

DAVID BIGGS

## Americans in An Giang: Nation Building and the Particularities of Place in the Mekong Delta, 1966–1973

Since the calamitous end of the Vietnam War (1959–1975), nation building has often been a contentious issue in US foreign policy. Its means and ends in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Central America have been fiercely debated. American experiences in Vietnam are invariably cited in these later debates, but often the references are vague or misleading. Many contemporary commentators seem unaware of the bureaucratic structures and processes through which the United States pursued its nation-building goals in Vietnam.

In fact, during the Vietnam War the term “nation building” had a very concrete and specific meaning for Americans. It referred to a host of military and civilian programs managed jointly by a nation-building “czar” based in the White House and a deputy ambassador in Sài Gòn; civilian officials worked closely with their US military counterparts at all levels of the chain of command. At the same time, nation building also referred to a particular complex of ideas about modernization set forth by social science theorists, such as the economist Walt Rostow, who served as an adviser to both presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson. In 1967, much of the day-to-day work of nation building in Vietnam was placed under the auspices of the Office of Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS), an interagency organization that managed the gamut of military and nonmilitary programs. CORDS took over preexisting

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military-run programs in counterinsurgency, psychological operations, and police training, seeking to combine these military initiatives with economic development activities such as agricultural mechanization, industrialization, infrastructure development, public school reform, and the expansion of public health care. From 1967 to 1973, several thousand US military and Foreign Service officers spent one to two years working mainly in provincial advisory teams, managing these programs in tandem with Vietnamese partner officials and agencies. Like many other US organizations in Vietnam, CORDS underwent significant changes after the Têt Offensive in 1968. Under President Richard Nixon, CORDS focused less on economic and social aid programs and more exclusively on military and counterintelligence initiatives such as the controversial Phoenix Program.<sup>1</sup>

In recent years, American diplomatic and military historians have begun to reexamine Cold War-era nation-building efforts in Vietnam and elsewhere. In these accounts, nation building appears as an enterprise that was primarily or exclusively American in design and implementation, and that was defined by American intellectual and ideological imperatives. Michael Latham and Nils Gilman, for example, draw from US presidential and state department records during the Eisenhower and Kennedy administrations to explain the intense interest of US officials and social scientists in modernization during this period. Both authors treat Vietnam as little more than a backdrop to their analyses of American ideology, and neither explore Vietnamese sources on the subject in any depth.<sup>2</sup>

Similarly, in an essay published in *Diplomatic History*, Jefferson Marquis identifies three main American schools of nation building: conservative populist, liberal nationalist, and bureaucratic authoritarian. He posits that the failure of US nation-building initiatives in Vietnam derived from the Americans' inability to synthesize these different schools into a single, coherent development philosophy.<sup>3</sup> Marquis' work is a useful guide to the various intellectual approaches that Americans applied in Vietnam; however, he is ultimately unable to demonstrate whether or how the sharp differences among these ideological camps affected nation-building outcomes in Vietnam.<sup>4</sup> Like other Americanists, Marquis is unable to ascertain what, if anything, came out of the myriad civilian and military programs initiated by the United States in Vietnam between 1950 and 1975. To assess the social,

environmental, or political effects of nation building in Vietnam requires a broader appreciation and incorporation of Vietnamese perspectives as well as close attention to the specific sites where programs occurred.

This essay is an attempt to explore the contested and contingent meanings of some of the US-sponsored nation-building programs established in the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) during the 1960s. As such, it both builds on and departs from other recent work on nation building and modernization during the twentieth century. In his popular critique of the style of modernization that he dubs “high modernism,” James Scott includes a moral plea for more attention to *metis*—that is, the various forms of indigenous knowledge that disappear as people in rural areas become more deeply engaged in globalizing processes.<sup>5</sup> Scott’s call to preserve local know-how certainly highlights the tremendous destruction that nation building can leave in its wake; however, it is not clear how this concept is relevant to 1960s South Vietnam—a society in which the lines between “the local” and “the foreign” (or between “traditional” and “modern”) had long been blurred. A more useful model is provided by Timothy Mitchell’s study on modernization and development politics in Egypt. Mitchell explicitly addresses the problem of blurred boundaries by showing how nation-building processes and outcomes in Egypt were intimately shaped by local actors and by deeper historical, political, and ecological factors. In Egypt, as in Vietnam, history and the particularities of place often transcended or undermined the designs of nation builders. Similar findings have been reported by Tania Murray Li in her recent study of people living in forested parts of Indonesia. She shows that the indigenous recipients of nation building and development aid often adapt imported technologies and ideas in ways not anticipated by those delivering them.<sup>6</sup>

By focusing on nation building in the Mekong Delta province of An Giang during the peak years of the Vietnam War, this essay will suggest how historians might begin to assess the effects of nation building within a Vietnamese historical framework. Such a history necessarily focuses on particular places and on the specific social and environmental conditions that shaped the course and outcome of the nation-building projects undertaken there. Despite the universalist aspirations inherent in nation building, Vietnamese experiences with nation building during the 1960s varied widely. I have

