The territory that eventually constituted the country of South Vietnam had a rich and complex history, but one scarcely known to most Americans who went there as nation builders. Most of the Americans who served as nation builders in South Vietnam did so after the downfall of Ngo Dinh Diem’s regime, which lasted from 1954 until his overthrow and murder in 1963. The challenges these nation builders faced were influenced not just by the events of Diem’s rule but also by South Vietnam’s colonial inheritance. The socioeconomic problems that afflicted rural peasants, the attitudes and foibles of South Vietnam’s rulers, and the Communist challenge the country faced were all shaped by the legacy of French colonialism. Diem’s inability to overcome these legacies stimulated the first American attempts at nation building in South Vietnam. Although unsuccessful in their goal of overseeing the emergence of an effective and legitimate GVN before Diem’s overthrow in 1963, these attempts showcased a variety of American approaches to the problem of nation building that would influence the more comprehensive and organized efforts of CORDS later in the decade.

The French Inheritance

Upon its independence, South Vietnam inherited largely intact the governing apparatus that had collaborated with the French in their rule over Cochinchina and southern Annam. As a tool for nation building, this apparatus had grave deficiencies. The
French had always paid lip service to their *mission civilisatrice*, the quest to transform Vietnam into a modern nation-state. But the main aim of colonial governance had been to protect the interests of French exporters and investors. One consequence of running Indochina as a business was that it created an incentive to keep costs down, meaning that the French did not develop colonial government beyond the level necessary to maintain order, levy taxes, and secure major towns and communication routes. French administration had its grip weakened further by the Japanese occupation of Indochina during World War II and the subsequent war against the Viet Minh. The GVN hence inherited a colonial governmental bureaucracy with little experience or tradition of involvement in the South Vietnamese countryside, precisely the area that was the source of the Vietnamese Communist movement’s strength.

Recent events aside, the story of Vietnamese history writ large suggested that the Saigon regime would struggle to exert its authority over South Vietnam. The historic center of Vietnamese civilization was the Red River Delta in North Vietnam, and the Vietnamese people had spread south only gradually. The Mekong Delta, the heartland of South Vietnam, had held a sizable Vietnamese population only from the late eighteenth century. The new settlers in the south developed what historian Li Tana calls “a new way of being Vietnamese,” one in which society was more fluid and less amenable to central control. The Nguyen family who ruled southern Vietnam first as princes and then as a dynasty after Vietnam was unified under Emperor Gia Long in 1802 did so only through loosely controlled intermediaries. An attempt by the emperor Minh Mang—to impose direct rule in 1833 led to a bloody insurrection that was quelled only after two years, underscoring how lightly the emperors had to tread in ruling the fractious southern populace. The confusing and shifting landscape of the delta, where even “the boundaries between water and land are often indistinct,” had hence rarely known the firm hand of state authority.

As concerned Americans realized, the GVN’s success or failure at a task that had eluded the emperors would depend on the effectiveness and outlook of its administrators. French colonization had interrupted Vietnam’s long tradition of mandarin governance, which dated back to the time the country was a Chinese dependency. This system had been based on the cultivation of a scholar-gentry steeped in Confucian learning, ultimately serving the emperor but responsive to the needs of the population in the province or district that they governed. Poor communication routes meant that the emperors were perpetually “starved of information” about events in their dominion, and the mandarinate provided a means to mediate between the imperial state and the tens of thousands of villages across Vietnam. The French transformed this system out of both necessity and desire. When the colonialists arrived in Cochinina, most local mandarins refused to collaborate with them, forcing them to rely on parvenus with little
knowledge of how precolonial governance had functioned. This new class of officials owed its position not to the honor and prestige associated with passing the traditional mandarin examinations, but instead on its willingness to collaborate. One member of the traditional scholar-gentry who refused to follow suit derided them as acting like “merchant[s] chancing on a pearl,” a particularly damning indictment, given that merchants were typically considered to lie at the bottom of the Confucian social order. Eventually the French abolished the mandarin examinations altogether and adopted a system of training for civil servants fashioned on the European model.

Nevertheless, the French were never able to find enough capable and willing local candidates to enter the civil service, and had difficulty trusting them even when they did. The result was a disproportionately large corps of French civil servants in residence. By 1925 Indochina had five thousand European officials, the same number that watched over a population ten times its size in India. Ho Chi Minh later complained that they spread “like tropical vegetation.” In consequence, there was a severe lack of experienced Vietnamese administrators to staff the GVN after independence. Vietnamese had not been permitted to occupy the highest rungs of the civil service until 1949, and even after that only 120 were given this distinction. When French officials were repatriated en masse following South Vietnam’s independence, mass promotions of the unqualified were necessary to fill the gaps in the bureaucracy. In turn, these newly empowered officials also had to be replaced from below. President Diem himself branded his civil servants “incompetent,” and most Americans agreed.

In the lower ranks of the civil service, French colonialism had produced a governing class drawn from a narrow social stratum and whose cultural outlook differed from that of the rural population. Almost all the civil servants recruited in the years before and after 1954 hailed from the urban middle class and had been educated in schools following French, or later American, curricula. The recruiting center and main institutions of higher education were in Saigon, meaning that the well-connected children of the Saigon elite predominated. Catholics were also present in disproportionate numbers. South Vietnam’s administrative class was hence drawn from the part of society most associated with French colonialism, and whose outlook and values had shifted much more rapidly than those of the rural population.

The GVN’s bureaucracy also inherited a pervasive centralism and formalism that discouraged local initiative. This legacy was hard to shake off. In a colonial civil service, it had been natural that French proconsuls wanted to make sure that their Vietnamese subordinates were not exceeding their authority. But the practice approached absurdity, with district chiefs not even able to officially commend a subordinate for a job well done without French approval.
independence, many GVN civil servants continued to pass every small decision upward. This was not just because they had difficulty assuming responsibility but also because the French bureaucratic tradition in which they had been trained prized centralization as a virtue. Writing in the 1850s, just before the French colonization of Cochinchina gathered steam, Alexis de Tocqueville had complained that French ministers “were seized with a mania for seeing with their own eyes the details of every thing, and managing every thing at Paris,” a trait he said dated back to the late Bourbon era.13 The GVN still showed the heavy imprint of this tendency a century later, which made it all the more challenging to confront a Communist movement that was skilled at adapting itself to local conditions.

The French inheritance left the GVN without a substantial connection to many of its rural citizens. This was due not only to the cultural outlook of its administrators but also to their physical presence, which was overwhelmingly concentrated in Hanoi, Hue, Saigon, and provincial towns. As the security situation worsened toward the end of French rule, this problem was only exacerbated. During the independence war, French forces occupied major towns and communication routes while mostly declining to contest control of the countryside on a sustained basis.14 Officials from the French collaborationist regime withdrew from many rural areas in the face of Viet Minh assassination campaigns, leaving the GVN with what future President Nguyen Van Thieu once referred to as a “huge head and small buttocks problem.” Over 80 percent of the regime’s personnel were stationed in the Saigon area, with the remainder mostly clinging to the safety of provincial capitals.15

Despite its relatively small size, the French colonial regime confronted Vietnamese peasants with an oppressive state of unprecedented efficiency, which historian David Marr writes “had capacities to control and to coerce never dreamed of by previous rulers.”16 Whereas the emperors had shown significant deference to local interests, the colonial state was powerful enough to enforce its will without the need to do so. Above all else this meant maximizing rice exports to generate profits while enforcing the maintenance of the socioeconomic order that made this possible. Those who collaborated with the French were rewarded with large tracts of land, while poorer peasants increasingly found themselves working as tenant farmers or sharecroppers. By 1930, 57 percent of the rural population in Cochinchina did not own any land, transforming tenancy into what one Vietnamese historian calls “a ubiquitous fact of life.”17 After the 1954 partition of the country, 2 percent of the population controlled 45 percent of the land, while 72 percent held only 15 percent.18 Village authorities, who had once performed the function of representatives of their commune’s interest, were increasingly placemen who defended this unequal socioeconomic order on behalf of landowners and the French. Village heads often had to pay for their positions, and in
turn they squeezed villagers through myriad petty forms of corruption to generate the cash needed to maintain them. The introduction of new legal codes and French notions of private property meant that those poor and uneducated Vietnamese who were slowest to adapt and had the least access to power were often dispossessed of their land. The result was the breakdown within several generations of the inherited social order in the villages, and increased polarization between different classes of villagers. In turn, this did much to fuel the rise of the Viet Minh and later the NLF as the vehicle for the aspirations of poorer peasants.

