



Exhibiting Signs of Resistance: South Vietnam's Struggle for Legitimacy, 1954–1960*

In late 1960, the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC, opened “The Art and Archeology of Viet Nam,” an exhibit featuring an impressive collection of Vietnamese relics and contemporary handicrafts. Patrons entering the exhibit were greeted by the soft sounds of Vietnamese music and the scent of burning incense. The centerpiece of the room was a large and intricately carved “National Ancestral Altar” dedicated to Vietnam’s “rulers, ministers, generals, scholars, and heroes.”¹ The altar stood next to a map of Vietnam and under a woven banner reading “Việt Nam Trùng Tôn” (“Vietnam Eternal”). According to one visitor, the effect was so powerful that he was “transported half way around the world in the fraction of a second.”² South Vietnamese officials would have been pleased with this enthusiastic response. They had, in the words of one Vietnamese official, helped to create the exhibit in order to engage in “political and cultural propaganda for the government and people of Vietnam.”³

At first glance, the exhibit at the Smithsonian may appear to be an episode of modest historical importance. Upon closer examination, however, it becomes clear that it captured many of the salient features of America’s relationship with South Vietnam during the critical period leading up to the Vietnam War.⁴ The

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1. *Art and Archeology of Viet Nam: Asian Crossroads of Cultures* (Washington, 1961), 26.

2. James Pomeroy Hendrick to Thomas Beggs, November 2, 1960, box 46, folder: Viet Nam, 1960–1961, Correspondence and Memoranda, Smithsonian Institution Archives, Record Unit 312, National Collection of Fine Arts, Office of the Director, Records, 1912–1965 (hereafter Smithsonian, RU 312).

3. Du Phuoc Long to Tran Van Chuong, November 8, 1956, golder 17397: Hồ sơ v/v tổ chức triển lãm Văn hóa VN tại Mỹ quốc năm 1957–1961 [File about establishing a Vietnamese cultural exhibit in the United States, 1957–1961.], Phủ Tổng Thống Đệ Nhất Cộng Hòa [Papers of the President’s Office of the First Republic], Trung tâm Lưu trữ Quốc gia II [National Archive Center II], Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam (hereafter PTTĐICH NAI).

4. The use of the term “South Vietnam” is convenient, if imprecise, shorthand. After the Geneva Convention, Bao Dai appointed Diem Prime Minister of the State of Vietnam. The State of Vietnam declared independence from France on January 1, 1955. In October 1955,

planning for the exhibit inched forward in fits and starts as South Vietnam's political fortunes changed: the proposal was put on hold when Ngo Dinh Diem's regime nearly collapsed in 1955; it moved ahead when he established himself as South Vietnam's "miracle man" just a year or two later. The exhibit also exemplified the relationship between the United States and South Vietnam, one marked by both collaboration and tension. While the two countries shared the goal of a stable, non-Communist South Vietnamese government, they sometimes differed on the best means to attain this end. Similarly, while they agreed on the usefulness of the Smithsonian exhibit, they occasionally disagreed over its content, such as the inclusion of explicit political propaganda in the display.

The cultural narrative of the exhibit attempted to reinforce Diem's claims that his government, and the Republic of Vietnam more broadly, were legitimate entities. As such, it represented part of Diem's ongoing attempt to strengthen his regime and undermine the claims of his rivals, especially those in North Vietnam. Diem used the exhibit to appropriate the historical narrative of Vietnam's long resistance to outside invaders—a narrative that Vietnamese communists had successfully used to win support for the Viet Minh. Diem hoped to demonstrate that this narrative, with its accounts of heroic opposition to Chinese control, could be reshaped to legitimize the Republic of Vietnam as a bulwark against Chinese communism. Yet, in the end, the exhibit did more to demonstrate Diem's shortcomings. By opening at a time when Diem's domestic support was waning, it only highlighted his inability to convince both Americans and Vietnamese alike that he was the "third force" leader who would unite Vietnam under a government that was neither colonialist nor communist. Diem's failings were brought into sharp focus when he barely survived a coup attempt in November 1960—just two weeks after the exhibit opened.

DIEM'S ASCENT AND DECLINE

The Smithsonian exhibition developed against the tumultuous background of Vietnamese politics in the mid-1950s. At the end of 1954, South Vietnam's future appeared tenuous at best. The Geneva Agreement had left Vietnam divided at the seventeenth parallel. Bao Dai, the unpopular playboy tarnished by his past cooperation with France and Japan, was the uninspiring president of the area below the seventeenth parallel. Months earlier, Ngo Dinh Diem had returned to the country to serve as Prime Minister after years of exile, but his viability as a political leader was uncertain. Diem's government had to address a legion of problems created by years of war and the rapid departure of French forces. The population of South Vietnam was divided among various political organizations and religious sects, none of which demonstrated an ability to

Diem announced the creation of the Republic of Vietnam (RVN). I use the term "South Vietnam" as a blanket term to describe these administrative units.

foster consensus. It was not clear that either Bao Dai or Ngo Dinh Diem could generate support among these disparate groups, let alone defeat Ho Chi Minh in the national elections scheduled for 1956.

Diem, however, surprised the skeptics by methodically dispatching his political rivals and strengthening his hold on power. In 1955, he began a campaign against South Vietnam's politico-religious sects, the Cao Dai, Hoa Hao, and Binh Xuyen.⁵ By the end of the year the government had defeated or co-opted its most powerful rivals. Historians have pointed to American support in the form of CIA payoffs as the main factor in Diem's victory.⁶ The South Vietnamese government interpreted its success differently, attributing it in part to an active campaign to "win the hearts" (*tranh thủ nhân tâm*) of the population in the areas where the sects had been popular. The government used mobile propaganda units to distribute books, pamphlets, and other printed materials in the areas south and west of Saigon that had been the center of Cao Dai and Hoa Hao strength. These propaganda activities, according to one report, continued "day and night, in every remote village and hamlet" until "the hearts of the people turned toward the government."⁷ Such activities foreshadowed Diem's emerging efforts to employ informational activities in defense of his government.

Diem's successful campaign against the sects was an important victory for his young regime, and over the next two years he took steps to consolidate his authority. In late 1955, Diem manufactured an overwhelming—and overwhelmingly suspicious—victory in a national referendum against Bao Dai. A year later he announced the promulgation of a South Vietnamese constitution. In May 1957, Diem made a triumphant visit to the United States and *Life* magazine anointed him a "miracle man" for his ability to withstand internal and external pressures and solidify his political power.⁸

Officials at the Smithsonian had first considered an exhibit of Vietnamese art in 1954. During Diem's early struggles, they put these plans on hold. An American official in Saigon was enthusiastic about the proposal, but lamented that it was "difficult to concentrate on the things one should like with a city burning down around you." Unfortunately, he added, "wars out here are like

5. See Jessica Chapman, "Debating the Will of Heaven: South Vietnamese Politics and Nationalism in International Perspective, 1953–1956" (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Santa Barbara, 2006), 180–92.

6. Seth Jacobs, *America's Miracle Man in Vietnam: Ngo Dinh Diem, Religion, Race, and U.S. Intervention in Southeast Asia* (Durham, NC, 2004), 206–10; George McT. Kahin, *Intervention: How America Became Involved in Vietnam* (New York, 1986), 81–84; Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (New York, 1983), 222–23.

