regarding economic affairs must involve the French, the Vietnamese, the Laotian, and the Cambodians in a quadripartite agreement.[32] Following the devaluation, even the most ardent Vietnamese defenders of the French Union could no longer believe that Paris would honor its commitments. At that moment, France lost the credibility it had gained with the creation of the State of Vietnam, the reunification of Cochinchina with the rest of the country, and the development of the Vietnamese Nationalist Army. In the aftermath of the French move, Diệm's call to exit the French Union gained more traction.

Unlike King Sihanouk of Cambodia, who successfully launched a diplomatic crusade to gain rapid independence from France, Bảo Đại did not demand the SVN's departure from the French Union. Instead, the cause was taken up by a coalition of anticommunists known as the Đại Đoàn Kết (Greater Union). Comprised of groups such as the Catholics from the Phát Diệm and Bùi Chu dioceses, the Cao Đài and the Hòa Hảo who controlled important parts of the Mekong Delta in the South, the Bình Xuyên, as well as the southern branch of the Đại Việt, the Union demanded elections for the creation of a national parliament as a prelude to total independence from the French Union.[33] The emergence of this coalition was neither new nor coincidental or temporary.

32 Hugues Tertrais, "L'économie indochinoise dans la guerre (1945–1954)," *Outre-mers, Revue d'histoire* (330–1) (2001), 125–6.

33 Liên, "Les catholiques vietnamiens pendant la guerre d'indépendance," 517; Hammer, *Struggle for Indochina*, 304–7; Guillemot, *Dai Viêt*, 570–1; Arthur J. Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience of the French and the Americans: Nationalism and Communism in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam* (Bloomington, 2002), 217–18.

Many of the key leaders had previously backed the Vietnam Restoration League and the leadership of Diệm as far back as the early 1940s. For these anticommunists, the time Diệm spent in foreign exile did not disqualify him from leadership. On the contrary, Bảo Đại and many other leaders hoped that Diệm's stay in the United States could translate into direct support from Washington to the SVN. Thanks to the support of the Greater Union, in tandem with the nationalist vision he espoused, Ngô Đình Diệm was officially selected by Bảo Đại to become SVN prime minister on June 26, 1954. He was, in Bảo Đại's judgment, "truly the right man for the situation" – an assessment that the former monarch stood by even several decades later.

Breaking Free from International Constraints

Ngô Đình Diệm had gained the SVN premiership largely through a combination of luck and his own political activism. But to stay in power, he would need the support of foreign governments – or at least gain their agreement not to interfere with his plans. At first, Diệm's chances of staying in office seemed poor. But by May 1955, circumstances had shifted to his advantage. By securing the political and financial support of anticommunist powers, as well as promises from France and other countries to refrain from forcing Saigon to implement the ceasefire agreements, Diệm found the means to move ahead with the realization of his political goals.

Some historians attribute Diệm's rise to power to the contacts he made in the United States during his exile, combined with the advocacy of the American Friends of Vietnam (AFV), an anticommunist lobbying group.[34] The AFV undoubtedly helped raise awareness within the United States about the strategic importance of South Vietnam. But US support for a Vietnamese nation-state and US backing of Ngô Đình Diệm were two very different commitments. During the negotiations of the Geneva ceasefire agreements, US officials signaled that they were prepared to provide aid and support directly to the SVN, without using France as an intermediary.[35] Yet, as David L. Anderson shows, it was not until Diệm overcame his domestic rivals months later that the Eisenhower administration finally agreed to back him unequivocally as the leader of "Free Vietnam."[36] Indeed, the trigger

34 Joseph G. Morgan, *The Vietnam Lobby: The American Friends of Vietnam, 1955–1975* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1997), 8; Jacobs, *America's Miracle Man in Vietnam*, 41; Miller, *Misalliance*, 40–1.
35 Catton, "'It Would Be a Terrible Thing,'" 347.
36 On US hesitation about backing Diệm, see Morgan, *The Vietnam Lobby*, 22–4; Jacobs, *America's Miracle Man in Vietnam*, chapter 5; Miller, *Misalliance*, 116, 118–19; Moyar,

for the decision on direct aid to the SVN had nothing to do with Diệm. It was a response to the French military's unilateral and surprise decision in late June 1954 to withdraw from the southern part of the Red River Delta, including the Catholic dioceses of Bùi Chu and Phát Diệm.[37] The French pullback changed perceptions in the West of the situation on the ground. US dailies covered the story of Vietnamese civilians – whom they depicted as both Christian and ardent nationalists – now faced with the stark choice of evacuation or enduring communist rule. An American news correspondent declared that the French withdrawal "was a far bigger victory for Ho Chi Minh's forces than their capture of Dien Bien Phu."[38] This idea that population displacement reflected a global threat and an opportunity to back a local political solution persisted even after the Geneva Conference concluded. When Diệm called on all the nations of the "Free World" to assist in the ongoing evacuations from the North, the United States deployed its Navy in "Operation Passage to Freedom."[39]