The grip of the French colonial state remained strong until the outset of World War II. A rebellion in the province of Quang Nam in 1908 and a larger uprising in the provinces of Nghe An and Ha Tinh in 1930–1931 had been brutally suppressed by the colonial state. These local rebellions never coalesced into national movements able to challenge French power. It would take a national movement with the ability to sustain its effectiveness and legitimacy over a long period to undermine and eventually overthrow this regime. This challenge to French imperialism eventually arrived in the form of the Vietnamese Communist movement.

The Rise of the Vietnamese Communist Movement

Sometime in the mid-1940s, two Vietnamese sisters from Saigon were on a trip with their father when he became embroiled in a road rage incident with a French driver. Nguyen Thi Thu-Lam and Nguyen Thi Tuyet Mai watched in horror as their father remonstrated with the Frenchman and then slapped him across the cheek. As they sped away from the scene, both girls understood that their father had violated one of the central taboos of the colonial state. The concept of a Vietnamese laying his hands on a Frenchman was so scandalous that it generated outraged coverage in colonial newspapers. The authorities tried to force the girls’ father into apologizing, something he refused to do. Looking back on the incident in their memoirs over forty years later, both women remembered experiencing the mixture of pride and foreboding that filled many Vietnamese when they challenged French authority in those years. But decades later, they were also in a position to see that this incident came at a pivotal moment for French rule in Vietnam. A colonial state whose grip seemed so absolute that it could trouble itself with minor incidents of road rage would soon be unable to maintain its position even with nearly a half a million troops at its disposal.

The rise of the Vietnamese Communist movement was instrumental in bringing about this change. The movement’s success lay in its ability to attract an effective base of rural support and then build an enduring administrative and
military machine on top of that base. Previous uprisings against the emperors and the French had mostly been limited in their scope and aims, directed more at addressing specific grievances in the context of existing Vietnamese society. By contrast, the Communist movement aimed to overthrow that society entirely in a revolution. “Thus, a rebellion reacts to facts,” wrote the Vietnamese historian Huynh Kim Khanh, “whereas a revolution involves principles.” The national, as opposed to local, orientation of the movement also made its leaders aware of the need to marshal their resources for a long struggle. From their humble beginnings in the 1920s the Communists eventually built a nationwide movement that could reconstitute itself after waves of repression and mobilize the resources to defeat the French colonial state in battle. The Communist leadership made many missteps along the way, but their movement’s remarkable regenerative properties allowed it to eventually achieve victory. Along the way, the Vietnamese Communist movement’s leaders successfully transformed themselves from nationalists into nation builders.

The Indochinese Communist Party (ICP) was founded in 1930 under the guiding hand of veteran revolutionary Ho Chi Minh. After playing a role in the Nghe-Tinh uprising that began that same year, the party suffered the first of many waves of repression that nearly drove it into oblivion. The party’s leaders learned from these early experiences that if they were to avoid the fate of previous anti-French movements, they needed to learn to carefully marshal their resources and avoid premature rebellion until victory was assured. Ho and other leaders eyed their chance when the Japanese occupied French Indochina in 1940 as part of their war effort in the wider Pacific. At an ICP meeting in May 1941, the party founded the League for the Independence of Vietnam, commonly referred to as the Viet Minh. While key anti-Communist Vietnamese nationalists such as Vu Hong Khanh and Nguyen Hai Than bided their time in southern China waiting for the moment when Chiang Kai-shek’s Guomindang could sweep them into power, the Communists began the hard work of building their organization in Vietnam itself. As a front organization, the Viet Minh was designed to mobilize nationalist sentiment across all of Vietnamese society while eliding the role of the Communists, whose social and economic agenda risked alienating key groups. Despite this front, the Communists occupied all leadership roles in the Viet Minh and dictated its strategy. This was the model of a broad-based movement directed by an ideological hard core that would impress many Americans and South Vietnamese and inspire their attempts at emulation.

The ICP planned to launch their revolution when the Pacific War came to an end, judging that this would be the moment of the colonial authority’s maximum weakness. Conditions developed even further in their favor owing to a devastating famine that struck northern Vietnam in 1944–1945. Both the Japanese and
the French stood by as millions died; in fact, the Japanese continued to requisition rice for their war effort, spreading outrage and revolutionary fervor in the wake of death. With perhaps 10 percent of the population of Tonkin and upper Annam perishing, peasant anger was directed not just at the two foreign occupiers but also the network of native provincial and district officials and notables whose circumstances shielded them from the worst effects of the famine. The situation became even more fragile in May 1945, when an uneasy coexistence between the French colonial authorities and the Japanese occupation forces came to an end as the latter launched a coup d’état, dismantling the French administration in Vietnam altogether. Seeing their erstwhile masters swept aside by fellow Asians had a profound psychological impact on many Vietnamese, for whom the myth of white superiority had formed a powerful bar in the cage of colonial rule. Amid the chaotic summer that followed, the Viet Minh seized Hanoi and many other urban centers in what came to be known as the August Revolution.

Yet as the leaders of the Saigon regime would later discover, ruling a country was much more difficult than merely occupying its capital. By the time of the August Revolution, the Viet Minh had established a presence in every province of Vietnam, but it was in a far from dominant position throughout most of the country. The movement was strongest in Tonkin and northern Annam, whereas in Cochinchina—the future heartland of South Vietnam—it was only one political actor among many. When France attempted to regain control of its colony by force from 1946 onward, the movement was driven out of the urban centers it had seized during the August Revolution and fell back onto a strategy of rural mobilization. From remote base areas beyond the reach of French power, the leaders of the movement directed a nationwide infrastructure that prevented the French from ever reestablishing a firm grip on rural Vietnam. The degree to which the Communists were able to organize and mobilize the rural population continued to vary throughout the country, but with Chinese Communist aid from 1950 onward, they were able to build a formidable politico-military machine that defeated France at the battle of Dien Bien Phu and finally forced Paris to sue for terms in 1954.

While other Vietnamese rulers such as the emperors, the French, and the Diem regime attempted to impose their state from the top down, the Vietnamese Communists built theirs from the bottom up. They were able to accomplish the essential tasks of nation building—constructing a state apparatus with administrative, coercive, and extractive functions while ensuring it enjoyed enough popular legitimacy to run smoothly—because their effort was organic to rural society in a way that the French or Diem regimes never were. The Viet Minh did not enjoy the support of all classes of rural peasants or all regions of the country, and it used violence as well as persuasion to enforce its will. Especially after
the initial patriotic wave of the August Revolution passed and French repression returned, it came increasingly to rely on the support of poorer peasants. But even though the movement was directed by distant leaders, and the weapons its members carried were often manufactured in foreign lands, its animating force was the ability to motivate and organize a sufficient portion of rural society to struggle and suffer in the name of the Viet Minh. After using this system to beat the French, the Vietnamese Communist movement later reconstituted it in the battle against the Saigon regime and its American allies.

The basic unit of Viet Minh administration was the village. In this respect, the Viet Minh were no different from every other Vietnamese regime stretching back into time immemorial. A village was a collection of hamlets with several thousand inhabitants that enjoyed substantial autonomy and performed all-encompassing governmental functions for its inhabitants. The competence of the village authorities extended “beyond insurance or welfare to include law and order, property rights, courts, and self-defense.” Although peasant mobility was increasing in the twentieth century, it remained the case that “for the overwhelming majority of the Vietnamese population, ‘government’ has always meant simply the village council—the peasant has little experience of any other.” An old adage on communal autonomy holds that “the emperor’s authority stops at the village gate,” although this reflected an idealized form of a more complex reality. During the colonial period, the French had increasingly transformed village authorities into placemen whose function was to collect taxes and defend the interests of a colonial socioeconomic system that marginalized the majority of peasants. The Communist movement was so successful at mobilization because it did not attempt to turn all these peasants into true believers in the national revolution, but rather to address concrete grievances against the existing structure of village government. Jeffrey Race called this the principle of “communalism.”