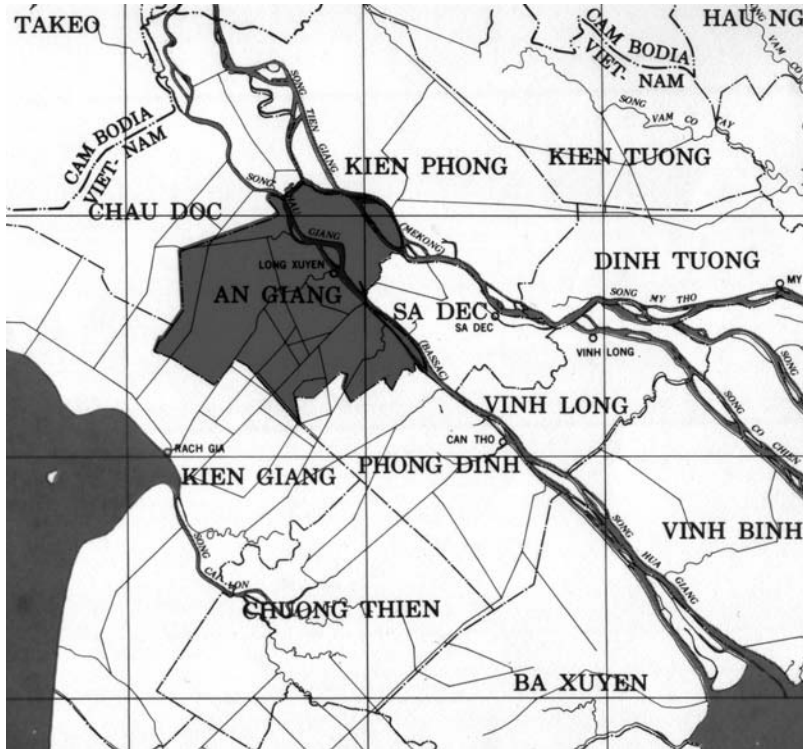


FIGURE 1: Map of An Giang Province with 1965 boundaries. Source: Engineer Agency for Resources Inventories (EARL), *An Giang Province Viet-Nam Resources Inventory* (Washington DC: GPO, 1968).

chosen An Giang because it figured prominently in American discourse about nation building in the RVN. I have also chosen to focus on the relatively narrow timeframe of the existence of the CORDS program (1966–1973) to illustrate how the vagaries of local places often subverted the broader developmentalist agendas emanating from Sài Gòn and Washington.

As a cultural and physical landscape, An Giang Province (Figure 1) was unique in several ways. Ruled largely by civilian officials and a militia affiliated with the province's Hòa Hảo Buddhist majority, the province was unusually safe for Americans—a condition that persisted even after the Tết Offensive. The anomalously peaceful nature of the province attracted attention both in Sài Gòn and in Washington. As President Johnson pushed for an “other war” to “win hearts and minds” in the rest of the RVN, An Giang

became a showcase for “accelerated development.” At the same time, An Giang was deemed to be a laboratory in which the validity and applicability of American theories of modernization could be demonstrated in a controlled environment that was free of the disruptions of warfare.

In assessing the course and fate of these nation-building initiatives, I make use of the rich archival sources produced by American provincial advisors during their tenures in An Giang. A close reading of these reports reveals why the history of American-sponsored nation building in the RVN cannot be explained solely by reference to American ideology. The American social scientists and military personnel who went to An Giang in this period intended to be agents of material, social, and political change. However, they were also witnesses to Vietnamese actions and practices, and they frequently found themselves acting as impromptu ethnologists as they scrambled to make sense of the social and political reality that they encountered in the province. In their analyses of local events and in their routine reporting on various centrally sponsored development programs, these Americans showed that they were acutely aware of the power associated with older, indigenous modes of doing things. Moreover, they described how they often joined with Vietnamese partners to find local alternatives to the one-size-fits-all approaches favored by Washington or Sài Gòn. By reading these American sources against the grain, it thus becomes possible to view national and global concerns in the context of the local instead of examining the local in the context of the global.

By reading the records of American nation builders in An Giang in this way, I aim to present an alternative understanding of the historical meaning of nation building. Instead of treating it as a set of globalized ideas, I examine nation building as an evolving field of human and material travels, multiple readings, translations, and locally applied practices that overlapped and sometimes interacted with one another. More specifically, American “imprints” on the boggy delta landscapes of An Giang generally comprised two kinds of processes: the forging of new representations of the province in the minds of locals and foreigners alike, and material interventions that altered local environments, flows of goods, and ways of life.

American representations of An Giang during the 1960s and 1970s involved much more than mere projections of globalized notions of

modernity onto the province. Indeed, much of the intelligence gathering, travel reporting, and remote surveying conducted by Americans in An Giang contributed to and reinforced earlier Vietnamese and colonial spatial framings. An Giang (a Sino-Vietnamese term meaning “pacified river”) had once been a province [*srok*] of the Cambodian kingdom before it was incorporated into the realm of Nguyễn Cochinchina in 1757. Nineteenth-century Vietnamese gazetteers and an 1836 land survey described a precolonial, early modern era of royal government activities in the province, including the building of canals, garrisons, and administrative networks. A series of French provincial monographs published from 1901 to 1911 continued this Vietnamese tradition of provincially based monographs [*địa phương chí*]; in effect, these colonial texts added sections on colonial developments to an earlier history derived almost wholly from the Vietnamese texts. While provincial boundaries changed frequently in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the idea of the province as the basic spatial and political unit for nation building was established long before Americans arrived. Given the broad array of historical and spatial texts (maps) produced about the province and a rapidly growing Vietnamese vernacular literature in the 1950s, American readings and representations of An Giang were not so much original interpretations of the landscape as they were updated and translated additions to earlier French and Vietnamese studies, often augmented with clearer maps and aerial photography.

When we situate the American interpretations of An Giang in an older province-oriented literature written by earlier generations of nation builders, a key weakness of current critiques of modernization becomes apparent. Nation building was not simply a process of inscribing American designs on a blank literary slate. Americans were not so much constructing a modern Vietnam as they were improvising from earlier designs. Indeed, it is not always clear which spatial framing—nineteenth-century Vietnamese, French colonial, post-1954 Vietnamese, or 1960s American—was at work in the pamphlets and other publications on An Giang produced by Americans. Although Americans and their Vietnamese counterparts were expected to pursue new kinds of nation-building projects—refugee settlements, agricultural improvements, and so forth—in practice they devoted much of their time to describing the existing environment and interpreting

current conditions. Nation building was thus not only a matter of enforcing a modernist Vietnamese or American order on An Giang's spaces and history but also a process of defining the historical landscape.

Of course, Americans did not work exclusively as reporters; they were involved in a wide array of material and political interventions in the province. These included everything from extending rural electric grids to importing fertilizer, selling the insecticide DDT and other agricultural chemicals (now mostly banned), and building school libraries from surplus military building kits. The provincial records of the CORDS program and other sources describe an unprecedented "invasion" in the mid 1960s of heavy construction equipment, chemicals, small engines, volunteers, foreign doctors, and junior Foreign Service officers. Besides the local terrain, Americans in An Giang had to also negotiate US bureaucracy. The result was often a haphazard, ad hoc attempt to reconcile policy objectives and logistics problems coming from Sài Gòn or Washington with the local scene and local demands. And just as Sài Gòn was worlds apart from Washington, so An Giang was a far cry from Sài Gòn.

