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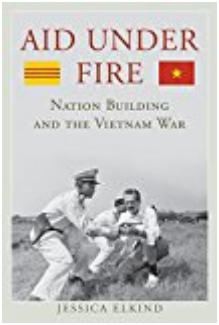
Jessica Elkind. *Aid under Fire: Nation Building and the Vietnam War.* Studies in Conflict Diplomacy Peace Series. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2016. 310 pp. $45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8131-6583-7.



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Aid under Fire by Jessica Elkind is a very useful and well-documented study on the use of aid by the United States as a weapon against the perceived threat of communism in Vietnam. The origin of this policy is correctly pointed out by Elkind in the introduction to the book: "Following the victory of anti-Communist factions in Greece and Turkey, in part as a result of American assistance, President Harry Truman's administration was emboldened to dedicate resources to the developing world and rely on foreign aid as an important weapon in the US diplomatic arsenal" (p. 10).

As far as Vietnam was concerned, right after the French defeat in 1954 at the battle of Dien Bien Phu, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles was quoted as saying that American intervention was now possible because "we have a clean base there [in Indochina] now without a taint of colonialism. Dien Bien Phu was a blessing in disguise."[1] Shortly thereafter, President Dwight Eisenhower sent a letter to Prime Minister Ngo Dinh Diem promising aid "in developing and maintaining a strong, viable state, capable of resisting attempted subversion or aggression through military means."[2] Elkind goes on to say that "in many ways, Ngo Dinh Diem represented the lynchpin of early US nation-building efforts in South Vietnam. From the perspective of many people, ranging from disaffected intellectuals in Saigon to Buddhist and other non-Catholic religious leaders to impoverished peasants who had been displaced from their homes during the First Indochina War, Diem was ill suited to lead the country" (p. 13).

The above statement, while mostly correct, needs some clarification. Most of the Vietnamese mentioned in the statement opposed the "US nation-building efforts" to create and maintain a separate South Vietnam because these efforts were in violation of the stipulations of the Geneva Agreements and were seen as a means of destroying the Vietnamese own efforts at reunifying their country through internationally supervised elections by 1956. In fact, many Vietnamese in both the northern and southern regions at that time saw the term "nation building" as a replacement

of the French "civilizing mission" (***mission civilisatrice***) to justify American neocolonialism and/or imperialism. Diem was "ill suited" partly because he was seen as an instrument of the American efforts at destroying the chances for Vietnam to become a unified country and not because of resistance to any serious "nation-building efforts." If anything, Diem seemed to have been quite well suited and effective in the roles chosen for him by the United States as indicated in the following statement by Elkind: "For eight years, US policy makers tolerated—and in many cases even encouraged—Diem's repressive and authoritarian policies because their desire to preserve an anti-Communist nation in South Vietnam out-weighed any commitment to promote democracy or address the concerns of Vietnam's people. In doing so, American policy makers and aid workers discounted local political dynamics and exhibited overconfidence in their ability to impose their vision rather than contend seriously with the legacy of colonialism or the nature of the ongoing revolution in Vietnam" (pp. 15-16).

To give details to points made in the introduction, each of the five chapters in the book "focuses on one type of development program and illuminates a key aspect of American aid workers' efforts" (p. 23). Chapter 1 examines US involvement, from 1954 to 1956, in settling three-quarters of a million Catholic northern refugees into various rural areas of the South in the attempt to provide support for the Diem regime. Tensions between the refugees and the local residents soon arose that created considerable instability in the settlement areas. But "American policy makers and aid workers chose to ignore such problems in order to justify continued intervention and ensure political and financial support for their policies in Vietnam" (p. 55). At the end of the chapter, Elkind concludes: "Many of the subsequent nation-building failures in South Vietnam might have been avoided had American policy makers and aid workers taken a more objective view of the refugee episode. Instead, they projected onto the crisis their profound desire for a successful outcome to the overall nation-building experiment in Vietnam" (pp. 55-56). But one wonders whether "subsequent nation-building failures" in the southern part of Vietnam might have been avoided as the author suggests. Effort justification would be unavoidable since the ultimate goal of the "overall nation-building experiment" by the United States was to create a separate South Vietnam against the will of the majority of the population in Vietnam.

Perhaps chapter 2—"Civil Servants and Cold Warriors: Technical Assistance in Public Administration"—serves in part to answer the above query. Advisors from Michigan State University (MSU) and from the US Operations Mission (USOM) were sent to South Vietnam to set up public administration and to train civil servants in order to "strengthen Diem's tenuous hold on power and reinforce South Vietnam's autonomy and legitimacy" (p. 58). But, after going into various details in the chapter, the author comes to the conclusion that "Diem's intransigence and the political considerations driving US aid ensured that technical assistance programs in public administration existed largely to benefit political elites and support an unpopular government in Saigon.... American aid workers' vision of establishing a professional civil service could not resolve the fundamental political and security problems in South Vietnam, especially the Diem regime's legitimacy crisis and the development of a potent antigovernment insurgency" (pp. 90-91).

Chapter 3—"Sowing the Seeds of Discontent: American Agricultural-Development Programs in South Vietnam"—describes in some detail how "American agricultural experts from both the USOM and the private International Voluntary Services (IVS) introduced a series of projects designed to transform rural society in South Vietnam" (pp. 93-94). In spite of the well-meaning efforts of the IVSers, their projects failed for many reasons. Near the end of the chapter, the author

gives the following explanation: “While these programs had always revolved around winning hearts and minds and cultivating support for Diem, early efforts focused on increasing agriculture production and improving the lives of Vietnamese farmers. By the early 1960s, however, the explicit objective of all technical assistance had become defeating the insurgency.... As a result, the focus of American aid workers explicitly shifted from providing technical assistance in agriculture to supporting the political and military campaign of the US and South Vietnamese governments” (p. 128).