7. "Thành tích của Bộ Công dân vụ, Nha Thông tin, Việt Tân Xã, phần thứ hai" [Accomplishments of the Ministry of Civil Affairs, Office of Information, and Vietnam Press, Part 2], folder 444: Hồ sơ thành tích hoạt động 7 năm của Chính Phủ (1954–1961) [File of seven years of government accomplishments (1954–1961)], PTTĐỊCH NAIL.

8. Jacobs, *America's Miracle Man in Vietnam*, 221.

spring in New England [—] always just around the corner.”⁹ By 1957, however, Diem had put these concerns to rest, at least temporarily. Around the time of Diem’s visit to the United States, Swedish archeologist Olov Janse, who had first proposed the exhibit, met with Thomas Beggs of the Smithsonian and Du Phuoc Long from the Vietnamese embassy in Washington. They noted that Diem’s visit to the United States had “stimulate[d] government interest” in the exhibit and concluded that “the stabilization of political affairs in Viet Nam” meant that the exhibit could safely move forward.¹⁰

REDEFINING DIEM’S ROLE IN U.S.-SOUTH VIETNAMESE RELATIONS

In the 1950s and 1960s, the United States implemented a host of political, economic, and military programs in a futile attempt to establish South Vietnam as a credible national entity. The United States offered massive aid to the South Vietnamese armed forces and sent American military advisers to train South Vietnamese soldiers. American agencies administered economic aid programs and advised President Ngo Dinh Diem on land reform. Michigan State University established a school of public administration in Saigon and helped train the domestic police force. As numerous valuable accounts have demonstrated, the United States played an active role in conceiving of, funding, and implementing many of these activities.¹¹

Recent scholarship, aided by the release of documents from Vietnamese archives, expands on earlier accounts by showing the degree to which South Vietnamese actors were involved in the process of nation-building. As Philip Catton has demonstrated, Ngo Dinh Diem and his brother Ngo Dinh Nhu were instrumental in planning and implementing the Strategic Hamlet Program and other land reforms.¹² Jessica Chapman convincingly argues that it was Ngo Dinh Diem himself, not Edward Lansdale or other CIA agents, who led the 1955

9. Thomas P. Mack to Thomas Beggs, May 11, 1955, box 46, folder: Viet Nam, General Correspondence, 1954–1959, Smithsonian, RU 312. See also Thomas Beggs to (Leonard?) Carmichael, May 2, 1957, box 46, folder: Viet Nam: General Correspondence, 1954–1959, Smithsonian, RU 312.

10. Thomas Beggs to Perry T. Rathbone, May 13, 1957, box 46, folder: Viet Nam, General Correspondence, 1954–1959, Smithsonian, RU 312.

11. Recent scholarship includes Jessica M. Chapman, “Staging Democracy: South Vietnam’s 1955 Referendum to Depose Bao Dai,” *Diplomatic History* 30, no. 4 (September, 2006): 671–703; John Ernst, *Forging a Fateful Alliance: Michigan State University and the Vietnam War* (East Lansing, MI, 1998); James T. Fisher, *Dr. America: The Lives of Thomas A. Dooley, 1937–1961* (Amherst, MA, 1997); Jacobs, *America’s Miracle Man in Vietnam, 1950–1963* (Lanham, MD, 2006); Edward Miller, “Vision, Power, and Agency: The Ascent of Ngô Đình Diệm, 1945–54,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 35, no. 3, (October 2004): 433–58; Joseph Morgan, *The Vietnam Lobby: The American Friends of Vietnam, 1955–1975* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1997); Mark Moyer, *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954–1965* (Cambridge, England, 2006); and Jonathan Nashel, *Edward Lansdale’s Cold War* (Amherst, MA, 2005).

12. Philip Catton, *Diem’s Final Failure: Prelude to America’s War in Vietnam* (Lawrence, KS, 2000).

campaign to discredit Bao Dai before the national referendum.¹³ Similarly, Edward Miller has mined materials in Vietnam and France to argue that Diem's vision for South Vietnam was less beholden to American patronage than previously believed.¹⁴ Other studies have explored the role of the South Vietnamese government in education reform and in creating and distributing propaganda materials.¹⁵ These important studies show that South Vietnamese figures had agency in nation-building, and not just as stubborn heel-draggers who stymied American efforts. The South Vietnamese, like their American counterparts, were initiators.¹⁶

In addition to demonstrating South Vietnamese agency, recent studies also illuminate Ngo Dinh Diem's unique vision for South Vietnam. Responding to accounts of Diem as hopelessly traditional, reactionary, and conservative, they provide ample evidence of Diem's modern sensibilities. To Chapman, Diem "navigated the country's transition from its traditional past and colonial administration to independence in the midst of an ongoing quest for modernization."¹⁷ Her description of the 1955 referendum to unseat Bao Dai shows Diem as the very model of a modern politician, using advertising techniques and the rhetoric of liberalism to attack his opponent. Similarly, Catton describes Diem as "forward-looking, concerned with change, and determined to strengthen the country."¹⁸ These attitudes informed the Strategic Hamlet Program, which was created as a means to promote social change, political revolution, and economic development. In describing Diem's rise to power in the 1940s and 1950s, Edward Miller paints Diem as a leader with "a distinctive vision of how Vietnam could become a modern nation."¹⁹

The story of the Smithsonian exhibit builds on these important studies, reinforcing their characterizations of Diem while also rounding out the picture. The exhibit at the Smithsonian was the culmination of a concerted effort on the part of a variety of American and South Vietnamese individuals, governmental agencies, and private organizations. The U.S. Information Agency and the U.S.

13. Chapman, "Staging Democracy."

14. Miller, "Vision, Power, and Agency," and Edward Miller, "Grand Designs: Vision, Power and Nation-Building in America's Alliance with Ngo Dinh Diem, 1954-1960" (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 2004).

15. Vasavakul Thaveeporn, "Schools and Politics in South and North Viet Nam: A Comparative Study of State Apparatus, State Policy, and State Power (1945-1965)" (Ph.D. diss., Cornell University, 1994); Matthew B. Masur, "Hearts and Minds: Cultural Nation-Building in South Vietnam, 1954-1963" (Ph.D. diss., Ohio State University, 2004).

16. This debate is still lively. In two recent books Seth Jacobs has argued that South Vietnam was clearly the junior partner in the U.S.-Vietnamese relationship. Edward Miller took issue with this conclusion in an H-DIPLO review of Jacobs' work, sparking a series of posts debating these issues. See Jacobs, *America's Miracle Man in Vietnam* and Edward Miller, Review of *America's Miracle Man in Vietnam* (<http://www.h-net.org/%7Ediplo/roundtables/PDF/AmericasMiracleMan-Miller.pdf> H-DIPLO roundtable).

