

EDWARD MILLER, *MISALLIANCE. NGO DINH DIEM, THE UNITED STATES AND THE FATE OF SOUTH VIETNAM*, HARVARD UNIVERSITY PRESS, CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS, LONDON, ENGLAND 2013, PP. 420

The Vietnam War remains a hotly debated topic in the United States. With the passage of years, new sources become available, and scholars with fresh perspectives, not burdened with earlier, ideological quarrels, start to grapple with the subject. Edward Miller's book deals with one of the most controversial topics of the pre-American Vietnamese War: The United States relations with South Vietnamese president Ngo Dinh Diem and the role in the history of the man himself. Ngo Dinh Diem remains a controversial figure to this day, finding both bitter detractors,<sup>1</sup> and fierce admirers<sup>2</sup> amongst American historians. However, most of those books are written from a purely American perspective. Miller makes Ngo Dinh Diem the main figure of his book, quite correctly arguing that "by continuing to rely on those clichés, Diem's admirers and critics have failed to give him his due as a historical actor."<sup>3</sup> By using wealth of Vietnamese sources, both printed and oral, the author of *Misalliance* sets before himself the ambitious goal of showing not only the true Diem, but also the objectives and motives of his policies, which Miller claims were both poorly understood and misinterpreted both by Diem's contemporary politicians and journalists, and historians in later years.

The book is split into nine chapters. It is equipped with an index, footnotes, and a list of abbreviations and published collections of government documents. However, it doesn't have a separate bibliography, making it harder to find specific publications.

The first chapter, *Man of Faith*, is dedicated to Ngo Dinh Diem and his life prior his appointment to the position of State of Vietnam prime minister in June 1954. It is very informative and provides good insight into the Ngo family, which formed, inspired, and actively helped Diem during his whole career.<sup>4</sup> Miller goes to great lengths to dispel many myths that circulated about the Vietnamese president during his time, and persist in a part of American historiography to this day. For example, the author of *Misalliance* skillfully presents how the June 1954 nomination of

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<sup>1</sup> D.L. Anderson, *The Columbia Guide to the Vietnam War*, New York, Chichester 2002, pp. XIV + 308; S. Karnow, *Vietnam. A History*, New York 1983, pp. XI + 752.

<sup>2</sup> M. Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken. The Vietnam War 1954–1965*, New York 2006, pp. XXXII + 17.

<sup>3</sup> E. Miller, *Misalliance. Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States and the Fate of South Vietnam*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, England 2013, p. 14.

<sup>4</sup> Diem was the third of six sons fathered by prominent Vietnamese mandarin, Ngo Dinh Kha, each of them attaining high rank in public service or Church.

Diem to the position of prime minister was not a *CIA* plot or a question of external pressure, but in fact the effect of long-term backstage activities of the Ngo brothers and their associates. Miller also devotes much attention to the present the issue of Ngo Dinh Nhu's *Personalism* ideology and the *Can Lao* secret party without the common American bias, which usually culpably simplified them.

The second chapter, *New Beginnings*, focuses on presenting the American concept of nation building, and the plans to implement it in the South Vietnam. Miller argues that "for many of the Americans who aspired to build nations overseas after 1945, the New Deal would serve as a touchstone of developmentalist ideas and models."<sup>5</sup> He distinguishes two competing schools of thought in the American concept of building developed societies: high modernism, which promoted top-down change in a form of big, centrally-controlled projects, inspired by the example of the Tennessee Valley Authority,<sup>6</sup> and low modernism, which argued that social change should come by the way of small-scale, locally-based initiatives, and was especially interested in a question of agrarian reforms in Third World countries. Miller also touches the topic of American academic circles, enthusiastically collaborating with US government officials on those nation building projects. The chapter also deals with the initial American attitude towards Ngo Dinh Diem, which was far from enthusiastic.

The third chapter, *The Making of an Alliance*, presents the first, most troublesome year of Diem's rule, from the June 1954 to May 1955. It describes in details the most important upheavals and crises of this period: the attempted coup of general Nguyen Van Hinh, the struggle for power with the French and politico-religious organizations *Hoa Hao* and *Cao Dai*, the disagreements and difficult cooperation with American special envoy, general Joseph Lawton Collins, and the fight for power over Saigon against the crime syndicate *Binh Xuyen*, which culminated in the Battle of Saigon at the end of April 1955. The biggest advantage of this chapter is the fact that Miller breaks up with usual practice of presenting those events from a purely American viewpoint. He convincingly shows how Americans taking part in those events overestimated and exaggerated their own role, and explores the motives of Ngo Dinh Diem and his fraction, rightly presenting the South Vietnamese prime minister as the main actor and scriptwriter of the drama taking place in the first year of his rule.

