America's Miracle Man in Vietnam

SETH JACOBS

Ngo Dinh Diem, Religion, Race, and U.S. Intervention in Southeast Asia

America's Miracle Man in Vietnam

American Encounters/
Global Interactions

A SERIES EDITED BY
GILBERT M. JOSEPH AND
EMILY S. ROSENBERG

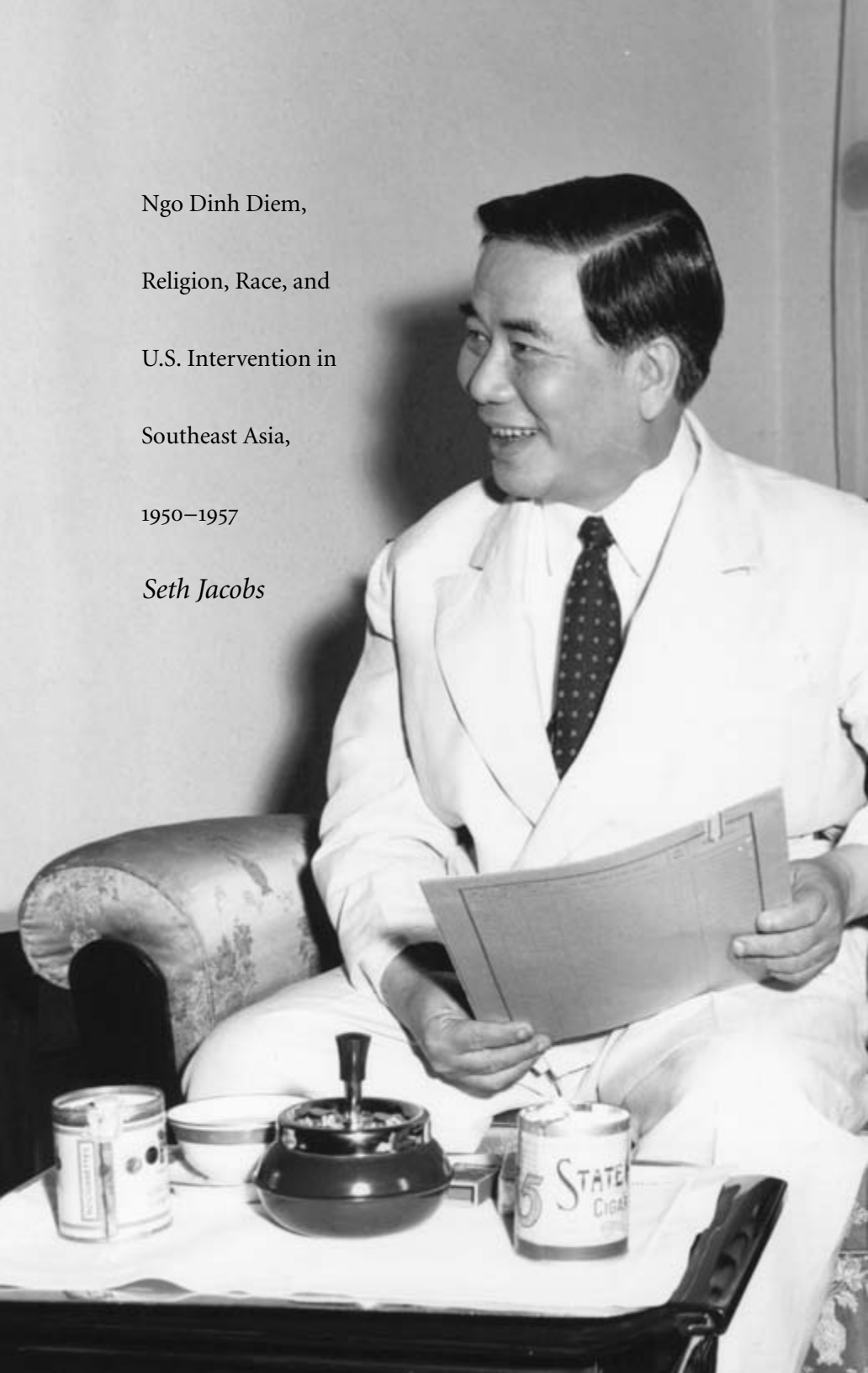
America's Miracle Man in Vietnam

DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS

DURHAM AND LONDON 2004

Ngo Dinh Diem, Religion, Race, and U.S. Intervention in Southeast Asia, 1950–1957

Seth Jacobs



Printed in the United States
of America on acid-free paper ∞
Designed by Rebecca Giménez
Typeset in Minion by Keystone
Typesetting. Library of Congress
Cataloging-in-Publication Data
appear on the last printed page of
this book. Frontispiece: President
Ngo Dinh Diem at an interview
during the Buddhist uprisings in
Saigon, Vietnam, 5 Sept. 1963.
(AP Photo/Horst Fass)

FOR DEVORA

AMERICAN ENCOUNTERS/
GLOBAL INTERACTIONS
A series edited by Gilbert M. Joseph and Emily S. Rosenberg

This series aims to stimulate critical perspectives and fresh interpretive frameworks for scholarship on the history of the imposing global presence of the United States. Its primary concerns include the deployment and contestation of power, the construction and deconstruction of cultural and political borders, the fluid meanings of intercultural encounters, and the complex interplay between the global and the local. American Encounters seeks to strengthen dialogue and collaboration between historians of U.S. international relations and area studies specialists.

The series encourages scholarship based on multiarchival historical research. At the same time, it supports a recognition of the representational character of all stories about the past and promotes critical inquiry into issues of subjectivity and narrative. In the process, American Encounters strives to understand the context in which meanings related to nations, cultures, and political economy are continually produced, challenged, and reshaped.

Contents

Acknowledgments

It is hard to believe that the researching and writing of this book took only six years, not only because I feel at least two decades older now than when I began but also because of the innumerable debts I have accumulated since my dissertation proposal was approved in 1997. Most of these debts are intellectual and spiritual, which makes them difficult to quantify. I am certain, though, that I will never be able to repay the many people—family, friends, colleagues, and instructors—who gave so generously of their time and talent.

Let me begin with the more tangible—that is, financial—debts. A dissertation year fellowship from Northwestern University provided funding for my research trips to Abilene, College Park, Lubbock, Missoula, Princeton, St. Louis, Washington, Cambridge, and Boston. The Cushwa Center at Notre Dame furnished a grant that covered the costs of a rewarding visit to South Bend. To cite an extreme instance of the openhanded beneficence that graced this project from the beginning: the staff of the Maureen and Mike Mansfield Library at the University of Montana has yet to bill me for the hundreds of dollars in photocopies I made, despite several phone calls and letters reminding them of my now four-year-old tab. Senator Mansfield could not have asked for a more accommodating group of archivists to oversee his papers.

Archivists in general, I have discovered, are a unique breed. James Arnold dedicates his fine monograph *The First Domino* "to the archivists, . . . custodians of democracy's greatest treasure, truth." I think that's making the eagle scream a bit. My appreciation of archivists owes less to the nobility of their profession than to the courtesy they inevitably display, their seemingly inexhaustible patience, and the countless hours of searching that their advice to look at this or that file has saved me. Among a stellar assortment, I would like to single out five archivists for special thanks. Tom Branigar and Herb Pankratz of the Eisenhower Library are simply the best record keepers I have ever encountered, having an encyclopedic knowledge and capacity to provide insight into personality and politics that beggars description. Ron Frankum was a

shrewd, engaging guide to the American Friends of Vietnam Papers and helped make my stay in Lubbock far more pleasant than it would otherwise have been. Finally, John Waide and Randy McGuire led me through Tom Dooley's correspondence with an admirable mix of forbearance and good cheer.