International organizations and NGOs also converged on South Vietnam. Although some historians depict this private mobilization as an unofficial extension of US official policy, it was in keeping with the mobilization of transnational civil society that had first emerged between the two world wars. Anticommunist NGOs did not need the prompting of the White House to create emergency relief programs for refugees fleeing communist rule. In fact, less than 48 hours after the signature of the ceasefire agreement, CARE International had already opened its Indochina fundraising efforts.[40] Although their interventions in Vietnam aligned with the interests of the United States' foreign policy, these transnational organizations became involved in Vietnam for their own reasons. Michigan State University's Vietnam Group saw an opportunity to put theories of development and public administration into practice.[41] CARE intervened to fulfill its mission of humanitarian relief and

Triumph Forsaken, 45–52; Chapman, *Cauldron of Resistance*, 89–111. On Eisenhower's perception of Diệm, see the chapter in this volume by David Anderson.

37 Ivan Cadeau, *La guerre d'Indochine, De l'Indochine française aux adieux à Saigon, 1940–1956* (Paris, 2015), 473–4.

38 Henry R. Lieberman, "French Give Up South Zone of Vietnam's Delta to Reds," *New York Times*, July 2, 1954.

39 Việt Nam Cộng hòa, "Kêu gọi thế giới giúp dỡ dân chúng di cư vào Nam, 10/8/1954," in *Con đường chính nghĩa độc lập, dân chủ, Hiệu triệu và diễn văn quan trọng của Tổng thống Ngô Đình Diệm, quyển I, từ 16-6-1954 đến 7-7-1955* (Saigon, 1956); Robert B. Frankum, *Operation Passage to Freedom, The United States Navy in Vietnam, 1954–1955* (Lubbock, TX, 2007).

40 "CARE Opens Indochina Fund," *New York Times*, July 22, 1954.

41 Ernst, *Forging a Fateful Alliance*.

poverty alleviation.[42] The International Refugee Committee continued its work of rescuing victims of Nazism and communism.[43] The Catholic Relief Service and other Christian organizations generously donated money and material in support of Catholic solidarity against communism.[44] This transnational support helped transform South Vietnam into a new stronghold against communist expansion. It also helped elevate Ngô Đình Diệm to the status of Cold War hero.

Yet Diệm still faced formidable international constraints. If the French had wanted to oust him by force, they certainly had the means to do so. Although the total number of French Union troops in Indochina had decreased from its peak of around 177,000 in June 1954, there were still approximately 60,000 soldiers under French command in South Vietnam as late as June 1955.[45] Moreover, French commanders were not lacking for opportunities to hamper, pressure, or eliminate Ngô Đình Diệm. Virtually all of his noncommunist political opponents asked the French for a helping hand during his first year in power – or at least for a promise not to interfere if Diệm was overthrown.[46] Yet the French never moved against Diệm nor sanctioned his removal, even though their leaders complained bitterly about his anti-French stance.

Although some commentators attributed France's unwillingness to oust Diệm to Paris' weaknesses vis-à-vis Washington, the French position was in fact more complicated. Indeed, France had been quietly rethinking its involvement in Indochina ever since it agreed to create the State of Vietnam in 1949. As the May 1953 devaluation of the piaster made clear, Paris no longer had any realistic hope of keeping Vietnam within the French Union. On June 4, 1954, French and SVN representatives signed a treaty recognizing Vietnam's

42 Delia T. Pergande, "Private Voluntary Aid in Vietnam: The Humanitarian Politics of Catholic Relief Services and CARE, 1954–1965," Ph.D. dissertation (University of Kentucky, 1999).