The advent of Viet Minh village rule was announced by the overthrow of the traditional governing council, which the Viet Minh decried as a “French puppet administration,” and the establishment of a new council. After the new body convened, members would mete out revolutionary justice to members of the previous regime, form village committees to deal with various issues, and organize a militia. The Viet Minh’s front strategy meant that all social and economic classes were initially welcomed as part of the new regime, and in parts of the south where the ICP was weak it appears that local landlords and notables often simply reconstituted themselves as the new council. While this allowed the Viet Minh to claim nominal control of much of the area that would later become South Vietnam, many of these landlords and rich peasants were happy to transfer their allegiance back to the French when the colonial authorities reoccupied
their areas. A similar trend occurred when forces aligned with the Diem regime reoccupied the South Vietnamese countryside after the Geneva Accords, and the upper strata of rural society flocked back to the banner of a regime that would protect their interests. The inherent unreliability of members of the front meant that over time the Communist movement came to rest on a much narrower but more reliable socioeconomic base of landless, poor, and middle peasants. Socioeconomic conflict within the village, and the differing bases of support for the GVN and the NLF, would prove key factors in the course of U.S. and GVN nation-building efforts.

The Viet Minh village administration, like its NLF successor, had two main functions. The first was to win support for the movement within the village and to inoculate the population against government appeals. This was achieved through a mixture of propaganda, socioeconomic reforms, and targeted coercion. As a Communist publication from the early 1960s explained, cadres should “choose the right moment to act . . . when the people’s rights have been endangered” by actions such as “corruption, high taxation, forced money donations, land robbing, military draft.” The cadres could then organize the people to agitate for their rights and ultimately seize power, focusing their appeals on precisely those individuals the regime had oppressed.31 Show trials were sometimes held to condemn landlords and regime officials to harsh punishments, and cadres would make sure that the villagers participated in these events to dramatize their break with the old regime and to serve pour encourager les autres. By taking these concrete actions that affected peasants within their own sphere of interests in the villages, the party and its fronts were able to establish a reservoir of supporters and accomplices. Even if government forces briefly reoccupied the area, all those who had benefited from the Communist seizure of power would have little reason to give the authorities their active support.32

The second function of the Communist village administration was to use this base of durable support to mobilize resources for the war effort. Rather than staffing its political and military apparatus with outsiders who then attempted to impose their authority on the village, the Communist movement built its structures of authority from the village upward. Its system of military recruitment had three levels. The first was the village militia, a group that in theory included every able-bodied adult member of a village, although only some were armed. After gaining experience in the armed militia, some members would graduate upward into the regional forces, full-time guerrillas who fought primarily in their own district. In turn, the regional forces served as the recruiting pool for main force regiments, which were both more heavily armed and more mobile. At each level the military and ideological elite was favored for promotion into the higher echelons, with the village militia serving as the start of the conveyor belt. Like-
wise on the political side, the Communist hierarchy consisted of six echelons, of which the village council was the bottom. Each layer drew some of its members from the secretaries of the layers below and had the primary task of adapting directives received from above to local conditions. A large degree of autonomy was built into the system, with a Communist village secretary having more power over matters like land reform than a province chief had in the highly centralized GVN.33 The autonomy, power, and opportunities for advancement that this system afforded to previously marginalized members of the village gave them a strong interest in providing the taxes and manpower needed to maintain the new order. “It can be explained very simply to the peasants,” a veteran Communist told a Western observer in the late 1960s, recalling this earlier time. “If you want to keep your land, you must fight the imperialists, and if you want to fight the imperialists, your son must go into the army and you must pay taxes. That is the strategic line of the Party.”34 In this way, the movement stitched together thousands of disparate village rebellions to make its revolution.

During the Franco–Viet Minh War, Tonkin remained the hub of Viet Minh power and recruitment. It was also the scene of most of the fighting. In Tonkin and Annam the movement ultimately deployed six combat divisions, whereas in Cochinchina it was never able to field forces larger than battalions.35 The south was also beyond the reach of the Chinese supplies that eventually made Viet Minh divisions in the north equal or even superior to their French rivals in firepower.36 The Communists also faced a more complicated political situation in Cochinchina, where two popular grassroots religious groups—the Cao Dai and Hoa Hao—held sway over a considerable part of the rural population, and were deeply distrustful of the Viet Minh. The latter’s murder of the Hoa Hao’s spiritual leader, Huynh Phu So, turned distrust into hate. Given these problems, the Viet Minh effort in Cochinchina during the war against the French had focused on protecting its core infrastructure, collecting taxes, and carrying out low-level harassment of the colonists. The division of Vietnam into two halves at the Geneva Conference reflected this balance of power, with the Communist movement strongest in what eventually became North Vietnam and weakest in the south. In line with the accords, Hanoi ordered the majority of its political and military cadres in South Vietnam to relocate north in the years immediately after 1954. Most of those who relocated came from southern Annam, reflecting the party’s greater presence in that region. While it is unclear how many cadres remained undercover in South Vietnam, estimates settle on about ten thousand.37 Doubting that the GVN would hold the national unification elections scheduled for 1956, the Communist leadership in Hanoi wanted to focus on domestic affairs in North Vietnam.38 But given the Com-
munist movement’s demonstrated strengths at mobilization and expansion, the skeletal party infrastructure remaining in the south could also serve as the basis of an anti-GVN uprising if circumstances required it.

The Diem Regime

Ngo Dinh Diem arrived in South Vietnam in June 1954 to become prime minister of the State of Vietnam (SVN). The SVN was a French colonial creation that claimed sovereignty over all of Vietnam but whose authority was circumscribed both by the de facto control of much of its territory by the Viet Minh and by French restrictions on its power and autonomy. Just weeks before Diem arrived, the guns had fallen silent at Dien Bien Phu. When the Geneva Conference concluded in July, Vietnam was split into two countries, with the Vietnamese Communist movement setting up the government of North Vietnam in Hanoi, and Diem’s SVN limited to the territory south of the seventeenth parallel.

Diem’s primary challenge became consolidating his government’s authority over this attenuated territory, which after a 1955 referendum came to be known as the Republic of Vietnam (RVN), widely referred to as South Vietnam. Diem faced challenges not just from non-state politico-religious groups who held a third of South Vietnam’s population and territory in their grasp, but also from the remnants of French influence and, later in the decade, a resurgent Communist movement. But Diem also had formidable assets on his side. Despite missteps that would eventually bring about his downfall, he proved he could be a wily and capable political operator who had a vision for how to build and consolidate the power of the GVN. For most of his tenure he could draw on the support of the world’s most powerful country, the United States, which funneled over $2 billion in military and economic aid to his regime between 1955 and 1961. Diem could also rely on the support of a succession of U.S. presidents, who dispatched aid workers, military advisers, and covert political operatives to assist him in the consolidation of his rule.

Until recently, many historians portrayed Diem as either an unthinking American puppet or a hopeless reactionary who lacked a vision for South Vietnam. Recent scholarship has demonstrated that neither of these views is true. Diem served in a series of positions in the French colonial regime in the 1920s and ’30s, reaching the position of interior minister in the imperial court of Hue in 1933. But he resigned soon after when France rejected his proposals to grant more political power to the Vietnamese, a move that burnished his nationalist credentials. At the same time, Diem was developing his ideas for the future of Vietnam. Violently opposed to the Communist movement that began to gather
strength in the 1920s, Diem instead based his vision on an idiosyncratic blend of Catholicism and Confucianism. Rather than a reactionary retreat into tradition, as it has often been understood, Diem’s governing philosophy was based on an activist and even revolutionary understanding of both his Catholic faith and his country’s Confucian tradition. Diem sought to fashion a “third force” out of these two belief systems, one that could offer a vision of the Vietnamese future that was both anticolonial and anti-Communist. In particular, he was influenced by Vietnamese nationalist Phan Boi Chau, a thinker at the forefront of early nationalist meditations on how Vietnam’s traditions could become the basis for the country’s path into modernity. In the early twentieth century, Chau had been one of the writers leading the way in introducing terms such as “revolution,” “nation,” and “citizen” into Vietnamese political discourse, displacing an earlier discourse based on the link between the emperor and his subjects rather than the people and their nation.41 Chau, a long-term mentor of Diem, had come to believe that “only a sweeping reorganization of Vietnamese society would guarantee the true liberation of the Vietnamese people” from both French colonialism and inherited tradition.42 A flexible, modern Confucianism would nevertheless be a key part of this postcolonial Vietnamese renewal, which Diem himself often described as a “revolution.”