My dissertation committee was all that a graduate student could hope for. Michael Sherry, Laura Hein, and Nancy MacLean's perceptive criticisms of the dissertation, their bracing insights into the problems it addressed, and most of all the example of their own scholarship inspired, facilitated, and greatly improved my work at every stage. My colleagues at Boston College provided an intellectually stimulating but not intimidating environment as I was revising the dissertation for publication. David Quigley, Robin Fleming, James O'Toole, and Lynn Johnson contributed well-informed criticism of parts of the manuscript. Lynn Lyerly deserves particular credit not only for investing a remarkable amount of time in reviewing my often congested prose but also for offering the most original and incisive commentary it has been my privilege to receive. Panel presentations at two meetings of the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations gave me the opportunity to air some of the themes in this book, and the response those panels elicited—from such formidable scholars as David Anderson, Anne Foster, Fredrik Logevall, and especially Andrew Rotter—was invaluable. The three anonymous reviewers at *Diplomatic History* were also helpful, as was the critical feedback I received when my article linking America's midcentury religious revival to the "Diem experiment" appeared in that journal. Mark Bradley, Christina Klein, and Edward Miller interjected needed guidance during the final stages of revision when I ran up against a series of evidentiary and methodological roadblocks. Finally, I am grateful to Valerie Millholland of Duke University Press for her interest in publishing this work and her encouragement.

My two daughters, Miranda and Sophie, were born while I was working on this project, and while I cannot in good conscience thank them for their patience—a virtue not normally associated with newborns and toddlers—I can thank them for being the most incandescent, magical children imaginable and for providing me with a constant reminder of why I am the luckiest man alive. For my wife, Devora . . . well, the debt that writers acknowledge to their spouses has become a cliché. This book is dedicated to her, for reasons too profound and personal for me to cheapen by trying to put into words.

Introduction

"The Winston Churchill of Southeast Asia" was a pitiful figure at the end. Shortly before 10 A.M. on 2 November 1963, South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem stumbled out of a Catholic church in Cholon, Saigon's Chinese district, to face the martyrdom he had courted ever since assuming command of his country in the mid-1950s. Eyes glazed from lack of sleep, trademark white sharkskin suit spattered with mud and soaked with perspiration, he hardly looked like a chief of state, much less the demigod eulogized by Washington policymakers and the American media. Diem's brother Ngo Dinh Nhu followed him down the church steps and into a narrow, dead-end street. Almost immediately, the two men were set upon by a contingent of soldiers who bound their hands behind their backs and ordered them into an armored personnel carrier. Diem did not protest the rough treatment but expressed disappointment that the cabal of generals who presently constituted South Vietnam's government had not sent a limousine befitting his rank. One of the soldiers responded that the armored car had been deliberately chosen to protect its distinguished passengers against "extremists." This appeared to satisfy Diem, but Nhu snarled, "You use such a vehicle to drive the *president*?" The soldiers had to force Nhu's head down as they shoved him into the car.[1]

During the trip to army headquarters in Saigon, Diem and Nhu were sprayed with bullets and repeatedly stabbed with knives and bayonets. Their bodies were buried in a prison cemetery. The officer who typed the brothers' death certificates inflicted a further, posthumous indignity upon Diem, describing him not as "head of state" but as "chief of province," a position he had held years earlier during the French colonial period. Even more degrading, in light of Diem's Catholic faith, was the official cause of death: "suicide," later amended to "accidental suicide" when published photographs of the president's corpse showed his hands tied behind his back.[2]

As news of the assassinations went out over the radio, Saigon exploded in jubilation. An American correspondent reported, "Every-

body seemed to be in the streets, singing, dancing, shouting, waving banners, or just standing by, watching. There were smiles on practically every face."[3] Tens of thousands flocked around the tanks of rebel soldiers to shower their heroes with presents and expressions of gratitude. Nightclubs threw open their doors, and revelers danced the twist, the tango, and all the other dances Diem had banned. Saigon's Buddhists congregated at Xa Loi Pagoda for a daylong service of thanksgiving. Students stormed the shell-scarred Presidential Palace, screaming "Freedom!" and "Long live the junta!" When newly released political prisoners began relating stories of torture, outraged mobs laid waste to the National Assembly Building and set fire to the homes of government officials. A few resourceful citizens used a power winch from a ship in Saigon harbor to pull down a statue of Diem's sister-in-law, Madame Nhu. The offices of the *Times of Vietnam,* a pro-Diem newspaper funded by the United States, were burned to the ground. Crowds lit bonfires in front of the residences of American diplomats, ransacked buildings and business establishments owned by the Ngo family, and ripped up Diem's portrait wherever it was displayed.[4] The cathartic rioting lasted less than a day, and then calm settled over the city. "After the crisis had passed," Frances FitzGerald writes, "the people of Saigon rarely spoke of the Diem regime again. There was nothing more to be said."[5]

Thus ended America's nine-year attempt to turn Ngo Dinh Diem into a popular leader capable of posing a noncommunist alternative to North Vietnam's Ho Chi Minh. The Eisenhower and Kennedy administrations had invested billions of dollars in Diem in the conviction that he, and he alone, represented South Vietnam's best hope for national survival. A slew of American political advisers had traveled to Saigon to assist Diem in everything from public relations to constitution writing; American military advisers had trained South Vietnam's armed forces to resist communist insurgencies and any neutralist threat to Diem's paramountcy; mainstream American newspapers and magazines had touted Diem as the "Tough Miracle Man of Vietnam" for whom "freedom is the very breath of life, . . . a man history may yet adjudge as one of the great figures of the twentieth century."[6] For almost a decade, American policymakers adhered to a strategy that the journalist Homer Bigart caustically dubbed "sink or swim with Ngo Dinh Diem."[7] After the drama of the Diem era played itself out, all the United States had to show for nine years of support was a whopping list of expenditures and

1. Rioters drag the head of a demolished statue through the streets of Saigon after the overthrow of the Diem regime. © AP/WORLDWIDE PHOTOS, 2 November 1963

a South Vietnamese republic in greater chaos than it had been in during the tempestuous early months of its creation.

While every historical phenomenon is subject to waves of revision and counterrevision, it would be difficult to characterize America's "sink or swim" policy as anything other than a disaster. When Diem became prime minister of South Vietnam in 1954, there were several dozen American advisers in that fledgling nation. By the time of his murder in 1963, U.S. personnel "in country" exceeded sixteen thousand. France, the dominant Western power in Vietnam for almost a century, refused to endorse Washington's so-called Diem experiment and relinquished its former colony within months of Diem's assumption of office, thereby conferring upon the United States primary responsibility for stemming the red tide in Southeast Asia. Diem's regime marked America's crossover point from advice and support to cobelligerency in a Vietnamese civil war. The commitment to Diem was the essential precondition for the ensuing measures that led to the defeat and humiliation of the United States.[8]

Vietnam War historians usually ascribe this fateful partnership to the regnant anticommunist ethos of the American cold war and the anonymity of most Saigon politicians. Diem's virulent anticommu-

nism, so the argument goes, made him the logical free world proxy for U.S. cold warriors seeking to quarantine Soviet and Chinese influence behind Vietnam's 17th parallel, especially insofar as Washington was unaware of any credible rivals for the South Vietnamese premiership.[9] Yet anticommunism and ignorance of local political realities are insufficient to explain why America opted to sink or swim with *Diem* rather than some other South Vietnamese. As the record of administrative deliberations in the mid-1950s makes plain, several popular, qualified, and irreproachably anticommunist politicians in Saigon presented attractive alternatives to Diem, and every member of President Dwight Eisenhower's policy-making coterie was aware of their existence; indeed, one aspirant, former defense minister Phan Huy Quat, came close to unseating Diem, as J. Lawton Collins, Eisenhower's "special representative" in Vietnam, relentlessly badgered Washington to effect such a change in command. Other suitable candidates included Foreign Affairs Minister Tran Van Do and General Nguyen Van Hinh. These men had all established their anticommunism, and all had greater political experience than Diem. Yet none was able to secure the backing of the Eisenhower administration.

