Conclusion

HUMILITY AND NATION BUILDING

The Communist offensive of 1972—known in the West as the Easter Offensive—was the beginning of the end for South Vietnam. Since the failure of the 1968 offensives, the Communist movement had carefully husbanded its armed strength and avoided provocations that might have slowed the U.S. withdrawal or led to a widening of the war. In 1972, hundreds of thousands of NVA soldiers with Chinese equipment and armored vehicles surged across the DMZ and the South Vietnamese borders with Laos and Cambodia. In the midst of the supposedly highly “pacified” Mekong Delta, the Communists managed to seize the provincial capital of Ben Tre. Just as Nixon and Kissinger’s Vietnam Special Studies Group had predicted, the reentry of NVA divisions of regiments into the war swiftly changed the balance of forces, and the GVN was unable to respond effectively. The ARVN grimly held on, supported by an enormous wave of U.S. airpower. But it would not be able to rely on the saviors in the sky much longer. Meanwhile, the Communist movement took advantage of its momentum to reconstitute its administrative and political apparatus in the populated areas, especially the Mekong Delta. Assailed from all sides, the GVN was forced to cannibalize territorial units to make up the losses in its main forces, only weakening its grip on the rural areas further. Just as its inability to mobilize the resources and manpower to combat the Communists had led to American escalation ten years earlier, the GVN again lacked the effectiveness or legitimacy to organize an effective resistance. Nation building had failed.
CORDS had reached the peak of its influence between 1968 and 1971. Barely had a generation of advisers begun to grapple with nation building before they began to be withdrawn from 1971 onward. Many had begun to take a more hands-off approach to their job in the final years anyway. “The day is past when advisors walk hand-in-hand with counterparts across the ride paddies and through the weeds,” said one adviser who served in 1971. “We should not be required to bolster courage and leadership at the small unit level. That day is past. If we haven’t imparted those techniques as yet, we never will.”

By October 1971, Everett Bumgardner, executive assistant to the head of CORDS, said that “most” province chiefs no longer looked to their counterparts for advice. Some fought back against the withdrawal. After serving on a task force in 1971 that eventually decided—against his wishes—to scale back and ultimately dissolve CORDS, former I and II Corps official Willard E. Chambers quit in disgust in November 1972, issuing a parting blast at “the leadership and philosophy being applied” to the nation-building effort. Far from believing the war was “won” or that nation-building was complete, many CORDS advisers believed they needed five to ten more years. But with public support for the war in the United States exhausted, the clock had run out.

CORDS had failed despite its attempt in the latter years of the war to emulate the successes of the Vietnamese Communist movement through the village system. While this was only the latest in a series of efforts to do so, it was certainly the most comprehensive. Through the village system, CORDS had abandoned the attempt to build rural support on the basis of an imagined community of the South Vietnamese nation, and instead had shifted to the idea of “communalism,” which the Communists had used so successfully. By attempting to tap into the village autonomy and identity, which had been the building block of Vietnamese rural life for centuries, they had moved far beyond the crude focus on physical control that had characterized earlier “pacification” efforts. Despite nation building being taken over by the military, the approach favored by many civilians—foremost among them Colby—had won out.

But it was precisely the political content of CORDS’s programs, and its attempts to forge a network of pro-GVN village communities, that failed. The GVN never managed to become effective enough at mobilizing rural support or legitimate enough to demand the sacrifices needed to win the struggle against the Communist movement. The “friendly infrastructure” that CORDS had hoped to nourish was unreliable and uncommitted until the end. The village system offered limited local empowerment and some sense of belonging and advancement to pro-GVN militiamen and officials. But its architects never managed to replicate the true keys to the success of the Communist movement—its deep and organic local roots, its offer of fundamental social and economic change, and the prospect of advancement through a political structure that stretched from
the remotest village to the Politburo in Hanoi. Never able to truly understand or trust its rural citizens, the GVN could not deliver the decentralization, empowerment, and ideological vision that might have made the village system meaningful. As outsiders both in understanding and in influence, American nation builders could hardly do so either.