### Representing An Giang

In writings about Vietnam, descriptions of the countryside typically involve a traveler—either foreigner or native—leaving the comforts of the city center for the unfamiliar and strange environments of rural areas. From highland forests to "ancient" villages in the Red River Delta, this travel literature combines awe for the unusual and unexpected with complaints about inconveniences and dangers experienced along the way. Rural Vietnam, especially during the war, made very strong impressions on outsiders, especially those sent to "develop" or "pacify" it. Takashi Oka, a young Japanese journalist, wrote an engaging narrative of his 1965 visit to An Giang entitled "A Journey to the Hoa Hao Regions." Unlike the US Agency for International Development (USAID) officials and military officers who came to An Giang, Oka did not arrive via military helicopter or on an Air America flight. Instead, he came by way of the single national highway that linked Sài Gòn to the provinces of the delta.

Leaving by bus from the Miền Tây station in Chợ Lớn, Oka and a friend traveled for about an hour into the delta before reaching a traffic jam. Two

of the bridges in Định Tường Province near Mỹ Tho were out, blown up the night before by guerrilla sappers. Their bus had to wait in line to cross a temporary pontoon bridge, so they decided to walk to the heavily damaged bridge and cross it on foot. They then hopped aboard a crowded, three-wheeled Lambretta motor scooter, which carried them to the next bridge, also destroyed. There, they met a bus headed to the ferries that traversed the two main branches of the Mekong River. After crossing the Hậu Giang [Lower River], they traveled by the region's distinctive motorcycle-pulled wagon [*xe lôi*] to their lodging in Long Xuyên.

This slow, hot, dusty journey, punctuated by long delays around the remains of insurgent violence, ended in what Oka noted was an island of relative peace and civility. Foreigners and locals alike traveled on foot and in small numbers in An Giang, without armed escorts or flak jackets; people even moved about safely at night. This was despite the fact that fighting had escalated in recent months beyond the province's boundaries in three directions: in the Plain of Reeds to the east, along the Cambodian border to the north, and in the Gulf of Thailand region to the west. Like other observers, Oka credited the unique situation in An Giang to recent deals between the military government of Premier Nguyễn Cao Kỳ and leaders of the Hòa Hảo Buddhist sect.<sup>7</sup>

The places described in Oka's 1965 travelogue—nineteenth-century temples at the feet of mountains, the city of Long Xuyên, inter-river islands [*cù lao*], and the vast, sea-like floodplains planted in floating rice [*luá nôl*—suggested a regional landscape deeply influenced by centuries of unique social and ecological forces. An Giang Province in 1965 included several large inter-river islands, and a large portion of its territory was situated in a seasonally flooded depression called the Long Xuyên Quadrangle (see Figure 2). The majority of this flooded terrain was demarcated by the thin strips of higher, alluvial land that lay next to rivers, creeks and a network of modern canals. The most heavily settled areas in the province were concentrated in these “garden strips” [*miệt vườn*]. The web-like dispersion of the population along major waterways and a few roads had long been the rule in An Giang; the only significant recent exception involved the construction of a series of new grid-like settlement schemes implemented during the 1940s and 1950s.



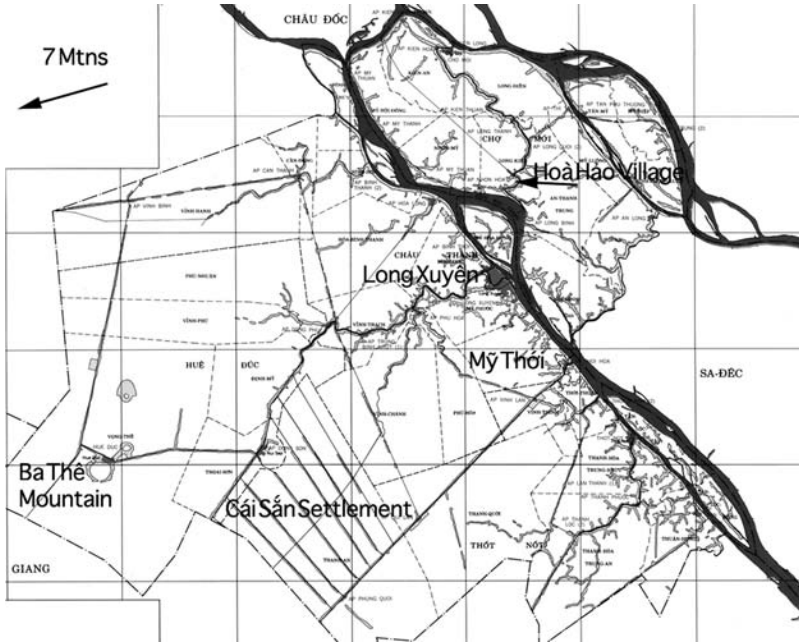


FIGURE 2: Settled areas and place names, An Giang Province. Urban areas such as Long Xuyên are shaded in dark grey, while villages and more densely inhabited rural areas are shaded in light grey. Source: EARI, *An Giang Province, Viet-Nam, Resources Inventory*.

After the global Depression in 1930 and during World War II, the colonial government investigated ways to reclaim the floodplains through various polder-based resettlement schemes known as *casiers*. Thousands of Tonkinese migrant farmers, known as *petit colons*, were moved from famine-stricken regions in the north into the relatively open but “unproductive” lands of An Giang. This program continued well into the postcolonial era; in 1956, the Ngô Đình Diệm government used American funds and bulldozers in a program that relocated over sixty thousand refugees into the western Mekong Delta. The majority of these new arrivals were Catholics who had relocated to the South following the Geneva Accords.<sup>8</sup>

