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INTRODUCTION

Sean Fear and Edward Miller

Reflecting on the "South Vietnamese Turn" in the Study of Modern Vietnam and the Vietnam War

No regular reader of the *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* is unaware that the year 2025 marked the passage of fifty years since the end of the Vietnam War and the demise of the Republic of Vietnam (RVN). Historical anniversaries often feel contrived—especially when they are treated primarily as occasions for rehashing well-worn debates. For some Vietnam War experts, the 2025 anniversary underlined the extent to which their fellow historians continue to rely on interpretive frameworks and perspectives that are as old as the war itself.[1] Nevertheless, anniversaries can also be opportunities to examine the ways in which memories and interpretations of the past are changing. In our view, the fifty-year commemoration provides a useful context for reflecting on recent trends in scholarship on South Vietnam's republican era (1955–1975) and its post-1975 legacies.

Over the past two decades, the scholarly study of South Vietnamese history, politics, culture, and society has flourished. The growing interest in South Vietnam is connected to broader efforts to incorporate Vietnamese studies perspectives into the study of the Vietnam War. In a 2009 essay published in this journal, Tuong Vu and one of the coeditors of this special issue hailed the "'Vietnamization' of Vietnam War Studies" and specifically noted the relevance of new work on South Vietnam.[2] Not long afterward, Andrew Preston, a leading Vietnam War historian and an expert in US foreign relations, called attention to "a South Vietnamese turn" in Vietnam War historiography. That turn, he declared, was where "the

really exciting work" on the Vietnamese dimensions of the war was taking place.[3] In the years since Preston's remarks, scholarship on South Vietnam has expanded significantly, with the publication of a host of new monographs, journal articles, and edited book chapters. That scholarship also appears in the recently published *Cambridge History of the Vietnam War*, which includes more than a dozen articles focused mainly or exclusively on South Vietnam.[4]

This special issue of the *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* presents five exciting new contributions to this thriving body of scholarship. All of the articles published here were presented in draft form at a workshop entitled "South Vietnam: Endings, Beginnings, and Continuities" held at Dartmouth College in May 2025. That workshop, cohosted by the two guest editors of this volume, was part of the Dartmouth History Institute, an annual event for early-career scholars. From the dozens of applications we received, we selected the most promising paper proposals on various topics in South Vietnamese history. The invited authors traveled to Hanover, New Hampshire, for two days of stimulating and productive discussions. In addition to the paper presenters, other participants in the workshop included Prof. Sara Swenson of Dartmouth, Prof. Tuong Vu of the University of Oregon, and Prof. Charles Keith of Michigan State University, all of whom kindly provided expert feedback and advice to the authors.

In this introductory essay, we aim to place these five articles into a wider historiographical perspective. What have been the key features of the South Vietnamese turn over the past two decades? What are the most interesting and promising current trends in the field today, and where might the study of South Vietnam go next?

At first glance, the easiest and most obvious way to describe the South Vietnamese turn is by reference to research agendas, and specifically by reference to the use of Vietnamese sources. Almost all of the scholarship published on the RVN and South Vietnam

since the early 2000s is based on research grounded in Vietnamese archives and other Vietnamese-language sources. It is not coincidental that the first contributions to the turn appeared shortly after policy changes in Vietnam during the 1990s made it possible for foreign scholars to access the extensive collections of RVN state documents held at National Archives Center II in Hồ Chí Minh City. Around the same time, researchers also began the first serious scholarly explorations of the astonishingly rich realm of South Vietnamese print culture. These explorations were carried out via the collections of South Vietnamese books, newspapers, magazines, and other published materials held in libraries in Vietnam, the United States, and other countries.

The centrality of Vietnamese vernacular sources in the recent scholarship on South Vietnam is a key point of difference with earlier writings on South Vietnam by Vietnam War historians. Prior to the 2000s, much of the Anglophone scholarship on the war relied heavily or exclusively on English-language materials held in US archives; few of the authors of those works could read or speak Vietnamese.[5] This striking contrast between the proponents of the South Vietnamese turn and their predecessors have led some to suggest that the use of Vietnamese sources is *the* defining feature of the new scholarship. According to this view, the historiography of South Vietnam since the 1970s is best understood as a succession of waves, each of which can be indexed according to the proportion of Vietnamese source materials used.[6]

As historians who have spent many hours in Vietnamese archives and whose research is based on extensive work in Vietnamese materials, we acknowledge and appreciate the central importance of Vietnamese vernacular sources in the research agendas of the South Vietnamese turn. Nevertheless, we do not believe that merely invoking the use of these sources provides much insight into the contributions of the new scholarship. The fact that more Vietnam War scholars are using Vietnamese sources now is a welcome development,

but it does not explain very much about the actual historical arguments they are making about South Vietnam. Instead of congratulating themselves for visiting Vietnamese archives and citing Vietnamese materials, historians of the war would do better to reflect on how they are using these sources to advance particular interpretive claims.

In lieu of defining the new scholarship by reference to the use of Vietnamese sources, some authors have emphasized a different concern: South Vietnamese agency. According to this view, the most important contribution of the new scholarship is to demonstrate that South Vietnamese—especially those not affiliated with the Vietnamese Communist Party—were autonomous actors with their own agendas and perspectives. This emphasis on agency is perhaps understandable, insofar as it was a reaction to the earlier practice of depicting RVN leaders and South Vietnamese partisans in caricatured and reductive terms. Indeed, both of the authors of this article have previously described the recovery of South Vietnamese agency as a key objective of our own work.[7] In hindsight, however, we put too much emphasis on a point that now seems obvious. We are inclined to agree with the historian Walter Johnson, who wisely warns against "framing [agency] as the defining contribution of our studies rather than as the simple predicate for any historical investigation."[8] We of course continue to view South Vietnamese as autonomous historical agents, but believe this should now be regarded as a historical truism rather than a historical truth that needs to be demonstrated.[9]

Instead of trying to understand the South Vietnamese turn by reference to research agendas or agency, we have adopted a thematic approach. In the historiographical survey presented here, we identify three organizing concepts that emerge from our reading of the scholarship: development, republicanism, and civil war. Admittedly, not all of the many books, articles, and essays written about South Vietnam over the past twenty years will fit neatly into one or the other of these three categories. Nevertheless, we believe that this schema can provide a useful way to think about trends and directions in a dynamic and

diverse field. We also hope that it will help readers to understand the value of the interventions that our five article authors are making.