43 Andrew F. Smith, *Rescuing the World, The Life and Times of Leo Cherne* (Albany, NY, 2002).

44 On the claim that the United States held Orientalist views and was deeply religious, see Jacobs, *America's Miracle Man in Vietnam*, 230–1. On the Catholic Relief Service, see Kauffman, "Politics, Programs, and Protests." On the reception of the CRS's emergency relief in Vietnam and the role of priests in its distribution, see Hansen, "The Virgin Heads South." See also Nguyen, "Victims of Atheist Persecution." On Mennonites, see Flipse, "To Save 'Free Vietnam' and Lose Our Souls."

45 On the CEFEO in June 1954, François Gérin-Roze, "La 'vietnamisation': la participation des autochtones à la guerre d'Indochine (1945–1954)," in Maurice Vaïsse (ed.), *L'Armée française dans la guerre d'Indochine* (Paris: Complexe, 2000), 146. On the numbers on June 1, 1955, see Cadeau, *La guerre d'Indochine*, 511.

46 Pierre Grosser, "La France et l'Indochine (1953–1956): Une 'carte de visite' en 'peau de chagrin,'" Ph.D. dissertation (Institut d'études politiques, Paris, 2002), 1170–1206, 1271–9.

independence and compelling Vietnam to respect any international agreement France would conclude on its behalf.[47] After Diệm and other political leaders strongly protested against the ceasefire agreements, France accelerated the transfer of postal, police, customs, and other administrative authority to the SVN.

Some historians have portrayed the conflicts between Diệm and hostile factions within the SVN military during late 1954 and early 1955 as a Franco-American conflict by proxy.[48] This interpretation discounts the depth of Diệm's antipathy for the French, as well as the fact that the Americans had not yet made up their minds to support Diệm. In fact, US officials often asked their French counterparts about which Vietnamese political leaders might replace the premier. In addition to the Đại Việt leader Phan Huy Quát, the French also put forward Bửu Hội, a well-known Vietnamese scientist, who was the subject of a fawning profile in the French magazine *L'Express*.[49]

In the end, France's reluctance to move against Diệm had less to do with concerns about the Americans than with anxieties about the rest of the French empire. The violent removal of Diệm would have jeopardized their hopes to earn the confidence of other French territories and mandates, such as Morocco, whose role in the French Union was deemed more strategically and economically important.[50] Thus, the decision to allow Diệm to denounce and defy France's lingering presence in Indochina was not the result of Paris' goodwill. It was for France a necessary evil to better protect her interests in northern Africa. As a consequence, Paris completed Vietnam's separation from France by concluding a treaty in December 1954, ending the economic union created by treaty less than four years earlier.[51] Paris also agreed to delegate to the United States the responsibility of providing military training to the SVN Army. The last troops of the CEFEO departed Vietnam in 1956.

After securing France's agreement to complete its military withdrawal from South Vietnam, Diệm still faced one major threat to his plans to remain in power. Under the terms of the Geneva Accords, the partition of Vietnam

47 "Traité d'indépendance du 4 juin 1954": https://mjp.univ-perp.fr/constit/vn1954.htm.
48 Kathryn C. Statler, "Replacing France: The Origins of American Intervention in Vietnam," *H-Diplo Roundtable Reviews* 9 (3) (2008), 128; Chapman, *Cauldron of Resistance*, 90.
49 Grosser, "La France et l'Indochine (1953–1956)," 1289–96; Hammer, *Struggle for Indochina, 1940–1955*, 353.
50 Pierre Grosser, "Une "création continue"? L'Indochine, le Maghreb et l'Union française," *Monde(s)* 12 (2) (2017), 71–94.
51 Vũ Quốc Thuc, "The Birth of Central Banking, 1955–1956," in Tuong Vu and Sean Fear (eds.), *The Republic of Vietnam, 1955–1975, Vietnamese Perspectives on Nation Building* (Ithaca, 2020).

into northern and southern zones was a temporary measure that would last only until nationwide elections could be held in 1956. Diệm had pointedly refused to endorse the agreements, in large measure because of his opposition to the elections provision. But this did not mean that he would ignore the agreements altogether. As the Geneva-facilitated exodus of civilians from North Vietnam to the South unfolded during late 1954 and early 1955, Diệm saw an opportunity. The sheer scale of the migration allowed Saigon to claim that Northerners were "voting with their feet" in favor of Free Vietnam. It also raised the possibility that DRVN officials might take steps to prevent more civilians from heading South. In other words, Diệm sought to promote certain aspects of the agreements, while at the same time suggesting that the DRVN was violating its legal commitments under the accords, thus justifying Saigon's refusal to participate in the elections.[52]