17. Chapman, "Staging Democracy," 680.

18. Catton, *Diem's Final Failure*, 36.

19. Miller, "Vision, Power, and Agency," 435.

Navy were responsible for packing the objects in Saigon and shipping them to San Francisco. In the United States, the Smithsonian Institution and the American Friends of Vietnam (AFV), a group of elite Americans who supported the non-Communist southern government after 1954, worked together to organize and publicize the exhibit. The Smithsonian Institution published a museum guide that was available for purchase at the museum. The AFV included the guide in the catalog of publications that it distributed to members of the organization and other interested parties. The AFV also covered the expenses of transporting the museum pieces from San Francisco to Washington.²⁰

The Smithsonian exhibit reinforces many of Catton's, Miller's, and Chapman's conclusions about Diem. The exhibit provides another example of the uneasy collaboration that marked Diem's relationship with American officials. As with the story of the 1955 referendum, it shows Diem's willingness to embrace modern methods of persuasion to accomplish his political goals. The exhibit also supports Catton's claim that Diem can best be seen as a "conservative modernizer."²¹ Miller correctly notes that Diem's "vision was not a reactionary plan to restore traditional values and institutions"; nevertheless, Diem relied on narratives of Vietnamese history and tradition to bolster his political ambitions.²²

The Smithsonian exhibit also adds to these accounts by showing Diem's willingness to take his ideological campaign abroad. Some American officials initially conceived of the exhibit as a gesture to show the Vietnamese people that they had steadfast allies in the United States. According to an official at the United States Operations Mission in Saigon, it would "certainly serve as an indication of our sincerity" in efforts to "win [the] friendship and trust of the Vietnamese people."²³ The South Vietnamese, however, had other ideas. For them, the exhibit was meant to send a message to Americans: it would show "the evolution of the Vietnamese people: their race, politics, economics, customs, and art."²⁴ Diem himself took more than a passing interest in the exhibit. During the early planning stages, he signed off on South Vietnam's participation in the exhibit. When the exhibit neared its completion, Diem requested that he top the list of "honorary patrons" if President Dwight D. Eisenhower were also

20. Institution Requests Funds to Transport and Insure Vietnamese Art Exhibits, March–April 1960, Box 8, folder 42, Douglas Pike Collection: Other Manuscripts—American Friends of Vietnam, The Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University (hereafter TTU VA). For more on the connection between state and private actors in American propaganda activities, see Kenneth Osgood, *Total Cold War: Eisenhower's Secret Propaganda Battle at Home and Abroad* (Lawrence, KS, 2006).

21. Catton, *Diem's Final Failure*.

22. Miller, "Vision, Power, and Agency," 440.

23. Thomas P. Mack to Thomas Beggs, May 11, 1955, box 46, folder: Viet Nam, General Correspondence, 1954–1959, Smithsonian, RU 312.

24. Du Phuoc Long to Tran Van Chuong, November 8, 1956, folder 17397: Hồ sơ v/v tổ chức triển lãm Văn hóa VN tại Mỹ quốc năm 1957–1961 [File about establishing a Vietnamese cultural exhibit in the United States, 1957–1961.], PTTĐỊCH NAIL.

included on the American side. Although the Smithsonian originally planned on Vice President Richard Nixon being the highest-ranking American patron, they subsequently received permission from Eisenhower to list the two heads of state.²⁵

The Smithsonian exhibit was not South Vietnam's only attempt to shape American public opinion in the 1950s and 1960s. After 1954, the Republic of Vietnam submitted editorials to American newspapers, sent books and pamphlets to American libraries, and organized conferences and symposia in the United States. In implementing a public relations effort in the United States, the South Vietnamese government acknowledged that nation-building was not simply an internal issue. In the struggle for national legitimacy, the perceptions of people outside Vietnam could be almost as important as the attitudes of the Vietnamese themselves. The South Vietnamese government recognized that it needed to shape the ways in which Americans thought of South Vietnam. Vietnamese officials believed that a reservoir of good will would help keep American financial support flowing into South Vietnam.

Finally, Diem's overseas activities displayed not only ambition, but also a degree of flexibility and savvy. The Smithsonian exhibit was almost entirely devoid of implicit or explicit references to Personalism, the oftentimes cryptic political-religious philosophy that guided many of Diem's nation-building activities in South Vietnam. This omission was perceptive: Catton, Miller, and Chapman all note that the unpopularity of Personalism was an important factor in Diem's political failures. But omitting Personalism from the exhibit was not enough to make it a success. The Smithsonian exhibit was much like Diem's presidency as a whole: it showed some degree of vision and agency but ultimately failed to accomplish its goals.

EXHIBITING RESISTANCE

As the Smithsonian exhibit illustrates, Diem understood that South Vietnam's challenge was to do more than simply create national political and economic institutions. A strong and vibrant culture was also an important characteristic of nationhood. Language, a literary tradition, religion, cuisine, mythology, a shared history, and the arts all contribute to the idea of a national entity. South Vietnamese propaganda materials presented Diem as the successor to Vietnam's heroic figures and his government as the modern equivalent of its historic dynasties. In public displays and in the educational curriculum, Diem suggested that his government, because of its loyalty to traditions and its willingness to fight outside aggression, had the proper claim to Vietnamese nationhood. The South Vietnamese government hoped these programs would create a sense of national pride and unity while encouraging self-sacrifice. Such

25. Thomas Beggs to (Leonard?) Carmichael, December 2, 1959, box 46, folder: Viet Nam: General Correspondence, 1954-1959, Smithsonian, RU 312.

messages, with their thinly-veiled suggestion that South Vietnam was a natural force against Chinese aggression, could also be a powerful argument for continued support from the United States.

For Ngo Dinh Diem, nation-building encompassed a variety of initiatives. He wanted to establish the civil institutions of nationhood, including a functioning government, a strong and stable economy, and secure borders. But he also wanted South Vietnam to stand as the modern embodiment of Vietnamese civilization. This included explicit attempts to craft and disseminate a narrative of Vietnamese history that lent credibility to his political activities. It also included efforts to promote Personalism, an ideology that he considered intimately tied to national strength. In Diem's eyes, cultural development was a precondition for national strength. In his formulation, "intellectual and moral factors play a great part in our national recovery politically, economically, and socially."²⁶

Encouraged by its success after the sect crisis, the Republic of Vietnam expanded its programs aimed at forging a sense of national pride and cultural unity. The South Vietnamese government declared numerous national holidays, organized musical tours and performances, and built memorials to Vietnamese heroes, all in order to rally the citizenry around the idea that South Vietnam's legitimacy could be traced to millennia of historical progress. Diem also consciously associated his government and his family with Vietnam's past. The South Vietnamese Ministry of Information and Youth, run by one of Diem's closest allies, was responsible for circulating this material. It distributed pamphlets and books, produced and screened propaganda films, and administered libraries and "cultural houses" which served as propaganda hubs for the government.²⁷ The Republic of Vietnam buttressed these activities with other programs, such as education reform, library and university expansions, and historic preservation projects.²⁸

South Vietnam's cultural programs were not limited to a domestic audience. In 1955, South Vietnam signed a contract with Harold Oram and Associates, an American public relations firm, to manage Vietnam's propaganda efforts in the United States. By the time South Vietnam signed this contract, Harold Oram had already been active in promoting the Diem regime in the United States. Oram was one of the most influential members of the AFV. The Oram group's strategy was to use the AFV's existing reputation and efforts to influence a select group of "policy initiators and thought-molders" in the United States on behalf

26. *President Ngo Dinh Diem on Democracy (Addresses Relative to the Constitution)*, (Saigon, 1957), 33.

27. Nghị Định số 257-ND/BTT cải tổ Bộ Thông tin và Chiến tranh Tâm-lý, July 1 1955 [Decision to restructure the Ministry of Information and Youth], folder 657: Sắc lệnh, Nghị định của Tổng thống Việt Nam Cộng Hòa v/v cải tổ Bộ Thông tin và chiến tranh tâm lý năm 1955 [Decrees and governmental decisions of the President of the Republic of Vietnam regarding the reorganization of the Ministry of Information and Psychological Warfare, 1955], PTTĐỊCH NAIL.