In keeping with his search for a “third force,” Diem refused to take a side in the Franco–Viet Minh War, rejecting both the French and the Communists. Eventually fearing his life was at risk in the polarized climate of the war, he left the country in 1950 to enter self-imposed exile, much of which was spent in the United States. When he returned in 1954 to take over the reins of the SVN on the invitation of the aging emperor Bao Dai, he finally had the chance to put his ideas for a “third force” into action as he sought to consolidate the Saigon regime’s power. In this effort he was joined by his brother and counselor Ngo Dinh Nhu. Nearly a decade younger than Diem, Nhu had spent the 1930s in France, where he developed an interest in the teachings of the Catholic philosopher Emmanuel Mounier. Mounier advocated a belief system known as Personalism, which rejected both liberal capitalism and communism as overly materialist and neglectful of the social and spiritual needs of individuals.44 As Diem’s closest confidant and a powerful figure in the GVN in his own right, Nhu would also be influential in the development of the regime’s nation-building vision.

Yet both Diem’s “third force” and Nhu’s Personalism proved vague and opaque in practice. The GVN under Diem never managed to articulate a vision of the Vietnamese future that resonated with enough of its citizens to allow the regime to spread legitimate power across South Vietnam. All too often, the high-minded promises of social, political, and economic reform that Diem and the Nhu made turned into coercive and regressive policies when implemented on the ground.
Diem and Nhu’s erratic personalities, their authoritarian and intolerant natures, and both the instruments of rule that they inherited from the French and those they developed themselves undermined their attempt at anti-Communist nation building in South Vietnam. By the early 1960s their rule had sparked peasant uprisings across the country, and when they were ousted in a 1963 coup, they left behind a regime that had little to show for nearly a decade of attempts at rural nation building.

Faced with the diffusion of power and loyalty across South Vietnam when they took power in Saigon in 1954, Diem and Nhu had stressed nationalism as a unifying force. The need for unity across regional and sectional groups had been a recurrent theme of Vietnamese nationalism under the French, and it now became a tool in the hands of the GVN. Local and sectional groups were commanded to subordinate their interests to that of the new South Vietnamese nation-state. “The interests of the nation at large must take precedence over the local interests,” wrote Nghiem Dang, an influential thinker in Diem’s regime, allowing that “the local population can always make itself heard, and indicate its wishes, demanding that measures be taken in the local interest, but only providing those measures do not hinder the putting into effect of the national policy.” The problem, according to one assessment by Diem’s officials, was that because the GVN lacked a presence in most rural areas, the population delivered their loyalty to “whatever party, religious sect or local warlord . . . seemed to care for their welfare.” The long legacy of indirect rule practiced by both Vietnamese and French rulers in South Vietnam, combined with the territorial fragmentation caused by the war of independence, had done much to produce this situation. The forging of a South Vietnamese nation-state would mean centralizing governance in Saigon and displacing these groups, who might speak of pursuing the national interest but in reality looked after their sectional interests.

Straightaway, this set the Diem regime on a collision course with the politico-religious groups the Cao Dai and Hoa Hao who held sway across large areas of South Vietnam, and also with countless peasant communities who were unprepared to take up the standard of South Vietnamese nationalism. It was this obstacle that would prove the most enduring. Diem succeeded in crushing the organized military power of the politico-religious groups in the first few years of his rule, earning him the title “America’s Miracle Man in Asia.” But he was now faced with the more difficult problem of stepping into the power vacuum left by their demise, and rallying the peasantry around the South Vietnamese flag.

This first meant creating a network of strong provincial and district governments who would owe their allegiance to the regime in Saigon rather than local political forces. Although the number of provinces in South Vietnam fluctuated as Diem combined and split them according to his whim, in 1962 it stood at
forty-one. Each of these provinces was further subdivided into a number of districts. Aside from village heads, the district chief was the official who had the most contact with the local population, as had been the case since the Chinese first used a system of districts to rule Vietnam. Diem appointed loyalists to these positions, and as the Communist insurgency grew he increasingly relied on officers from the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) to fill them. In doing so he was following in the tradition of a long line of Vietnamese rulers who had tried to use military government to pacify the wild south. By 1962, thirty-six out of forty-one province chiefs were from the military, as were the majority of district chiefs.

This coercive and administrative apparatus now had to be used to establish bonds of mutual obligation with the peasantry across the country. Dang, who headed Saigon’s National Institute of Administration (NIA) for much of its existence, believed that a key task for the GVN was “developing communication with the people” so that the latter could make demands on the former and see the benefit of submitting to GVN rule. At the NIA, Dang attempted to develop a new generation of GVN administrators who would throw off the colonial inheritance and concern themselves with the well-being of the rural population. He believed that the French colonial regime’s reliance on administrators from a narrow, urban social class had caused a profound rupture between the government and the population. Like Diem, he saw the answer in a new governing philosophy that would draw on certain aspects of Vietnam’s Confucian inheritance while reinterpreting them in a modern context. In Dang’s view, Confucian administrators had been tasked not so much with executing central policy as with resolving local problems and achieving consensus within a broad purview. The fact they received a humanist education tended to enlarge their field of vision. By contrast, French-educated Vietnamese administrators were trained in the law. They limited their scope of action to enforcing colonial law, abandoning the paternalistic concern for the people’s general welfare that had been part of the mandarin ideology. The fact that this law dealt mainly with extracting labor and taxes, combined with the lack of cultural identification between the rulers and the ruled, produced what Dang described as “a breach between the new attitude of the civil servant who withdraws more and more behind the passivity of legal texts and rules and the traditional behavior of the people who persist in seeing in him the proxy of the Son of Heaven.” In Dang’s view, this explained “the relative effectiveness of the colonial administrative machine in that it tended to exploit the country to the profit of the colonial power and, on the other hand, the complete failure of that same machine in promoting the well-being of the population.”

The solution, according to Dang, was to inculcate graduates of the NIA academy with a philosophy inspired by his understanding of the old mandarinate.
These graduates were encouraged to see government as a two-way process in which local administrators had a responsibility to communicate the wishes of the population up to the central government, as well as imposing the whims of Saigon. As Dang explained, using the example of the district level of government: “The district chief is responsible for presenting to the people the policies of the government and for communicating to the central government the wishes of the population.”53 “Anh” (a pseudonym), an NIA graduate who worked in a number of local government positions, explained how he saw his position: “I am appointed, and as an appointee I am responsible to the central government. Yet, I am a Vietnamese administrator who has an obligation to serve the people. But suppose there is a conflict of interest between the government and the people. What position should I take? I serve my people. Sometimes the government is too far from the people, and I’m close to them and know their aspirations.”54

Yet the overall influence of the NIA was limited. While the NIA produced a corps of administrators who had a socially conscious and expansive view of their role, the absolute number of graduates of the academy was small. In the early 1960s it was training about one hundred administrators a year at a time when the GVN civil service had about 140,000 employees.55 NIA graduates also tended to serve in subordinate positions as deputies, while real power in local government continued to be wielded by captains and majors of the ARVN. Diem remained reliant on the military for consolidating his rule, especially when the Communist insurgency began to pick up speed. The decision to ally himself with the particular strata of the population who were most identified with French colonial rule and most influenced by its social and cultural legacy was perhaps inevitable but made it difficult for him to change the dynamics of relations between the GVN and its rural citizens.