Nor could the Americans, or their forward-thinking allies among the South Vietnamese, bring about wholesale reform of the GVN in a way that might have made its rural nation-building efforts more likely to succeed. There was ultimately only so far the GVN could be pushed. Time and again—from Robert Komer’s decision to work within the existing corps commander system in 1966, to the rejection of Major Nguyen Duc Thang’s proposals to reform it in 1967, and the quiet shelving of Operation Shock in early 1968—U.S. officials opted for evolution over revolution. Historians such as James McAllister have suggested they should have acted more forcefully. Yet this book has shown that U.S. freedom of action was always constrained by its desire not to unleash chaos of the sort that had followed the coup against Diem. Nor could the Americans ignore nationalist sensitivities. The key assumption underlying Operation Shock had been that as Saigon was unable to claim all the attributes of sovereignty without American assistance, it was reasonable for the Americans to ask for that sovereignty to be conditioned and limited according to American demands for reform. Yet fearing a complete collapse in the Saigon regime’s legitimacy if it was seen to be taking orders from the Americans, CORDS continued to attempt to operate behind the scenes and indirectly. The result was, for the Americans, the worst of both worlds: the influence of American advisers was sharply limited, but their very presence continued to provide the Communist movement with a propaganda boon.

Their evolutionary approach meant that the reforms favored by those Americans most concerned with nation building were very slow to be implemented. The tardiness was on the U.S. side as well as the Vietnamese. Even though the military and civilian agencies like the CIA and USOM had been attempting to strengthen the GVN for nearly a decade by the time of the Americanization of the war in 1965, it took two years from the arrival of the first U.S. combat units to the creation of CORDS. A semblance of political stability in the GVN arrived only in late 1966, whereas Thieu managed to consolidate power and put an end to factional squabbles at the top of the GVN only during 1968. As the VSSG studies produced in the Nixon White House had pointed out, the surface stability and security that allowed for the attempted implementation of the village system from 1969 onward was itself dependent on the Communist movement’s decision to lie low and engage in an economy-of-forces strategy while the U.S. withdrawal continued. The limits of American leverage and its dependence on events over which the United States had no control meant that even if American nation builders had possessed a perfect understanding of South Vietnam and
a clear vision for how to achieve nation building, the conditions in which they operated made it impossible to do so. In reality, they possessed neither of these things anyway.

Despite the questionable wisdom of their efforts, the American experience of attempted nation building recounted in this volume does challenge claims by some historians that the Americans were totally indifferent to the existing state of South Vietnamese politics and society or that their approach was dominated by assumptions from modernization theory. On the contrary, this book has shown that some American nation builders from Saigon down to the villages were keenly interested in understanding and influencing the intricacies of South Vietnamese rural life. They also devoted attention to studying the successes of the Vietnamese Communist movement and attempting to replicate them, learning heavily from former Viet Minh fighters such as Tran Ngoc Chau and Nguyen Be. Nation-building efforts from the RD program through to the village system showed their heavy imprint. Recognizing that they were faced with the same tasks of political organization and mobilization that the Communist movement had carried out so effectively, Americans and South Vietnamese attempted to replicate the very movement they were attempting to save South Vietnam from. Their efforts were also in accord with the conventional wisdom of contemporary theorists of revolutionary and colonial warfare. American nation building in South Vietnam was shaped by many influences.

By providing an analysis of how these ideas played out in practice, this book has presented the most detailed account yet of the failure of U.S. nation building in the latter years of the war. It has moved beyond orthodox accounts of U.S. nation building in Vietnam that focus on structural reasons for its failure while neglecting the evolution of U.S. nation-building policy or the agency of the actors involved, especially in the later years of the war. By coloring between the historical lines laid down by these accounts, this book has aimed to deprive revisionists of the space in which to make claims about the successes of U.S. nation building in the later years of the war. This book has shown that there is little evidence the GVN had built a base among its own people that would have justified continued U.S. support in 1974–1975 and afterward. The eerie peace that settled over much of South Vietnam in the early 1970s might have been testament to successful pacification, but it certainly did not amount to nation building. It also took place in a security environment that was permissive largely because of a change in Hanoi’s strategy. Had the U.S. militarily intervened to defend South Vietnam in 1975 when Hanoi again took the offensive, the GVN may have stumbled on for several more years, but it would have been no closer to overcoming the legacies of ineffectiveness and illegitimacy that dated back to 1954. Nation building in South Vietnam had produced a regime highly dependent on American support
and unable to survive without it. That support was now gone. “Having given us the needles,” as the Vietnamese American novelist Viet Thanh Nguyen has the protagonist of his novel *The Sympathizer* remark, “they now perversely no longer supplied the dope.” Nor was the Saigon regime showing any serious signs of getting over its addiction to American largesse. No counterfactual “what if” can escape the fact that by the time of Hanoi’s final offensives, nation building had not been achieved and did not look likely to be achieved anytime soon, despite twenty years of American and South Vietnamese efforts. Meanwhile, the U.S. public’s appetite for continuing to support Saigon had run out. A strategy reliant on a level of public support that evaporates before victory can be achieved can hardly be considered a winning one. Hearts and minds at home matter, too. This was not a “lost victory.” It was simply a defeat.