Moreover, the contention that Diem initially governed South Vietnam as a liberal reformer and became an autocrat only in the final months of his reign—a narrative that the Kennedy and Johnson administrations promulgated in the early to mid-1960s—is simply false. Evaluations composed by American observers during Diem's first days in office identified the very same qualities that would bring about his assassination nine years later: discrimination against non-Catholics, refusal to share power, and easy resort to violence to quell dissent. None of these idiosyncrasies ought to have come as a surprise to Eisenhower, his chief advisers, or those molders of American public opinion—the press lords Henry Luce and DeWitt Wallace, Senators Mike Mansfield and John F. Kennedy, "celebrity saint" Tom Dooley, and others—who championed Diem in the 1950s and helped bankroll his despotism. Diem never pretended to be anything other than what he was, and he never changed.

This indicates a shortfall in Vietnam War scholarship. Traditional explanations cannot account for the launching of the Diem experiment by men who, on the face of it, ought to have known better. The 1954 Geneva Accords that came out of multilateral peace talks on the Indochina War allowed the United States only two years in which to build up

its Vietnamese candidate into a figure capable of challenging Ho Chi Minh in a nationwide election. Why did Eisenhower and Secretary of State John Foster Dulles gamble on a devout Catholic in a country 90 percent Buddhist? Why stake America's future in Southeast Asia on an individual deprived of the flexibility necessary to deal with the problems he confronted? Why, to paraphrase Barbara Tuchman, would intelligent statesmen behave in a manner so contrary to the way reason pointed and enlightened self-interest suggested?[10]

This book attempts to answer those questions. Neither a traditional work of diplomatic history nor what is commonly designated cultural history, it straddles both genres, drawing from such time-honored founts as government archives and presidential libraries as well as more unorthodox sources like television and radio broadcasts, movies and newsreels, fiction and nonfiction best-sellers, and the papers of citizens and private organizations whose nongovernmental status has frequently rendered them invisible to historians of the Vietnam War. There is no generally accepted label for such noncanonical inclusiveness, but I have chosen, despite misgivings, to call it ideological history—or history of the power of ideas. I propose to demonstrate how a particular body of ideas about religion and race helped cement the Eisenhower administration's alliance with Diem. Taking this approach does not mean I discount ostensibly more tangible factors like economics and "national security," although I join with Michael Hunt and Anders Stephanson in questioning whether such familiar explanatory devices can be isolated from the elusive realm of culture.[11] It does mean that I heed Frank Ninkovich's admonition not to "treat . . . ideas as second-order phenomena, derivations of the generative *Realfaktoren* that make the world go round."[12] Ideas matter. They can drive people to murder or martyrdom, catapult them into outer space, and conscript them into wars fought far from their national territory for no discernible pecuniary or strategic purpose. "Ideas," Terry Eagleton reminds us, "are what men and women live by, and will occasionally die for."[13] Thousands of Americans and millions of Vietnamese died in the 1960s and 1970s largely because of ideas governing the calculations of U.S. policymakers in the 1950s.

My unease in dubbing this approach ideological history stems from the fact that *ideology* is a difficult term to pin down.[14] An essay in a journal of political science catalogs no fewer than twenty-seven definitions of *ideology,* and while historians tend to select from a narrower range of meanings, they still disagree profoundly about what ideology is

and how it works.[15] The diplomatic historian William Appleman Williams seems to view ideology in functional terms, as an instrument employed by political actors to achieve and maintain positions of power and whip up popular support for their policies.[16] By contrast, Eric Foner adopts a sweeping construction, describing ideology as "the system of beliefs, values, fears, prejudices, reflexes, and commitments—in sum, the social consciousness—of a social group, be it a class, a party, or a section."[17] Other scholars, notably Emily Rosenberg and Michael Latham, incorporate both specificity and expansiveness. Ideology, Latham writes, "function[s] in diverse contexts," both as a "rhetorical tool employed to justify particular actions" and as a "perceptual framework through which much broader, widespread understandings of America's national identity, mission, and world role [a]re apprehended."[18] Given such disagreement and the potential for confusion, anyone attempting to prove the importance of ideology in a crucial episode in the history of U.S. foreign policy needs to define his or her terms and come to grips with a number of methodological problems.

First, let me address the issue of what ideology is not. Ideology is not the same thing as discourse, although several diplomatic historians use those words more or less interchangeably.[19] I accept Gail Bederman's definition of discourse as "a set of ideas and practices which, taken together, organize both the way a society defines certain truths about itself and the way it deploys social power."[20] In my view, ideology does not encompass either those practices or the observable manifestations of that power; it does not refer to physical actions like firing a gun or material institutions like the Pentagon. Those phenomena, however, are dependent upon ideology for their existence because ideology provides the concepts, values, and language that enable people to make sense of the world and act within it, whether by pulling a trigger or building a fortress. Ideology is also not the same thing as propaganda, by which I mean government-sponsored publicity calculated to sway people into fulfilling their leaders' (usually hidden) agenda. To qualify as ideology, public statements must echo private deliberations, as they did with regard to Vietnam in the fifties. While Washington certainly used ideologically charged rhetoric to sell its Vietnam policy to the American people, statesmen described that policy in almost identical terms in top-secret conferences and correspondence. There was a high degree of continuity, for example, between the Dulles millions of Americans saw on their television screens and the man who dominated National Se-

curity Council meetings. "[T]o a considerable extent, the rhetoric *is* the reality," Robert Packenham notes in his study of U.S. foreign aid programs for a number of third world countries, including Vietnam. "Much rhetoric was in fact firmly and widely believed by the officials."[21] That is because the rhetoric reflected those officials' ideology; it was not just window dressing.

At the same time, ideology is never the sole force driving policy. Single-issue explanations seldom suffice for any geopolitical endeavor, and they definitely fall short with respect to America's plunge into Southeast Asia, which David Anderson astutely describes as a "multilane freeway."[22] U.S. policy toward Vietnam in the mid-1950s was impelled and constrained by a number of political, social, and strategic factors that cannot be completely disentangled from ideology but that were not entirely coincident with it: American defense commitments to Western Europe, the Middle East, and Latin America as well as Indochina; the administration's tacit pledge not to violate the Geneva Accords prohibiting introduction of new forces into Vietnam; co-occurring cold war crises in Guatemala and the Formosa Straits; and so on. The fact that U.S. statesmen had the military and financial *means* to keep an anticommunist client regime afloat in South Vietnam was also critical. French policymakers may have experienced similar ideological impulses, but they lacked America's awesome arsenal and booming economy. Stephanson's conclusions about Americans' nineteenth-century "national ideology" of Manifest Destiny are equally applicable to the notions Eisenhower and Dulles carried in their heads while inaugurating the Diem experiment. "Manifest Destiny did not 'cause' President [James] Polk to go to war against Mexico," Stephanson declares. "No particular policy flowed from [it] as such: though certainly conducive to expansionism, it was not a strategic doctrine. . . . What I do argue, however, is that Manifest Destiny is of signal importance in the way the United States came to understand itself in the world . . . and that this understanding has determinate effects."[23] I make a similar case in this book. While the roots of American activities in Vietnam were many and complex, the ideological assumptions identified herein facilitated those activities by making them seem logical and necessary and blinding policymakers to their consequences.