Development

Our identification of development as a major theme in the study of South Vietnam is drawn from the field that is now widely known as the history of development. Compared to scholars in other fields, historians were relative latecomers to conversations and debates over the phenomenon of development in the twentieth century. It was only in the 1990s and early 2000s that historians began to treat development as a topic deserving of study from a historical perspective. As Nick Cullather observed in 2000, much of the previous scholarship on development had either celebrated its transformative potential or condemned it as a tool of imperialist subjugation. Historians, in contrast, seek to historicize development. This opens the possibility of understanding development as neither inherently good nor inherently bad—even though the consequences of individual development schemes could run the gamut from relatively positive and beneficial to horrifically harmful.[10]

The ubiquity of development in social science discourse makes it difficult to define. Although the concept has traditionally been framed in economic terms, many historians would agree with Cullather that development is also a particular "species of politics," one that "speaks to humanity's greatest ambitions for progress and welfare and to its greatest fears of social collapse." Studying the history of development therefore requires attention not only to the study of economic ideas, policies, and practices but also to phenomena such as nation building, humanitarianism, foreign aid, popular mobilization, and counterinsurgency.[11]

The relevance of the history of development as an analytical frame for studying South Vietnam can be seen in some of the most important early contributions to the South Vietnamese turn. Consider, for example, Philip Catton's pathbreaking 2002 monograph

entitled *Diệm's Final Failure: Prelude to America's War in Vietnam*. Catton was among the first non-Vietnamese scholars to access the RVN state records held at the National Archives Center II in Hồ Chí Minh City. But even more significant was Catton's treatment of the ideas and policies of the Ngô Đình Diệm government. This was evident in his analysis of the Strategic Hamlet Program, Ngô Đình Diệm's signature counterinsurgency program. In contrast to US diplomatic historians who had depicted the hamlet program as an American-designed and directed scheme, Catton showed that it was in fact devised and implemented by the RVN president, his brother Ngô Đình Nhu, and other senior South Vietnamese officials.[12]

One of Catton's key insights had to do with the central importance of ideas about development in the Ngô brothers' thinking about the hamlet program. He noted that "underdevelopment" was one of the three conceptual "enemies" (along with "communism" and "disunity") that the Ngôs frequently claimed to be fighting.[13] In this respect, the Strategic Hamlet Program was very much a development program, even as it also aimed to serve the regime's military and mass mobilization objectives. Catton also emphasized how the hamlet program was shaped by the Ngôs' interest in the French Catholic philosopher Emmanuel Mounier and his elaboration of the doctrine known as personalism—an interest that most earlier scholars had dismissed as a mere philosophical smokescreen for the regime's authoritarianism.

Development was also a central focus of Edward Miller's *Misalliance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and the Fate of South Vietnam*, which appeared a decade after Catton's book. To understand the role that development agendas had played in the rise and fall of the Ngôs' partnership with the United States, Miller sought to reconstruct the Ngôs' thinking about nation building—a concept he defined as inclusive of both state-building activities and also identity-building efforts aimed at forging national solidarities. To understand the origins of the brothers' ideas, Miller analyzed their political activities and

writings prior to 1954, as well as Ngô Đình Nhu's early engagement with personalism. *Misalliance* also examined the regime's actual nation-building policies with regard to state institutions, rural reform, and counterinsurgency, and discussed the development ideas and prescriptions that US officials and experts brought with them to South Vietnam. To better understand the US-RVN interactions in these areas—and how disagreements over development led eventually to the unraveling of the US alliance with Ngô Đình Diệm—Miller drew on the growing history of development scholarship, including work written by American historians and scholars of US foreign relations.[14]

Another development-focused book that appeared around the same time as *Misalliance* was David Biggs's outstanding monograph *Quagmire: Nation-Building and Nature in the Mekong Delta*. As his subtitle implies, Biggs aimed to study southern Vietnam by situating it within larger and longer histories of development. Biggs, who is trained both as a Vietnamese studies specialist and as an environmental historian, was specifically interested in the central importance of water and hydrology in the Mekong Delta development schemes undertaken by various state and institutional actors from the early nineteenth to the late twentieth century. These actors include the states that claimed formal sovereignty over the delta (the Nguyễn dynasty, the French colonial regime, the RVN, and the postwar Socialist Republic of Vietnam) as well as expert advisors from places like the United States and Japan.[15]

Because *Quagmire* spanned two centuries of history and includes only two chapters on the RVN period, it is often overlooked in historiographical surveys of scholarship on South Vietnam. But one of Biggs's most valuable contributions to the South Vietnamese turn lay precisely in his adoption of a longue durée perspective. Instead of treating development during the RVN era as something that the United States or other foreign actors imposed on South Vietnam, Biggs showed that the RVN was in fact just the latest in a string of what the

historian David Ludden calls "development regimes."[16] At the same time, Biggs also built on prior environmental histories of the delta, such as Pierre Brocheux's *The Mekong Delta: Ecology, Economy, and Revolution, 1860–1960*. More recently, scholars such as Michitake Aso have followed Biggs's lead in publishing their own histories of development in Vietnam (including South Vietnam during the RVN period) from environmental historical perspectives.[17]

Since the publication of these monographs, other scholars have explored additional topics in the history of development in South Vietnam. Stan B-H Tan published a pair of excellent studies of Ngô Đình Diệm's resettlement and land policies in the Central Highlands. RVN resettlement policies and development agendas during the First Republic (1955–1963) also figured prominently in Jason Picard's deeply researched study of the experiences of the migrant Catholics who moved from North Vietnam to the South [*Bắc di cư*]. Meanwhile, Simon Toner broke new ground with his work on the development policies and strategies promulgated by RVN President Nguyễn Văn Thiệu during the era of the Second RVN (1967–1975).[18]

Several recent publications have pushed the study of RVN development and nation building in exciting new directions. Significantly, these works have a broader chronological scope that includes the entire two decades of the RVN's existence. The most important recent work on northern Catholics and their involvement in nation building in South Vietnam is Phi Van Nguyen's outstanding monograph *A Displaced Nation: The 1954 Evacuation and Its Political Impact on the Vietnam Wars*, published in 2024. A second recent book that speaks more directly to aspects of RVN development by linking them to the understudied topic of South Vietnamese civil society is Van Nguyen-Marshall's excellent *Between War and the State: Civil Society in South Vietnam, 1954–1975.* The role of civil society actors is also explored by Adrienne Châu Minh Lê, who considers the efforts of Buddhist clerical and lay

activists to promote their own distinctive notions about nation building, peace, and democracy.[19]

When the works cited above are considered together, it is evident that taking a history of development approach to the study of South Vietnamese history has been productive and valuable in several ways. By treating development as a form of politics, these scholars have revealed a great deal about South Vietnamese political culture during the republican era, and especially about the competing visions of economic, political, and social transformation espoused by RVN leaders and supporters. At the same time, a history of development approach also offers the prospect of being able to view South Vietnam within broader comparative, South-South, or global perspectives. Studying development in the RVN enables us to think about how South Vietnam can be written into histories of development in Asia, or transnational histories of postwar decolonization. Moreover, development can also be a useful lens to study the French, American, and other non-Vietnamese actors in South Vietnam without crowding their Vietnamese counterparts off the stage. Even if it is true that earlier writings on the Vietnam War were excessively "American-centric," replacing such a perspective with an exclusively "Vietnamese-centric" one hardly seems like an improvement.

Its advantages aside, there are also some limitations associated with a history of development approach—at least in the forms it has been practiced up to now. First and perhaps most obviously, most histories of development in South Vietnam written up to now have focused heavily or exclusively on the state. Authors such as Catton and Miller placed RVN leaders and their development programs and policies at the center of their analyses. The more recent work by Nguyen, Nguyen-Marshall, and others has paid relatively more attention to the roles of non-state actors in South Vietnamese development. Yet even those studies have been concerned mainly with the interactions of those non-state actors with the RVN state. There is of course nothing inherently wrong with conducting historical inquiries about

the South Vietnamese state and its relations with various groups and individuals—especially when we consider the unwillingness of an earlier generation of scholars to take RVN leaders and state institutions seriously. Still, the state-centered quality of the development approach should give us pause and provoke us to think about what we may be missing.