The American experience of nation building in South Vietnam hence ought to be a humbling and sobering lesson for would-be nation builders. Too many adherents of nation building, and indeed of counterinsurgency, focus on technical issues of implementation rather than acknowledging the immense structural barriers in the way of their goals. One example is the concept of “unity of command,” the idea that ever-closer coordination between the military, other agencies, and their equivalents among the host government is the key to success. Sherard Cowper-Coles, a former British ambassador to Afghanistan, described this idea as “snake oil.” CORDS had the greatest unity of command of any U.S. attempt at nation building in history, and yet still it failed. When we consider the immense time and effort required from the presidential level down to assure that this unified, if ultimately futile, effort was established in the first place, we begin to see the magnitude of the challenge facing would-be nation builders. CORDS boasted thousands of personnel, unity of command, a sophisticated operating concept based on an understanding of its main antagonist, theoretically close integration with the host government, and even a training institute dedicated to producing personnel skilled in understanding the country in which it operated. Still it failed. No doubt in the future there will be those who say they can succeed in its stead, but they ought to have to reckon with its failure all the same.

The story told in this book also has much to teach us about the relationship between pacification, which is now often called counterinsurgency, and true nation building. While counterinsurgency doctrine has progressed since the time of the Vietnam War, it still suffers from an unclear relationship to strategic victory. Just as the endless churn of pacification operations in Vietnam did little to address the fundamental weaknesses of the GVN and the rural socio-political structure, so today’s “population-centric” counterinsurgency often fails to address the root causes of a conflict. This has led one contemporary critic to deride counterinsurgency as a “strategy of tactics,” an echo of Colonel
Harry Summer’s famous labeling of U.S. strategy in the Vietnam War as a “kind of grand tactics” because it provided no route to strategic victory. But as the relationship between pacification and attempts at more sophisticated forms of nation building in Vietnam shows, the link between counterinsurgency and strategic victory—at least in theory—is nation building. In practice, without achieving true nation building, the gains of pacification are likely to prove ephemeral, and counterinsurgency is indeed doomed to be little more than a “kind of grand tactics.” By demonstrating the difficulty of carrying out the sort of deep political and socioeconomic change called for by nation building in South Vietnam, the site of the most ambitious and energetic attempt by the United States to date, this book ought to give pause to those who in the future see in nation building the key to strategic victory. A clear-eyed understanding of the failure of U.S. nation building in South Vietnam is more useful than fantasies of a “lost victory.”

This study also teaches us to be wary of the metaphor of “nation building.” Policy makers who embark their countries on such ventures should be aware of how little control they will have over either the finer details of implementation or the prerequisites for success. Once the process has begun, high-level policy makers are only able to intervene with broad brushstrokes rather than with regard to the finer detail. Leveraging reform from an allied government whose officials have also to look out for their own political interests is highly challenging, however cleverly the scaffolding of influence is constructed. While the metaphor of “nation building” seems to promise tractability and predictability, in reality the process is influenced by myriad actors with divergent agendas, of whom the intervenor is but one. Nation building is ultimately an activity that privileges local knowledge and action and is hostile to grand designs.

The temptation to go chasing after grand designs is an expression of what Hannah Arendt, writing just as the anti-Diem popular uprising was about to burst forth in South Vietnam in the late 1950s, called the gravest political sin—that of hubris. Many of the Americans who worked against the odds to strengthen the Saigon regime and ensure its survival in the face of the Vietnamese Communist movement were guilty of it. But even more so were the policy makers in Washington who embarked on a war that was dependent on such an improbable task being accomplished. Nation building was an unavoidable condition of victory for the United States in the Vietnam War. It was also, given the legacies of Vietnamese history and the unfolding course of the war, almost certainly preordained to be impossible to achieve. Thus does U.S. strategy in the Vietnam War stand guilty of the sin of hubris, and thus did it fail.