Beyond the floodplain, An Giang’s most distinctive feature is the series of mountains that rise abruptly in the western reaches of the province, like granite islands above a sea of floating rice. These mountains have figured

prominently both in the millenarian politics of the region and in a much more ancient history only recently uncovered in archaeological surveys. In 1930, the discovery of ceramics and gold in the tailings of steam dredges, as well as crop markings revealed in aerial photographs used for cadastral mapping, pointed to some sort of polity located in the vicinity of Ba Thê Mountain (Figure 2). Pierre Paris, a French colonial civil servant who served in the province starting in 1930, also noticed traces of ancient shipping canals linking the Gulf of Siam to Ba Thê Mountain and north to the Mekong.<sup>9</sup> During the Japanese occupation of Indochina from 1942 to 1945, French archaeologist Louis Malleret directed excavations around Ba Thê Mountain and confirmed that the traffic on these canals during the early centuries of the Christian Era carried pottery, statues, and jewelry from India, China, and beyond.<sup>10</sup>

In the past century, the mountains of An Giang and the larger Seven Mountains range near Châu Đốc figured prominently in the spiritual and political life of the Mekong region. Healers, prophets, anti-French rebels, and assorted Khmer, Chinese, and Vietnamese mystics frequently sought refuge and solitude on the forested slopes. The island-like ecology of the mountains features cool springs, rare medicinal plants, and exotic animals. This beautiful and rugged terrain attracted those fleeing from Vietnamese royal troops in the 1830s, cholera outbreaks in the 1840s, and French militias in the 1860s.

In 1849, amid a wave of civil strife and cholera epidemics that killed upwards of a million people, the Seven Mountains witnessed the creation of the millenarian sect that would eventually become known as Hòa Hảo Buddhism. As violence and disease ravaged the region, a Buddhist monk named Đoàn Minh Huyền began preaching and offering healing amulets inscribed with the Hán-Việt words “Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương” [Strange Mountain–Perfumed Scint]. Over the next several years, he built a strong local following and declared himself an incarnation of the Buddha.<sup>11</sup> In the decade after the prophet’s death in 1856, the French conquest of the Mekong Delta seemed to invest his millenarian teachings with even greater poignancy and urgency. Those who became prominent in the cult included former Vietnamese royal officers who had chosen to resist the colonial incursions. One of the most famous of the anticolonial folk heroes in the delta, a

fisherman-turned-saboteur named Nguyễn Trung Trực, is believed to have hid out in the Seven Mountains and converted to the sect. After his capture and execution by the French in 1868, other sect leaders retreated to densely forested swamps at the base of the mountains and founded settlements that were both millenarian and anticolonial in character. In her study of Hòa Hảo Buddhism and millenarian politics in Việt Nam until 1975, Hue-Tam Ho Tai suggests that this sect's successful fusing of millenarianism with anticolonialism was central to its ability to survive and thrive throughout the colonial era.<sup>12</sup>

The latter-day version of the Hòa Hảo sect was established by another millenarian prophet, Huỳnh Phú Sổ, who was born in 1919 in Hòa Hảo Village on Ông Chuông Island, the large inter-river island across from the town of Long Xuyên. As a sickly youth who struggled in school, Huỳnh Phú Sổ was sent by his parents to the Seven Mountains to study and possibly to receive treatment from a famed healer living on the mountain. In 1938, he returned to his native village. One stormy night, he reputedly began citing obscure Buddhist scriptures and gained his first followers. Declaring himself a reincarnation of the Maitreya Buddha and the founder of the Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương sect, Huỳnh Phú Sổ soon attracted the attention of French authorities, who placed him in a mental asylum in 1940. But even in detention, Huỳnh Phú Sổ continued to build his following, which came to include tens of thousands of adherents across the Mekong Delta. With protection and support provided by the Japanese, Huỳnh Phú Sổ was released from detention and began to advocate for the creation of a paramilitary force to protect Hòa Hảo lands from the French. In the wake of the August Revolution of 1945, the Hòa Hảo forces were briefly allied with the Việt Minh against their common colonial enemy; however, the sect and the revolutionaries soon were at loggerheads over both spiritual and military matters. In 1947, Huỳnh Phú Sổ was allegedly assassinated by Việt Minh operatives, an event that earned the revolution the undying enmity of Hòa Hảo adherents throughout the region. Following Huỳnh Phú Sổ's death, leadership of the group passed to several lieutenants, who organized competing paramilitary groups that existed in uneasy alliance with each other. At the same time, many of these leaders also chose to cooperate with the French-backed State of Vietnam following its creation in 1949.<sup>13</sup>

Although the US government supported French military operations in Indochina beginning in 1950, Americans did not travel to An Giang in any significant numbers until late 1955. By this point, Ngô Đình Diệm had successfully forced most Hòa Hảo and Cao Đài militia groups either to disband or to integrate into the South Vietnamese military. Although few members of the US Operations Mission (USOM) in South Vietnam spent any time in An Giang before 1965, the United States nevertheless played a major role in supporting one of the largest resettlement schemes ever attempted in Vietnam. Ngô Đình Diệm designated the southern portion of An Giang for the Cái Sắn Refugee Resettlement area (Figure 2). Although they had not been consulted by Ngô Đình Diệm in advance, members of USOM's Division on Refugees and Resettlement surveyed the terrain and requested funds from Washington to support the project. From 1955 to 1958, American technical advisors and volunteers made routine visits to Cái Sắn as over fifty thousand settlers, mostly refugees from Catholic villages in the northern province of Thái Bình, settled around a newly dug grid of canals. Most settlements were organized politically by parishes.<sup>14</sup> Among their other contributions to the project, USOM staff produced pamphlets and a movie script to showcase Cái Sắn to American audiences. Those targeted included members of the US Congress, which furnished a fleet of bulldozers and most of the aid for the refugee families. For many Americans during the 1950s, Cái Sắn seemed to provide concrete proof that US aid to the Vietnamese countryside was working. Robert Alden, writing for the *New York Times*, described the first stage of the settlement project as a Cold War Wild West tale, with the refugees portrayed as “foes to red penetration.”<sup>15</sup>

As scholarship on Ngô Đình Diệm's final years has shown, the apparent success of Cái Sắn would eventually be overshadowed by the spreading discontent and rebellion in rural areas of South Vietnam and by the general failure of Ngô Đình Diệm's various attempts at rural reconstruction. As the communist-led revolt against his regime intensified during the late 1950s and early 1960s, Ngô Đình Diệm and his brother Ngô Đình Nhu experimented with various kinds of counterinsurgency strategies. Contrary to what some have assumed, the Ngô brothers' approaches were not simply derivative of the resettlement schemes used by the British during the Malayan Emergency of 1948–1960. In 1959, they embarked on a campaign

to build new “agglomeration centers”—or “agrovilles”—which were supposed to gather rural populations into modernist towns, thus exposing the population to the benefits of urban life while also placing them under government surveillance.<sup>16</sup> However, these projects, which often involved coerced relocation and forced labor, served mainly to turn participants against the government. By 1960, Ngô Đình Diệm had put the program on hold. An American aerial photograph taken in 1967 reveals the fate of one of the cancelled settlements; the dim lines of the abandoned grid can be seen faintly discerned beneath the heavier lines of freshly dug canals (Figure 3).



