

BOOK REVIEW

Here's the Beef: Religion, Culture, and Ngo Dinh Diem

Seth Jacobs. *America's Miracle Man in Vietnam: Ngo Dinh Diem, Religion, Race, and U.S. Intervention in Southeast Asia*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004. x + 351 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. \$79.95 (hardcover), \$22.95 (paper).

An editorial cartoon drawn by Karl Hubenthal for the Hearst newspapers in November 1963 depicted President John F. Kennedy as a mischievous boy who has just tipped over a statue labeled "Diem Regime." The cartoon—ideal for PowerPoint lectures on the Vietnam War—shows the notch in the Cold War consensus that would soon widen into the credibility gap. Hubenthal's caption cut through official obfuscation around the overthrow and assassination of President Ngo Dinh Diem, exposing the supposedly covert hand of U.S. policy. "Just leaned on it a little," the impish JFK shrugs. The image also contains a revealing irony: the shattered figure appears to be Buddhist, or possibly Hindu, but as every regular reader of *Time*, *Reader's Digest*, or Tom Dooley's bestselling novels, as well as viewers of Bishop Fulton Sheen's top-ranked television show knew, Diem was Roman Catholic. His repudiation by the United States and especially by Kennedy, his coreligionist, required a change of sacerdotal imagery. Diem the crusader became, in death, an Oriental idol.

Seth Jacobs's study describes the mixture of religion and image making that produced Diem and his short-lived reputation as a Vietnamese Joan of Arc. Americans in the 1950s customarily read Cold War scenarios in religious terms. Church and synagogue attendance soared nationwide, a revival Jacobs calls the Third Great Awakening. Religious books and films dominated popular culture, while mass-circulation religious newspapers and magazines, such as *Commentary*, *America*, and *Christian Century*, treated national issues from a denominational perspective. As in earlier awakenings, the spiritual movement spilled over into political life. Jacobs argues that Dwight Eisenhower, the first president baptized in the White House, regarded faith—not democracy or capitalism—as the heftiest ideological counterweight to communism. National security officials, most of them mainline Protestants, measured religions in much the same way they assessed governments, by their resources and vulnerabilities in meeting the Communist challenge. Jacobs is particularly critical of their failure to see possibilities for alliance with the syncretic "sects" flourishing in the Mekong

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Just Leaned on It a Little . . .



Delta, Cao Dai and Hoa Hao, which they disparaged as voodoo cults. Eisenhower's aides likewise dismissed Buddhism, Vietnam's principal religion, as a passive, effeminate creed.

Catholicism, by contrast, held an allure entirely out of proportion to its miniscule Vietnamese flock. The heroic resistance of East European clerics and the experience with Christian Democrats in Italy convinced policymakers that Catholics could be mobilized to defend their religion. When they asked the question once put derisively by Stalin—"How many divisions has the Pope?"—they imagined large, organized legions. Catholicism enjoyed so much influence in the United States in the 1950s, Jacobs argues, less because of its electoral

strength or its highly placed adherents than because of its image as a muscular, anti-Communist faith.

Policymakers drew their impressions not from theologians or Orientalist scholars but from assumptions conveyed by mass culture. Echoing the analysis of Christina Klein and Jonathan Nashel, Jacobs traces the movement of ideas from Graham Greene, James Michener, and Rogers and Hammerstein into the discussions of the National Security Council. Policymakers would have been disturbed had they known more about Diem's autocratic philosophy of "personalism," borrowed from antimodern French moralists. Assumptions based on the familiar pastoral traditions of Italy, Boston, and Bing Crosby movies reassured them that Diem would favor a Tammany-style paternalism. In this context, warnings about the regime's nepotism and corruption simply confirmed that the program was on track. Michener and the State Department's most seasoned experts agreed that Asians knew nothing of democracy and wanted only strong leadership. "Can we make a synthetic strong man of him?" CIA director Walter Bedell Smith asked of Diem in 1954.¹ That is precisely what they did, Jacobs confirms, fashioning an imaginary strong man out of bits of Chiang Kai-shek, Knute Rockne, and Yul Brynner.

Jacobs fills Robert Buzzanco's order for "beef" on the role of culture and religion in international affairs. In a challenge to culturalist approaches, Buzzanco asked six years ago in these pages "how, in the final analysis, does [religion] explain state action, which presumably is the basis of the study of foreign relations?"² Historians have been somewhat at a loss to explain state action in the selection of Diem to head the Saigon government improvised in the wake of the Geneva settlement. The reclusive, antidemocratic Diem, Frances Fitzgerald argues, was "a curious candidate for the role of American protégé."³ His religion, some claim, should have been an obvious disqualification. "This devout Catholic who once wanted to be a priest," Neil Jamieson contends, "was grotesquely miscast" as leader of a Buddhist country.⁴ In fact, these and many other objections—such as his tendencies to resist advice and alienate supporters, the thinness of his support, and early indications of corruption—appeared repeatedly in high-level memos at a time when Diem was one among several candidates for leadership. "What is striking in retrospect," George Herring writes, "is the degree to which early on the scene estimates of the prime minister's leadership pointed directly toward the major problems that would develop later."⁵ The strength of those objections presents a historical problem, Kai Bird argues: "Why did the Eisenhower administration gradually climb deeper into bed with

1. Quoted in Lloyd C. Gardner, *Approaching Vietnam* (New York, 1988), 315.

2. Robert Buzzanco, "Where's the Beef? Culture without Power in the Study of U.S. Foreign Relations," *Diplomatic History* 24, no. 4 (Fall 2000): 623.