Finally, ideology is not monolithic in the sense of being uncontested or exerting equal influence over all members of a community, much less a nation. Even during the earliest years of the cold war, when there was

general concurrence among policymakers about how and why Washington ought to meet the communist threat to Southeast Asia, not all Americans shared the deeply persistent beliefs of their leaders. Well-known iconic figures like the journalist I. F. Stone and the singer Paul Robeson critiqued policymakers' condescending perceptions of the developing world; the political scientist Hans Morgenthau argued that Asian communism did not derive from the same sources as European communism; and even Secretary of Defense Charles Wilson occasionally questioned whether a noncommunist South Vietnam was essential to U.S. security.[24] Although the ideology that gave Eisenhower and Dulles a conceptual handle on Vietnam pervaded all sectors of American society in the 1950s, it did not eliminate the possibility of resistance or dissent. Nonetheless, as this book demonstrates, contrary points of view were exceedingly rare—in academe, in the mass media, in the entertainment industry, and especially where it mattered most: in the White House, State Department, Pentagon, and Congress. Senior policymakers, all wealthy, white men of middle age or older, tended to draw upon the same constellation of mutually reinforcing ideas when coping with Vietnam. There were no ideological mavericks in this select group, and to that extent, at least, recollections of the Eisenhower years as an age of conformity and consensus have substantial basis in fact.

What, then, is ideology? Among the many competing definitions, I favor that of the cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz, who calls ideology a "symbolic framework" that "attempt[s] . . . to render otherwise incomprehensible social situations meaningful, to so construe them as to make it possible to act purposefully within them."[25] Even more helpful is Hunt, who explicitly relates Geertz's formulation to American foreign policy. Ideology, Hunt claims,

> [i]s an interrelated set of convictions or assumptions that reduces the complexities of a particular slice of reality to easily comprehensible terms and suggests appropriate ways of dealing with that reality. . . . To move in a world of infinite complexity, individuals and societies need to reduce that world to finite terms. Only then can they pretend an understanding of their environment and have the confidence to talk about it and the courage to act on it. Policymaking, like any other individual or collective activity, requires that simplifying clarity.[26]

Put in terms more relevant to U.S.–Vietnam relations in the Eisenhower era: ideology gave American policymakers their keys to Viet-

namese "reality." It allowed men like Mansfield to look at Vietnam and believe they understood what they observed. Because of "an interrelated set of convictions or assumptions," Mansfield could bring order (at least in his own mind) to events that would otherwise have been indecipherable. His ideology isolated certain features of Vietnam in the mid-1950s as salient and crucial, screened out discordant information, and applied some basic principles to determine what Washington's response should be; he was then able to make policy appropriate for the situation as he comprehended it. Unfortunately for him and other U.S. officials, to say nothing of the Vietnamese, much of America's ideological scaffolding in the fifties rested on shifting sand; it bore little relation to actual conditions in Southeast Asia and proved catastrophic as a guide to action. Crafting policy less to fit the facts than their own preconceptions, American officials went from blunder to blunder in Vietnam during the Eisenhower years. Their greatest mistake was their choice of strongman.

Hunt's Geertzian definition of ideology is capitally suited to the historical problem of Diem's deputation by the United States not only because of its commonsensical breadth and the precision of its language —"pretend an understanding"—but also because Dulles, the South Vietnamese leader's most powerful American advocate, anticipated Hunt in an address to a gathering of State Department officials in April 1955. This after-dinner talk has been ignored by historians (even Dulles's most accomplished biographer does not mention it) and this is hardly surprising.[27] A U.S. secretary of state makes dozens of speeches a year; unless he or she is proposing a Marshall Plan, threatening "massive retaliation," or announcing "peace is at hand," these orations are soon forgotten. But if one is willing to allow that religion, shaping as it does the deepest values of life, might play some part in shaping policy, then what Dulles said to his audience of fellow policymakers after a day of struggling to shore up American support for Diem is of legitimate concern to scholars. The themes Dulles stressed, his choice of illustrative examples, and above all the manner in which he resolved the dilemma he posed suggest he was engaged in more than the fulfillment of a tiresome social obligation. Rather, his words may have been the most revealing articulation of his ideological frame of reference ever set down on paper, and their implications for the study of foreign policy in the Eisenhower era are profound.

Dulles began by acknowledging, as Hunt would over three decades

later, the infinite complexity of the modern world. "There is hardly any international problem which lends itself to easy or sure solution," he declared. "I have the impression that, in the days before the world became so unified, it was easier to take decisions. The issues were, or seemed to be, simple. . . . Today, almost every problem has many complications." Even maps, the diplomat's most basic guide, no longer realistically portrayed a planet on which "time and space" had been "almost annihilated." Dulles noted that traditional geographical concepts like the nation-state had "lost much of their former forbidding significance" as a result of global information technology, near-instant communications, and air power. Furthermore, many people did "not want to be contained by the lines which statesmen have drawn." Dulles offered two cases in point:

> In Korea, the 38th parallel became famous as a line between the free and communist-dominated parts of Korea. But the line did not demarcate the hopes and aspirations of the people. I recall being in Korea in June 1950 and addressing at Seoul a religious gathering of thousands of refugees. They had fled from the North and crossed the parallel to the South in the hope of finding the freedom of religion which they cherished. In Viet-Nam a line was drawn at the 17th parallel. But hundreds of thousands of refugees have crossed it, fleeing to the South. Again, the driving force was a longing for religious freedom.

These were among the most vivid recent demonstrations that, in the convoluted international environment of the cold war, "geographical solutions rarely coincide with human solutions."

Some policymakers, Dulles observed, were defeated by the volume of information they felt obliged to master. Their effort to see all sides of a problem before acting on it tended to "deprive decisions of the dynamic quality which is needed to make them effective. The mainspring of action is a sense of certainty. Unhappily, those who are best informed are often deprived of that satisfaction." How was a geopolitician to overcome the paralysis brought on by information overload? Dulles's solution could not have been farther removed from the unsentimental realism normally attributed to statesmen of his generation. "The great deeds of history," he argued, "were wrought primarily by men with deep conviction and dynamic faith. They were sure that they were right. It seems today that sureness can be dependably found only in the spir-

itual realm. . . . Certainty is not readily found in the mundane realm, at least when there is full knowledge of the facts. The yearning for more certainty and precision than is compatible with the complexity of affairs encourages . . . ultimate disillusionment." If policymakers were to avoid such inhibitive anomie, Dulles counseled them to set their sights on a higher goal than "immediate political expediency." Stop trying to absorb every piece of intelligence that flows into your department, he in effect advised, and remember a few maxims: "It was said by Jesus that material things will be added unto those who seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness. . . . Men who feel a sense of duty to some Higher Being strive here to do His will. Because of their faith, they have power and virtue and simple wisdom." In conclusion, and without naming Ngo Dinh Diem or any other American ally, Dulles reminded his audience, "Our policies must be dependably embraced by . . . our people, who are essentially religious."[28]

The sentiments expressed in Dulles's speech—the mistrust of facts and data, the preference for doctrinal certainty—were those of a Savonarola, not a Metternich. As we will see in chapter 5, Dulles spent much of the day prior to delivering this address opposing Special Representative Collins's campaign to strip Diem of office, going so far as to obstruct transmission of a presidential message authorizing the appointment of a new South Vietnamese premier. In conniving to rescue Diem, Dulles may, to appropriate his own phraseology, be said to have cast America's lot with "dynamic faith" against "disillusionment" and "full knowledge of the facts." It was an astonishing display of statecraft as faith act, of religious fervor trumping evidence and common sense, and it was hardly inconsistent with the spirit of the times. More than in any other period in modern American history, policymakers in the 1950s tended to view events at home and abroad through a religious lens.