28. For more on these activities, see Masur, "Hearts and Minds," 92-125.

of the Republic of Vietnam.²⁹ To promote the cause of South Vietnam in the United States, the Oram group and the AFV organized conferences, distributed political tracts, and wrote editorials for American newspapers and magazines.³⁰

Diem strongly believed in the need for overseas propaganda. In late 1956, he asked his cabinet ministers to compile information for pamphlets that would “introduce Vietnam to the people of friendly nations.”³¹ These pamphlets outlined Diem’s strong commitment to preserving and popularizing Vietnam’s cultural traditions. One publication juxtaposed Diem’s cultural nationalism with the North Vietnamese Communists who “disavowed the ancient national culture and know nothing outside the thought of the modern apostles of the communist credo.” The pamphlet lamented the loss of Vietnamese historical and cultural consciousness in Hanoi, where “the words of great Vietnamese poets have vanished from the public libraries, and the national heroes are unknown.”³²

Other propaganda materials described the superiority of Southern forms of Vietnamese culture, thereby suggesting that the Republic of Vietnam more accurately represented Vietnamese civilization than the regime in the North. One publication offered a long, detailed description of the history of *hát bội*, a type of traditional Vietnamese theater popular in the South. According to the pamphlet, *hát bội* was a complicated art form whose “real beauty [could] only be appreciated by a cultured audience.” After devoting eleven pages to a discussion of *hát bội*, the pamphlet included only four sentences on *hát chèo*, a “simplified” form of theater “much in favor in North Vietnam.” *Hát chèo*, the essay noted flatly, was characterized primarily by “grotesque songs and riddles.”³³

The Smithsonian exhibit represented a continuation and expansion of these propaganda activities. An official at the Vietnamese embassy in Washington believed that bringing these messages to an American audience could lead Americans to admire Vietnamese culture and thus put pressure on Congress and the president to provide greater “material and spiritual support” for Diem’s government.³⁴ A few months later, Nguyen Duong Don, South Vietnam’s secretary of state for national education, sent a letter to Diem outlining the

29. Report on Oram activities, no date (circa 1959–1960), 1, 8, folder 8982: Tài liệu của Bộ, Truờng PTT v/v thiết lập và hoạt động của các Tòa đại diện VN ở ngoại quốc năm 1960 [Documents of the secretary of state at the presidency regarding the establishment and activities of Vietnamese representative offices in foreign countries, 1960], PTTĐỊCH NAIL.

30. See Morgan, *The Vietnam Lobby*, and Jacobs, *America’s Miracle Man in Vietnam*.

31. Diem to Secretaries of State, September 21, 1956, folder 18760: Hồ sơ về hoạt động tin tuyên truyền ở ngoại quốc năm 1956–1959 [Folder about overseas propaganda activities, 1956–1959], PTTĐỊCH, NAIL.

32. *The Fight against the Subversive Communist Activities in South Vietnam* (Saigon, 1956), 1, 14, 16.

33. *The Vietnamese Theatre* (Saigon, n.d.), 14, 19.

34. Vietnamese Embassy to Ministry of National Education, November 26, 1956, folder 17397: Hồ sơ v/v tổ chức triển lãm Văn hóa VN tại Mỹ quốc năm 1957–1961 [File about establishing a Vietnamese cultural exhibit in the United States, 1957–1961], PTTĐỊCH NAIL.

proposal to exhibit Vietnamese artifacts in the United States. Don described the exhibit as “a favorable opportunity to propagandize in the areas of politics, culture, and economics.” After suggesting certain types of artifacts that would be included in the exhibit, he noted that the materials “would be chosen so that the American public would have a clear idea of the richness of Vietnamese culture and the way of life in the Republic of Vietnam.”³⁵ Diem agreed, and in April 1957 he personally approved plans for the exhibit.³⁶

Although the exhibit was tentatively scheduled to open in late 1957 or early 1958, delays forced the South Vietnamese Ministry of Education to postpone the exhibit until 1960.³⁷ South Vietnamese officials, in consultation with the Smithsonian, decided to schedule the opening for October 26, South Vietnam’s “National Day.” The exhibit, as several Vietnamese officials had already stated, was an opportunity to introduce the American public to political, economic, and social conditions in South Vietnam. October 26 marked the establishment of an independent republic and Diem’s victory in the referendum to depose Bao Dai (in 1955), as well as the promulgation of the South Vietnamese Constitution (1956). It also symbolized the accomplishments of the Republic of Vietnam in its five years of existence. An autumn 1960 opening was preferable for another reason as well. According to Tran Huu The, the South Vietnamese education secretary, it was especially important to launch a public relations campaign around the time of the American presidential election. Tran Huu The likely believed that the exhibit could win public support for Vietnam at a time when the candidates were most concerned with winning the White House. Rather than try to influence American politicians directly, South Vietnam hoped to create a wave of public support in the United States that American officials would have to recognize.³⁸

“Art and Archeology of Viet Nam” opened to the public on October 26, 1960. Many of the pieces in the exhibit showcased the aesthetic achievements of the Vietnamese people. The exhibit also represented Vietnamese civilization as both dynamic and rooted in tradition. It constructed an historical narrative of a

35. Nguyen Duong Don to Ngo Dinh Diem, March 8, 1957, folder 17397: Hồ sơ v/v tổ chức triển lãm Văn hóa VN tại Mỹ quốc năm 1957–1961 [File about establishing a Vietnamese cultural exhibit in the United States, 1957–1961], PTTĐICH NAI.

36. Tran Huu The to Ngo Dinh Diem, March 16, 1959, folder 17397: Hồ sơ v/v tổ chức triển lãm Văn hóa VN tại Mỹ quốc năm 1957–1961 [File about establishing a Vietnamese cultural exhibit in the United States, 1957–1961], PTTĐICH NAI.

37. It is not clear what delayed the exhibit. In late 1958 and early 1959, Olov Janse met with South Vietnamese officials in Saigon. He was frustrated by the slow pace of planning for the exhibit, a complaint that he passed along to Thomas Beggs in April 1959. Janse’s letter does not specify the reason for the delays: it appears to have been nothing more than the slow movement of the South Vietnamese bureaucracy. See Olov Janse to Thomas Beggs, no date. Box 46, Folder: Viet Nam: General Correspondence, 1954–1959. Smithsonian, RU 312.