The bulk of the GVN’s officials had come of age serving a French governing apparatus whose main means of intercourse with the rural population had been the use of force, not the two-way exchange of ideas. There was little communication between villagers and local government officials, and little active support for the GVN. Most GVN officials had spent the past decade battling the Viet Minh. This gave them a security-oriented approach to their jobs and also meant that they tended to view all former sympathizers of the struggle against French rule as potential threats, even though the Viet Minh enjoyed wide support for their nationalist credentials.56 After Diem launched an “Anti-Communist Denunciation Campaign” in 1956, province officials cast the net widely over their old enemy, targeting many former Viet Minh. One province chief told a Western visitor in 1957: “When you have an official who will deal sternly with the Viet Minh, it is of secondary importance whether he is honest or otherwise capable. It is better to have a district chief who steals than a district full of Communists.”57 Tran
Ngoc Chau, a South Vietnamese official who was unusually sensitive to the plight of villagers, complained that those who had formerly had connections with the Viet Minh were automatically assumed by GVN officials to be Communists. Villagers who had supported the Viet Minh found it incomprehensible that they were now supposed to side with former collaborators against the resistance. It is not surprising that a widespread rumor held that when Ho Chi Minh heard that a large contingent of pro-French officials had fled Hanoi to seek refuge in the South, he remarked: “Good! That is the best news I have heard in a long time. With that crowd in the South, how can we lose?”

Given their backgrounds, training, and predilections, most South Vietnamese officials lacked the ability to understand rural society, and especially the strengths and motivations of the Vietnamese Communist movement. These facts proved difficult to grasp for a class of administrators and soldiers who had benefited from French rule and experienced it mostly from the vantage point of the prosperous cities. Tran Van Don, who was a leading general under Diem before turning against his regime, would later write of this period that Vietnam had “no peasants exploited by rich landowners,” and “the bulk of the land was held by individual Vietnamese who owned only small parcels on a highly democratic basis.” This comment rates as frankly bizarre, given that large-scale landlordism in the south dated at least to the Nguyen, who had ruled the region through powerful landholding intermediaries. This tendency had only increased under the French, and by the 1930s only a third of the land in Cochinchina was owned by those who farmed it. But Tran’s belief was widely shared among his colleagues.

Diem and Nhu were aware of the shortcomings of the GVN’s traditional civil service and military and never fully trusted their nationalist zeal, given that so many had been trained under the French. They accordingly attempted to supplement their regime’s political base of support by building organizations and paramilitaries that owed their loyalty directly to the Ngo family itself. Both Nhu and Diem admired how proficient the Communists were at political mobilization, and they attempted to emulate the Communists’ techniques in setting up these extra-constitutional organizations. Just as the Communists had done through the Viet Minh, the Ngo brothers sought to construct a series of fronts, mass movements, and associations that would mobilize support for their rule and allow them to spread their influence throughout rural society. At the heart of this network was the Can Lao, a clandestine party headed by Nhu whose members—like those of the Communist Party—were the ideological and political elite of the regime. The party’s members even penetrated the military and governing institutions of the South Vietnamese state inherited from the French, where they attempted to steer policy in the direction desired by the Ngo brothers and sniff out disloyalty. The brothers sought to use the Can Lao and its fronts to create
a broad network of loyal supporters and agents throughout South Vietnamese society, just as the Communist Party had done.

Yet lacking a clear ideology beyond boosting the power of the Ngo brothers, the Can Lao and its fronts had little success at achieving pro-regime mobilization. Tram Kim Tuyen, one of the early architects of the Can Lao who later became disillusioned with the Diem regime, commented later that “those who want to build parties like the Can Lao . . . start from the premise that the Communist Party is the source of strength in communist regimes, and that this example should be copied. Whereas the Communist Party is created first, develops, then seizes power, and finally establishes an administration as an extension of its power, those who established the Can Lao . . . think they can reverse the sequence.”63 Rather than following this bottom-up process of mobilization and organization, the Can Lao instead became an instrument of top-down coercion. In the words of an official CIA history, the true aim of the Can Lao was not to win popular support, but to “act for the new government where the bureaucratic legacy of the colonial regime was found inadequate.”64

With the Can Lao as its steel spine, Diem’s regime maintained the essentially coercive relationship with the rural population that had typified the colonial period. One aspect of this was the brutal crackdown he directed against alleged Communists and their fellow travelers, which culminated in the infamous Law 10/59 prescribing capital punishment for any “offense to national security.”65 The regime also embarked on a number of ambitious schemes to remake rural society altogether and make its rural citizens easier to control. Diem began by abolishing village elections and appointing what his critics called “hand-picked henchmen” to oversee village affairs instead.66 These attempts at controlling rural society through coercion would eventually culminate in the Strategic Hamlet Program of 1962–1963, in which a large part of the population was to be relocated to new villages where they could be physically separated from anti-regime guerrillas and locked into ties of mutual obligation with the GVN. Although the program called for the reinstatement of village elections and a social and economic reform agenda intended to take the wind out of the NLF’s sails, the officials who implemented it found it easier to forcibly regroup the population behind a barbed wire fence and declare their job done.67

Even as Diem seemed to score successes at increasing the coercive and administrative powers of the GVN, his failure at the other side of nation building—ensuring that those powers enjoyed legitimacy and popular support—was proving to be his undoing. His repression of anyone perceived to be an opponent of his regime was generating huge rural discontent and providing fertile conditions for the Communist movement to reconstitute itself. Those who feared GVN repression understandably turned to Communist cells for protection.
FIGURE 2. President Diem receives a loyalty oath from personnel of the Vietnamese Air Force, 1962. Diem’s regime relied heavily on police and security forces to impose control over the countryside.

National Archives identifier 542330, Color Photographs of U.S. Air Force Activities, Facilities and Personnel, Domestic and Foreign, Record Group 342, National Archives II at College Park, Maryland.
More broadly, the millions of villagers who had experienced rule by the Viet Minh councils during the war against the French chafed at the return of the old socioeconomic order to their villages. These events, as well as the pressure being placed on the remnants of the Communist movement in South Vietnam, caused Hanoi to reappraise its policy of restraint. Diem’s anti-Communist campaigns did grave damage to the remaining party infrastructure in South Vietnam, and the late 1950s have often been called the “darkest” period for the Communists in the South.68 The leadership in Hanoi was split over how to respond to Diem’s repression and refusal to hold reunification elections, but faced mounting pressure from its lower echelons to take the offensive against the GVN. Facing annihilation at the hands of Diem’s security forces, cadres in the South began to arm themselves and commit targeted acts of violence against GVN officials. While this initially went against the party line being promulgated from Hanoi and angered some party elders, it also demonstrated how the party’s decentralized decision-making procedure provided internal checks and balances. Attempting to follow Hanoi’s line had led to absurdities such as party members with guns in their hands refusing to fire on GVN agents pursuing them. After the Communist cells began fighting back out of necessity, Hanoi gradually changed its line to reflect local realities. From 1957 onward, official armed units began to form, and an “elimination of traitors” campaign claimed the lives of hundreds and eventually thousands of GVN officials. In response, Diem ratcheted up his repressive measures. By 1959, the Politburo in Hanoi was reporting that Diem’s regime had “increased the reactionary quality” of local authorities, and was even “consolidating [governing] organs” in the villages, staffing them with security personnel, Catholics who backed the regime, and anti-Communists who had fled North Vietnam following the Geneva Accords.69

In 1959–1960, a popular uprising swept much of South Vietnam, encouraged by the Communists but spreading further and wider than their own damaged infrastructure could ever have reached on its own. In late 1960, Hanoi directed the creation of the NLF in an attempt to harness the wave and transform the rebellions into a revolution once more.70 As in the war against the French, party cells began to replicate themselves by recruiting cadres and attracting support to the new front, which like the Viet Minh aimed to “unite all people who can be united.”71 As the countryside rang to the sound of the wooden tocsins that had long announced the arrival of rural uprisings in Vietnam, the Communists worked to painstakingly reconstitute the revolutionary village councils, the militia, and the politico-military structures that sat atop them.72 As they did so, their apparatus, which had already driven the French from the country, became the bane not just of the Diem regime but also of its superpower ally.
American Nation Building under Diem

On May 11, 1962, a forty-two-year-old American named Albert J. Fraleigh stepped off a cargo plane in Saigon. This was only his latest posting in a long career for the U.S. government and the United Nations. In World War II, Fraleigh had supervised the construction of airfields in Alaska and on the Aleutian Islands before working as part of U.S. Navy civic action teams persuading Japanese civilians to refrain from committing suicide after the defeat of their armed forces on Saipan and Okinawa. Managing UN port facilities in Shanghai after the war, Fraleigh became a close friend of future Chinese Communist premier Zhou Enlai. When the Communists took over the city in 1949, he was held under house arrest and harshly interrogated, escaping only with the aid of Zhou. Fraleigh then moved to Taiwan, where he worked for an American aid mission and became an adviser to future Taiwanese president Chiang Ching-kuo. Recognized as a result of this experience as the U.S. Agency for International Development’s “most experienced man in civic action, rural development and Asian communism,” Fraleigh had now been summoned to Saigon to help strengthen Diem’s embattled government. It was his first time in South Vietnam.