Religion is accordingly one of two categories of analysis under the rubric of ideology that this book employs in making sense of America's covenant with Diem. Although many historians and sociologists have addressed the theological renaissance of the Eisenhower era,[29] this mid-century religious revival has been absent from studies of Eisenhower's foreign policy, for reasons that may be guessed at. Americans are presumed to separate church and state. Those self-styled realists who dominated much of policymaking during the fifty-year standoff with the Soviet Union—the George Kennans, Robert McNamaras, and Henry

Kissingers—would protest that religious ideals and the principles of conduct derived therefrom have no place in geopolitics.[30] If this were the case, however, Americans would dare elect and appoint only irreligious public servants, a condition that did not obtain in the 1950s, when over 80 percent of respondents to a Gallup poll claimed they "would refuse to vote for an atheist for president under *any* circumstances."[31] Dulles, who served as U.S. secretary of state for most of that pious decade, once responded to mild criticism of North Korean President Syngman Rhee and Nationalist Chinese leader Chiang Kai-shek by defending them as "Christian gentlemen who have suffered for their faith."[32] Scholars would do well not to dismiss such statements as hyperbole and pay greater heed to Dulles's choice of analogy when, for example, he repeatedly compared the communist menace to "the tide of Islam [that] swept over much of Christendom . . . in the tenth century after Christ."[33]

For Dulles and many other statesmen and pundits of the 1950s, religious metaphors, symbols, icons, keywords, and clichés provided much of the "simplifying clarity" identified by Hunt as ideology's prime function. As Dulles's biographer Townsend Hoopes notes, "Dulles, along with most Americans, was magnificently ignorant of Vietnamese history and culture."[34] The secretary had never encountered a more alien state of affairs than the wars-within-wars maelstrom that raged in South Vietnam in 1954–55. He could not begin to fathom this cauldron of competing ethnic, economic, and political groups, but he *could,* as Hunt puts it, "pretend an understanding" by referring to whatever exegetic paradigm was most familiar. The fact that Diem was a Christian and his rivals were not proved to be the organizing principle that Dulles and other policymakers seized upon in solving the riddle of Vietnam. Phan Huy Quat and Tran Van Do may have been more seasoned politicians than Diem, but they were also Buddhists, and American ethnocentrism linked that faith to certain assumed traits, including passivity, weakness, selfishness, depravity, impracticality, and cowardice. Those candidates for the premiership who were members of Vietnam's Cao Dai and Hoa Hao religious groups fared even worse. American officials and the American media reviled them as atheists at best, devil-worshipers at worst, and in any event unsuitable allies for a superpower that, in the jingoistic words of Senator Edward Martin, "must move forward with the atomic bomb in one hand and the cross in the other!"[35]

In my archival research, I have encountered countless examples of policymakers' bias against "Eastern" faiths like Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism. These attitudes are amplified in such artifacts of American popular culture as the Luce publications—*Time* and *Life* magazines—best-selling books, and television programs. It is impossible to connect attitudes precisely to deeds—ideological histories always leave the relationship between belief and action in the realm of the problematic[36]—but there is considerable evidence that American delimitation of what did and did not constitute a real religion regulated the manner in which Washington selected its allies. As H. W. Brands muses in his popular survey of U.S. cold war foreign policy, "It was convenient, and not completely coincidental, that three of America's principal protégés in Asia—Chiang [Kai-shek], [Syngman] Rhee, and South Vietnam's Ngo Dinh Diem—were Christians."[37] Brands does not follow up on his insight, but this book does. The Diem disaster is here reconceptualized as symptomatic of a religious ethos that also manifested itself in alliances with Rhee and Chiang, two other Christian statesmen who presided over largely non-Christian nations on the front lines of the cold war.

If, however, American solipsism mandated endorsement of a disciple of a recognized Western faith over any Buddhist, Cao Dai, or Hoa Hao alternative, religion alone cannot account for the durability of the Diem–U.S. affiliation. After almost one million North Vietnamese Catholics fled south in the "Passage to Freedom" exodus of 1954–55, Diem appointed thousands of his émigré coreligionists to key posts in his regime. The South Vietnamese government was soon well stocked with Catholic politicians—indeed, Catholics were overrepresented in both the civil and military bureaucracy. If the Eisenhower administration merely wished to see American interests in Southeast Asia defended by a Christian executive, many South Vietnamese met that requirement by the time Eisenhower began his second term in 1956. Yet America stuck by Diem, despite periodic reports by U.S. representatives in Saigon that he was making no attempt to cultivate a base of popular support and was, in fact, a dictator who regularly ordered the execution of political opponents, shut down dissident newspapers, and violated every article in South Vietnam's constitution.

In order to understand why Washington clung in paralyzed attachment to the policy of sink or swim for so long, then, one must incorporate another ideological proclivity, superimposing it upon religion in

the manner of an optometrist combining lenses of different concavities to produce a sharper image. For over two decades, following Edward Said's pioneering work, historians labeled this category of analysis Orientalism, but Melani McAlister has recently made a powerful case for the limited utility of that term in explaining U.S. foreign policy after 1945. McAlister correctly notes that *Orientalism* refers to the presumption of a "generalized 'East' " in which nations as dissimilar as China, Saudi Arabia, and Vietnam are conflated by the Western observer into "a single world deemed 'Oriental.' "[38] Certainly, the Eisenhower administration engaged in this type of crude nation lumping when fashioning U.S. policy toward Vietnam, but Washington's conceptualization of Asia was more complex. Policymakers, especially Dulles, alternated to suit their purposes between positing a homogenous, monolithic "Orient" and drawing distinctions between Asian nations. Frequently, they justified U.S. support of Diem's regime on the grounds that the South Vietnamese were different from other Asians, then, often within the same breath, excused Diem's trampling of civil liberties as being necessary throughout "the Orient." As Barbara Fields observes, racial stereotypes are "promiscuous creatures," and a central survival mechanism of the various sets of beliefs classifying humanity into racial hierarchies is their malleability and capacity to accommodate contradictory notions.[39] I find the well-worn term *racism,* inexact and tendentious as it unquestionably is, still the best locution to describe those many-faceted attitudes and perceptions that contorted Americans' view of Asian societies and played a formative role in the conduct of U.S. foreign policy.

Few diplomatic historians would deny that racism pervaded Washington's postwar relations with Asia. Kennan, the "father of containment" and arguably the cold war's most influential intellectual, referred to "Oriental secretiveness and conspiracy" in his famous "long telegram" of 1946 and advertised his anti-Asian bias on many other occasions.[40] The muster roll of Dulles's generalizations about "Orientals" is long, as this book demonstrates.[41] Eisenhower, while more temperate than his secretary of state, also made numerous public and private remarks that smacked of a deep-seated racist condescension toward America's allies and adversaries in the East. These men grew up in a culture shaped by more than a century of stereotypical depictions of Asians, and when they looked at Vietnam in the mid-1950s, they saw what their background had conditioned them to see.

What they did not see were a people ready for democratic self-

government. A number of historians have documented the American tendency to invest the citizens of predominantly nonwhite countries with the symbolic characteristics of childhood: immaturity, unreliability, excitability. Mary Renda's superlative study of U.S.–Haitian relations is perhaps the most rigorous unpacking of the "ideology of paternalism" that "encouraged" Americans "to take up the role of father to what was considered a child nation." Not only did the ideology Renda identifies legitimate U.S. intervention in nations like Haiti; it also "justified violence committed under the guise of necessary discipline."[42] From the perspective of American policymakers, it was absurd to expect backward, childlike people to responsibly conduct their own political affairs. Rather, they needed a strict, even ruthless national paterfamilias, either in the form of an occupying Western army or a native tyrant, to avoid degenerating into anarchy. With regard to Vietnam, this paternalistic construct was confirmed by supposed experts like Professor Wesley Fishel of Michigan State University, a close friend of Diem employed by both the State Department and the Central Intelligence Agency to advise policymakers on Vietnamese politics and culture. As Fishel wrote in a 1959 *New Leader* article, "The peoples of Southeast Asia are not sufficiently sophisticated to understand what we mean by democracy and how they can exercise and protect their own political rights. . . . That individual human rights may often be neglected or sacrificed in this period of national infancy should not be surprising."[43] Such reasoning played into Diem's hands. Officials stationed in Saigon might occasionally question whether he was the most *fitting* superintendent for South Vietnam, but no high-level U.S. policymaker ever doubted that autocracy was the best form of government for a recently liberated Asian colony, and no prominent American journalist or authority on Vietnam raised the issue either.