Another criticism that might be leveled at the development approach has to do with its heavy focus on the nation and nation building. To be sure, those of us who study nation building in Vietnam are very aware that nations and nationalism are constructed and contingent formations. None of the scholars cited here are taking the Vietnamese nation or Vietnamese nationalism for granted or treating Vietnamese national identity as monolithic and timeless. Nevertheless, if we focus too exclusively on nation building in South Vietnam, it may cause us to overlook other forms of community and belonging that South Vietnamese sought to create.

One of the most provocative recent interventions in the study of twentieth-century decolonization and development is Adom Getachew's *World-Making After Empire*. Getachew argues that Black intellectuals and political leaders in Africa, the Caribbean, and North America did not view nation building as the exclusive or even the most important component of liberation from colonial domination. Instead, they treated anti-colonial nationalism as part of world making—a process that envisioned new transnational solidarities among decolonized societies.[20]

Although Getachew focuses on Pan-Africanism and the Black Atlantic, she suggests that world-making projects could be found across the decolonizing world. By Getachew's definition, Ngô Đình Diệm can be plausibly described as a world maker. He sent a South Vietnamese delegation to the 1955 Bandung Conference and maintained diplomatic ties with many of the member countries of the Non-Aligned Movement. Moreover, as Mitchell Tan has shown, Ngô Đình Diệm pursued membership in the Asian People's Anti-Communist

League not merely as an exercise in Cold War alliance building, but as a strategy for building transregional spiritual solidarities and promoting his ideas about development—specifically the doctrine of personalism—on an international stage.[21] Viewed in this light, it seems all but certain that future work in this area will lead to new insights about the involvement of South Vietnam (and South Vietnamese) in the broader currents of the history of development in the twentieth century.

Republicanism

If the theme of development was the predominant one from the earliest stages of the South Vietnamese turn, the concept of republicanism was somewhat slower to emerge as an alternative approach to the study of the RVN and the republican era. Like development, republicanism is an analytical category that has long been applied to the study of politics in states and societies in Europe, North and South America, and Asia. However, as Peter Zinoman has observed, historians of modern Vietnam have only recently become interested in republicanism. He notes that major works on modern Vietnamese intellectual history published between the 1970s and 1990s by Alexander Woodside, David Marr, Huỳnh Kim Khánh, and Hue-Tam Ho Tai did not list "republic" or "republicanism" in their indexes.[22] This earlier neglect notwithstanding, the study of modern Vietnamese history has finally taken a republican turn. It is worthwhile to consider what this might mean for the study of South Vietnam and RVN history.

To date, the bulk of the work on republicanism in Vietnam has focused on the latter decades of French colonial rule. In the 1990s and the first decade of the 2000s, scholars of the French empire such as J. P. Daughton, Martin Thomas, and Agathe Larcher-Goscha began exploring what Alice Conklin called "the republican idea of empire." These early inquiries focused mostly on the republican-minded reform agendas of French colonial leaders such as

Governor-General Albert Sarraut. Then, in the early 2010s, scholars such as Vĩnh Sính, Philippe Peycam, and Zinoman published a series of studies which examined how various Vietnamese intellectuals—ranging from the early twentieth-century revolutionary Phan Châu Trinh to the author Vũ Trọng Phụng—drew on republican ideas and traditions in their writings and political activism.[23] All of this scholarship was brilliantly synthesized by Christopher Goscha in the early chapters of his 2017 *Penguin History of Modern Vietnam*. According to Goscha, Vietnamese political history during the first third of the twentieth century was defined by "the failure of colonial republicanism"—that is, the failure of the French colonial state to live up to the reformist promises made by its senior leaders.

The fate of what Zinoman calls "late colonial republicanism" clearly merits consideration for the study of South Vietnam and the RVN. Even if interwar colonial republicanism failed, it is reasonable to ask how elements of colonial-era republicanism may have endured in South Vietnam after 1954. The argument for republicanism as a new interpretive framework for RVN history has been made most explicitly by Nu-Anh Tran and Tuong Vu in the introduction to their 2023 edited volume *Building a Republican Nation in Vietnam, 1920–1963*. Following Zinoman and Goscha, Tran and Vu agree that although the colonial version of republicanism had been discredited by the 1940s, a form of "Vietnamese republicanism" persisted and would become a central feature of South Vietnamese politics during the RVN era.[24]

The use of republicanism as a lens to explore the political history of the RVN is promising for at least three reasons. First, it offers a way to connect the ideas and politics of the RVN era to the late colonial period. Just as the development approach aims to historicize the RVN by situating it within a longer line of development regimes in Vietnam, republicanism may help us to excavate the deeper roots of RVN politics in Vietnam's pre-1945 history.

Second, republicanism offers a new perspective on a long-standing problem in the study of South Vietnamese history: the profoundly fragmented nature of South Vietnamese politics during the RVN era. Virtually all scholarly accounts—both those produced before 1975 and since then—have emphasized the fractious qualities of RVN political culture.[25] But the focus on internal divisions begs an important question: If South Vietnamese leaders and factions were hopelessly at odds with each other from the outset, then how did the RVN state survive for two decades? Thinking about republicanism as a key element of RVN political culture may provide at least a partial answer.

Finally, the study of Vietnamese republicanism may offer new interpretive perspectives on South Vietnamese anti-communism. Zinoman notes that "a virulent anticommunism" became a prominent feature of French republicanism during the 1920s and 1930s, displacing anticlericalism as the "preeminent bogeyman" in republican discourse.[26] The entanglement of republicanism and anti-communism in France suggests that Vietnamese republicanism may well have shaped the evolution of Vietnamese anti-communism as an ideological formation. Recent articles by Tuan Hoang, Tran, and Nguyen Thien Y offer compelling new insights into the history of Vietnamese anti-communism, especially with respect to the indoctrination practices of the RVN state and its partisans.[27] Future research could illuminate the extent to which republican ideas and values were implicated in this history.

For all of these reasons, we concur with Tran, Vu, and Zinoman that republicanism during the RVN era warrants more exploration. At the same time, we have some reservations about certain claims that have been advanced about Vietnamese republicanism. In addition, we are wary of ascribing too much explanatory power to republicanism, or of treating it as the central feature of RVN political life and culture.

Our first reservation involves the genealogy of Vietnamese republicanism. Much of the recent scholarship seems to treat republicanism as an import from metropolitan France that was brought to Indochina by French colonial officials like Albert Sarraut or by intellectuals such as André Malraux. As Tran and Vu put it, "Republicanism was a global trend that originated in the French revolution. . . . French imperialism spread these ideas to Vietnam."[28]

This interpretation is not wrong, but it seems incomplete. It specifically appears to discount the many ways in which Vietnamese republicanism was shaped by Vietnamese engagements with transregional Asian political communities and discourses. As Vĩnh Sính and other authors have shown, Vietnamese nationalists such as Phan Châu Trịnh and Phan Bội Châu were already reading about republicanism in texts written by Chinese and Japanese reformers during the first years of the twentieth century. Likewise, scholars including John T. Sidel, Nicole CuUnjieng Aboitiz, Chi P. Pham, Agathe Larcher-Goscha, and Tim Harper have demonstrated the extent to which Vietnamese intellectuals and activists contributed to and drew inspiration from South and Southeast Asian political, cultural, and commercial networks in which ideas about republicanism had significant currency.[29]