Very quickly, Diệm realized that the International Control Commission, composed of one representative each of the Western bloc, the Soviet bloc, and neutral countries, could not enforce the ceasefire provisions regarding the right of civilians to join the zone of their choice. In October 1954, the Indian chair rejected a request to allow northern civilians to wait in camps pending their transportation to the South.[53] The Commission would not serve as an acting agency capable of sheltering civilians or granting temporary asylum. As northern civilians discovered that moving to the South would be more difficult than anticipated, the number of confrontations between Việt Minh cadres, the People's Army, and the local population, especially in northern Catholic parishes, increased sharply. The International Control Commission (ICC) sent field teams to investigate allegations that the DRVN was preventing civilians from leaving; they also followed up on reports that SVN officials were pressuring some Northerners to move to the South.[54] After months of debate, the members of the ICC finally voted to condemn the DRVN for hampering the right of civilians to join the zone of their choice.[55] Despite this decision, neither France nor the United Kingdom, the two main Western signatories of the agreements, imposed any sanctions or retaliatory measures on the DRVN. Nor did the Soviet Union or the People's Republic of China call the DRVN to account for its failure to respect the ceasefire. This international paralysis was

52 D. R. Sardesai, *Indian Foreign Policy in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam, 1947–1964* (Berkeley, 1968), 87.
53 Ramesh Thakur, *Peacekeeping in Vietnam: Canada, India, Poland, and the International Commission* (Edmonton, AB, 1984), 132.
54 See the chapters by Martin Thomas and Alec Holcombe in this volume.
55 Sardesai, *Indian Foreign Policy*, 89, 92.

bad news for the northern civilians who were still trying to reach the South. Yet for Ngô Đình Diệm, it showed that the ceasefire agreement had no teeth.

By the time that the 300-day period of free travel between the two Vietnams expired in May of 1955, the fragile consensus reached in Geneva had been shattered. The ICC's authority was under fire from both the DRVN and France, and the major powers that had endorsed the agreements no longer seemed willing to enforce the provisions.[56] For DRVN leaders in Hanoi, this turn of events was dismaying, if not entirely unexpected. But for Ngô Đình Diệm, all the stars had aligned. He had defeated his anticommunist rivals and neutralized the French threat to his government. In addition, he now enjoyed the strong support of the United States, which now provided aid directly to his government and also claimed the legal right to defend South Vietnam's territory under the terms of the 1954 Manila Pact. In this new context, Diệm could easily refuse to participate in the 1956 elections or even to consult with the DRVN. In the meantime, Diệm was free to turn to his next objective: discarding the SVN and the last remnants of "association" with France by creating an entirely new state, the Republic of Vietnam.

From a Decentralized State to a Strong Republic

As demonstrated above, Diệm's unexpected triumphs in late 1954 and early 1955 had hinged in no small measure on his ability to assemble and maintain a diverse coalition of supporters. In the eighteen months following the battle of Saigon, Diệm moved decisively toward the creation of a centralized state. But as he did so, many of his former supporters resisted his efforts to strengthen Saigon's authority – even though they remained in favor of a united front to oppose the DRVN and communist expansion in South Vietnam. Why did South Vietnam's anticommunist nationalists abandon the one leader who seemed capable of unifying them around the shared goal of opposition to Hanoi? Did the later ruptures between Diệm and South Vietnamese society emerge out of these early conflicts with his former allies?

Historians have long debated the compatibility of Diệm's political vision with Vietnamese nationalism. Revisionist accounts depict Diệm's views as the most authentic expression of such nationalism. These accounts contrast Diệm with Hồ Chí Minh, who is represented as a nationalist imposter.[57]

56 Bhaskarla Surya Narayana Murti, *Vietnam Divided: The Unfinished Struggle* (Bombay, 1964), 89.

57 Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken*, 9–18.

Orthodox interpretations, on the other hand, suggest that Diệm was an outsider who espoused alien ideas, and whose repression of groups such as the Cao Đài and the Hòa Hảo resulted in the elimination of genuine Southern Vietnamese nationalism.[58]

Both interpretations are flawed in supposing the existence of an idealized "true" Vietnamese nationalism. In a country whose long, S-shaped territory had only been ruled as a united entity for a few decades in the nineteenth century and a few weeks during 1945, there were many competing notions of what the nation could or should be, encompassing various geographical spaces and cultural identities. In South Vietnam, these rival nationalist projects struggled over the same questions: What would be Saigon's position toward Hanoi or the Geneva Accords? Should the Army have a political role in the State of Vietnam? Should the state be a federation of regions or a highly centralized republic?