FIGURE 3: Vọng Thê agroville. The grid of an earlier 1950s-era settlement along an abandoned canal can be seen in the lower right of this image. Vọng Thê Hill is located approximately three kilometers northeast of Ba Thê Mountain.

Although mostly ignorant of An Giang's historical geography when they arrived in the province, the Americans who served there quickly became familiar with these natural and historical contours as they learned their way around the vernacular landscape. The basic features of this province—its millenarian political networks, northern Vietnamese Catholic parishes, and strange, Khmer-named mountains—found their way into the reports of Advisory Team 69. Like the other nation builders who had come to the area before them, Americans in An Giang thus continued the older practice of folding earlier conceptual frameworks into their own reports.

### Representing Nation Building

What had attracted Oka to An Giang soon attracted scores of other visitors: the role of Hòa Hảo Buddhism in producing the province's apparent tranquility. From 1966 on, American advisors in Long Xuyên devoted a considerable effort to understanding and representing the province's politico-religious landscape to audiences in Sài Gòn and abroad. The provincial administration with whom they worked each day was made up almost exclusively of military officers and civilians belonging to the Hòa Hảo faith. The advisory team not only reported on current events but also collected published materials in Vietnamese that they had translated by local office staffers.

An elaborately decorated souvenir program dated March 28, 1965, announced an anniversary celebration in the main square of Long Xuyên commemorating the eighteenth anniversary of founder Huỳnh Phú Sổ's death by Việt Minh assassination. It was clearly a political rally designed to bind together not only Hòa Hảo adherents but also Catholics and others into the anticommunist effort, but the speeches given that day reflected an intense allegiance to Hòa Hảo Buddhism that clearly delineated the differences between allegiance to the national government and allegiance to the religion. Among the state and provincial officials who spoke was a Hòa Hảo veteran from the First Indochina War (1946–1954), who stated, "In the past, where is the silhouette of the national soldier? Where, too, is the silhouette of the Hòa Hảo soldier? Together they raise the flag of the national cause higher and they work side by side to exterminate the communists."<sup>17</sup>

Such an apparently separatist comment, delivered in the presence of the interior minister and the vice president, might have been considered

treasonous under Ngô Đình Diệm; by 1965, however, such language was more common. In May 1966, Premier Nguyễn Cao Kỳ even approved the Hòa Hảo Executive Committee's request to form its own Hòa Hảo Buddhist Self-defense Force. Older officers of the Hòa Hảo, such as Lt. Col. Trần Văn Tuối, had integrated into the Vietnamese National Army in the 1950s, but they took posts in the Nguyễn Cao Kỳ government as provincial heads in delta provinces with Hòa Hảo majorities such as An Giang.<sup>18</sup>

While the finer points of the sect's politics were typically lost in popular essays such as Samuel Huntington's (cited below), Americans and others in Long Xuyên soon learned to recognize tensions and differences within the sect and its affiliated political parties. Hòa Hảo military officers and province chiefs were not necessarily unified or universally trusted by the majority of the sect's followers living in the countryside. Takashi Oka noted in 1965 some general difference between roughly one million rural adherents who tended to support the anti-Ngô Đình Diệm renegade leader Lê Quang Vinh (Ba Cụt) rather than Hòa Hảo military officers, such as Lt. Col. Trần Văn Tuối, who had returned to An Giang after serving in the national army in distant provinces. The Nguyễn Cao Kỳ government in 1966 reversed common practice by allowing Hòa Hảo officers to serve in their home provinces.<sup>19</sup> These tensions appear to have been resolved two years later when a general conference, convened at Hòa Hảo Village in 1968, elected now Colonel Trần Văn Tuối as secretary-general of the Executive Committee. Speeches given during this conference not only commemorated the death of the founder but also paid respects officially to Lê Quang Vinh, thus honoring the folk hero while inaugurating a sect leader with strong ties to Sài Gòn.<sup>20</sup>

As they had with Cái Sắn, American advisors from 1966 to 1968 supported the idea of An Giang as a "priority development area" even though the concept was not likely an American idea. Major General Nguyễn Đức Thắng, Premier Nguyễn Cao Kỳ's minister of Revolutionary Development, invented the An Giang Priority Area Development Program as a means of accelerating nation-building programs, given the province's exceptionally secure situation compared to most provinces at the time. In a report issued in March 1966, the ministry outlined a plan for accelerated programs in education, public works construction, health care, agricultural modernization, and especially land reform for the roughly 75 percent of the population listed as tenant farmers

[*tá điền*]. The ministry committed over one hundred million piasters, a significant portion of its total budget, to jump-start these programs.<sup>21</sup>

Major General Nguyễn Đức Thắng was a powerful force in Sài Gòn politics after Ngô Đình Diệm's assassination. He had been a close friend of Edward Lansdale, and through William Colby he had support from the CIA for his leadership role in the pacification effort.<sup>22</sup> Nguyễn Đức Thắng supported the joint civilian-military nature of CORDS and directly managed nation building in the Vietnamese government as minister of Revolutionary Development until January 1968. After the Tết Offensive, he took over the command of Military Region IV (the Mekong Delta), where he likely continued to support programs in delta provinces such as An Giang through military channels.<sup>23</sup> As with Cái Sắn in the 1950s, the American role in nation building was thus more that of an enabler than that of an architect. While Americans delivered an unprecedented quantity of new equipment, weapons, and money into the region, what they did best in these situations was represent such programs in glossy pamphlets, short documentary films, and dozens of press visits. An Giang became, in effect, a staged laboratory that presented evidence of experiments in various economic and civic fields, but that rarely produced any lasting results.