Historians of Vietnamese republicanism also need to reckon with another important model and source of republican ideas and practices: the Republic of China (ROC). From the time of its creation in the 1911 Xinhai Revolution, the ROC was a source of inspiration for many politically active Vietnamese. It was also an important source of political and material support. The central importance of the ROC is evident in the history of groups such as the Vietnam Nationalist Party [Việt Nam Quốc Dân Đảng] (VNQDĐ), which modeled itself on the ROC's Guomindang Party. Many VNQDĐ members and operatives spent years and even decades in republican China. These included Vũ Hồng Khanh, who received training at a Guomindang (GMD) military academy and was commissioned as an officer in the ROC

Army before going on to head the party's organization in South Vietnam. Other Vietnamese with deep ROC ties included Nguyễn Hải Thần, the founder of the GMD-backed Vietnam Restoration League [Việt Nam Cách Mạng Đồng Minh Hội], and the novelist Nguyễn Tường Tam, who was affiliated with both the VNQDD and the Restoration League.[30]

The many connections between Vietnamese anti-communists and republican China raise interesting questions about whether and how RVN political culture may have been shaped by ROC precedents. Although there has been little research in this area to date, Tran's exploration of the origins of the term "Việt Cộng"—the slur that RVN partisans used to refer to Vietnamese communists during the Vietnam War—seems very suggestive. Tran shows that "Việt Cộng" was coined in the early 1950s by Vietnamese anti-communists who took inspiration directly from ROC political propaganda.[31]

Our second reservation about republicanism as an analytical framework for studying RVN politics has to do with the relationship between republicanism and democracy. Are republicanism and democracy the same thing? Most historians of republicanism in Europe and the United States would argue that the answer to this question is "no," or at least "not always."[32] In its seventeenth- and eighteenth-century formulations, republicanism was usually an anti-democratic doctrine. It was espoused by elites who viewed republican forms of government as a bulwark preventing aspiring demagogues from appealing to the disenfranchised masses. It was only during the nineteenth century that republicanism and democracy began to be seen as mutually compatible. Since Vietnamese republicanism dates from the early twentieth century, it is not surprising that republicanism and democracy were sometimes linked together in Vietnamese political discourse. Nevertheless, as historians, we should be wary of treating the two terms as interchangeable. A telling example of the differences can be seen in the decidedly anti-democratic convictions of Bùi Quang Chiêu, the founder of the republican-minded Vietnamese Constitutionalist Party. As both Hue-Tam Ho

Tai and Goscha have pointed out, Bùi Quang Chiêu staunchly opposed Governor-General Sarraut's proposal to reward Vietnamese workers who served in World War I with the right to vote in elections for the Cochinchina legislature.[33]

The importance of drawing analytical distinctions between republicanism and democracy is underlined by the fact that the meaning and practice of democracy were deeply contested in South Vietnam throughout the republican era. In her 2022 monograph entitled *Disunion*, Tran argues that clashes over democracy were the defining feature of RVN anti-communist politics during Ngô Đình Diệm's tenure in power. She divides RVN supporters into "Diemists" and "oppositionists." According to her, the Diemists had a very narrow and limited idea of democracy and were much more authoritarian in their thinking than the oppositionists, whose notions about democracy were relatively more pluralist and placed more emphasis on civil liberties.[34] Interestingly, even though Tran does not dispute the general importance of republicanism in RVN politics, her heavy focus on democracy suggests that her interpretive approach in *Disunion* is somewhat different from the approach presented in her coauthored essay with Vu.

Republicanism and democracy may well have been linked in the minds and agendas of RVN leaders, but it is possible that disputes over the latter overrode any shared commitment to the former. The comparatively greater salience of democracy as compared to republicanism in RVN discourse appears to be confirmed by other recent work exploring the urban politics and political culture of the Second Republic.[35] Virtually all of these accounts emphasize that questions about democracy—how to define it, how to practice it, and how to protect it from those who might undermine it—were central issues in RVN politics and political culture, especially during the last years of the republican era. Invocations of republicanism, in comparison, were notable mostly by their absence.

One last reservation about the theme of republicanism has to do with its applicability across all spaces and sectors of South Vietnamese society and politics. Virtually all of the work published on South Vietnamese republicanism appears to describe a phenomenon that was primarily elite and urban. What, if anything, was the relevance or significance of republicanism for the majority of the population that lived in rural areas? Especially after the massive escalation of the Vietnam War during the mid-1960s, the links between city and countryside became more fraught, and the corresponding gaps in lived experiences became more pronounced. To cite just one dimension of this: Rural newspaper distribution declined markedly after the 1963 death of Ngô Đình Diệm and news of Sài Gòn politics was more often conveyed to rural areas by rumor and gossip, when it arrived at all.[36]

The significance of the urban-rural divide in South Vietnam is important to consider when thinking about republicanism—and when thinking about South Vietnamese history, politics, and society more generally. The collective memories of South Vietnam that endure today in Vietnam, the United States, and elsewhere are defined disproportionately by gauzy images of the material culture of Sài Gòn and other RVN cities. As historians, we need to keep in mind that the glamour, fashion, pop music, and American-subsidized abundance that thrived in Sài Gòn did not reflect the realities of life for all South Vietnamese—especially those living in the countryside. As Hoang warns, the postwar memoirs of prominent South Vietnamese officials are often suffused with wistful romanticism and nostalgia, and a tendency by their authors "to absolve themselves from contributing to major problems during the war and the eventual demise of South Vietnam."[37] Republicanism was indisputably important in the political history of the RVN, but as historians we need to be mindful of both its diverse origins and the diverse ways in which the concept has been deployed over time.

Civil War

As we have shown, the recent efforts to examine the history of South Vietnam through the lenses of development and republicanism have yielded a wealth of insights about RVN politics and political culture. Up to now, however, the scholars who have adopted these approaches have had rather less to say about war and warfare in South Vietnamese history. Given that the RVN was engaged in waging war for most of its existence and that it was eventually defeated and conquered by North Vietnam, the relative lack of attention to the Vietnam War and its impact seems surprising. The de-centering of the war is undoubtedly a reaction against prior accounts by journalists and US historians, some of which depict South Vietnam as a country that was "invented" to serve US militaristic and neocolonial objectives.[38] For the historians leading the South Vietnamese turn, those blatant attempts to deny the autonomy of the RVN state are anathema, not least because they recall an even older tradition of viewing Southeast Asian history exclusively through the eyes of its Western colonizers.[39]

Nevertheless, there is no denying the central importance of the Vietnam War in the history of South Vietnam. Beginning during 1959–1960 and especially after 1965, the war profoundly shaped the RVN state and South Vietnamese society. Conversely, South Vietnamese leaders and ordinary South Vietnamese were active and influential participants in the war. Yet the wartime history of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN)—the single largest contributor of military personnel to the conflict—remains remarkably understudied, especially compared to the much better documented American and North Vietnamese war efforts.[40] Writing new histories of South Vietnam requires us to consider whether and how we can write the RVN and its soldiers, partisans, and citizens back into the broader history of the Vietnam War, including the military history of that conflict. This is where our third approach to South Vietnamese history—one organized around the theme of civil war—may have particular utility.

The First and Second Indochina Wars have traditionally been depicted either as anti-colonial wars of national liberation or as episodes in the Global Cold War. In the last decade, however, some historians have revisited a third way of framing these wars: as Vietnamese civil wars. These scholars have suggested not only that civil warfare was widespread in Indochina after 1945, but also that these wars were widely recognized and experienced as civil wars by Vietnamese combatants and civilians alike.[41]

But what, exactly, does it mean to call the Vietnam War a civil war? Some historians have used the term "civil war" simply to highlight the fact that many Vietnamese fought on opposing sides, or to point out that the combatants in the war included two rival Vietnamese states. We contend, however, that studying the role of civil war in Vietnam War history requires us to do more than merely document Vietnamese-on-Vietnamese (or Indochinese-on-Indochinese) violence. Taking civil war seriously requires Vietnam War historians—and historians of South Vietnam—to shift from a descriptive to an analytical approach to civil warfare. To do this, we can borrow insights from the work of historians, political scientists, anthropologists, and others who study civil wars as a distinctive form of armed conflict.