Chapter 4, *Revolutions and Republics*, starts with description of the immediate aftermath of the Battle of Saigon, and the dramatic change of American politics towards South Vietnam. It then proceeds to depict the concept of *National Revolution* coined by Ngo Dinh Diem and Ngo Dinh Nhu, the referendum to depose the former emperor Bao Dai, and the birth of the Republic of Vietnam. Miller then presents how Diem's and US concepts of *democracy*, *agrarian revolution* and *nation building* were in many aspects similar enough to allow the alliance and cooperation, but at the same time different enough to create tensions and plant seeds for a future rupture in relations. Again, the author of *Misalliance* goes beyond the simplistic discourse of

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<sup>5</sup> E. Miller, op. cit., p. 56.

<sup>6</sup> TVA is a corporation, owned by the US federal government, created in 1933 to oversee economic development in the Tennessee Valley, a region exceptionally hit by Great Depression. It provides navigation, energy, fertilizers and flood control to this day, <https://www.tva.gov/> (access: 20.01.2016).

*Diem – democrat or tyrant?*, showing that the South Vietnamese president, like many other Third World leaders, had a vision of his own, which was misunderstood by his oversea partners.

Chapter 5, *Settlers and Engineers*, centers around one of most controversial topics of Diem’s presidency – the rural reform in South Vietnam. The author of the book shows that for the Ngo brothers, the re-making of the rural landscape of their country was not only about the economy and security. South Vietnamese rural development was also aimed to change the Vietnamese farmer himself, and turn him into a responsible member of the national community, with the use of the *Personalist* ideology. Miller uses examples of three different agricultural programs to show that while Diem’s approach could, and in some places was successful, in the end, for various reasons, his concept of development of rural areas didn’t succeed.

Chapter 6, *Countering Insurgents*, is dedicated to a period of renewed communist activity in the South, which symbolically started with the attempt to assassinate Diem on February 27<sup>th</sup> 1957. Forced to take action by the effective anticommunist government campaigns in South Vietnam, Hanoi restarted terror activities of its cadres below the 17<sup>th</sup> Parallel. This in turn resulted in even more ruthless and wide-reaching government activities, which also swept along many non-communist opponents of the regime. The situation escalated over the years, turning into open guerrilla warfare in 1960. The chapter also deals with the failed Paratrooper Coup, that took place in November 1960, and was the first real challenge to Diem’s rule since the turbulent year 1955.

Chapter 7, *Limited Partners*, focuses on the hopes of both Vietnamese and Americans related with new presidential administration of John F. Kennedy. In the end, those hopes were reduced to a “limited partnership” instead of a full-fledged alliance that Diem was hoping for.<sup>7</sup> In this part the book also deals with the *Strategic Hamlet Program*, which, as Miller points out, for the Vietnamese was not only a simple security measure to regain the control over the countryside population, as it is usually described in American historiography, but also a tool of changing the South Vietnamese rural society in accordance with the *Personalist* ideology. This part of *Misalliance* also touches on the differences between Americans and the Vietnamese about the methods of implementation and the goals of the *Strategic Hamlet Program*, that came to light during its creation and realization.

Chapter 8, *Mixed Signals*, starts at the beginning of 1963, when both governments looked with optimism into the future, content that the “tide of the struggle had already changed.”<sup>8</sup> This however abruptly shifted with the Buddhist Crisis that erupted in May 1963. Miller argues that Vietnamese Buddhists saw their religion inseparably connected with the fate of their nation, and had their nationalist vision of their own, making them rivals to Diem. However, despite that, they coexisted with the government surprisingly well until the crisis of 1963. Even after the outbreak of the crisis, both sides at first tried to find a compromise. Yet, when things moved to a confronta-

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<sup>7</sup> E. Miller, op. cit., p. 231.

<sup>8</sup> Ibidem, p. 249.

tion, and the government decided to use force, it turned out that the American public opinion is vehemently against Diem's regime, in contrast to year 1955. The author of *Misalliance* argues, however, that the American belief of a religious cause of the conflict is erroneous, and in reality it was a clash of two competing visions of Vietnam.

Chapter 9, *The Unmaking of an Alliance*, is dedicated to the last, tense period of American relations with Ngo Dinh Diem, from August to November 1963. Miller depicts the suffocating atmosphere of Saigon, when rumors of plots and counterplots circled endlessly, and mutual suspicion was commonplace. The author devoted a lot of space to the backstage machinations of Ngo Dinh Nhu,<sup>9</sup> who sought to ensure the safety of the regime of his brother, at the same time trying to outmaneuver various groups of plotters and mend Vietnamese-American relations. However, he made a fatal mistake of misjudging the intentions of the US ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge Jr., who from the moment of his arrival in Saigon by the end of August, worked tirelessly to depose Diem and his family, finally succeeding in November 1963.

By using wealth of Vietnamese sources, both printed and oral, the author of *Misalliance* carefully crafts intricate portrait of Ngo Dinh Diem and his complicated relation with the United States. The main merit of this book lays in the abandonment of black and white narration about Ngo Dinh Diem, which until very recently dominated in American historiography. Edward Miller convincingly shows that things and actions that were obviously undemocratic, rash, heavy-handed and incomprehensible for Americans, in reality were thoroughly thought through and in full accord with the idea of democracy in the vision of Ngo Dinh Diem. A vision that was vastly different from the American one, true, but far from the reactionary despot devoted to "hopelessly backward ideas,"<sup>10</sup> like he was depicted by many Americans.