38. Tran Huu The to Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, April 2, 1960, folder 17397: Hồ sơ v/v tổ chức triển lãm Văn hóa VN tại Mỹ quốc năm 1957–1961 [File about establishing a Vietnamese cultural exhibit in the United States, 1957–1961], PTTĐICH NAI.

people fiercely protective of their independence, as evidenced by their millennia of resistance to China. But it also suggested a degree of cultural flexibility—a Vietnamese willingness to adopt the best characteristics of other cultures. In the words of one South Vietnamese official, the exhibit was “a rare opportunity for America and the world to better understand conditions in Vietnam.” The “primary aim,” he continued, “was for the American people to understand the abundance and richness of the culture of Vietnam and the life of the Vietnamese people from the past to the present.”³⁹

A museum exhibit was an ideal venue for presenting South Vietnam’s political and cultural messages to an American audience. Patrons of the arts are, in some ways, a natural target for propaganda—they are involved, engaged, generally well-educated, and affluent. Furthermore, other propaganda activities might reach a wider audience, but few matched the Smithsonian’s reputation for authoritativeness and objectivity. In the words of art historian Carol Duncan, “[t]o control a museum means precisely to control the representation of a community and its highest values and truths.” The putatively “objective” displays at a museum are in reality spaces that construct a story or a contingent truth. Most museums, as Duncan noted, “equip visitors with maps to guide them through the universe they construct.”⁴⁰

In planning “The Art and Archeology of Viet Nam,” organizers paid close attention to the cultural narrative that they were constructing. In the early planning stages, Beggs suggested that the exhibit would win admiration for Vietnamese culture by displaying the “fine draftsmanship” of the Vietnamese people and the “enchanting quality” of Vietnamese art and handicrafts.⁴¹ Silk scarves, brocaded tunics, and ornate theatrical costumes attested to Vietnamese skills in weaving and embroidery. The exhibit also included intricately carved mother-of-pearl, tortoise shell, buffalo horn, marble, and ivory, as well as examples of engraving and metalwork.⁴² In the eyes of South Vietnamese officials, this cultural vitality carried a political message. According to one propaganda pamphlet, “ancient crafts and honored traditions . . . have always been a guarantee of the nation’s strength and prosperity.”⁴³

A small collection of contemporary artwork—several oil paintings, watercolors on silk, and laquerware—complemented the handicrafts. The modern art

39. Tran, Huu The to Ngo Dinh Diem, March 16, 1959, folder 17397: Hồ sơ v/v tổ chức triển lãm Văn hóa VN tại Mỹ quốc năm 1957–1961 [File about establishing a Vietnamese cultural exhibit in the United States, 1957–1961], PTTĐỊCH NẠI.

40. Carol Duncan, *The Aesthetics of Power: Essays in Critical Art History* (Cambridge, England, 1993), 8.

41. Thomas Beggs to Tran Van Chuong, November 19, 1956, folder 17397: Hồ sơ v/v tổ chức triển lãm Văn hóa VN tại Mỹ quốc năm 1957–1961 [File about establishing a Vietnamese cultural exhibit in the United States, 1957–1961], PTTĐỊCH NẠI.

42. Invoice list, “Viet Nam Art and Archeology,” box 46, folder: The Art and Archeology of Vietnam, October 1960, Smithsonian, RU 312.

43. *The Origins of Certain Aspects of Culture and Traditional Crafts in Vietnam* (Saigon, n.d.), 18.

showed that, although Vietnamese culture was rooted in tradition, it was also vibrant, dynamic, and evolving. This vitality was perhaps most evident through the inclusion of “Fair,” an oil painting by renowned Vietnamese artist and architect Ngo Viet Thu. The painting shows a cityscape complete with skyscrapers and a Ferris wheel. The subject matter and Thu’s bold and lively strokes were exciting, modern, and cosmopolitan. As with the handicrafts, the aesthetics of the paintings were intended to convey a political message. The American official who recommended including modern art pieces attributed the “touch of daring” in modern Vietnamese art to a people who have “only lately . . . commenced to feel the flush of freedom” after a century of subjugation.⁴⁴

One of the most impressive artifacts in the Smithsonian exhibit was the Buddha of Dong Duong, a three-and-a-half-foot tall bronze statue from Funan, an ancient settlement in the Mekong Delta. The statue was noteworthy for its aesthetic value—one newspaper article described the piece as “magnificent,” calling special attention to the “small and delicately formed” facial features.⁴⁵ Of greater relevance for South Vietnamese officials involved in organizing the exhibit was its presence as a powerful symbol of the duration of Vietnamese civilization. The piece, dating from about 300 C.E., was one of the oldest artifacts in the exhibit. For Americans accustomed to thinking of South Vietnam as a new nation that had only existed for half a decade, the statue was material evidence of a national genealogy that could be traced back for centuries.

If the Buddha of Dong Duong was too indirect a reference to Vietnam’s history, the published guide to the exhibit laid out the theme more explicitly. Tran Van Chuong, South Vietnam’s ambassador to the United States, wrote in the guide that the artifacts illustrated “the originality of the Vietnamese culture which appeared thousands of years ago.”⁴⁶ The guide declared, moreover, that Vietnam’s political history began in 2789 B.C.E. with the establishment of the Hong Bang Dynasty and the reign of the Hung Kings. Chuong failed to note that the Hung Kings were mythic figures and that the Hong Bang Dynasty predates Vietnam’s recorded history. Nevertheless, highlighting the ancient roots of a Vietnamese polity clearly served the nation-building needs of the Republic of Vietnam by challenging the notion that South Vietnam was a young and therefore fabricated country. Even if the current regime had only been in existence for five years, it was heir to 4,500 years of civilization. Tracing Vietnamese history to 2789 B.C.E. showed that Vietnamese society existed and indeed flourished for thousands of years before the Chinese occupation. In other

44. Thomas P. Mack to Thomas Beggs, May 11, 1955, box 46, folder: Viet Nam, General Correspondence, 1954–1959, Smithsonian, RU 312.

45. Newspaper clipping (St. Louis Post-Dispatch?), n.d. (Summer 1961), box 46, folder: Viet Nam: Museums (1 of 2), Smithsonian, RU 312.

46. *Art and Archeology of Viet Nam*, 3.

words, Vietnamese independence was natural; subsequent Chinese rule was simply an aberration.⁴⁷

The exhibit guide described resistance to Chinese rule as a fundamental characteristic of Vietnamese history. After Vietnam “fell under Chinese domination” in 111 B.C.E., Vietnamese “national leaders . . . struggled against Chinese overlords” for the next thousand years. In 939 C.E., Vietnam finally achieved liberation from China but for several centuries fought renewed Chinese encroachments. This period was characterized by the emergence of national heroes who fought the Chinese. The Tran family, for example, “earned national fame by thrice repelling wild Mongol invaders,” while Le Loi ended a short period of cultural domination by the Ming Dynasty.⁴⁸

This narrative was typical of South Vietnamese propaganda at the time. An overview of Vietnamese culture and history, published in cooperation with the South Vietnamese government, noted that any discussion of Vietnamese history had to begin by considering “the presence of China to the North, a huge mass of land and men, hanging over [Vietnam] as an eternal threat.” It described Vietnam as an “ancient civilization” with a “long and often glorious history” characterized by “the Vietnamese people’s struggle throughout the centuries to achieve their independence.” During periods of Chinese rule, according to this depiction, the “wrongs done to the principles of Justice and Charity were so profound that the normal movement of the universe seemed in suspension.” Fortunately, numerous Vietnamese heroes resisted Chinese control, eventually “put[ting] an end to foreign domination.”⁴⁹

The historical account at the Smithsonian exhibit did not mention French colonialism. In this respect, South Vietnam’s historical narrative differed notably from that of the Vietnamese communists, who used similar themes of resistance to attack French rule. As Patricia Pelley has argued, communist Vietnamese historians after 1945 attempted to counter the prevailing accounts of Vietnamese history produced during the colonial period. In this way, the process of writing history became a means of declaring and normalizing Vietnamese independence. Communist historians contradicted many of the themes that had dominated French historical scholarship on Vietnamese history and culture. This “postcolonial history” emphasized the brutality and violence of colonialism, in stark contrast to French depictions of the *mission civilisatrice*. Postcolonial scholars also fought the view, promoted by French historians, that Vietnam was a “smaller, less brilliant version of China.” In the 1950s and 1960s, they enshrined resistance “as the very principle” of Vietnamese history. This

47. Communist historians during this period also dated Vietnam’s history to the Hong Bang, for some of the same reasons. See Patricia Pelley, *Postcolonial Vietnam: New Histories of the National Past* (Durham, NC, 2002), 65–66.