A civil war is a particular kind of struggle over sovereignty. By definition, civil wars are conflicts over sovereignty within a particular country, polity, or community. However, not every violent struggle between rival leaders or factions is necessarily a civil war. As David Armitage has argued, a civil war is not just a fight over who will rule; it is a violent struggle between rivals who differ over how they intend to legitimate their claims to sovereignty.[42] In short, civil wars are wars in which the combatants advocate rival notions of political order.

Civil wars are also multilevel conflicts. The conflict over sovereignty between the warring parties is usually most obviously apparent at the level of the region, country, or nation. Viewed from this perspective, a civil war appears to be a war between two states, or

between a state and an armed movement. However, civil wars are never waged exclusively at the national level. They also unfold in provinces, towns, districts, and villages. Moreover, these local instances of civil warfare are not merely transposed versions of the national-level struggle writ small. They are intensely intracommunal conflicts in which friends, neighbors, and even family members are pitted against each other.

To gain advantage in these community-level conflicts, the warring parties in civil wars seek to build local networks of collaborators and informants. As the political scientist Stathis Kalyvas has demonstrated, the resulting competition over informants is a key driver of the local-level fratricidal violence that is a distinctive feature of all civil wars. Because each side wants information about their enemy's network, they seek to recruit civilians who will identify the other side's supporters, so that those enemy operatives can be targeted for capture or assassination. But the informants may themselves become targets, since the enemy also wants to show that it can protect its own operatives. The resulting cycle of denunciations and counter-denunciations produces what Kalyvas calls the "microdynamics" of violence in civil wars.[43]

The model of civil warfare proposed by Kalyvas and other scholars has important implications for the study of Vietnam War history in general and South Vietnamese wartime experiences in particular. Contrary to what some skeptics have claimed, recognizing the role of civil warfare in the Vietnam War does not oblige us to dismiss the national liberation interpretation of the war, or to excuse or minimize the involvement of Americans and other foreign actors.[44] There are many other examples of civil wars in which foreign states and armies played major roles, as the cases of the Spanish and Greek civil wars demonstrate. There are also many cases in which anti-colonial uprisings turned into civil wars, or vice versa. Historians can and should study the Indochina Wars as complex struggles in which civil warfare overlapped and interacted with anti-colonial liberation struggles and Cold War

politics. It therefore seems reasonable to ask: How does thinking about the Vietnam War as a civil war change the way we think about South Vietnamese history?

One set of analytical insights that a civil war approach can provide has to do with the origins of the South Vietnamese state. As Goscha has convincingly argued, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) was a "state born of war"—that is, its institutions, practices, and political culture were profoundly shaped by the war that the DRV waged against France and its other enemies during the First Indochina War of 1945–1954.[45] A similar argument can be made for the RVN state, which emerged out of the same conflict. In the latter case, however, we can modify Goscha's formula to say that the RVN was a state born of *civil* war. This becomes evident when we examine the history of the State of Vietnam (SVN), the progenitor of the RVN.

The SVN was set up under the sponsorship of French officials during the early years of the First Indochina War and formally proclaimed in 1949. Because of this genealogy, many historians have dismissed the SVN and its chief of state, the former emperor Bảo Đại, as hapless puppets. But this interpretation discounts one of the key reasons that French leaders undertook to create the SVN in the first place. The SVN was the brainchild of French High Commissioner Leon Pignon, who conceived of it as a means to transform the Indochina War from a colonial conflict into a civil war. In a 1947 document, Pignon advocated steps to "transpose the quarrel we have with the Viet Minh on to a strictly Vietnamese playing field." For Pignon, this meant that "we ourselves [should] take part as little as possible in the campaigns and reprisals which should be the work of the native adversaries [of the DRV]."[46] From the outset, the SVN was intended as the vehicle by which the French and their anti-communist Vietnamese allies might steer the microdynamics of civil war violence to their advantage.

The civil-war origins of the SVN state in the midst of the First Indochina War have been extensively explored by Brett Reilly. In both a journal article and in his pathbreaking 2018 dissertation, Reilly examines the shifting array of noncommunist leaders, parties, and communities who aligned themselves with the SVN at various points between the late 1940s and the end of the war in 1954; he also argues that the cobbled-together qualities of the Sài Gòn–based state is critical to explaining the fragmented forms of sovereignty wielded by both the SVN and the RVN after 1955.[47] Many of Reilly's conclusions are consistent with the findings of Shawn McHale in his study of the social and political history of the First Indochina War in the Mekong Delta. In *The First Vietnam War: Sovereignty, Violence, and the Fracture of the South*, McHale demonstrates that the war that erupted in the delta in 1945 was in fact a multisided civil war waged in communities divided along ethnic and sectarian lines. He also argues that the French largely succeeded in their efforts to turn these local "fractures" into military advantages, and that they had effectively defeated DRV forces in the delta prior to the 1954 ceasefire.[48]

To date, the work that Goscha, Reilly, and McHale have done on civil warfare during the First Indochina War has no analog in the scholarship on the Second Indochina War. In other words, no one has yet produced an in-depth, multilevel scholarly study of the military and political history of the Vietnam War that explicitly examines the conflict as a civil war. Nevertheless, a close reading of some existing studies of the war reveals substantial evidence of the "local cleavages" and the microdynamics of violence that Kalyvas and other theorists have identified as the defining features of civil warfare. These features are evident, for example, in many of the local-area studies of counterinsurgency warfare that were conducted by American social scientists and military officers in South Vietnam while the war was ongoing. Although these experts usually framed what they were seeing as examples of

revolutionary war rather than civil war, their detailed descriptions are highly consistent with the Kalyvasian model.[49]

The single most important scholarly study of the microdynamics of violence at the local level in South Vietnam during the Vietnam War is David Elliott's *The Vietnamese War*. In this magisterial study, David Elliott examines the political, social, and military strategies employed by Vietnamese Communist Party cadres in Đình Tường Province in the Mekong Delta from the 1930s to the end of the Vietnam War in 1975.[50] Like his wartime expert predecessors, David Elliott mostly refrained from using the term "civil war" to describe the conflict between the communist-led National Liberation Front (NLF) and the RVN. (He did apply the term to the final phase of the war, following the withdrawal of US combat units from Indochina in 1973.) Still, his extensive use of testimony from local Vietnamese residents—most of it collected during wartime interviews conducted by the RAND Corporation—provides a revealing window on the ways in which the NLF-RVN rivalry was defined by the village- and hamlet-level interplay among collaboration, denunciation, and violence. The relevance of David Elliott's work to understanding the role of civil warfare in the Vietnam War has been recognized by none other than Kalyvas himself, who cited *The Vietnamese War* extensively when writing *The Logic of Violence in Civil Wars*. Scholarly accounts aside, the civil war dimensions of the Vietnam War in South Vietnam are amply documented in many of the personal memoirs written by Vietnamese who fought in the wars or who experienced them as civilians. Perhaps the most outstanding example is Mai Elliott's *The Sacred Willow*, which relates how the First and Second Indochina Wars split her family along both partisan and geographic lines. Tellingly, Mai Elliott explicitly describes the post-1945 conflict as the latest chapter in an intermittent Vietnamese civil war that began in the eighteenth century.[51] Another Vietnamese memoirist who does not shy away from using the term "civil war" is Nguyễn Công Luận, whose *Nationalist in the Vietnam Wars* depicted both