*Misalliance* is a very well written book, and Miller had put much effort (and succeeded) in describing complex issues in an accessible manner, at the same time without falling into cliché and simplification. The main points of his book: that Ngo Dinh Diem was a shrewd, standalone operator with his own vision for Vietnam's modernization, that Americans and the Vietnamese both wanted to pull the modernization cart, but each in a slightly different direction and by a different route, and that the politics of nation building in Vietnam were influenced both by competing American visions of modernization, and interactions and rivalries among the Vietnamese themselves, are presented in a convincing way and based on a broad source base.

However, the book also has some flaws. It is sometimes hard to find clear evaluation of the decisions made by American policymakers, especially in the critical few last months before the November coup of 1963. The author also has a tendency to gloss over some important details that are inconvenient from the US perspective.

Writing about the failed Paratrooper Coup of 1960, Miller writes that „Diem and Nhu suspected – incorrectly, as it turned out – that some Americans had encouraged

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<sup>9</sup> Which included confidential contacts with Viet Cong and Hanoi representatives, and the intermediary of Polish representative in International Commission for Supervision and Control in Vietnam, Mieczysław Maneli. Ibidem, pp. 305–307.

<sup>10</sup> Ibidem, p. 14.

the coup.”<sup>11</sup> It is not only an understatement, it is plain wrong. Even the documents from *Foreign Papers of United States* alone show that at least some of the US Embassy personnel sympathized with the rebels and had prior knowledge of the coup. For example, moments after the first shots were fired in Saigon, the Counselor of the Embassy for Political Affairs, Joseph Mendenhall, declared that it was an “attempt by non-Communists to overthrow the Diem Government.”<sup>12</sup> In the next hours he “recommended that the Embassy take a neutral position towards the coup, for it soon became clear that the other side was ‘as much a friend of ours as Diem was.’”<sup>13</sup> Writing about the joint fact-finding mission of the Department of State and the Department of Defense that president Kennedy sent to Vietnam in summer 1963, which resulted in his famous quip “The two of you did visit the same country, didn’t you?,”<sup>14</sup> Miller omits the fact that the Department of State representative was Joseph Mendenhall himself. In other words, the report that described Ngo’s “reign of terror” and raised “the specter of a religious war,”<sup>15</sup> was written by the man who wanted to depose Ngo Dinh Diem as early as in 1960.

Describing the battle of Ap Bac, the author of *Misalliance* places lieutenant colonel John Paul Vann as a mere observer, while in reality Vann was the main advisor of the South Vietnamese forces present on the battlefield, and was directly responsible for the disaster that took place.<sup>16</sup> The role of the American press corps in turning the US public opinion against Diem is also touched on very briefly.

Introducing the figure of Henry Cabot Lodge Jr., Miller doesn’t write about the political motivations of President Kennedy, who nominated a potential rival in the presidential election to the post of ambassador to Vietnam to pull the Republican Party into responsibility for the US policy in Vietnam. In effect, when Lodge started to create his own policy in Vietnam in October 1963, encouraging the conspiring generals, Kennedy was too scared about the political consequences to call off his disobedient envoy, ending in a situation when, in the words of Secretary McNamara, “We’re dealing with [the situation in South Vietnam – author’s note] through a press-minded ambassador and an unstable Frenchman.”<sup>17</sup> *Misalliance* also lacks that last paragraph about the ultimate fate of Diem. The book closes with a scene where he boards an armored carrier and drives off. And while the readers reaching for *Misalliance* probably are familiar with the tragic end of Ngo Dinh Diem, it would be fitting to end the book with a complete description of his fate.

Finally, the book’s conclusions remain silent about the dire consequences of the death of the first President of the Republic of Vietnam. One can risk to claim that the author deliberately omitted them because attempting to maintain a balanced tone of

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<sup>11</sup> Ibidem, p. 204.

<sup>12</sup> *Editorial Note*, undated, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1958–1960*, vol. I, pp. 660–663.

<sup>13</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>14</sup> E. Miller, op. cit., p. 299.

<sup>15</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>16</sup> Vann was later actively involved in the whitewashing of his own role in the clash. M. Moyar, op. cit., pp. 186–205.

<sup>17</sup> Ibidem, p. 259.

his work, and seeking to give a voice to all parties in this aspect he would have to unequivocally admit that the overthrowing of Diem was short-sighted and brought a disaster to both the Vietnamese and the Americans.

Despite of the above concerns, *Misalliance* by Edward Miller is definitely recommendable. The effort to bring out the true picture of Ngo Dinh Diem from the previously imposed clichés is commendable, sources are solid, and the logic of the author's reasoning is, for most of the time, hard to challenge.

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