48. *Art and Archeology of Viet Nam*, 13.

49. Thai Van Kiem, *Vietnam, Past and Present* (Commercial Transworld Editions, 1957), 432, 18, unnumbered.

narrative, according to Pelley, “undoubtedly helped to mobilize support for the war” against France, the United States, and South Vietnam.⁵⁰

The resistance narrative, employed so effectively by postcolonial scholars, was arguably even more suited to South Vietnam during the Diem years. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, Vietnam again faced the threat of foreign domination. Vietnamese Communists ruled the northern half of the country and were attempting to conquer “Free Vietnam” below the seventeenth parallel. It was easy to see Communist control of North Vietnam as a continuation of centuries of Chinese imperial designs in Vietnam, especially because the People’s Republic of China provided material support for North Vietnam. If resistance to China was indeed an essential part of Vietnamese history, then South Vietnam was the legitimate Vietnamese nation, at least in historic terms. The North Vietnamese, by contrast, were betraying Vietnam’s past by collaborating with the Chinese.

South Vietnamese propaganda in the United States often raised the issue of Vietnamese cultural independence from China, which paralleled Vietnam’s tradition of resistance to Chinese political control. Several propaganda pamphlets conceded the historical connections between Vietnamese and Chinese culture. They emphasized, however, that contemporary Vietnamese culture was distinct from that of China. Millennia of evolution, combined with a tradition of adopting foreign elements, had created cultural forms unique to Vietnam. Vietnamese theater, for example, had Chinese roots, but, as one propaganda pamphlet explained, “[a]fter a period of assimilation, there was such a rapid evolution that all Chinese elements disappeared and the Vietnamese theatre no longer bore any resemblance to its Chinese counterpart.”⁵¹ Similarly, although Tet was of Chinese origin, the festival developed over time in Vietnam to the point that in the modern world it showed “only a remote resemblance to the Chinese festival.”⁵² South Vietnamese propaganda also emphasized the superiority of Vietnamese cultural forms. One essay characterized the “dissonance” of Chinese music, noting that the “shrill high-pitched sounds which are the hallmark of the Chinese theater have never been appreciated by the Vietnamese music-lovers.” The Vietnamese people, with their historic dedication to music, “notably improved the Chinese instruments, casting aside those which had only been built to create the dissonances so little relished by music-lovers.”⁵³ Some of these propaganda publications were available for perusal at the Smithsonian exhibit.

The organization of the exhibit acknowledged the influence of Indian and Chinese traditions on Vietnamese culture, but it also downplayed these foreign influences in order to show the “ancient, deeply rooted, [and] indigenous

50. Pelley, *Postcolonial Vietnam: New Histories of the National Past*, 7 and Patrica Pelley, “History of Resistance and Resistance to History,” in Keith Taylor and John K. Whitmore, eds., *Essays into Vietnamese Pasts* (Ithaca, NY, 1995).

51. *The Vietnamese Theatre*, 4.

52. *Vietnamese Customs and Legends Related to Têt* (Saigon, n.d.), 5.

53. *The Vietnamese Music* (Saigon, n.d.), 6–7.

culture” of Vietnam.⁵⁴ Numerous pieces illustrated the importance of “old cultural traits.” Some of the design elements of contemporary handicrafts could be traced to the Cham, a civilization that predated Vietnamese control over what is now southern and central Vietnam. The exhibit also included “tribal costumes” and model dwellings of Vietnam’s ethnic minorities, who were the “survivors and descendants of the earlier [i.e., non-Chinese] civilizations.” Vietnamese musical instruments, which were displayed prominently in the exhibit, were products of a “local culture” and distinct from instruments in China. In fact, the exhibit guide noted, Vietnamese music shared elements with Greek and Arabic music. Vietnamese music and theater, according to the exhibit guide, might help in “ultimately settling the question of Vietnamese cultural progenitorship.”⁵⁵ In this description, it was clear that China contributed to Vietnam’s cultural evolution, but it was not the only, nor perhaps even the most important, cultural influence.

Some of the most intriguing objects in the exhibit were Greco-Roman coins and cameos that had been discovered in southern Vietnam. These pieces reinforced the narrative of Vietnamese culture being the product of indigenous roots and outside contacts. This unique amalgamation proved, according to the exhibit guide, that Vietnamese culture “is not to be regarded primarily as sub-Chinese in nature.”⁵⁶ The *Times of Vietnam* went even further in its assessment, stating that “most of the archaeological items indicate that, far from inheriting its culture from the Chinese, Vietnamese art happens to have more ties with the Greco-Roman empire and the Christian culture of Asia Minor.”⁵⁷

After leaving Washington, the exhibit traveled to a dozen other American cities. AFV Executive Secretary Louis Andreatta was optimistic that the New York showing would make “a definite contribution to American-Vietnamese understanding.”⁵⁸ Officials at the University of Pennsylvania, which hosted the exhibit in the spring of 1961, believed that the exhibit was appealing to students and professors interested in Asian art and culture, but it also provided “a great deal of pleasure for the art public of the greater Philadelphia area.”⁵⁹ Clevelanders, similarly, “expressed very real interest” in the display.⁶⁰ In Baltimore, “the exhibition was received favorably and with interest by our public,

54. *Art and Archeology of Viet Nam*, 9.

55. *Art and Archeology of Viet Nam*, 15.

56. *Art and Archeology of Viet Nam*, 9.

57. “An Eyeful of Vietnamese Art,” *Times of Vietnam* (n.d.), box 47, folder: Viet Nam Exhibit: Newspaper Clippings, Smithsonian, RU 312.

58. Show of Vietnamese Art, a definite contribution to American-Vietnamese Understanding, January 17, 1961, box 8, folder 43, Douglas Pike Collection: Other Manuscripts—American Friends of Vietnam, TTU VA.

59. David Crownover to Thomas Beggs, November 2, 1961, box 46, folder: Viet Nam, 1960–1961, Correspondence and Memoranda, Smithsonian, RU 312.

60. Constance Gill to Thomas Beggs, April 27, 1962, box 46, folder: Viet Nam, 1960–1961, Correspondence and Memoranda, Smithsonian, RU 312.

although it was felt that a certain proportion of the archaeological material appealed specifically only to rather sophisticated and informed visitors.”⁶¹

By some measures, then, the Smithsonian exhibit was a success. The exhibit reached a considerable audience in several cities around the United States and it gave Diem access to well-educated and culturally aware Americans.⁶² The *Washington Post* printed several articles on the exhibit in the months leading up to the opening in October 1960; local newspapers did the same as the exhibit traveled the country. These articles helped spread the exhibit’s message even to those who never attended. One mentioned that the artifacts were “evidence of the friendly political status of the East and West.”⁶³ Another noted that the exhibit made Southeast Asia “seem much like America,” in part because Vietnam “is a melting-pot land of different peoples and cultures . . . not just a Chinese sub-culture as [is] sometimes thought.”⁶⁴ While such responses were encouraging for South Vietnamese officials, they should not be overemphasized. As Warren Cohen has argued, “acceptance of another nation’s art does not necessarily precede or lead to understanding its culture.”⁶⁵ It is safe to say that it also does not necessarily lead to support for another nation’s political leaders.