the civil warfare that he witnessed as a child in northern Vietnam during the late 1940s and 1950s as well as his attempts to win "hearts and minds" while serving as an ARVN officer in rural South Vietnam during the late 1960s and early 1970s.[52] Similar dynamics appear in David Lan Pham's *Two Hamlets in Nam Bo*, which describes how residents of a pair of Mekong Delta communities were forced to navigate a bewildering and seemingly endless procession of rival states and local authorities over a period of decades beginning in 1940.[53] Civil war is also a recurring theme in some of the best-known Vietnamese cultural and literary works on the Vietnam War. The novelist Bảo Ninh, who served as a People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) soldier in South Vietnam during the war, explicitly described the conflict as a civil war [*nội chiến*] in his acclaimed novel *The Sorrow of War*.[54] The South Vietnamese singer-songwriter Trịnh Công Sơn referred to the war as a civil war in his 1965 song "Mother's Legacy" [*Gia tài của mẹ*]—a mention that resulted in the banning of the song by both the anti-communist and communist governments.[55] One of the most searing accounts of civil war violence in all of Vietnam War literature is found in Nhã Ca's *Mourning Headband for Hue*. Nhã Ca's account, which was first published in South Vietnam during the war, vividly describes the experiences of civilians during the Battle of Huế, part of the 1968 Tết Offensive. Although the battle is remembered for the massive amounts of conventional firepower used by American, South Vietnamese, and North Vietnamese regular forces, Nhã Ca described how the fates of some Huế residents were sealed when they were denounced by former friends and neighbors.[56]

In Vietnamese studies scholarship thus far however, the concept of civil war has been much more implicit than concretely theorized, particularly with regard to the Second Indochina War. We therefore see an exciting opportunity to further explore and refine the concept of civil war in Vietnam, which we think ultimately may have even more interpretive utility than either development or republicanism in the study of South Vietnamese history.

Focusing on civil war dynamics offers a way to think about the Vietnam War as both a multisite and a multilevel conflict over sovereignty, and to connect the tumultuous wartime politics of Sài Gòn and other South Vietnamese urban centers to the microdynamics of violence that were most acute in provincial towns and villages. More generally, a civil war approach offers a way for historians to place all of the many actors who participated in the Vietnam War in South Vietnam—the RVN state, the NLF, the North Vietnamese army, the US military, Vietnamese religious, political and ethnic organizations and ordinary South Vietnamese civilians—into a single historical analytical framework. The Vietnam War was in many ways an incredibly complex war and no single interpretive framework can capture all of the myriad facets and dimensions of the conflict. Nevertheless, thinking about the civil war dimensions may lead to new insights—especially about the experiences of the Vietnamese who fought, lived, and died during the long years of warfare.

The Articles

As guest editors of this special issue of the *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, we are pleased and honored to present five articles that we believe reflect the current vibrant state of current research and scholarship on the history of South Vietnam. We observe that all five of the authors whose work appears in this issue are junior historians who have either recently received their PhDs or are still in graduate school. It also seems significant that all five of them were born in Vietnam but subsequently chose to pursue graduate study in Singapore, Europe, or North America. After reading and collaborating with this talented group of scholars to present their work, we are confident that all of them are going to be authoring many more important articles and books on Vietnamese history in the future.

The essays by Bui Chi Thien and Nguyen Thien Y both assert the significance of South Vietnam's so-called interregnum between Ngô Đình Diêm's death in 1963 and the

founding of the Second Republic in 1967. Replete with political protests, sectarian violence, military infighting and American and communist escalation, this period is often covered hastily in general overviews of the war, perhaps because it appears daunting in its political complexity. But as Bui Chi Thien and Nguyen Thien Y both illustrate, through the respective analytical prisms of social revolution and critical juncture, the interregnum was as politically generative as it was chaotic. In contrast, Duy Nguyen's article provides a rather different perspective on RVN political culture by examining the surprisingly contentious debates over the meaning and relevance of the myth of the Hùng kings. Although the legend of the Hùng kings as ancient founders of the Vietnamese nation was widely known and embraced in South Vietnam, elites disagreed over whether and how to deploy the myth in the service of RVN nation-building efforts. Finally, the articles contributed by Bui Khanh Minh and Thanh Nguyen demonstrate that the collapse of the RVN state in 1975 did not mean that South Vietnam had suddenly ceased to be important in Vietnamese politics, culture, society, or memory. In their respective accounts of postwar policies toward sex work and the remarkable career of the economist Nguyễn Xuân Oánh's, both authors examine the political and ideological legacies of South Vietnam's republican era. Collectively, all five essays testify to the enduring complexity and historical significance of the RVN—and to the skill and energy which a new generation of scholars is bringing to the study of South Vietnamese history.

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Sean Fear is a Lecturer in International History at the University of Leeds. His research focuses on South Vietnamese domestic politics and diplomacy during the Second Republic (1967-1975), and he is completing a book manuscript under contract with Harvard University Press. He has published in The Cambridge History of the Vietnam War, Diplomatic History and the Journal of Vietnamese Studies among other outlets. In 2022-23 he served as Visiting

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ABSTRACT

This essay reflects on the emergence and evolution of the "South Vietnamese turn" in the study of wartime Vietnam. We suggest that celebrating the use of Vietnamese-language sources or asserting South Vietnamese "agency" are no longer necessary or productive. We instead survey three thematic frameworks that scholars have used to examine South Vietnamese history: development, republicanism, and civil war. We argue that the interpretive framework of civil war provides an especially promising analytical lens, illuminating the Republic of Vietnam's regionalized and fragmented political landscape, and local struggles over sovereignty and popular legitimacy within South Vietnamese society.

KEYWORDS:

Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam), Vietnam War, Development, Republicanism, Civil War

Notes

[1] Pierre Asselin, "'The Vietnam War at 50: The (Tragic) State of the Field," in "Round Table for the 50th Anniversary of the Fall of Saigon, Part I: America's Vietnam War," *Cold War History* 25, no. 2 (March 2025).

[2] Edward Miller and Tuong Vu, "The Vietnam War as a Vietnamese War: Agency and Society in the Study of the Second Indochina War," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 4, no. 3 (2009): 1–16.

[3] Andrew Preston, Timothy J. Lynch, David Ryan et al., review of *Rethinking the Vietnam War*, John Dumbrell, *International Political Review* 1(2013): 37–48, https://doi.org/10.1057/ipr.2013.4.

[4] Lien-Hang T. Nguyen, Edward Miller, Andrew Preston, and Pierre Asselin, eds., *The Cambridge History of the Vietnam War*, 3 vols. (Cambridge University Press, 2025).