From the outset, Ngô Đình Diệm knew that despite the large coalition he headed, many parts of South Vietnamese society did not support his leadership or share his opposition to Hanoi and to the ceasefire. Factions of the Đại Việt and VNQDĐ parties signaled their opposition by regrouping into the central provinces of Quảng Nam and Quảng Trị, where they formed a maquis. Diệm's army repressed them, but only with great difficulty.[59] In Saigon and elsewhere, many intellectuals disagreed with Diệm's criticism of the Geneva Accords and advocated for peace and for recognition of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam as a legitimate political authority.[60]

The fiercest resistance came when Diệm sought to transform the State of Vietnam into a strong and centralized government. Much more than a clash of rival leaders, these conflicts emerged from the difficult and violent process of determining which nationalist vision would prevail. The first major challenge to Ngô Đình Diệm came from the SVN military, after radio broadcasts in September 1954 announced a potential showdown between the prime minister and General Nguyễn Văn Hinh, the commander of the Vietnamese

58 Frances FitzGerald, *Fire in the Lake: The Vietnamese and the Americans in Vietnam* (New York, 1972); Chapman, *Cauldron of Resistance*.

59 Guillemot, *Dai Viêt*, 574–7.

60 Sophie Quinn-Judge, *The Third Force in the Vietnam War: The Elusive Search for Peace, 1954–1975* (London, 2017), 34–42; Richard Ellison, "Vietnam, A Television History, Interview with Nguyen Huu Tho" (1981): http://openvault.wgbh.org/catalog/V_574058E4FEA14C4A899AED78987AB37E. For the 1954 evacuees' reactions to the peace movement, Phi-Vân Nguyen, "Les résidus de la guerre, La mobilisation des réfugiés du nord pour un Vietnam non-Communiste, 1954–1965," Ph.D. dissertation (Université du Québec à Montréal, 2015), 298–301.

National Army. At stake in this confrontation was the question of whether the army would play a political role in postcolonial Vietnam.[61] Should noncommunist Vietnam be ruled by a military or a civilian government? Like Thailand, Burma, Indonesia, and many other newly independent countries in Southeast Asia faced with communist expansion, the relative authority of the military and the state was up for grabs. In South Vietnam, Diệm won this battle. But he prevailed only because Bảo Đại intervened to solve the matter. The chief of state recalled General Hinh to report on a mission to France in November 1954, fearing that the end of Diệm's leadership would also terminate American support to Vietnam.[62]

Yet the question of defining the role of the army was not confined to the military's influence in politics. It was also a matter of establishing the independence of the military vis-à-vis the state. What provoked Hinh's open confrontation with Diệm was the interior minister's arrest of a military officer, a disciplinary measure that normally belonged to military jurisdiction. The state's interference in army affairs also materialized in the promotion of young officers loyal to Diệm, the dispatching of older generals overseas, and the infiltration of the army by pro-Diệm partisans.[63]

Beyond the subordination of the army, Diệm also achieved a massive overhaul of the State of Vietnam, transforming the decentralized amalgam of religious and political groups into a unitary republic with a strong political center. Whether or how this centralization was consistent with Vietnamese personalism's celebration of the precolonial commune as the locus of democracy remains unclear.[64] What is very clear is that Diệm moved decisively to crush the local autonomy of his rivals.

The Bình Xuyên in Saigon were the first to experience this brutal transition. Historians have often represented the Bình Xuyên as depraved criminals, since they trafficked drugs and ran brothels while also controlling the Saigon police force. But recent research has stressed the fact that they, too, had a political vision, and that they participated in or funded several nationalist

61 On the "Hinh crisis," see Miller, *Misalliance*, 95–108; Jacobs, *America's Miracle Man in Vietnam*, 176–80. On the diplomatic exchange between Paris and Washington regarding the crisis, see Grosser, "La France et l'Indochine (1953–1956)," 1170–1206, 1271–9; David L. Anderson, *Trapped by Success: The Eisenhower Administration and Vietnam, 1953–1961* (New York, 1991), 78–95.