In response to a request from Major General Nguyễn Đức Thắng, Americans in An Giang not only recorded events on the ground but they also coordinated soil maps, aerial photography, and other environmental surveys. The *An Giang Province, Viet-Nam, Resources Inventory*, compiled by the US Army's Engineer Agency for Resources Inventories (EARI) for USAID, showcased American abilities to quickly produce baseline studies of a given environment. From July to September 1967, an EARI team including geographers, a photogrammetrist, soil scientists, hydraulic engineers, and cartographers compiled existing information and aerial photographs to produce one of the few detailed provincial studies in Vietnam before 1975. As with earlier colonial and even precolonial provincial monographs, the EARI atlas covered the same basic categories as older works: natural resources, human resources, and infrastructure. The EARI group, however, added detailed thematic maps based on US Army aerial photographs.

Aerial photographs of settlement types in An Giang, notably one showing a 1961 agrovillage site at Vọng Thê (see Figure 3) and another showing a





FIGURE 4: Vĩnh Lan New Life Development Hamlet. The image shows the refugee resettlement hamlet, located inside the large square. Set alongside the canal and at the canal intersection are the existing residences of this village. On the northern side are the floating rice fields, with the circles designating threshing platforms.

1964 New Life Development hamlet of Vĩnh Lan (see Figure 4), conveyed the intense environmental and social delineation between different historic layers in the landscape. In the case of Vọng Thê, the straight lines of a paved road and canal as well as large fields for floating rice overlay an earlier, faded rectilinear settlement of an abandoned New Life Development settlement.<sup>24</sup>

In Figure 4, the rectangular grid of the resettlement hamlet, with small homes roofed in thatch, contrasts with the much larger homes and warehouses along the canal, covered almost exclusively in tile or metal roofing. Behind the single line of homes and orchards along the canal bank can also be seen a largely natural drainage area where fields of floating rice were cultivated, with light-toned circles designating threshing platforms.<sup>25</sup> Such

a visual record confirmed the statistical evidence that the overwhelming majority of the province continued to function in a largely traditional manner, while new settlements and urban zones hugged the major canals and the few paved roads.

While these unusually detailed, cartographic, and measured readings of An Giang did not result in any significant changes in land use, they are important for two reasons. First, unlike atlases and surveys of most provinces in Vietnam in the late 1960s, they captured detailed ecological information. For those interested in baseline environmental conditions during the 1960s, such a source is an invaluable asset. Second, the *Resources Inventory* perpetuated the idea of the province as a politico-ecological unit; the maps and surveys only conveyed information within the borders of the province.

### Interventions and Responses

While in the early years of their presence American advisors could do little but sit on the sidelines and report on An Giang's affairs, by 1967 they began to play an important material role in supporting agricultural development and other schemes outlined in Nguyễn Đức Thắng's Priority Area Development Program. They were instrumental in coordinating the delivery of commodities such as fertilizer and building materials, as well as orchestrating construction of new works and buildings carried out by American volunteer groups. When examined close up, the records of Province Advisory Team 69 present the advisors as intermediaries situated in processes much broader in scope and more complex in political detail than the projects at hand. Their reports and correspondences describe their interventions in these processes; however, the general tone of the reports repeatedly emphasizes the limits of their power to influence results. Still, as the sole representatives in the province for an American aid network moving billions of dollars worth of materials, they did at least play a kind of Pandora-like role by overseeing the delivery of materials and inspecting their uses.

American aid, channeled through USAID and partner ministries, was most heavily focused on extending loans to farmers to purchase such goods as chemical fertilizers, pesticides, and imported seed. This effort, part of the agency's Division of Agriculture and Natural Resources, had begun almost a decade earlier in Vietnam and was connected with Green Revolution

programs occurring throughout Southeast Asia at the time. In the 1960s the entire region was going through rapid social and economic changes, especially in rural areas. This was due not only to an exploding population and the importation of high-yield rice varieties, but also to a more profound shift in rural society toward commercialization. Geographer Jonathan Rigg succinctly describes how American-backed efforts to commodify the staples of rural life altered individual experiences in the region. One Thai farmer explained: “Children have to be educated and books and uniforms paid for; medicines bought; soap, radios and cigarettes purchased; and ultimately a motorcycle or pick-up acquired.”<sup>26</sup> American advisors did not design the Green Revolution and its associated commercialization of agriculture, but they wholeheartedly supported it through the mobilization of USAID-backed commodity imports and loans for farmers to purchase these goods.

Because of the fighting, Vietnam missed much of this early wave of agricultural commodification. An Giang Province, however, because of its unique security status, served as a kind of trial site for the Green Revolution. A 1964–1967 summary of National Agricultural Credit Office (NACO) loans to farmers in An Giang shows that with Major General Nguyễn Đức Thắng’s designation of the province as a Priority Development Area, a concerted effort was made by USAID, NACO, and American and Taiwanese technical advisors to identify eligible farmers for packaged loans involving a mix of inputs such as seed, fertilizer, pesticides, and machinery. Initial funds were limited through 1966, but in 1967, the program finally transferred the significant commodity imports to Long Xuyên, including 372 metric tons of seed, 1,370 metric tons of fertilizer, and 31 metric tons of pesticides, including malathion, Dithane, DDT, and endrin.<sup>27</sup> The program also called for importation of several hundred motorized pumps, boat motors, chemical hand sprayers, and several dozen small tractors and necessary attachments. These amounts roughly doubled in fiscal year 1968.