[5] There were some important exceptions to this general pattern. Studies published before 2000 that use Vietnamese sources to explore important topics in Vietnam War history include Jeffrey Race, *War Comes to Long An: Revolutionary Conflict in a Vietnamese Province* (University of California Press, 1972); D. Gareth Porter, *The Myth of the Bloodbath: North Vietnam's Land Reform Reconsidered*, interim report no. 2. (Ithaca: Cornell University IREA Project, 1972); James Trullinger, *Village at War: An Account of Revolution in Vietnam* (New York: Longman, 1980); R. B. Smith, *An International History of the Vietnam War: Revolution versus Containment 1955 – 61*. (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1983); William S. Turley, *The Second Indochina War: A Short Political and Military History, 1954–1975* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1986); Carlyle Thayer, *War by Other Means: National Liberation*

and Revolution in Viet-Nam, 1954–60 (Cambridge, MA: Unwin Hyman, 1989); Edwin E. Moise, *Land Reform in China and North Vietnam: Consolidating the Revolution at the Village Level* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983); Christine Pelzer White, "Agrarian Reform and National Liberation in the Vietnamese Revolution: 1920–1957" (PhD dissertation, Cornell University, 1981); Jayne Susan Werner, *Peasant Politics and Religious Sectarianism: Peasant and Priest in the Cao Dai in Viet Nam* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Southeast Asia Studies, 1981); R. B. Smith, *An International History of the Vietnam War*, 3 vols. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1983–1990). Although it was not published until 2003, David Elliott's study of the war in Đình Tương Province is also part of this pioneering scholarship; see David Elliott, *The Vietnamese War: Revolution and Social Change in the Mekong Delta, 1930–1975*, 2 vols. (M. E. Sharpe, 2003).

[6] See, for example, Nu-Anh Tran, *Disunion: Anticommunist Nationalism and the Making of the Republic of Vietnam* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2022), 3–5; and Tuan Hoang, review of *Between War and the State*, Van-Nguyen Marshall, H-Diplo Roundtable 16–38 (May 12, 2025), https://issforum.org/roundtables/h-diplo-rjissf-roundtable-16-38-on-nguyen-marshall-between-war-and-the-state#Hoang.

[7] Miller and Vu, "The Vietnam War as a Vietnamese War"; Edward Miller, "Vision, Power and Agency: The Ascent of Ngo Dinh Diem," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 35, no. 3 (October 2004); Sean Fear, "Saigon Goes Global: South Vietnam's Quest for International Legitimacy in the Age of Détente," *Diplomatic History* 42, no. 3 (2018).

[8] Walter Johnson, "On Agency," *Journal of Social History* 37, no. 1 (Autumn 2003): 114. See also Sam Lebovic and Matthew B. Karush, "Introduction to 'On Agency' at Twenty," *Journal of Social History* 57, no. 3 (2024): 379.

[9] Not everyone agrees with us on this point. The 2024 annual conference of the Association of Asian Studies featured a panel entitled "Rethinking Republican Vietnam, 1955–1975: Agency and Freedom."

[10] Nick Cullather, "Development? It's History," *Diplomatic History* 24, no. 4 (2000): 641–653.

[11] Nick Cullather, *The Hungry World: America's Cold War Battle Against Poverty in Asia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), ix.

[12] Philip E. Catton, *Diem's Final Failure: Prelude to America's War in Vietnam* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002). For the claim that the Strategic Hamlet Program was designed and implemented by the US government, see Michael Latham, *Modernization as Ideology: American Social Science and "Nation Building" in the Kennedy Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), chapter 5.

[13] Ibid., 37.

[14] Edward Miller, *Misalliance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and the Fate of South Vietnam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013).

[15] David Biggs, *Quagmire: Nation-Building and Nature in the Mekong Delta* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2010).

[16] David Ludden, "Development Regimes in South Asia: History and the Governance Conundrum," *Economic and Political Weekly* 40, no. 37 (2005): 4042–4051.

[17] Pierre Brocheux, *The Mekong Delta: Ecology, Economy, and Revolution, 1860–1960* (Madison: Center for Southeast Asian Studies, University of Wisconsin–Madison, 1995); Michitake Aso, *Rubber and the Making of Vietnam: An Ecological History, 1897–1975* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018).

[18] Stan B-H Tan, "'Swiddens, Resettlements, Sedentarizations, and Villages': State Formation Among the Central Highlanders of Vietnam Under the First Republic, 1955–

1961," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 1, no. 1–2 (2006): 210–252; Stan B-H Tan, "The Struggle to Control Land-Grabbing: State Formation on the Central Highlands Frontier Under the First Republic of Vietnam (1954–1963)," in *On the Borders of State Power: Frontiers in the Greater Mekong Sub-Region*, ed. Martin Gainsborough (Routledge, 2008), 35–49; Jason Picard, "Fertile Lands Await," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 11, no. 3–4 (2016): 58–102; Simon Toner, "The Paradise of the Latrine: American Toilet Building and the Continuities of Colonial and Postcolonial Development," *Modern American History* 2, no. 3 (2019): 299–320; Simon Toner, "Imagining Taiwan: The Nixon Administration, the Developmental States, and South Vietnam's Search for Economic Viability, 1969–1975," *Diplomatic History* 41, no. 4 (2019): 772–798.

[19] Phi-Van Nguyen*, A Displaced Nation: The 1954 Evacuation and Its Political Impact on the Vietnam Wars* (Cornell University Press, 2024); Van Nguyen-Marshall, *Between War and the State: Civil Society in South Vietnam, 1954–1975* (Ithaca, NY: Southeast Asia Program Publications, 2024); Adrienne Châu-Minh Lê, "Toward National Buddhism: Thích Nhất Hạnh on Buddhist Nationalism and Modernity in the Journal *Phật Giáo Việt Nam*, 1956–1959," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 19, no. 1 (2024): 9–48.

[20] Adom Getachew, *Worldmaking After Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019).

[21] Mitchell Tan, "Spiritual Fraternities: The Transnational Networks of Ngô Đình Diệm's Personalist Revolution and the Republic of Vietnam, 1955–1963," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 14, no. 2 (2019): 1–67.

[22] Peter Zinoman, "A Republican Moment in the Study of Modern Vietnam," in *Building a Republican Nation in Vietnam*, ed. Nu-Anh Tran and Tuong Vu (University of Hawai'i Press, 2022). Zinoman might have added that both words are also absent from the index of his own 2001 monograph *The Colonial Bastille: A History of Imprisonment in Vietnam, 1862–1940*

(University of California Press)—a book whose very title seems to beg the question of the significance of republicanism in colonial Indochina.

[23] Vĩnh Sính, *Phan Chau Trinh and His Political Writings* (Cornell Southeast Asia Program Press, 2009); Philippe Peycam, *The Birth of Vietnamese Political Journalism, 1916–1930* (Columbia, 2012); Peter Zinoman, *Vietnamese Colonial Republican: The Political Vision of Vu Trong Phung* (University of California Press, 2014).

[24] Tran and Vu, *Building a Republican Nation in Vietnam*, 1–22.

[25] As Nu-Anh Tran puts it, "The RVN was home to a wide range of political groups whose endemic factionalism threatened to tear the regime apart." Nu-Anh Tran, *Disunion: Anticommunist Nationalism and the Making of the Republic of Vietnam* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2022), 5.

[26] Zinoman, *Vietnamese Colonial Republican*, 6.

[27] Tuan Hoang, "The Early South Vietnamese Critique of Communism," in *Dynamics of the Cold War in Asia: Ideology, Identity, and Culture*, ed. Tuong Vu and Wasana Wongsurawat (Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Nu-Anh Tran, "Denouncing the 'Việt Cộng': Tales of Revolution and Betrayal in the Republic of Vietnam," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 53, no. 4 (2022): 686–708; Nguyen Thien Y, "When State Propaganda Becomes Social Knowledge," in *Building a Republican Nation in Vietnam, 1920–1963*, ed. Nu-Anh Tran and Tuong Vu (University of Hawai'i Press, 2022).