62 Bao Dai, *Le dragon d'Annam* (Paris, 1980), 335.

63 Nguyen, "Les résidus de la guerre," 229–31.

64 Nguyen, *The Unimagined Community*, 78–9. Nguyen uses the strategic hamlet as the main iteration of communal idealism but gives scant attention to Diệm's earlier efforts to promote local self-government.

initiatives.[65] Yet Diệm and his supporters castigated the Bình Xuyên as gangsters and launched a military offensive, the battle of Saigon, in April 1955, which inflicted heavy damage on the corridor between Saigon and Chợ Lớn. Diệm's victory not only confirmed his command of the reshuffled army officer corps, but also restored government authority over the police apparatus.

The Hòa Hảo and Cao Đài also lost out due to Diệm's concentration of power. Many of them had initially backed Diệm and served in his first cabinets. But after 1955, Diệm categorically refused to allow the administrative and political autonomy they previously enjoyed in territories scattered across the Mekong Delta. He had no interest in continuing the French practice of permitting states within a state. While many historians have underlined the fact that Cao Đài and Hòa Hảo leaders were divided over the question of support for Diệm, it seems more accurate to say that they disagreed over how best to preserve their political and military autonomy. Some commanders calculated that Diệm would accommodate them, while others – such as Hòa Hảo general Ba Cụt – fiercely refused to cooperate with Saigon. The confrontation between Saigon and the rebellious factions peaked during the spring and summer of 1955, and ended with most Hòa Hảo and Cao Đài leaders condemned to retirement, imprisonment, execution, or exile.[66] Ngô Đình Diệm had built his coalition on his hostility to communism and colonialism, on the appeal of his political and social vision, and on his connections to Washington. But as his coalition partners discovered, an alliance with Diệm was no guarantee of a future share of power.

Even those allies who agreed with Diệm's religious and ideological convictions discovered that their autonomy would be sharply limited under the new republic. American journalists and other observers often assumed that the hundreds of thousands of northern evacuees who arrived in the South – most of whom were Catholic, anticommunist, or both – supported all of Diệm's policies without question.[67] But tensions emerged quickly between these

65 Kevin Li, "Partisan to Sovereign: The Making of the Bình Xuyên in Southern Vietnam, 1945–1948," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 11 (3–4) (2016), 140–87.

66 This is not to say that Diệm aimed to wipe out either of these two religious traditions. Diệm allowed Cao Đài and Hòa Hảo religious and spiritual practices to continue, so long as they abandoned military or political activities. See Jayne S. Werner, *Peasant Politics and Religion Sectarianism: Peasant and Priest in the Cao Dai in Viet Nam* (New Haven, 1981), 54; Serguei A. Blagov, *Caodaism: Vietnamese Traditionalism and Its Leap into Modernity* (New York, 2001), 108–9. Both groups continued to thrive after 1956; see Jérémy Jammes, "Caodaism in Times of War: Spirits of Struggle and Struggle of Spirits," *SOJOURN* 31 (1) (2017), 247–94.

67 David Halberstam, *The Making of a Quagmire: American and Vietnam during the Kennedy Era* (New York, 1965), 120; George Mc T. Kahin, *Intervention: How America Became Involved in Vietnam* (New York, 1986), 76; Fitzgerald, *Fire in the Lake*.

communities and the government. Although some Northerners advocated forming a large Catholic bulwark just below the 17th parallel in anticipation of an assault on the North, Diệm preferred to disperse the migrants across more than three hundred resettlement villages.[68] The previous military and administrative autonomy these had enjoyed was also eliminated. For example, members of the Nung ethnic minority group, who had previously administered an autonomous commune in the mountains of Tonkin, were resettled near Phan Thiết, only to watch helplessly as the government undercut the power of their communal council.[69] Something similar happened to Catholic migrants from the Bùi Chu and Phát Diệm dioceses, many of whom had previously served in Christian militia units. Despite sharing Diệm's faith and anticommunist outlook, they were not allowed to integrate their units into the South Vietnamese army, and the members of their dioceses in exile were eventually dispersed. Under Diệm, everyone in the South was required to embrace citizenship in the Republic, and Saigon would be the only source of political and administrative authority.

Although the centralization of the regime's authority was largely carried out via top-down reforms, the Ngô combined these with bottom-up efforts at mass mobilization. The infamous Cần Lao Party (The Labour Party) eventually became a secret institution to which everybody in the civil service, the army, or the police had to pay allegiance. But the party initially functioned in a very different way. At the time of its creation in the early 1950s, most of Cần Lao members were drawn from the intellectual circles and labor organizations.[70] It was only in the years after 1954 that Cần Lao leaders began to mimic the Việt Minh's practice of building mass organizations that organized social groups by profession, gender, and age.[71]

One of the first and most important of these mass organizations was the National Revolutionary Movement (NRM), founded by Ngô Đình Nhu in October 1954. During July 1955, the NRM launched a daily newspaper called

68 On the 1954 resettlement, see Hansen, "Bắc Di Cư"; Hansen, "The Virgin Heads South"; Jason A. Picard, "'Fertile Lands Await': The Promise and Pitfalls of Directed Resettlement, 1954–1959," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 11 (3–4) (2016), 58–102. On the idea of resettling them close to the 17th parallel, see Nguyen, "Fighting the First Indochina War Again?" 212.