After the introduction of American troops into Vietnam, the main goal of the United States was to carry out the pacification of the countryside by destroying crop lands through bombardment and chemical defoliants in order to drive the rural population into so-called refugee camps. In November 1966, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara explained that it “has been our task all along” to “root out the VC [Viet Cong] infrastructure and establish the GVN [Government of Vietnam] presence.”[3] In the hope that hunger would force the rural population to stop supporting the NLF (National Liberation Front of South Vietnam) and move over to the US-Saigon-controlled areas, by the end of 1966, more than half of the chemicals sprayed were admittedly directed at crops. In February 1967, Donald Hornig, President Johnson’s chief scientific advisor, explained to a group of scientists that “the anticrop program was aimed chiefly at moving the people.”[4]

The next two chapters clearly indicate that the terms labeled as aid or development programs by American policymakers were clearly meant for propping the clientele regime in Saigon through outright repression and thought control. And one wonders whether they never saw that these efforts might not eventually lead to military confrontation and war. At the beginning of chapter 4—“Policing the Insurgency: Police Administration and Internal Security in South Vietnam”—the author writes that this program “reflected the early confidence South Vietnamese and American policy makers had in nonmilitary modernization efforts, and it reveals the high value they placed on maintaining stability and defending the new state” (p. 131). After discussing the details of repression, the author concludes: “Diem refused to acknowledge that increasingly repressive authoritarian rule did not win him any friends in the Vietnamese countryside or in Washington, DC.... Similarly, American policy makers continued to believe that South Vietnam’s problems could be solved by an intense military campaign” (p. 171).

The very first sentence of chapter 5—“Teaching Loyalty: Educational Development and the Strategic Hamlet Program”—reads: “American nation builders believed that educational development offered an important avenue for bolstering the state of South Vietnam and for improving the lives of its people” (p. 143). On the next page, the author states that “education advisers from USOM and especially IVS assumed an explicit political role and served to implement US and GVN policies to a far greater degree than most other American aid workers in the country” (p. 174). As for the strategic hamlet program, which was a massive relocation of rural areas into practically concentration camps, the author writes: “The strategic hamlet program was a direct response to escalating warfare and the failure of previous GVN attempts to secure the loyalty of Vietnam’s rural population” (p. 193). At the end of the chapter, she concludes: “As the 1960s wore on, the war consumed all other American efforts in Vietnam. American aid programs increasingly assumed counterinsurgency functions and explicitly advanced military objectives” (p. 208).

In connection to the situation in rural South Vietnam in 1967 and IVS volunteers, Elkind writes in the conclusion of her book: “In September 1967, as the war raged and negotiations seemed like a remote possibility, forty-nine members of the IVS team signed an open letter to President

Johnson imploring him to change course and end the war in Vietnam. In their letter, the IVSers documented the devastating effects of the war on Vietnam's people, including the development of virulent anti-American sentiment among the local population. They also argued that US assistance and nation building had thwarted real self-determination" (p. 212). On the next page, Elkind makes the following observation: "Although their 1967 letter and resignation strongly condemned US policies like most other nation builders the IVSers failed to acknowledge the pivotal role that they and other civilian aid workers had played in shaping and implementing those policies. In fact, given the central position they had occupied in executing development projects and advancing US goals in Vietnam, their shift and later critique of American policies appears somewhat ironic.... In key ways, the ineffectiveness of nation-building and development programs—all in service of propping up an unpopular, repressive, and, in the minds of some people, illegitimate regime in the South—led directly to the very war that many aid workers later protested" (pp. 213-214).

It seems to me that the above assessment is somewhat harsh, suggesting that both aid and the aid workers should be under fire. Granted that some of these people were perhaps "do-gooders" who became tools, unwittingly or willfully, for the US policy of using aid as a weapon and "nation building" as a justification for it. I also have some doubts about the following line in the last page of the book: "Had US officials and aid workers fully appreciated the complex political situation in South Vietnam and responded to these conditions with greater flexibility instead of imposing their own rigid agenda, nation building in Vietnam might have produced more lasting achievements" (p. 217). From the beginning, aid was meant as a weapon by American policymakers to destroy "the enemy" and hence it would inevitably lead to war. Wars usually create all kinds of dislocations and polarizations—economic, social, political, and moral, to name a few—which together make nation building extremely difficult. Furthermore, if a war is won by military means, as was the case in Vietnam in 1975, then a "winner-takes-all" mentality develops among the "victors." This mentality has further complicated the tasks of nation building in Vietnam ever since.

Notes

[1]. Quoted in Joseph Buttinger, ***Vietnam: The Unforgettable Tragedy*** (New York: Horizon Press, 1977), 33.

[2]. Quoted in Harry Ashmore and William Baggs, ***Mission to Hanoi*** (New York: Putnam, 1968), 230. Full text of letter in Marvin E. Gettleman, ed., ***Vietnam: History, Documents, and Opinions on a Major World Crisis*** (New York: Fawcett World Library, 1966), 204-205.

[3]. Senator Gravel Edition of ***The Pentagon Papers*** (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1971), 4:374.

[4]. Quoted in Seymour M. Hersh, "Our Chemical War," ***New York Review of Books***, April 25, 1968.

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