[28] Tran and Vu, *Building a Republican Nation in Vietnam,* 9.

[29] John T. Sidel, *Republicanism, Communism, Islam: Cosmopolitan Origins of Revolution in Southeast Asia* (Cornell University Press, 2021); Nicole CuUnjieng Aboitiz, *Asian Place, Filipino Nation: A Global Intellectual History of the Philippine Revolution, 1887–1912* (Columbia University Press, 2020); Chi P. Pham, "Beyond the Indian Ocean Public Sphere: Vietnamese Reception of Rabindranath Tagore and Anticolonial Thought," *Journal of*

Vietnamese Studies 16, no. 2 (2021): 60–83; Agathe Larcher-Goscha, "Bùi Quang Chiêu in Calcutta (1928): The Broken Mirror of Vietnamese and Indian Nationalism," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 9, no. 4 (2014): 67–114; Tim Harper, "Singapore, 1915, and the Birth of the Asian Underground," *Modern Asian Studies* 47, no. 6 (2013): 1782–1811.

[30] Vũ Hồng Khanh, *Việt Nam Quốc dân Đảng: Đảng Sử Tập 1 The Vietnamese Nationalist Party: Party History Volume 1* self-published, 1966.

[31] Tran, "Denouncing the 'Việt Cộng'"; see also Brett Reilly, "The True Origin of the Term 'Viet Cong,'" *The Diplomat*, January 31, 2018, https://thediplomat.com/2018/01/the-true-origin-of-the-term-viet-cong/.

[32] See, for instance, Daniel Rodgers, "Republicanism: The Career of a Concept," *Journal of American History* 79, no. 1 (1992).

[33] Goscha, *Vietnam: A New History*; and Hue-Tam Ho Tai, "The Politics of Compromise: The Constitutionalist Party and the Electoral Reforms of 1922 in French Cochinchina," *Modern Asian Studies* 18, no. 3 (1984): 379–380.

[34] Tran, *Disunion*. Duy Lap Nguyen also challenges the assumption "…that the Republicanism of the South Vietnamese state was, from beginning to end, that of a nationalist government aimed at establishing a democratic alternative to communism based on the principle of popular sovereignty." Duy Lap Nguyen, *The Unimagined Community: Imperialism and Culture in South Vietnam* (Manchester University Press, 2018): 13.

[35] Examples include Sean Fear, "Saigon War Politics 1968–1975," *The Cambridge History of the Vietnam War, Volume III: Endings and Aftermaths* (Cambridge University Press, 2024); Nguyen-Marshall, *Between War and the State*; George J. Veith, *Drawn Swords in a Distant Land* (Encounter, 2021); Heather Stur, *Saigon at War: South Vietnam and the Global Sixties* (Cambridge University Press, 2020); Sophie Quinn-Judge, *The Third Force in the Vietnam War: The Elusive Search for Peace 1954–1975* (I. B. Taurus, 2017).

[36] Võ Phiến, *Văn học miền Nam: Tổng quan Literature in the South: An Overview* (Charleston, SC: Người Việt Books 2014), 79–80. See also David Hunt, "Propaganda and the Public: The Shaping of Opinion in the Southern Vietnamese Countryside During the Second Indochina War," *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 31, no, 2 (2016): 497–531.

[37] Tuan Hoang, "Political, Military, and Cultural Memoirs in Vietnamese," *The Republic of Vietnam 1955–1975: Vietnamese Perspectives on Nation-Building*, ed. Tuong Vu and Sean Fear (Cornell University Press, 2020): 334.

[38] James Carter, *Inventing Vietnam: The United States and State Building, 1954–1968* (Cambridge University Press, 2008). For a recent example see "Not the Fall of Saigon—Its Liberation," interview with Vivek Chibber, *Jacobin*, April 30, 2025, https://jacobin.com/2025/04/vietnam-war-communists-us-empire.

[39] John Smail, "On the Possibility of an Autonomous History of Modern Southeast Asia," *Journal of Southeast Asian History* 2, no. 2 (July 1961): 72–102.

[40] Notable English-language exceptions include Andrew Wiest, *Vietnam's Forgotten Army: Heroism and Betrayal in the ARVN* (New York University Press, 2009); Robert Brigham, *ARVN: Life and Death in the South Vietnamese Army* (University Press of Kansas, 2006); and especially George J Veith, *Black April: The Fall of South Vietnam, 1973-75* (Encounter Books, 2013)

[41] For an account that positions the Indochina Wars within a much longer history of civil warfare in Vietnam, see Keith Taylor, *A History of the Vietnamese* (Cambridge University Press, 2013). In a recent edition of his Vietnam War survey history, Pierre Asselin draws on Taylor's framework to describe the Indochina Wars as "the Fourth Vietnamese Civil War"; see Pierre Asselin, *Vietnam's American War: A New History*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2024). Other scholarly accounts which frame the Indochina Wars as civil wars include

François Guillemot, *Des Vietnamiennes dans la guerre civile: L'autre moitié de la guerre, 1945–1975* (Les Indes Savantes, 2014); and John C. Schaefer, "Ngô Kha, Vietnam's Civil Wars, and the Need for Forgiveness," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 13, no. 1 (2018): 1–41. The journalist Huy Đức analyzes the Communist Party's postwar treatment of South Vietnamese partisans and military personnel in light of its status as the victor in its civil war against the RVN; Huy Đức, *The Winning Side (Bên Thắng Cuộc)* (Osinbooks, 2012).

[42] David Armitage, *Civil Wars: A History in Ideas* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2017).

[43] Stathis N. Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

[44] For the assertion that the study of civil warfare in Vietnam War history is "ahistorical" because it attributes "too much causal force to local and transnational actors" and does not focus enough on the United States and Americans, see Daniel Bessner and Fredrik Logevall, "Recentering the United States in the Historiography of American Foreign Relations," *Texas National Security Review* 3, no. 2 (2020): 38–55, esp. 49. See also Christian Appy, "What Was the Vietnam War About?" *New York Times*, March 26, 2018.

[45] Christopher Goscha, *Vietnam, un Etat né de la guerre, 1945–1954 Vietnam, a State Born of War 1945-1954* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2011). See also the substantially revised and expanded English-language version of this text: Christopher Goscha, *The Road to Dien Bien Phu: A History of the First War for Vietnam* (Princeton University Press, 2022).

[46] Léon Pignon, quoted in Goscha, *The Road to Dien Bien Phu*, 209.

[47] Brett Reilly, "The Sovereign States of Vietnam, 1945–1955," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 11, no. 3–4 (2016): 103–139; Brett Reilly, "The Origins of the Vietnamese Civil War and the State of Vietnam," (PhD dissertation, University of Wisconsin–Madison, 2018). See also Brett Reilly, "Redefining the Origins of Vietnam's Civil War: The Cold War Conflict Between Phan Bội Châu and Hồ Chí Minh in the 1920s–30s," paper presented at the

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[48]Shawn McHale, *The First Vietnam War: Violence, Sovereignty, and the Fracture of the South, 1945–1956* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

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[56] Nhã Ca, *Mourning Headband for Hue: An Account of the Battle for Hue, Vietnam 1968*, trans. Olga Dror (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014).