Overt political propaganda at the exhibit also undermined South Vietnam’s goals. The power of an exhibit rests in part with its ability to imbue its narrative with the “status of objective knowledge.”⁶⁶ But what if the audience loses faith in the objectivity of the information? Besides the cultural and historic pieces, the exhibit included a large picture of Diem, along with several South Vietnamese propaganda tracts. After some visitors complained about the inclusion of political pamphlets in the exhibit, Louis Andreatta sent a letter to the Vietnamese embassy in Washington to “strongly urge that any literature available for distribution or examination at future showings be confined to that of a cultural nature.”⁶⁷

61. Denys P. Myers to Thomas Beggs, May 10, 1962, box 46, folder: Viet Nam, 1960–1961, Correspondence and Memoranda, Smithsonian, RU 312.

62. It is hard to gauge exactly how many people saw “Art and Archaeology of Viet Nam” in person. Museum statistics indicate the total number of visitors without determining how many saw the special exhibit and how many viewed the permanent collections. Museum totals during the run of “Art and Archaeology of Viet Nam” are as follows: Baltimore, over 10,000; Pennsylvania, about 26,000; St. Louis, 42,763; Cleveland, about 50,000. Box 46, folder: Viet Nam, 1960–1961, Correspondence and Memoranda, Smithsonian, RU 312.

63. Tony Gieske, “Exhibit Here to Show Old East-West Art.” *Washington Post*, July 14, 1960. Box 47, folder: Viet Nam Exhibit: Newspaper Clippings, Smithsonian, RU 312.

64. “Vietnamese Art to Go On Display.” *Washington Post*, October 25, 1960, B11. Box 47, folder: Viet Nam Exhibit: Newspaper Clippings, Smithsonian, RU 312.

65. Warren I. Cohen, *East Asian Art and American Culture: A Study in International Relations* (New York, 1992), 4.

66. Duncan, *Aesthetics of Power*, 8.

67. Show of Vietnamese Art, a definite contribution to American-Vietnamese Understanding, January 17, 1961, box 8, folder 43, Douglas Pike Collection: Other Manuscripts—American Friends of Vietnam, TTU VA.

An exhibit's narrative, no matter how carefully constructed, is continually interpreted and often "misread."⁶⁸ Visitors to a museum can be coaxed in a certain direction, but they also see the museum through their own unique perspective. In the case of "Art and Archeology of Vietnam," visitors tended to respond positively to materials Andreatta described as "of a cultural nature." Recall the remark from the visitor who was "transformed across the world in a fraction of a second." It is not clear, however, that audiences absorbed or embraced the more political messages that the exhibit organizers hoped to spread. A more specific conclusion—that Diem was the rightful leader of Vietnam of a legitimate nation deserving American support—was a much harder sell.

THE AFTERMATH

The failure of the Smithsonian exhibit was tied to the deterioration of support for Diem in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Preparations for the exhibit gained momentum in 1957–58, around the time that Diem enjoyed unrivaled popularity in the United States. When the exhibit finally opened in late 1960, the situation had changed dramatically. In the late 1950s, he faced increasing threats from rural insurgents. In 1959, American newspapers carried Albert Colegrove's exposé alleging South Vietnamese misuse of American economic aid. The reports were damning enough that Congress initiated an investigation into the charges. In 1960, some of Diem's domestic opponents issued the "Caravelle Statement" announcing their opposition to his autocratic policies and nepotism in the government.⁶⁹

By the time the exhibit opened in October 1960, Diem may have been weakened, but he still appeared to have a firm grip on power. Neither Diem nor other Vietnamese officials could have predicted that within weeks Diem would face the most serious threat to his rule since the dangerous spring of 1955. On November 11, while the exhibit ran in Washington, a group of military officers launched a coup attempt against Diem and Nhu. News of the coup ran on the front page of the *New York Times*, which reported the rebels' announcement that they had deposed the president.⁷⁰ By the following day it became clear that Diem had survived the coup attempt, but reports of his beleaguered position appeared regularly in the *Times* in the coming weeks. Just when Diem was hoping to draw attention to an art exhibit at the Smithsonian, papers were reporting instead on "repressive rule, nepotism, and corruption in the Diem regime."⁷¹

68. Duncan, *Aesthetics of Power*, 13.

69. For a more detailed discussion of Diem's declining popularity, see Jacobs, *America's Miracle Man in Vietnam* and Jacobs, *Cold War Mandarin*.

70. "Battle at Palace," *New York Times*, November 11, 1960; "Ngo's Firm Rule Irritated Many," *New York Times*, November 11, 1960; "Washington Hears of Ouster," *New York Times*, November 11, 1960.

71. "Failure of a Coup," *New York Times*, November 13, 1960. See also "Top Rebels Jailed in South Vietnam," *NY Times* November 13, 1960; "Diem Regime Opposed," *New York Times*, November 18, 1960.

The crisis of late 1960 ushered in a new phase in South Vietnamese propaganda activities as the government decided to launch a public relations offensive in the United States. Vietnamese officials feared that the coup attempt would lead Americans to question Diem's popular support and South Vietnam's ability to withstand communist subversion. This change in public opinion could cause the United States to withdraw its material support from South Vietnam. As a result, Diem stepped up propaganda activities in late 1960 and early 1961. As the situation grew more urgent, South Vietnam turned to more direct propaganda messages. Rather than simply encouraging general admiration for South Vietnamese culture and society, South Vietnamese officials decided to convince Americans that South Vietnam was instituting democratic reforms, and Diem was winning support from the citizenry.

Other factors pushed South Vietnam to change its informational strategy in the United States. South Vietnam's public relations campaign had successfully introduced many Americans to events in Vietnam. One consequence of this achievement, according to the Oram firm, was that South Vietnam's propaganda could no longer rely on a "simple anti-communist" message—it would also have to highlight specific achievements of the Diem regime.⁷² Materials "emphasizing the client's positive achievements in authoritative journals by respected writers . . . will maintain the degree of support achieved earlier."⁷³

Throughout the early months of 1961, South Vietnamese officials in Saigon, Ambassador Tran Van Chuong, and Gilbert Jonas, a member of the Oram firm, formulated a new, aggressive, and covert public relations campaign in the United States. In January 1961, Chuong wrote a letter to South Vietnamese Foreign Minister Vu Van Mau raising concerns about Vietnam's propaganda methods in the United States. Chuong stated that the Vietnamese embassy in the United States could serve as a clearinghouse for information about South Vietnam. Every day, he explained, professors, students, tourists, and businessmen wrote letters to the embassy requesting information on Vietnam. Journalists and writers sent manuscripts to the embassy for fact-checking. By answering these requests, the embassy could gradually gain influence over Americans' views of South Vietnam. If the embassy failed to answer these inquiries, or responded too slowly, people would look elsewhere for information on Vietnam. Chuong was presumably referring to the American press, which was printing more negative assessments of the situation in South Vietnam.⁷⁴

In early 1961, Diem announced a series of reforms in the hopes that they would translate to greater support in South Vietnam and simultaneously

72. Report on Oram activities, n.d. (circa 1959–1960), 5, folder 8982: Tài liệu của Bộ Trưởng PTT v/v thiết lập và hoạt động của các Tòa đại diện VN ở ngoại quốc năm 1960 [Documents of the secretary of state at the presidency regarding the establishment and activities of Vietnamese representative offices in foreign countries, 1960], PTTĐỊCH NẠI.