When Fraleigh arrived in South Vietnam in May 1962, the Diem regime was floundering. The Communist movement had reconstituted its politico-military infrastructure and spread its influence across much of South Vietnam, and was taking the armed offensive. A few weeks after Fraleigh arrived, NLF attacks reached an all-time high, targeting “health workers, teachers, and minor officials as well as village guards, local militia and the regular military.” These attacks on anyone associated with the regime were forcing the retreat of GVN authority from much of the countryside, prompting military counteroffensives that did little to restore it. American officials were anticipating a long war against what they conceded to be “experienced, well-organized, and competently led guerrilla fighters.”

In response to this challenge, Fraleigh and his partner, a former CIA officer named Rufus Phillips, created the framework around which the wartime nation-building effort would eventually be built. In late 1961, President Kennedy had dispatched former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Maxwell Taylor and deputy national security adviser Walt Rostow to the country to assess the U.S. effort there. One of their recommendations was for a new push to develop links between the Diem regime and the rural population by strengthening and legitimizing local governments. The United States Operations Mission (USOM) was to be the vessel for this effort, and Fraleigh and Phillips—who had worked on a similar program in Laos—its catalysts. As so often throughout the war, this
new nation-building push accompanied an increase in the U.S. military effort. The Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) was created in 1962 to coordinate military activity in the country, and American military advisers were assigned to all ARVN units of battalion size and above, and also to South Vietnamese province chiefs.77

The extension of a permanent official American presence into the South Vietnamese countryside, where it would remain until the American withdrawal in 1973, dates from the Taylor-Rostow report. Although USOM had deployed personnel to the provinces to help with the resettlement of refugees from North Vietnam in the 1950s, Diem had forced its withdrawal in 1958.78 It was only the deteriorating military situation that led the president to reverse his stance. From late 1961 onward, the number of Americans deployed throughout the country increased steadily, their involvement in its political life growing along with the military presence. Phillips and Fraleigh’s USOM personnel jostled for attention alongside Americans from other agencies, especially the CIA, who also began to become increasingly involved in rural affairs in the Diem period. This diffusion of agencies led William Colby to complain that Americans operated in “autonomous baronies,” with little coordination between their activities. “Like the blind men around the elephant” he later wrote, “the [Americans] . . . gathered about the Diem Government, each dealing with different pieces and sections of its problems and defining the animal accordingly.”79 This was problematic not only because it made it difficult for the Americans to speak with a single voice to the GVN, but also because each American agency had its own ideas about what that voice should be saying. This diffusion of effort and lack of agreement over the correct approach to nation building would continue to afflict U.S. efforts until the creation of CORDS.

The Washington policy makers who directed this nation-building effort provided little guidance on specifics. The Kennedy administration was full of officials who claimed expertise on guerrilla warfare and nation building in the abstract without having much knowledge of Vietnam in particular. One such official was Roger Hilsman, a close Kennedy adviser who served as head of the State Department’s intelligence arm and afterward as assistant secretary of state for Far Eastern affairs. During World War II, Hilsman participated in guerrilla operations behind Japanese lines in Burma. He then returned to the United States and obtained a PhD in international relations before holding a series of academic posts. He met Kennedy while working in a senior position at the Congressional Research Service and was brought into the new administration in February 1961. Regarded as an expert on guerrilla warfare because of his service in Burma, Hilsman was called on to contribute to the administration’s understanding of the emerging insurgency in Vietnam.
In a major report in 1962, Hilsman assured his colleagues that the basic desire of the peasants was that the GVN provide “security” against the NLF. But this was a simplistic view that ignored the extent to which many Vietnamese peasants viewed the GVN and not the NLF as the primary threat to their security and socioeconomic interests. A misunderstanding of how deeply the conflict was rooted in Vietnam’s colonial legacies also led American officials to produce wildly inaccurate estimates of the strength of NLF support. Hilsman wrote that the organization had only one hundred thousand “supporters and sympathizers,” but both the documented reach of the Viet Minh and the fact that the GVN claimed to be killing twenty thousand members of the NLF a year indicated this number was undoubtedly too low.80

Lacking clear guidance from Washington, American nation builders diverged in their approaches. American attempts at nation building in South Vietnam in this period can be split into three broad categories. The first category of project addressed itself to the central institutions of the Saigon regime. These nation builders took a top-down perspective, working on national plans for internal security forces, the training of civil servants, and the running of government ministries. Personnel concerned with these issues were drawn from the U.S. Agency for International Development (known locally as the United States Operations Mission, or USOM) and from a group of experts and technicians from Michigan State University (MSU) who operated under a contract with USOM. Diem had met the leader of the MSU group, Wesley Fishel, while in exile and had subsequently requested that Fishel head up a program of technical assistance to GVN ministries. The MSU group provided advice on public and police administration to the regime, as well as helping to run the NIA.

The MSU team’s ability to have a meaningful impact on nation building was limited both by the narrowness of its aims and the approach that it brought to its work. MSU team members were experts in public administration in the abstract and not Vietnam itself; furthermore, their expertise lay specifically in Western public administration. This led them to attempt to graft lessons from the United States inappropriately onto the Vietnamese context, as historian Jessica Elkind has shown.81 Dang, who frequently received their advice, complained that although their reports “were written by experts, some of whom had long practical administrative experience, in most cases their value was largely academic, because they brought out theoretical and technical problems, and lacked factual knowledge of the Vietnamese context.”82 The MSU team was constantly frustrated by its inability to persuade the Diem regime to introduce what it considered professional standards into the GVN civil service. Eventually, after a falling out with Fishel, Diem ejected MSU from the country altogether.
The second group of Americans who worked to strengthen the Diem regime were CIA officials who worked with province chiefs to attempt to increase the efficiency and legitimacy of GVN rule. Agency personnel had a keen interest in what they called “political action,” the countering of the Communist movement’s rural apparatus and the building of support for the GVN in its place. Colby, who served as deputy chief and then chief of station in Saigon between 1959 and 1962, was typically bullish about the CIA’s expertise in this area. “Uniquely in the American bureaucracy,” he later wrote, “the CIA understood the necessity to combine political, psychological, and paramilitary tools to carry out a strategic concept of pressure on an enemy or to strengthen an incumbent.” Colby and his colleagues closely studied both the deficiencies of the GVN and the organizational strengths of the Communist movement and modeled their remedies accordingly. Colby believed that the GVN needed to copy the Communist model by “organizing the population into political groups, articulating a cause that would attract their participation and support, developing leadership and cohesion at the local rural community level, etc.” This was in contrast to MSU, who focused on pushing the central regime in Saigon into economic and political reforms. Instead, CIA officers began to work with local South Vietnamese officials on a joint rural nation-building agenda.

Tran Ngoc Chau, a former Viet Minh battalion commander and political officer who had rallied to the anti-Communist cause, did more to influence the CIA’s efforts than any other individual. Born in 1924 into a mandarin family in Hue, Chau had joined the Viet Minh to oppose the Japanese occupation of Vietnam in the 1940s and then participated in the war against the French. Taken in by the Viet Minh’s front policy, it was only as he was promoted through the ranks that he came to understand—and despise—the Communist ideology that lay at the core of the movement. After being the subject of repeated unsuccessful attempts to recruit him into the Communist Party, he defected to Bao Dai’s pro-French government in 1949. He transferred his allegiance to the GVN when it was created in 1955, and by the early 1960s had attained the rank of major in the ARVN.