3. Frances Fitzgerald, *Fire in the Lake* (Boston, 1972), 80.

4. Neil L. Jamieson, *Understanding Vietnam* (Berkeley, CA, 1993), 236.

5. George C. Herring, *America's Longest War*, 4th ed. (Boston, 2000), 60.

the Diem regime in Saigon, even as its own intelligence estimates were warning that the regime had little political viability?"⁶

Religion has not figured prominently in historians' answers to this question. Characteristically, a recent, wide-ranging treatment of the Diem-Kennedy relationship by Howard Jones includes no index entry under Catholicism, and while many writers note the influence of prominent Catholics such as Cardinal Spellman and Senators Mike Mansfield and John F. Kennedy, it is not clear why John Foster Dulles was so easily swayed by outsiders and junior senators from the opposing party. Some analysts have seen the choice of Diem in spite of his religious affiliation as evidence of the arrogance and miscalculation that lay behind U.S. actions. Edward G. Lansdale "was so naive about the [religious] implications," Neil Sheehan argues, "that he formed entire civic action teams of Northern Catholics to propagandize against the Viet Minh among the Delta peasants."⁷ What these interpretations do not explain is why U.S. arrogance and miscalculation redounded consistently to Diem's advantage.

Other interpretations have stressed the absence of substitutes for Diem and the legacy of McCarthyism, which made middle- and high-ranking officials reluctant to risk their political necks by advocating alternatives, but these explanations are likewise short on beef. As Jacobs shows, there was no scarcity of choices or of officials unafraid to put them forward. Prior to the sect crisis, removing Diem would have required only a telegram from the emperor, Bao Dai. The easiest replacements would have been General Nguyen Van Hinh, head of the army, and Phan Huy Quat, the defense minister, but U.S. envoy Lawton Collins, a Catholic, suggested other names as well while warning that just about any candidate would outlast Diem. Diem's survival has often been seen as hanging on a bureaucratic duel between Collins and Lansdale (also a Catholic), but Jacobs explains that Collins undercut his own recommendations by acknowledging Diem's "spiritual qualities" presented an alternative to "the insidious religion of communism" (p. 194). Meanwhile in the same week, *Time* trumpeted Diem as Vietnam's salvation and *Life* reminded policymakers that "Buddhist passivity could be helpful to communism" (p. 190). Dulles went as far as drafting an order recommending Diem's removal, but then demurred because of his lingering confidence in Diem's "high moral character" (p. 207).

The links between American Catholicism and Cold War politics have come under scholarly scrutiny in recent years, and Jacobs mines this new field of research. Much of the material on the Vietnam Lobby and Thomas Dooley, the "jungle doctor" and novelist, will be familiar to readers of James T. Fisher's excellent biography. Fisher and John T. McGreevy, another historian of religion, have regarded Vietnam as an episode in Catholic assimilation. Catholic politicians and intellectuals self-consciously associated their religion with the anti-Communist cause as a way to overcome pervasive suspicion of the Vatican's

6. Kai Bird, *The Color of Truth* (New York, 1998), 178–79.

7. Neil Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie* (New York, 1988), 174.

fascist ties and “totalitarian” authority.⁸ Jacobs illustrates this point with a photograph of a Catholic Youth Organization chapter rallying in front of St. Patrick's Cathedral in naval uniforms with American and Vatican flags flying. Dooley and Kennedy were both exemplars of a new breed of Catholic, able to juggle orthodoxy and pluralism. Jacobs's narrative stops with the death of Dulles in 1959, leaving a wide space for a sequel, because in the 1960s the juggling became more complicated. How, one wonders, did considerations of religion figure into Kennedy's decision to topple Diem?

The escalation of the war fractured the assimilationist consensus within the Church. While Spellman and other leaders maintained the Cold War line, dissident Catholics, such as Fr. Daniel Berrigan and the Catholic magazine *Ramparts*, assumed prominent positions in the antiwar movement. In the 1960s, religion began to disappear from political discourse as a singular noun (the Catholics) and appear in adjectival forms (Christian conservative) that implied fluid alignments in place of the institutional power the churches were once thought to have. No matter how many megachurches spring up in the red states, it is unlikely that the pendulum will swing all the way back. In this innovative and lucid treatment, Jacobs recaptures a moment when religion had an unusual and influential hold on public life, and, tragically, on foreign affairs.

8. John T. McGreevy, “Thinking on One's Own: Catholicism in the American Intellectual Imagination, 1928–1960,” *Journal of American History* 84, no. 1 (June 1997): 97–131.