69 Nguyen, "Les résidus de la guerre," 222–6.

70 Donnell, "Politics in South Vietnam," 128–57, 239; Miller, *Misalliance*, 41–8; Nguyen, "The Vietnamization of Personalism."

71 Donnell, "Politics in South Vietnam," 224–38; Miller, *Misalliance*, 41–8; Geoffrey Stewart, *Vietnam's Lost Revolution, Ngô Đình Diệm's Failure to Build an Independent Nation, 1955–1963* (New York, 2017).

National Revolution (*Cách mạng Quốc gia*), which would become one of the regime's primary media mouthpieces. The NRM also formed an auxiliary league for South Vietnamese civil servants and distributed propaganda denouncing the "three enemies" of feudalism, colonialism, and communism.[72]

None of this is to suggest that the regime's centralization agenda was implemented easily, or without opposition. In late April and early May 1955, as Diệm's forces were battling to oust the Bình Xuyên from Saigon, a self-styled "People's Revolutionary Council" was created during a series of government-sponsored meetings in Saigon. Although the council included some Ngô family loyalists, its leadership was dominated by Cao Đài and Hòa Hảo military commanders who had sided with Diệm against the Bình Xuyên but who still expected to play leading political roles in South Vietnam. The independence of the council was evident in its demands for the immediate ousting of Bảo Đại as SVN chief of state – a move that the Ngô viewed as premature. The regime eventually succeeded in marginalizing the council, but doing so took several months.[73]

In the summer and fall of 1955, the NRM took the lead in formulating the next steps in the consolidation of the regime's authority. Instead of simply ousting Bảo Đại by decree, the Ngô brothers used the NRM to organize a popular referendum. South Vietnamese voters would be obliged to choose between Bảo Đại, whom the government portrayed as a dissolute and corrupt playboy, and Diệm, who was presented as a champion of both anticolonialism and anticommunism. In the balloting held on October 23, 1955, Diệm received an overwhelming 98% of the vote tally. Although the referendum had not been presented as a proposal to change the structure of the state, Diệm nevertheless took advantage of the moment to proclaim that the SVN had been dissolved to make way for a new entity, the Republic of Vietnam. He also announced his own elevation to the position of president, an office that had not previously existed under the SVN (Figure 14.1).[74]

In the year following the proclamation of the republic, the government undertook two more major state-building initiatives: the creation of a

72 On the National Revolutionary Movement, see Tran Nu Anh, "Contested Nationalism: Ethnic Identity and State Power in the Republic of Vietnam, 1954–1963," *ISIS Fellow Working Papers* (2012); Chapman, *Cauldron of Resistance*, 113, 129; Miller, *Misalliance*, 130–6.

73 Miller, *Misalliance*, 126–31; Nu-Anh Tran, *Disunion: Anticommunist Nationalism and the Making of the Republic of Vietnam* (Honolulu, 2022), 76–84.

74 Jessica Chapman, "Staging Democracy: South Vietnam's 1955 Referendum to Depose Bao Dai," *Pacific Rim Research Program* (2005). See also Miller, *Misalliance*, 140–4, and Tran, *Disunion*, 84–8.

Figure 14.1 Ngô Đình Diệm proclaiming the establishment of the Republic of Vietnam with himself as its first president. Diệm spoke three days after the referendum in which he defeated the ex-emperor Bảo Đại (October 26, 1955).
Source: Bettmann / Contributor / Bettmann / Getty Images.

legislature and the writing of a constitution. In early March 1956, elections were held for a 123-member RVN National Assembly. This body was charged with reviewing and approving a draft constitution furnished by the president himself. Since a large majority of the elected deputies were affiliated with four pro-government parties, Diệm was free to shape the document according to his own lights. The final version, as promulgated in October 1956, endorsed the principle of executive supremacy: "The president is vested with the leadership of the nation." In addition, Article 7 declared that communism was incompatible with the basic principles of the state. Meanwhile, Article 98 empowered the president to suspend the freedoms granted in the constitution "to meet the legitimate demands of public security and order and of national defense." Along with its explicit endorsement of personalism, the 1956 constitution perfectly embodied all elements of Diệm's political vision, including his anticommunism and his commitment to centralized power.