In 1962, Diem appointed Chau chief of Kien Hoa, a province in the Mekong Delta. Chau’s sympathetic participation in the Viet Minh had given him a largeness of vision that was unusual among other individuals in his class, as Americans who met him soon realized. Chau had seen firsthand how the Communists operated and how they responded to the genuine grievances of the rural population to win support for their movement. While he had been turned off when he realized that the Communists ultimately planned to establish a “dictatorship of the proletariat” that would abolish all property and religion—something rarely mentioned in their propaganda to the peasantry—he continued to see the value of their approach to
local mobilization and politics. He also felt sympathy and “compassion” for rural villagers who felt it necessary to take up arms against their own government, “people whose duties were to provide them security and peace.” This “villager-enemy” was one who should be won over to the GVN’s cause rather than targeted in a brutal security crackdown, as the Diem regime did. “Since I always preferred to win over a living person than a dead one,” Chau later wrote, “my ideas basically were aimed at converting the enemy, thus eliminating the need to kill him.”

To convert the enemy, Chau drew heavily on his experiences in the Viet Minh. His nation-building idea was based around the concept of the cadre, and what Stuart Methven, one of the Americans who learned from him, would later call “parapolitics.” In the Viet Minh and the NLF, the word “cadre” (can bo) referred to an operative in a revolutionary organization, not necessarily a party member. While cadres had different functions, Chau focused on those through whom the Communist movement attempted to solidify its influence among the rural population. Mobile groups of specialist agitprop cadres toured the countryside, making contact with sympathetic villagers and combining to orchestrate the overthrow of the old village authorities and the installation of ones allied with the front. They had been instrumental in consolidating the revolutionary wave that swept South Vietnam in the early 1960s. Because of their temporary but decisive political presence, Methven referred to their activity as parapolitical, or “political action.” A witness to the same methods when they had been deployed on behalf of the Viet Minh, Chau now hoped to replicate them for the benefit of the GVN. “It was, in my understanding,” he later wrote, “a revolutionary process to build the power from the grassroot peasants to change the colonial and mandarin system that most of the Vietnamese leaders, military and civilian inherited.”

Chau set about recruiting mobile cadre teams from among the local peasantry. This made a stark contrast to Diem’s rural mobilization teams which were usually composed of moonlighting civil servants. Chau’s cadres formed what he called Census-Grievance (CG) teams. Like the NLF agitprop teams, they roamed the villages of the province, inquiring about rural grievances. Chau was adamant that the teams inquire about grievances caused by local GVN officials as well as the NLF, and in the early stages of the program about 70 percent of complaints concerned the Saigon regime. Chau could then use his power as province chief to address GVN abuses, and USOM contributed material aid in response to grievances. In addition, the CG teams also took a census in the villages, attempting to discover who was working for the NLF. A mixture of persuasion, cajolery, and attempted compromise would then be used to persuade them to defect to the GVN. In the last analysis, “counter-terror” teams could be sent to kidnap or assassinate them.

Chau’s methods were based on an assumption that the traditional GVN bureaucracy would never be able to win over and mobilize the peasantry as effec-
tively as the Communist movement did. This was a belief shared by the CIA officials who learned from his methods and later attempted to replicate his program beyond Kien Hoa. The paradox of Chau’s position was that although he denigrated the GVN bureaucracy and hence constructed parapolitical structures to circumvent it, his influence depended on his position as province chief within this same bureaucracy. For the Americans, it hardly constituted a nation-building strategy to hope that similarly talented leaders amenable to American advice would emerge in all forty-four of South Vietnam’s provinces. As Daniel Ellsberg, another American influenced by Chau, ruefully recalled, there were barely a handful of like-minded individuals across the GVN. Chau complained that “the Saigon generals ignored my success in Kien Hoa,” and without the involvement of higher-ups in the GVN, the program could not be extended to other provinces. Neither did Chau possess the resources or personnel to have a decisive impact even in Kien Hoa, where the Communist movement continued to advance. Both the replicability of Chau’s efforts and their ability to have a decisive impact were in doubt, and as late as 1964, the CIA’s efforts consisted of only a few dozen officers trying to do “something, anything” to bolster local government.

The third group of Americans who worked toward nation-building goals in South Vietnam under the Diem regime were those who worked out in the villages in daily contact with Vietnamese peasants, often focusing on economic development projects. The first Americans to do so on a sustained basis were those working for International Voluntary Services (IVS), an NGO that placed young Americans into development projects throughout the world. While MSU focused on the GVN’s central institutions, IVS volunteers—or “IVSers,” as they were known—lived and worked deep in the South Vietnamese countryside. Although the IVS presence in South Vietnam was fully funded by the U.S. government, many of those working for it saw their mission as separate from that of both the United States and the GVN. Don Luce and John Sommer, two prominent IVSers, were so focused on stimulating economic development for the sake of rural inhabitants that “even as late as 1963 and 1964 it often seemed” to them “as though the war itself hardly existed.” They likewise felt remote from the Diem regime, seeing themselves as “more observers than participants in the affairs of the Vietnamese government.” IVS personnel worked on tasks such as helping villagers build agricultural improvements and spreading improved seed and crop strains. Many IVSers did not perceive their work as political, while those who did were often surprised to find that their assistance and material aid rarely translated into support for either the GVN or the U.S. presence. Such small efforts might help individual farmers, but they did nothing to address the reality of systemic political and socioeconomic repression that fueled resentment of the GVN and support for the NLF.
CHAPTER 1

After the 1962 arrival of Fraleigh and Phillips, USOM itself began to develop an official network of American representatives that would match and eventually exceed the reach of the IVSers. Prior to that year, USOM had run a “traditional” economic aid mission that focused on advising central political and economic policy-making institutions in Saigon, much like MSU. Even though the local governments that actually had contact with the rural population seemed to be the GVN’s weakest link, USOM officials resisted involvement in the provinces. As for the guerrilla crisis, they believed that was best left to the military. Instead, Fraleigh and Phillips pushed for the permanent deployment of American representatives in each province of South Vietnam, where they could act as conduits for U.S. influence over province chiefs. Although Diem had previously been opposed to having American representatives influencing civil government in the provinces, the deepening guerrilla crisis eased his reservations. Diem was also reassured by his trust in Phillips, whom he had met when the latter was deployed in Saigon as a military adviser in 1954. Phillips and Fraleigh’s efforts amounted to a revolution in the way USOM operated. When the pair arrived in Saigon, USOM had 120 employees, and only 3 were stationed outside the capital. They set about recruiting a new breed of provincial representatives who would act as American eyes and ears in the provinces, as well as providing advice to province chiefs on matters of civil government. Unable to elicit any volunteers from within USOM, Phillips and Fraleigh recruited a diverse bunch of Americans from outside the agency. The group included former military officers, personnel from other American agencies, and Peace Corps volunteers who had served in other countries. The first provincial representative was a former IVS volunteer who was dispatched to Phu Yen, a province on the central coast, in September 1962. Another early recruit was David Hudson, an NBC stringer who fancied his hand at rural reform. Duly hired, he was dispatched to the southern tip of the delta, a redoubtable NLF stronghold. Some of the Americans who worked in the program would later go on to storied careers in the executive branch of the U.S. government, including Richard Holbrooke, John Negroponte, Hamilton Jordan, and Anthony Lake.

The new organization was known as the Office of Rural Affairs, and it eventually grew to have a representative in every province. Unlike the CIA, whose cadre program attempted to emulate the Communist movement’s focus on propaganda motivation, the Office of Rural Affairs focused on the provision of social and economic benefits to the rural population. But while USOM had traditionally operated by attempting to influence the GVN in Saigon, Phillips and Fraleigh believed that “the best plans in the world dreamed up in Saigon or Washington, won’t mean a thing unless they really reach the rural population.” After gaining the trust of the province chief to whom they were accredited, the representatives were supposed to influence him to explore the “felt needs” of the rural
population and then respond to them. Ideally there should be a “two-way street,” with top-down projects such as the Strategic Hamlet Program and agricultural improvements being imposed from above, and suggestions for “hamlet self-help projects” being passed up from below. A special fund, which could be signed off at province level without reference to the interminable bureaucracy in Saigon, was set up. The aim was to decentralize the power and resources needed to carry out local development projects. As the Provincial Representatives Guide put it, the “hamlet people must and can be convinced by your quick action that their government has become responsive to their needs.”