As well as legitimating Diem's centralization of power, American racism explained away his more disturbing traits—paranoia, violent temper, and vainglory—as being customary in Asia. Behavior that would have been interpreted as evidence of a psychopathic personality if indulged in by a Western statesman was not only tolerated but encouraged by U.S. officials as a means of demonstrating that America was not interested in foisting an obeisant puppet upon the South Vietnamese. Responding to French premier Edgar Faure's denunciation of Diem as "not only incapable but mad," Dulles asserted, "Diem is not a person to whom one can dictate. [The] U.S. cannot undertake to force

upon him [a] govt. or policies which he does not like. . . . Any man who would blindly accept U.S. bidding would not be worth supporting."[44] In one of the bitterest ironies of the Vietnam War, Diem's supporters in the United States often charged those who criticized his suppression of human rights with neocolonialist leanings and insensitivity to Asian ways of thinking.

As significant as Diem's conformity to policymakers' concepts of Asianness was the extent to which he violated those clichés. The journalist Marguerite Higgins spoke for many Americans when she contrasted Diem favorably with "Asian leaders who punctuate smiles and protocol politeness with pointed reminders of their neutralist creed." After tortuous dealings between the United States and Jawaharlal Nehru, Higgins noted, "it is a refreshing—almost startling—experience to hear this Asian hero assert forthrightly: 'communism isn't neutral, therefore we cannot be neutral.' "[45] A recurring theme in the treatment accorded Diem in government correspondence and in the American media was how unique he was among Asian heads of state: anticommunist whereas most were neutral, incorruptible whereas most were mercenary, congenial toward U.S. business interests whereas most were suspicious, a staunch Catholic whereas most worshiped their ancestors or practiced some "fatalistic" religion like Buddhism. Colonel Edward Lansdale, Diem's principal American advocate in South Vietnam, emphasized this uniqueness prior to Vice President Lyndon Johnson's visit to Saigon in 1961. "Diem's feet barely seem to reach the floor when he is seated," Lansdale noted in a Pentagon communiqué. "However, he is not defensive about his short stature and is at ease around tall Americans. He has a very positive approach to Westerners, not the least bit concerned about differences such as Asian-Caucasian background. When the vice president sees him, he will find him as interested in cattle as any Texan, and as interested in freedom as Sam Houston."[46] (LBJ was indeed taken with Diem, dubbing him "the Winston Churchill of Southeast Asia.")[47] Viewed through the prism of American racism, Diem was not an inflexible reactionary with a Christ complex but rather that rarest of commodities: a straight-shooting, God-fearing, two-fisted *man* in the inscrutable, un-Christian, effeminate East. Diem, Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas remarked to Senator Mansfield in early 1954, was "the kind of Asian we can live with."[48]

As American propagandists like Tom Dooley and Joseph Buttinger published their widely read paeans to Diem in the mid- to late 1950s, and

as members of Congress like Mansfield, Walter Judd, and Edna Kelly delivered speeches extolling his accomplishments, the Vietnamese people as a whole came to be viewed in America as the kind of *Asians* we can live with. This projection of Diem's perceived strengths onto the population of his country was never complete; he retained a privileged status as the Miracle Man who alone could galvanize an otherwise simpleminded people for holy war against the communists. American writers never credited the Vietnamese in general with such qualities as rugged individualism or creativity—these attributes were reserved for Diem—but a distinction was drawn, by degrees, in American minds between Vietnam and "the rest" of Asia. While Diem's subjects were saddled with such putatively "Oriental" shortcomings as backwardness, inscrutability, and obtuseness, they were nonetheless, Americans learned, exceptional in their adaptability to Western political and economic procedures and their gratitude for American tutelage. The fact that a small but significant percentage of them were Catholics, making Diem's so-called republic the most Catholic country on mainland Asia, only reinforced the popular American notion of the Vietnamese as a superior breed of Asians who might one day fulfill in some measure Senator Kenneth Wherry's quintessentially fifties pledge: "With God's help, we will lift Shanghai up and up, ever up, until it is just like Kansas City!"[49]

By examining Americans' impressions of Vietnam and relating them to the contemporaneous religious revival in the United States and to racist patterns of perception, this book historicizes a connection between domestic culture and foreign policy. It demonstrates that, in addition to the incontestably important anticommunist factor, two mutually reinforcing ideologies shaped America's covenant with Diem: religion and race. These conceptual frameworks disposed policymakers like Eisenhower and Dulles to interpret events in South Vietnam in a fashion cataclysmic for the United States but remarkably favorable to Diem. The book documents how Diem's reign of terror and error was filtered through a lens of American ethnocentrism that translated the South Vietnamese dictator's shortcomings into merits, and how Washington's "Vietnam" became, from at least 1950 through 1957, a projection of American religious and racial preconceptions.

Those preconceptions overlapped and interpenetrated, and any attempt to pull them apart for purposes of analysis runs the risk of implying a discreteness that did not exist. Still, they may be usefully enumerated as follows: (1) America's conflict with the Soviet Union was

an all-consuming religious crusade against an adversary who rejected God's universal moral law and sought to enslave humanity under an atheistic creed; (2) the free world needed faith, best exemplified by Christianity, to win its battle against godless communism; (3) foreign leaders who subscribed to a recognized "Western" religion were better allies than followers of "Eastern" faiths whose ethical inconstancy rendered them unable to distinguish right from wrong and whose submissiveness made them easy prey for the reds; (4) communism posed a particular threat to former European colonial possessions in Asia because the inhabitants of those countries had no experience governing themselves, were culturally predisposed to submit to strong leaders, and were so immature as to believe communist blandishments about Marxism's capacity to overcome poverty and desperation; (5) given Asian unfamiliarity with and incapacity for popular self-rule, it was necessary for Washington to countenance Asian allies who eschewed democratic politics provided they shared America's religious opposition to communism.

Schematizing ideology in this fashion has the advantage of pointing up a feature of U.S. attitudes toward Vietnam that is easy to miss: the degree to which anticommunism grew out of and was predicated on religiosity and racism. This contingent relationship tends to be obscured in conventional accounts of the Vietnam War that stress the primacy of American anticommunism; indeed, I anticipate that diplomatic historians from the realist camp and other more traditional scholars will respond to my argument by contending that while conceptions of religion and race may have had some impact on U.S.–Vietnam relations, they played a decidedly subservient role to policymakers' overriding compulsion to contain the global spread of communism.[50] But this misses the point: statesmen like Dulles were so fiercely anticommunist precisely *because* they were so religious, and they supported a South Vietnamese dictator as a direct consequence of their racist assumption that the Vietnamese, being childlike and primitive, required authoritarian government if they were to be kept out of the communist bloc. Both Americans' motivation for opposing communism and the manner in which they sought to halt its Asian advance derived in large part from their religious and racial views. To privilege anticommunism over religion and race in interpreting the Eisenhower administration's Vietnam policy is to assume a false hierarchy. The question of whether, for example, Dulles was more anticommunist than Christian—or whether his anticommunism outran his paternal-

ism where the Vietnamese were concerned—is, I submit, unanswerable and frankly misguided. America's Diem experiment rested on an ideological tripod, all three legs of which were necessary to elevate Diem to high office and keep him there for so long.

