H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Edward Miller. *Misalliance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and the Fate of South Vietnam.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013. 432 pp. $39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-07298-5.

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Published on H-Decol (June, 2015)

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In *Misalliance*, Edward Miller attempts to dispel many of the myths surrounding the history of Ngo Dinh Diem, the notorious founder and first president of the Republic of Vietnam (RVN). From his climb to state power in the early 1950s to his coup and execution in 1963, Diemâs political rise and fall in most Cold War historiography traditionally stands in for the highly dramatized narrative of American intervention and subsequent âfailureâ in Indochina. Rather than see him as a proxy for the United States or as an unquestioning puppet, however, Miller asserts that Diem should be considered a rational and self-interested leader who often mediated American demands not only to survive the specificities of his political climate but also to advance his own unique political vision. Miller argues that previous âstructuralâ interpretationsâbe they geostrategic, economic, ideological, or culturalâare unconvincing ways to interpret the historical relations between Diem and the United States. In response, Miller foregrounds contingency, accounting for the âpersonalities, experiences, and habits of mindâ that Vietnamese and American leaders and officials brought to specific and historical contexts (p. 9).

Dedication to contingency *and* context entails widening the scope of perspectives and sources, and Miller reorients the reader away from strictly American viewpoints and toward Vietnamese voices. To achieve this, he combines two methods that he asserts are not normally used within the same frame: studies of US foreign relations and Vietnamese studies. The widening of archives and methods to include Vietnamese sources leads to Millerâs central intervention, that ânation buildingâ drove the actions of both the United States and the Diem regime.

On the one hand, the nation building frame allows Miller to focus the narrative of *Misalliance* on the âU.S. diplomats, soldiers, intelligence officers, social scientists, and aid expertsâ on the ground in Vietnam during the 1950s and 1960s (p. 12). On the other, it helps explain the problems those actors ran into in Vietnam, especially when Vietnamese actors and groups derailed any hope of long-term collaboration. Therefore, according to Miller, nation building not only explains the collaboratory and contested strategies adopted by both the US officials and advisors and the Diem regime, but also tragically sowed the seeds of the eventual breakdown of the alliance.

Misalliance presents the era of Diemâs political rule in a straightforward chronological narrative of nine chapters. Each chapter is a highly detailed account of the variegated interactions between powerful Southern Viet-

namese elites and leaders and official and unofficial representatives of the United States. Several episodes illuminate exactly how Vietnamese histories and agents shaped US foreign policy in Indochina. For example, the first, third, and fourth chapters of *Misalliance* illustrate how the family tradition of political dissent informed Diem and his brothers, but it also situates their family within the moment of revolutionary national consciousness that emerged during the interwar period in French Indochina. Miller ably emphasizes both the uniqueness and the heterogeneity of Vietnamese anticolonial politics in these chapters, consequently problematizing the more common monochromatic understandings of the Vietnam wars. Indeed, he introduces the different and diverging kinds of social activism, religious movements, political philosophies, and crime syndicates in a way that foreshadows the antagonistic and hazardous path Diem had to traverse in order to establish and maintain political power.

From that starting point, Miller holds that Diem was neither a traditionalist nor a religious zealot, but rather a firm believer in the heterogeneous promises of modernity so vital in the political imaginations of the decolonizing era. This is a position many scholars will challenge, but the assessment of Diem as a modern and pragmatic leader allows Miller to weave the more traditional narratives of US foreign policy and Vietnamese domestic politics with the broader history of development and decolonization. For example, chapters 2, 5, and 7 demonstrate how discourses of nation building simultaneously constricted and enabled military, political, and economic policymaking of both Vietnamese and American elites. By looking at the ideological and theoretical discrepancies and disputes between such noted Cold War figures as Wolf Ladejinsky, Wesley Fischel, Walt Rostow, and Roger Hilsman, Miller convincingly establishes that American approaches to development were far from monolithic in their application to the problems of an independent South Vietnam. From the point of view of the Diem regime, in fact, there appeared to be an excess of contesting expertise flowing from the United States, a torrent of professionalized counterinsurgent knowledge eagerly awaiting to be concretely applied to Vietnamese soil and bodies. In response, Diem and his brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu, appropriated and manipulated different types of technocratic knowledge and pacification techniques in order to advance their own agendas. Miller highlights the tensions and frustrations of these collaborations not only to reveal the agency of the Diem regime but also to expose just how such concepts as modernity, nation-state, and democracy could be conceived in radically different ways.

The best example of this is the United Statesâ and Diem regimeâs shared obsession over the vast peasant population surrounding Saigon. The peasantry of Southern Vietnam was often a source of both optimism and dread. For the modernizing optimist, Vietnamese peasants provided a laboratory for the possibilities of a formerly colonized people to transform into an industrial and democratic society. Yet peasants also held the terrifying capacity to not only hide National Liberation Front (NLF) membersâCommunist guerillas who appeared to circulate effortlessly through agrarian communities. But peasants also held the potential to transform into revolutionaries themselves. The development of opposing strategic solutions for the peasantry reveal for Miller the increasingly incompatible future visions of a postcolonial Vietnam. While Americans who were eager for short-term results pushed for land redistribution, the Ngo brothers implemented relocation and resettlement policies, which they hoped would radically unsettle social bonds and allegiances and eventually reorganize populations in such a way as to necessitate state mediation in all aspects of life.

In conclusion, *Misalliance* convincingly uses Diemâs political biography as a lens to explore the well-known events that occurred in South Vietnam between 1954 and 1963âthe struggle over power with Bao Dai and General Hinh in 1954, the battles with religious cults and warlords in 1955, the failed military coup in 1960, and the Buddhist protest crisis in 1963. Each of these instances of political intrigue, covert alliances, and violent conflicts are meticulously narrated by Miller. *Misalliance* succeeds in its primary objective: foregrounding the agency of Vietnamese political actors in the making and unmaking of the Diem regime. At the same time, Miller should be commended for bringing in Vietnamese agency by demonstrating how âblameâ should âfall on the heads of American and Vietnamese leaders alike,â acknowledging agency should not mean forgetting the highly asymmetrical relationship that existed between Saigon and Washington (p. 10). That hierarchy severely constrained the field of possibility for Vietnamese actions and actors, perhaps more than Miller admits. Notwithstanding this limitation, *Misalliance* is a welcome contribution to not only the study of US foreign relations and Vietnam studies but also broader historical studies of modernization and decolonization.