While the CIA effort was based on a specific doctrine and idea of the role of Americans in supporting GVN officials who were particularly insightful and energetic in battling the insurgency, Fraleigh and Phillips built their effort on what they referred to as the American “‘Can Do’ spirit.” Rather than being dispatched with detailed instructions on what they were supposed to accomplish, the Office of Rural Affairs representatives were exhorted to use their “dedication, common sense and imagination” to improve the lot of the rural population. Fraleigh explicitly modeled what he wanted in a recruit on the young “BA generalists” favored by the Peace Corps, which he would later claim to have had a hand in founding. The focus of the representatives was overwhelmingly on fulfilling the perceived material needs of the population; indeed, it is as a provider of “barbed wire and other materiel for community efforts” that Colby remembers the Office of Rural Affairs in his memoirs. Representatives could act as a conduit to the central GVN and USOM agencies in Saigon, expediting the delivery of agricultural inputs, technical advice, and aid with schools and dispensaries. With this material backstop, they were exhorted to “feel proud of yourselves as Americans” and “make the seemingly impossible work successfully.” This early group of young and idealistic representatives became known as “the Tigers” because of Fraleigh’s stock motivational phrase: “You can do it, Tiger!” Through this combination of American élan and materialism, the Office of Rural Affairs aimed to make the GVN’s local organs a match for those of the NLF.

Although USOM’s provincial representatives had a broad remit to attempt to make provincial government both more effective and more legitimate, like the IVSers before them they had little ability to alter the fundamental dynamic between it and the rural population. The Communist movement’s success did not derive simply from the provision of material benefits to the villagers. Instead, it had a political strategy to win them over, and offered them opportunities to achieve their own local aims as part of the movement. It cultivated local leaders and promoted peasants into positions of responsibility. Increasing the material resources available to GVN province chiefs could not alter the fact that they continued to treat the peasants as objects rather than subjects of governance. Most
province chiefs were field-grade ARVN officers who were unlikely to change their behavior or views simply because an enthusiastic young American came into their orbit. Even when USOM representatives were successful in prodding GVN officials to carry out limited economic development projects, their involvement was unlikely to change the basic structure of relations between the GVN and the peasantry. Nor were the Tigers in a particularly good position to assess the impact of their own efforts. Although some of them stayed in one province for years and came to know it well, in general they were recruited and dispatched without any specialized knowledge of South Vietnamese history, governance, or politics. As we shall see when we turn to consider the experiences of CORDS advisers in subsequent chapters, this severely handicapped their ability to make a meaningful contribution to nation building. And like their counterparts in the CIA, what exactly the USOM representatives could accomplish was ultimately determined by the province chief to whom they were accredited.

**FIGURE 3:** Children gather at a market built with the help of USAID. Villagers might appreciate such projects, but they delivered few long-term political benefits to the GVN.

National Archives identifier 541851, Miscellaneous Vietnam Photographs, Record Group 306, National Archives II at College Park, Maryland.
This problem of comprehending and influencing rural society would bedevil American nation builders for the entire conflict. Americans who considered the position of the rural peasant during the Diem years frequently came to the conclusion that, as one put it, “lack of rapport between him and the central government” was the crucial problem facing the country. The solution, they believed, was to “strengthen the political and administrative bases of the government.” Yet few Americans in South Vietnam had the language skills or understanding of rural South Vietnam to be able to accurately observe how “strong” these “bases” were, let alone to strengthen them. In 1959, only 9 of the 1,040 Americans working for government agencies in the country could speak Vietnamese. Despite an ever-growing number of military advisers, the United States lacked its own network of agents who understood South Vietnamese rural society. As a result, U.S. officials complained that all they knew was “what the government of Vietnam knew that we wanted [to know].” John Vann put it more colorfully to an American visitor in 1962: “Hell, I don’t even know what is going on across the river at night.” American officials hence complained of a “shadow of uneasiness” when they turned their thoughts to popular attitudes toward the GVN, conceding that it was “difficult, if not impossible, to assess how the villagers really feel.” A CIA report on the attitudes of peasants in fifteen provinces was unable to establish much beyond their hatred of province, district, and village officials. Washington officials reported not finding field reports on the topic “particularly informative or encouraging.”

American observers had initially been hopeful that the Saigon regime might make a concerted effort to gather support in the villages and construct a genuine mass basis for the regime. But they soon concluded that the Ngo brothers only intended to use their parties and fronts as instruments of control, not to widen political participation. As career advancement and even survival became dependent on joining the Can Lao, it became clear that it and similar organizations were “actually formed by coercion—that is, people join because they are afraid not to—rather than being genuine organizations rooted in the hearts of the Vietnamese people.” Even worse, heavy-handed, top-down schemes like the Strategic Hamlet Program failed to achieve political mobilization for the GVN or to bind the population into ties of mutual obligation with the regime. In fact, they were mainly successful at mobilizing support for the NLF, driving more peasants into the arms of the front than they suppressed. Rural communities had been given little reason to identify their interests with a regime composed of colonial holdovers and Diemist parvenus, and Saigon’s attempt to reshape rural society in its own interests had paid little heed to the desires of the peasantry.

This points to yet another problem in early U.S. efforts: it required the resources and active interest of the central government in Saigon to carry out such a sustained nation-building effort across South Vietnam. There was only
so much that province chiefs or other local figures could do on their own without national support. The situation became even more dire after the overthrow of Diem. Local officials and their schemes were subject to the capriciousness of national politics, as there was always a risk that each new junta would feel the need to appoint its own loyalists to positions in local government. A case in point was the Force Populaire, an extensive cadre program run by Diem’s brother in northern South Vietnam, which was summarily disbanded after the 1963 coup and the Ngo family’s fall from grace. Parapolitical efforts such as those of Chau could look suspiciously like attempts to build local power bases when viewed from Saigon. Indeed, the frequent turnover in Saigon did encourage the emergence of such bases. Given the weak institutional basis of the Saigon regime, local politics in South Vietnam were prone to warlordism, as they had been throughout Vietnamese history. After the 1963 coup, the four commanders of South Vietnam’s military regions—known as corps commanders—took over responsibility for civil government as well as military matters within their area. This included the hiring and firing of province chiefs, giving them the ability to build up local fiefdoms that were generally free from central oversight. Centrifugal tendencies made it even more difficult to construct a nationwide effort to reform local governance. Colonel Robert M. Montague, a key figure in the creation of CORDS, castigated the resultant “44 separate province wars” as “ridiculous” because “you didn’t have the leadership down at the province; you didn’t have the resources to go around; and the enemy could have defeated you piecemeal, because he was operating under a centralized strategy.”

Diem, who remained a hardheaded nationalist even as his own government’s incapacity to deal with its problems became clear, refused the deep collaboration with the Americans that would have been necessary to create such a centralized strategy. To do so would necessarily have increased the influence of the foreigners over the GVN, diminishing its claim to independence and validating the Communist propaganda that labeled him “My-Diem”—American Diem. Those Americans who managed to influence Diem the most were ones who developed a personal connection with him, such as Fishel and Phillips. But much like the CIA’s relationship with Chau, theirs were temporary and partial arrangements that never managed to change the fundamental dynamic of the GVN’s relations with its rural citizens or to provide an effective counterpoint to Communist rural mobilization. After Diem’s overthrow and murder in 1963, the GVN collapsed into even greater chaos as the civil service was purged of his loyalists and a succession of coups rocked Saigon. Under these difficult circumstances, the Johnson administration set out to reorganize America’s nation-building machinery in South Vietnam in search of an effective and centralized strategy that might change the dynamics of the conflict.