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316225240.019 Published online by Cambridge University Press

What remained to be seen was how the charter would fare in practice, especially if the RVN found itself confronting a Communist-led insurrection in South Vietnam.[75]

Conclusion

Ngô Đình Diệm's journey from exile to SVN prime minister and eventually to the presidency of a newly created republic was shaped by good fortune and by Diệm's own ambitions and decisions. Although Diệm clearly benefited from the unexpectedly favorable circumstances created by the Geneva Accords, his success also derived from his past collaborations with other Vietnamese groups, the appeal of his ideas about political and social change, and his ability to transform the weak and decentralized State of Vietnam into a centralized republic – and to do so in a surprisingly short period of time.

Even with hindsight, it is impossible to determine historically if Diệm was the "right" person to build an anticommunist nation in South Vietnam. Diệm was neither the craven puppet that his critics reviled nor the heroic savior of Vietnam celebrated by his admirers. Beyond his staunch commitments to anticommunism and anticolonialism, our examination of Diệm's early tenure in power reveals three additional conclusions.

First, it is no longer possible to sustain the view of Ngô Đình Diệm as the handpicked candidate of US officials, or as a leader whose tenure was defined by subordination to Washington. Bảo Đại nominated Diệm because of his political experience and his appeal to Vietnam nationalists, not because of US pressure. Diệm's diplomatic policies, which included outreach to neutralist and nonaligned states, showed that he was not a mere satellite of US foreign policy.[76] Although French and American actors influenced the course of events in South Vietnam during 1954–6, they did not define the political and social vision Diệm advocated, nor did they drive the transformation of the SVN into a republic.

75 For discussions of the 1956 constitution, see Tibor Mende, "Les deux Vietnam, laboratoires de l'Asie," *Esprit* 251 (1975), 924–50; J. A. C. Grant, "The Viet Nam Constitution of 1956," *The American Political Science Review* 52 (2) (1958), 437–62; Donnell, "Politics in South Vietnam," 303–6; Mark Sidel, *The Constitution of Vietnam, A Contextual Analysis* (Oxford, 2009); Miller, *Misalliance*, 146–7; Chapman, *Cauldron of Resistance*, 175–82; Tran, *Disunion*, 96–105; Nguyen, "A Secular State for a Religious Nation," 749–50.

76 Edward Miller, "The Diplomacy of Personalism: Civilization, Culture, and the Cold War in the Foreign Policy of Ngo Dinh Diem," in Christopher E. Goscha and Christian Ostermann (eds.), *Connecting Histories: Decolonization and the Cold War in Southeast Asia, 1945–1962* (Palo Alto, 2009); Mitchell Tan, "Spiritual Fraternities: The Transnational Networks of Ngô Đình Diệm's Personalist Revolution and South Vietnam's First Republic, 1955–1963," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 14 (2) (2019), 1–67.

Second, Diệm's emergence in 1954 and the subsequent consolidation of his power cannot be reduced to the influence of a family, a loyal clique, or a Catholic circle. The presence of so many Đại Việt, Hòa Hảo, Cao Đài, and Buddhists in the ranks of Diệm's supporters stemmed from his insistence that the republic would be neither a Catholic theocracy nor a banana republic serving his family interests nor a regime in which northern and central Vietnamese would dominate Southerners. Although Diệm would go on to face many accusations of religious, regional, and familial favoritism, his initial rise to power was founded squarely on his efforts to rally support for his vision of Vietnamese postcolonial identity and transformation.

Finally, the broad-based nature of Diệm's political vision was not sufficient by itself to win wide popular support within South Vietnam or to ensure the success of his policies. In this regard, he underestimated the depth of resentment that his centralization efforts would provoke, and the bitterness that resulted from his crushing of the autonomy that other groups had previously enjoyed. The destruction of rival centers of power did not mean that these groups disappeared altogether, or that the opposition to Diệm's actions ceased to exist. Diệm's intolerance of alternative views foreshadowed the authoritarian abuses of the republic that would be revealed in the latter years of Diệm's rule, when he confronted a new communist insurgency in the South Vietnamese countryside, as well as new criticisms from his former supporters.