73. Ibid.

74. Tran Van Chuong to Vu Van Mau, January 15, 1961, folder 9211: Hồ sơ v/v quan hệ giữa Việt Nam với Mehico, Brazil, Mỹ năm 1961 [Files about relations between Vietnam and Mexico, Brazil, and the United States, 1961], PTTĐỊCH NẠI.

encourage Diem's backers in the United States. Jonas used Diem's 1961 reforms in his public relations activities after the November coup. In March he wrote to the editors of *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *Life* inquiring about their lack of coverage of Diem's February 14 announcement of reforms in South Vietnam. According to Jonas, space constraints precluded reporting on the reforms, but the magazines planned in-depth coverage to correspond with the April 9 elections in South Vietnam.⁷⁵

Chuong also suggested that South Vietnam could effectively manipulate American press reports on Vietnam by, as the occasions warranted, either facilitating or obstructing journalists' activities in Vietnam. In February 1961, Chuong met with Jonas to discuss American journalists' coverage of Diem. The problem, according to Jonas and Chuong, was that "virtually all the news dispatches emanating from Saigon" after the coup of November 1960 were "of a critical or negative nature." Jonas lamented that "[o]ur more understanding and informed friends" had not reported from Vietnam in at least a year, and sometimes two or three. The solution, Jonas and Chuong agreed, was to shape news coverage by arranging for these "competent and objective" journalists to return to Vietnam. By early 1961, the South Vietnamese embassy in the United States had arranged for a *Time-Life* correspondent to go to Vietnam to report on conditions there.⁷⁶

This new strategy was no more effective than the "soft sell" at the Smithsonian. South Vietnam's propaganda efforts ultimately failed to create an upsurge in American sympathy for Diem and his regime. In the final years of his presidency, propaganda emphasizing the democratic nature of his regime coincided with increasingly autocratic measures. Images of burning monks and stories of indiscriminate violence against peaceful protesters gave the lie to Diem's exaggerated claims. In spite of Diem's ongoing efforts to win the public relations battle, growing American disapproval combined with internal dissent and communist subversion to drain his political authority.

CONCLUSION

Scholars of the Diem period have downplayed South Vietnam's role in formulating and directing nation-building programs. Diem's position has been minimized for at least two reasons. First, most historians rely on American documents to tell the story of the Diem government; as a result, the actions of American actors are almost always predominant. Second, historians have often paid close attention to the areas of nation-building that are most closely related

75. Gilbert Jonas to Nguyen Phu Duc, March 13, 1961, folder 8982: Tài liệu của Bộ Trưởng PTT v/v thiết lập và hoạt động của các Tòa đại diện VN ở ngoại quốc năm 1960 [Documents of the secretary of state at the presidency regarding the establishment and activities of Vietnamese representative offices in foreign countries, 1960], PTTDICH NAIL.

76. Memo, Gilbert Jonas to Tran Van Chuong, February 7, 1961, folder 9211: Hồ sơ v/v quan hệ giữa Việt Nam với Mehico, Brazil, Mỹ năm 1961 [Files about relations between Vietnam and Mexico, Brazil, and the United States, 1961], PTTDICH NAIL.

to state power. It is not surprising, for example, that studies of economic aid to South Vietnam create the impression of the United States in a position of undisputed control over the Diem government. In these accounts, historians and journalists described Diem's policies as "inspired by Americans, planned by Americans and carried out with close American guidance."⁷⁷

To the great frustration of American officials, Diem's willingness to occupy a supporting role was greatly exaggerated. While Diem's regime could not match the United States in economic power or military strength, it usually found a way to accept American aid without being beholden to American advice. This was also the case when it came to formulating an ideology around which the state would be formed. South Vietnamese policies showed that Diem's government could determine, to some extent, the propaganda and cultural messages that were disseminated both in South Vietnam and in the United States.

The Smithsonian exhibit was more than just an effort to bring together a collection of antiquities and contemporary handicrafts based on their artistic merit. The American and South Vietnamese governments, along with nongovernmental groups and individuals, worked to ensure that the exhibit satisfied the political goal of lending authority to Ngo Dinh Diem and the recently established Republic of Vietnam. The nexus of the political and the cultural was captured in a passage from the exhibit guide:

The history of Viet Nam is replete with periods of subjugation followed by periods of the resurgence of its indigenous creative genius. The recent establishment of a republican form of government under President Ngo-Dinh-Diem again releases the creative urge of Vietnamese craftsmen and indicates the revitalization of traditional arts and the flowering of new forms of expression.⁷⁸

As late as 1962, the participants were repeating their claims about Vietnam's history and its relevance to the future of South Vietnam. In July 1962, Ambassador Frederick Nolting and Nguyen Quang Trinh, South Vietnam's secretary of state for national education, attended a ceremony marking the return of the exhibit artifacts to Vietnam. The archaeological pieces, Nolting stated,

testify to the genius of your land and your nation, and to 2,000 years of your history. They testify to a great culture which stands at the crossroad of three civilizations, exposed to the impact of powerful currents from many directions. The fact that Vietnam stands at such a crossroad has been, and still is, the cause of much suffering for your people. But it is also a source of your strength: the fountainhead from where your admirable culture has emerged with its particular brand of genius.⁷⁹

77. Denis Warner, *The Last Confucian* (New York, 1963), 79.

78. *Art and Archeology of Viet Nam*, 14.

79. Remarks of the Honorable Frederick E. Nolting on July 17, 1962, at the National Museum on the Occasion of the Return of Vietnamese Art Treasures from the United States,"

Trinh responded by noting that South Vietnam hoped to “throw a bridge between our two continents and, in showing the American public the fundamental traits of the Vietnamese culture, the stages of our history, the trade marks of our sensibility, to establish the foundation of a durable friendship between our two peoples.”⁸⁰

Trinh’s comments provided another opportunity for South Vietnam to repeat its claims that Vietnam’s historical march ended in Saigon, not Hanoi. Trinh’s remarks also served as a call for greater U.S.-South Vietnamese cooperation, another objective of the Smithsonian exhibit. Astute listeners might have noted a hint of desperation in Trinh’s words. Diem had returned to Vietnam almost exactly eight years earlier. His early political success emboldened his supporters and converted some of his doubters. Nevertheless, Diem’s propaganda campaign could not overcome the apparent weaknesses in his rule—his unconvincing claims to historical legitimacy, his domestic opposition, and renewed American skepticism about his abilities to govern. The deterioration of South Vietnamese politics over the next fifteen months, ending with Diem’s assassination, graphically illustrated this failure.

box 46, folder: Viet Nam, 1960-1961, Correspondence and Memoranda, Smithsonian, RU 312.

80. “Response by the Secretary of State for National Education,” box 46, folder: Viet Nam, 1960-1961, Correspondence and Memoranda, Smithsonian, RU 312.