A word on sources is in order. As Bruce Cumings observes in a famous article entitled "The Poverty of Theory in Diplomatic History," "An unsystematic, nearly random survey of articles in the popular press, sermons by Fulton J. Sheen, speeches in the *Congressional Record,* etc., is no way to judge how 'profound' was the impact of domestic politics."[51] Perhaps. But I would counter that if the same loaded imagery appears in both the *Congressional Record* and a popular book—if, for example, both Senator Mansfield of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and Tom Dooley, author of the great early best-seller on Vietnam, refer to the Vietnamese as clay needing to be molded by American sculptors[52]—then a broad-scope process of value ascription is at work that cannot help but play a part in fashioning foreign policy. Similarly, if the National Security Council, a justice of the Supreme Court, America's most widely read magazine, and a scholarly monograph all characterize Vietnamese Buddhism as passive and thus vulnerable to communist influence,[53] such like-mindedness is indicative of the climate of opinion in which policy is made, and this legitimate subject of historical inquiry cannot be discerned, let alone investigated, unless the historian is willing to be eclectic in his or her choice of sources. In this regard I am persuaded by John Dower, who defends his wide-ranging research into the "stereotyped and often blatantly racist thinking" exhibited by Americans and Japanese in the Pacific War as necessary to establish the ideological context of policymaking:

> This is not the tidiest way to do history, but it is satisfying. . . . To understand how racism influenced the conduct of the war in Asia has required going beyond the formal documents and battle reports upon which historians normally rely and drawing on materials such as songs, movies, cartoons, and a wide variety of popular as well as academic writings published at the time. In some academic circles these are not respectable sources. . . . But they are invaluable for recreating the ethos which underlay the attitudes and actions of men and women during these years.[54]

Neither Dower nor I would assert that the actors in our respective studies were helpless prisoners of an "ethos" that dictated their "atti-

tudes and actions." One of the most arresting passages in Dower's *War without Mercy* involves a middle-aged Charles Lindbergh, who, having overcome his prewar isolationist sentiments, flew several missions in 1944 as a civilian observer with U.S. forces based in New Guinea. Although in many respects as xenophobic as the men he accompanied, the famous "Lone Eagle" was appalled by the atrocities American soldiers committed. Unable to reconcile his observation that GIs "were as cruel and barbaric . . . as the Japs themselves" with the interpretive dichotomy of "Oriental barbarian[s]" versus "civilized" Americans, Lindbergh attempted (unsuccessfully) to persuade his superiors to adopt a more humane means of prosecuting the war. This did not constitute an escape from the racist paradigm Dower identifies; rather, it represented an instance of "the same stereotypes that fed . . . outright race hate" being "turned about . . . to legitimize . . . [a] purpose contradictory" to that of most U.S. commanders in the last year of Japanese-American conflict.[55] Similarly, while the American Catholic Joe Collins was just as disdainful of Vietnamese Buddhism, Hoa Haoism, and Cao Daism as his contemporaries in the Eisenhower administration—and no more willing than a French rubber plantation baron to concede to the Vietnamese rights of self-government—he managed to bend the terms of hegemonic ideological notions about "the Orient" and "non-Western" faiths to argue against America's investment in Diem. The "Collins mission" to Vietnam in 1954–55 lends credence to Gail Bederman's proposition that "ideology, although coercive, does not preclude human agency."[56] But individuals like Collins were in the minority, and their counsel proved insufficient to deter more powerful statesmen from embracing the devouring incubus of the Diem regime.

Ultimately, the same rewards that spurred earlier studies sustain and justify this entry in what Robert McMahon calls the "Why Vietnam sweepstakes"[57]: I hope to arrive at a fuller understanding of the origins of America's longest and most divisive war and of why the United States expended so much blood and treasure in an area of such apparent strategic and economic insignificance. I believe historians can achieve this understanding only by charting fresh directions and becoming more cross-disciplinary in their research. If there is one thing that the ever-expanding secondary literature on the Vietnam War makes clear, it is that traditional balance-of-power and materialist interpretations cannot explain America's thirty-year military involvement in Southeast Asia. The answers will not be found on maps or in bankbooks. Room

must be made for what Richard Slotkin calls "the activities of symbol-making, interpretation, and imaginative projection [that] continuously interlock with the political and material processes of social existence."[58]

Happily, several historians of diplomacy have expanded their horizons to accommodate these activities. The field of diplomatic history is entering a new and exciting stage in which categories of analysis perennially consigned by more conservative scholars to cultural history are enabling scholars like Laura McEnaney, Kristin Hoganson, Mary Dudziak, Michelle Mart, Geoffrey Smith, Penny Von Eschen, Brenda Gayle Plummer, Emily Rosenberg, Robert Dean, and Andrew Rotter to illuminate critical dimensions of policymaking long overlooked.[59] This book contributes to that trend. Conceptually, it represents a refinement of Loren Baritz's observation that "Americans were ignorant about the Vietnamese not because we were stupid, but because we believe certain things. . . . These things necessarily distorted our vision and confused our minds in ways that made learning extraordinarily difficult. To understand our failure, we must think about what it means to be an American."[60] *Pace* Baritz: to understand the Diem commitment, we must think about what it meant to be an American in the Eisenhower years—a time of unprecedented religious revival and global interventionism during which detailed knowledge of the Far East was almost completely lacking. Consideration of the ideology that shaped policymakers' consciousness in this pivotal time can help explain why the strategy of "sink or swim with Ngo Dinh Diem" was adopted and pursued for so many years, and why America's experiment in nation building in Southeast Asia was doomed from the outset despite the investment of billions of dollars, the sacrifice of hundreds of thousands of lives, and the application of more firepower than had previously been deployed in all of American history.

We live in a post–cold war world of snowballing nuclear proliferation, where it is more rather than less likely that America will face geopolitical crises involving unfamiliar peoples. In light of these sobering facts, the significance of the Diem experiment for the study and conduct of U.S. foreign relations is self-evident. It is a superb vehicle for exhibiting the effects of cultural insularity upon the crafting of policy and vividly demonstrates the need for periodic testing of policymakers' preconceived notions and emotional fixations against the evidence. Dower may be correct when he asserts that "fantasy and sensationalism shape the mind in ways beyond measure, undoubtedly a great deal

more than most scholarship does."[61] Still, this does not absolve historians of the responsibility of challenging those public servants—presidents, secretaries of state, senators—who view complex international events with rigid ideological tunnel vision. As Clifford Geertz declared in one of the earliest defenses of ideology as a proper concern for scholars, "The social function of science vis-à-vis ideologies is first to understand them—what they are, how they work, what gives rise to them—and second to criticize them, to force them to come to terms with (but not necessarily to surrender to) reality."[62]

America's Miracle Man in Vietnam

1

"Colonialism, Communism, or Catholicism?": Mr. Diem Goes to Washington

On 7 July 1954, Jean Baptiste Ngo Dinh Diem formally took over the government of the young, besieged State of Vietnam. Diem's appointment as prime minister represented the culmination of many years of campaigning, a time during which, like most politicians, he cultivated the support of influential patrons by seeking out their company and telling them what they wanted to hear. He was also fortunate in that certain features of his background and character, over which he had no control, appealed to many government officials and well-connected private citizens. Through a classic mix of networking and luck, Diem had built up such an effective power base by the summer of 1954 that the emperor of Vietnam had no choice but to offer him the premiership.

What made Diem's rise to prominence noteworthy was the fact that none of his prestigious sponsors were Vietnamese. Indeed, Diem was not widely known in his native land, where he had held no public office for more than twenty years. He was likewise unable to command any meaningful support in France, Vietnam's longtime colonial overlord. It was in the United States that Diem won his post. His piety and his appeals to Americans' paternalistic and missionary impulses favorably impressed statesmen like Senator Mike Mansfield and Representative Walter Judd, among others. Not merely Diem's Christianity but his Catholicism endeared him to elite figures in the Eisenhower administration and made him stand out among possible candidates for America's cold war surrogate in Saigon. Moreover, widespread assumptions that Asians were culturally, and perhaps racially, unready for demo-

cratic self-government predisposed U.S. policymakers to excuse Diem's overtly dictatorial ambitions as appropriate for Vietnam.

From the beginning, Diem's government was an American creation. As a Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) operative stationed in Saigon in the mid-1950s recalled, Diem was "so wholly dependent on American support that he would have fallen in a day without it. . . . What he did was inspired by Americans, planned by Americans, and carried out with close American guidance."[1] Those Vietnamese who disparaged the Diem regime as "*My-Diem*"—"American Diem"—were more insightful than they could have known, as was the British novelist Graham Greene, who in 1955 called Diem "The Patriot Ruined by the West."[2] The same qualities that enabled Diem to acquire South Vietnam's highest office through the agency of the Eisenhower administration also ensured that he would never establish a government of any popular legitimacy and doomed his so-called republic to permanent, quasi-colonial reliance upon Western aid—a cruel paradox for a man who, whatever his faults, must be counted among Vietnam's staunchest nationalists.