While such imports were common features of Green Revolution agricultural programs around the world at this time (DDT and endrin were common commodities until they were banned in the 1970s), historic conflicts in Vietnamese society, notably the division between the masses of tenant farmers and the relatively small but politically connected cohort of landowners and entrepreneurs, stymied the spread of these new commodities. A USAID

representative from the Division of Labor visited Long Xuyên's Trưng Vương Square to attend a public meeting of the Tenant Farmer's Union on January 20, 1967. In this meeting of twenty-nine delegates and about four hundred others, union leaders criticized the failure of NACO and the Ministry of Revolutionary Development for failing to appoint the union as the distribution agent for the imported fertilizer. By allowing wealthy entrepreneurs in Long Xuyên to distribute and sell the fertilizer, the province effectively limited supply and drove up the price for a fifty kilogram bag from 260 piasters to a black market rate of 700 piasters. Convention delegates accused private entrepreneurs in Long Xuyên of manipulating the market and thus creating a fertilizer black market as well as eroding tenant farmer confidence in Revolutionary Development.<sup>28</sup>

American influence in resolving such disputes was limited at best, and similar conflicts between tenant farmers and provincial officials or wealthy entrepreneurs continued for years. American investigations into such conflicts merely showed the extent to which red tape in the Vietnamese government stalled projects. In one investigation into the reasons why three grain silos donated by the Australian government to the Farmer's Union in 1964 had yet to be constructed in 1967, the American advisor found that the Farmer's Union was prohibited by some obscure government regulations from receiving funds as a nongovernmental organization to build the facility. In districts such as Chợ Mới with a strong influence from Hòa Hảo organizations, farmers responded to such restrictions and supply shortages by circumventing policy and relying on the religious organization for assistance. While waiting for one of the Australian silos, farmers used the district's Hòa Hảo office yard for storing fertilizer and harvested rice.<sup>29</sup> This move further complicated the ideological goals of nation building as the religious sect took over functions not adequately managed by the state.

Even in a "pacified" province, experiments in agriculture were often severely geographically limited to villages that Americans could easily access within a few hundred meters of a paved road. American knowledge of what was happening in the vast, flooded interiors beyond was limited to reports from Vietnamese partner agencies. To translate this geographic fact into development terms, an American table showing the acreage of crops in the province in 1967 listed 145,000 hectares planted in the flood-tolerant but

low-yielding floating rice and just 4,600 hectares planted in the higher-yielding but more labor-intensive short stem, transplanted rice. Thus approximately 90 percent of the province's fields were planted in a single crop, with the fields laying fallow the rest of the year.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, transplanted rice was limited to traditional varieties and not the high-yield, fertilizer-intensive rice coming from the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) in the Philippines.

Besides being limited to narrow corridors of established villages along the major roads, another limit to American direction in experimenting with new IRRI high-yield varieties was the inability to adequately monitor the proliferation and dispersion of seed after its import to the province. A report by William Kaiser, an agricultural advisor for the entire delta region, notes that only a small amount of the IRRI seed listed in the 1966 budget had actually reached An Giang by 1967. At the Mỹ Thới Improved Farm on Highway 9 between Thốt Nốt and Long Xuyên, Kaiser noted that IRRI seed had been procured not from the government Rice Service or through the Ministry of Revolutionary Development, but from a private farmer. A Mr. Thiết acquired his own supply of IRRI seed through a dealer in Mỹ Tho in 1966 and had since grown three crops and sold most of the rice as seed, except for the amount required to replant a half-hectare area. By contrast, the area Rice Service chief had received forty-seven varieties of IRRI rice from Sài Gòn, but he lost all of the nursery stock because he planted it in a flood zone. With none of the government-imported seed available, Kaiser arranged to buy seed from Mr. Thiết and used his private farm as a demonstration farm.<sup>31</sup>

While the corresponding picture of an American-sponsored "labscape" in An Giang may appear as wholly compromised by the ineptness of Rice Service technicians and the autonomy of private farmers such as Mr. Thiết, the ad hoc experimental farm in Mỹ Thới was nevertheless significant. Mr. Thiết's tiny plot near the highway demonstrated the intense productivity of the IRRI rice. It yielded an average of ten tons per hectare, compared to the average of one ton for floating rice and two tons for transplanted rice. In one year, Kaiser noted that over one thousand persons had visited Mr. Thiết's farm, including a Vietnamese television crew, a handful of American and international visitors, and hundreds of fellow farmers. Mr. Thiết even

complained that some farmers stole rice at night to develop their own supply of IRRI rice.<sup>32</sup>

This experience undermines a common assumption at the time and since: that American agencies such as USAID were pivotal to the modification of agriculture in the 1960s. The picture derived from American field reports instead suggests that there were the makings for a rapid intensification of agriculture, but these tendencies came from within the local population and outside the reach of government authorities.

Besides land reform and agriculture, another major focus of American support for nation building involved projects aimed to improve urban life in provincial capitals through public works construction, new schools, and improved health care. American advisors, together with American and foreign contractors and volunteers, comprised a relatively visible community in the provincial downtowns where they mostly worked and lived. The only Americans most people in An Giang encountered outside of those piloting helicopter gunships or traveling on the highway were the several dozen advisors and technicians working in Long Xuyên, with occasional sightings in the district towns. As with agricultural development, aid in the development of public works and urban construction was generally limited to targeted rural communities—that is, refugee villages, historic refugee settlements such as the Catholic settlements at Cái Sắn, and areas with important resources such as the quarry site at Núi Sập. Given the more permanent nature of the public works projects (water-pumping stations, power houses, hospitals, etc.), many have survived to the present and are often glimpsed in today’s delta landscape as rusting relics.

One example of such an effort was the USAID-supported rural electrification campaign. Bringing electricity to remote, rural areas had been one of the most transformative urbanization projects in the United States in the 1930s. As a young congressman from the Texas Hill Country, Lyndon Johnson had launched his political career on this issue by persuading President Roosevelt to lower the density requirements for a Rural Electrification Administration loan to bring electricity to his constituents. Robert Komer, Johnson’s White House director of the CORDS program in 1966, later commented that Johnson saw pacification in Vietnam as a similar sort of program, transplanted thousands of miles away. The war to “win hearts and minds” was

to Johnson something akin to building the Tennessee Valley Authority or establishing the Rural Electrification Administration.<sup>33</sup>