"An Exceptionally Serious Catholic"

Diem first set foot on American soil in late August 1950, less than two months after the outbreak of the Korean War. While hardly the most distinguished Asian statesman to visit the United States that year, he came with impressive references. Edmund Gullion of the American embassy in Saigon informed Secretary of State Dean Acheson that Diem was "the chief leader of the Vietnamese Catholics" and speculated that his visit might heighten Catholic awareness of "the communist danger to Viet-Nam."[3] Charles Spinks, the U.S. ambassador to Japan, saw Diem during the latter's stopover in Tokyo and alerted his superiors that Diem was "anti-French, anti-communist, progressive, liberal, [and] a good possibility as an American tool in Indo-China."[4] Ever on the lookout for potential tools to arrest the communist advance in Asia, Washington took heed of these reports. The State Department's Bureau of Far Eastern Affairs made arrangements for a reception for Diem at the capital.[5]

Diem arrived in Washington accompanied by his brother, Bishop Ngo Dinh Thuc, who ironically made a better impression on State Department representatives than Diem did. James Webb, acting secretary of state, cabled the Saigon embassy, "We were impressed that Thuc,

through the Catholics, might be [an] important figure in [the] present IC [Indochina] complex. . . . [The i]nfluence of Thuc's clerical background and position[,] with its evident bearing on his thinking[,] was apparent." Diem, on the other hand, struck officials as "less precise, realistic, and authoritative. . . . He fits more into [the] mold of [a] present-day Vietnamese politician, steeped in Oriental intrigue." Both Diem and Thuc stressed the need for greater Vietnamese autonomy from France, criticized the Vietnamese emperor, Bao Dai, for his inability to rally popular support to the anticommunist cause, and argued for more direct American involvement in the war raging in Vietnam. They were, however, incapable of advancing any strategy whereby the United States could displace the French in Indochina without damaging the recently inaugurated North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and proved similarly unable to explain how American forces, nearly expelled from the Korean peninsula just weeks before, could fight two land wars in Asia at the same time. Diem in particular irritated Webb with his "resort to generalities." "Like other prominent Vietnamese," the acting secretary complained, "Diem is . . . either incapable or unwilling to [*sic*] offer any constructive solution to [the] current dilemma other than vague and defamatory ref[erence]s to Fr[ance] and implications that only [the] U.S. can solve [the] problem, thru him of course."[6]

The Ngo brothers remained in America for almost a month, occasionally meeting with lower-level functionaries in the Truman administration but associating primarily with clergymen and other individuals active in Catholic circles. They left for Europe in mid-October to lobby for Diem's installation as Vietnamese prime minister.[7] Shortly after their departure, Dean Rusk, then assistant secretary of state for Far Eastern affairs, wrote to Father Frederick McGuire, a former Vincentian missionary to Indochina who often advised the State Department on Asian matters. Rusk thanked McGuire for his "cooperation and assistance . . . in receiving Mr. Diem" and called Diem and Thuc "valuable allies in our common endeavor to preserve the rights of free men in Indochina." While Rusk did not anticipate that Diem and Thuc would return to America, he assured McGuire that "they have expressed themselves eager . . . to remain in touch with the Catholic clergy of the United States."[8]

No American newspaper mentioned Diem's visit, and a contemporary observer could be forgiven for assuming that the stocky little man from the other side of the world would soon fade into obscurity. In-

deed, Diem's life prior to 1950 suggested a personality ill-suited to politics, at least by Western standards.[9] Born in 1901 near the imperial city of Hue in central Vietnam, Diem was one of nine children in a wealthy family headed by Ngo Dinh Kha, the highest-ranking mandarin in the court of Emperor Thanh Thai. The Ngo family had been Catholic for generations, converting in the seventeenth century. They paid a heavy price for their faith under emperors Minh Mang and Tu Duc, who encouraged the persecution of Catholics. Around 1880, when Kha was studying for government service in Malaya, Buddhist monks led an anti-Catholic riot that nearly wiped out the Ngo family. More than a hundred Ngo—including Kha's parents, sisters, and brothers—were burned alive. Such oppression only intensified Kha's devotion to the Catholic Church, a sentiment he passed on to his six sons and three daughters.[10]

Diem grew up in a household in which, according to one biographer, "Catholicism and Confucianism went hand in hand."[11] Kha was not a nurturant or forgiving father. Through harangue, catechization, and frequent beatings, he impressed upon his children the importance of self-denial and conformity to the moral and social order.[12] Diem stood out for his piety, rising every morning before dawn to pray and flying into a rage if interrupted by his siblings. At six, he won his first school prize—for "assiduousness."[13] At fifteen, he entered a monastery and considered becoming a priest but dropped the notion because, as he informed Stanley Karnow, "the discipline was too rigorous."[14] Denis Warner is probably nearer the mark when he concludes that Diem "found the Church too pliable for his own unbending will."[15]

A year after leaving the monastery, Diem took competitive examinations for French Indochina's equivalent of a high school diploma. He scored so high that the French offered him a scholarship in Paris, but he declined, enrolling instead in Hanoi's School of Public Administration and Law. While a student there, he had a fleeting romance with the daughter of one of his instructors, but she jilted him and joined a convent. He probably remained celibate for the rest of his life.[16] Diem performed well at school, graduating first in his class and moving into government service. Within a few years, he became provincial chief of a district containing over three hundred villages. It was here that he first encountered local communist agents distributing propaganda. Revolted by the Marxist doctrines of social revolution and atheism, he helped the French suppress the first communist-inspired peasant revolts. By 1933,

when he was only thirty-two years old, the French agreed to his appointment as minister of the interior under Emperor Bao Dai.[17]

It was a decision the French would regret. Shortly after assuming office, Diem was invited to head a commission to examine possible administrative reforms. He submitted a list of proposals, all of which the French rejected. In an act of considerable bravery, he publicly resigned, denounced Bao Dai as "nothing but an instrument in the hands of the French," and returned all of the decorations the emperor had bestowed on him.[18] The French threatened him with deportation. Diem retired to his family home in Hue to nurse his wounded pride. He would not work for a living for the next twenty-one years, although he remained politically active, meeting often with nationalist intellectuals and keeping up a diligent correspondence with the legendary Phan Boi Chau, Indochina's most famous anticolonial activist.[19]

Like Ho Chi Minh, Diem recognized that World War II presented a unique opportunity for Vietnam to break free from French control. When Japan completed its occupation of Indochina in 1942, he tried to convince Japanese officials to grant Vietnam its independence, but they preferred to leave the outward form of French colonial administration in place. Three years later, the tide of war having turned, the Japanese relented and asked Diem to serve as prime minister in a nominally sovereign Vietnam. Diem refused. Both the Japanese and the French declared him a subversive and ordered his arrest. Diem fled south to Saigon, where he lay low and managed to avoid capture until the end of the war. His older brother Ngo Dinh Khoi was not so fortunate. The communist Viet Minh apprehended Khoi and his son, tried and convicted them for counterrevolutionary acts, and buried them alive.[20]

Diem himself was seized by Viet Minh agents in late 1945. His anticommunism and prior service in the colonial administration might have sealed his fate, but Ho Chi Minh was anxious to have a Catholic in his first coalition cabinet. Rather than order Diem's execution, he had Diem brought to Viet Minh headquarters in Hanoi. The ensuing dialogue between the two men vividly demonstrated both Ho's political skills—which enabled him to hold a fractious, poorly armed population together through decades of war—and the dogmatism that would hamstring Diem's efforts to pull off a similar feat:

Diem: What do you want of me?

Ho: I want of you what you have always wanted of me—your coop-