Despite such visions in Washington, in practice efforts to bring electricity to people in a “pacified” province such as An Giang fell far short of the transformative goals expressed by Johnson at the 1966 Honolulu meeting with Prime Minister Nguyễn Văn Thiệu and Premier Nguyễn Cao Kỳ. Outside of military bases, a few factories, and government offices using private generators, less than 20 percent of the province’s population had access to electricity, and the vast majority of those users lived in Long Xuyên. Only in December 1967 did the electric plant in Long Xuyên become the property of the state public utility, Electricity of Vietnam (EOV). Until then it had been a private franchise operating continually since the colonial era as the Société des Eaux et Electricité [Water and Electric Company]. Besides assisting EOV to purchase the franchise’s property, USAID and the Ministry of Rural Development developed plans for a rural electricity cooperative, and the ministry inaugurated a pilot project to set up four 30-kilowatt electric generators in rural hamlets.<sup>34</sup>

As experiments in rural electrification, the four hamlet-sited generators demonstrated the severe institutional limitations of USAID and the newly created provincial public works office. Hamlets were provided with three months’ worth of fuel and funds to pay a local operator. After three months, two generators had ceased operating, while the other two operated below capacity. USAID hired the American firm Lyon Associates to send an engineer to report on the condition of the generators. Visiting Tân Hiệp A Hamlet in January 1968, field supervisor John E. Campos revealed that the hamlet had operated the generator for only three days before the machine broke down. The hamlet operator had been unable to repair the generator, and it lay quiet for over two months before the hamlet requested repairs so there would be electricity for the upcoming 1968 Tết holiday. Upon returning to Long Xuyên, Campos interviewed the province public works chief about the generators and learned that Shell Oil had cut off fuel deliveries to public offices because they had not paid their bills; thus, fuel deliveries promised to the hamlets did not arrive. Additionally, bureaucratic actions required before hamlets could receive operator salaries or fuel supplies also caused delays.<sup>35</sup>

Conflicts over the maintenance of such equipment also sometimes revealed deeper tensions in the province. Electric generators and other machines, even if they were not working, signified a special relationship between a village and the state or American aid representatives. CORDS records recorded one such dispute between the Thốt Nốt district chief and Catholic priests in the province over a generator that the district chief had removed from a Catholic village in the Cái Sắn area. CORDS advisors made a visit to Thanh An Village, one of the refugee villages founded in 1956 along present-day Highway 80. The village operated a small hospital supported by Catholic relief organizations, and parish priests in its hamlets acted as hamlet chiefs, managing government-funded self-help projects such as building classrooms, clinics, and bridges. The priests alleged that besides withholding funds from the village, the district chief removed the village's broken down electric generator on the grounds that the priests did not possess the means to repair it. He also allegedly removed a television — a rare commodity in the province at the time — and placed it at his headquarters. American advisors commented that the generator had been donated as part of the earlier USOM-supported Cái Sắn settlement in 1956 and had powered the hospital and surrounding village for the eleven years since.<sup>36</sup>

Given the difficulties that Americans faced in responding to such fundamental nation-building efforts, it is not surprising that results were also limited in the field of education and cultural affairs. Nevertheless, An Giang's secure nature allowed local advisors to spend some of their time responding to the overwhelming need for schools and libraries. Noting that there was no public library for schoolchildren in Long Xuyên, the provincial representative for CORDS organized the construction of a small library, joining two stesiphon huts retrieved from the USOM yard in Sài Gòn (see Figure 5).

Construction of the library involved local high school students working on land donated by the province. Americans working in psychological operations and for cultural organizations such as the Asia Society visited the new construction soon after its completion in September 1967. The only problem with the new library was that it lacked books. One advisor even wrote back to his hometown mayor in San Antonio asking him to adopt Long Xuyên's new library and donate materials.<sup>37</sup>





FIGURE 5: High school library made of two conjoined stesiphon huts. Source: "Library 1967," Box 7, Advisory Team 69, NARAC-II.

The extremely limited American budget for civil operations, however, contrasted starkly with the comparatively massive sums of money involved in similar operations of military design. For the most part, military spending was limited to base construction and supply of military hardware; however, in certain areas, military spending seeped into civilian affairs. The Military

Provincial Health Assistance Program (MILPHAP) was one such program, designed to assist local physicians meet the greater demand for health care among civilians wounded by warfare. Staffed by officer-doctors in the Air Force's 569th Medical Service Flight, the provincial team consisted of physicians and other medical personnel assigned to a provincial hospital and district clinics. Because civilian casualties in An Giang were so light, the team that arrived there in 1965 found the only provincial hospital in Vietnam that had an ample supply of medical services. An Australian surgical team was also assigned to Long Xuyên. Thus, MILPHAP doctors revamped the district clinics and made regular visits to rural villages. With military support, the team in An Giang established a dependable logistics network for delivering medicine to rural sites, and by 1967, team members focused more on advising Vietnamese physicians than on delivering basic care.<sup>38</sup>

While nation building as conceived in CORDS was to be seamlessly integrated into the larger military operations of the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, in reality, military infrastructure and operations overshadowed such programs even in a "pacified" province. In many cases the American military presence undermined the appeal of American aid programs, especially over incidents of civilian casualties. Throughout the delta, farmers often complained of helicopter gunships shooting at people or buildings in areas beyond no-man's-lands called "free fire zones." West of Ba Thê toward the Cambodian border were several such free fire zones in An Giang, and it was typically in these areas that most reports of war damage came. Especially in the months after the Têt Offensive, American air crews repeatedly used open areas in the province as a gun range and occasionally killed or wounded civilians in the process.<sup>39</sup>

The abduction and death of one American volunteer several days before the Têt Offensive and the many deaths of Vietnamese civilians caused by helicopter fire in free fire zones were reminders that the war was never far from the towns and cities. Dave Gitelson worked in An Giang as a volunteer with the Mennonite organization International Voluntary Service (IVS) and was posted in the district town Ba Thê. He wrote to USAID officials, noting several incidents of indiscriminate firing by helicopters around the villages. He criticized the zones for the economic burden that restrictions on local travel placed on farmers who normally supplanted their income by

fishing in these flooded areas.<sup>40</sup> Like many IVS volunteers, Gitelson traveled extensively in the local area, and less than a week before the Tết Offensive, while traveling beyond secure areas to distribute clothing, he was captured by National Liberation Front (NLF) soldiers. He was allegedly shot while trying to escape, and his body was later recovered by district authorities. A report drafted by the province's senior military advisor noted that when the young man's body was returned to Ba Thê, some five hundred people came to see it, many of them crying.<sup>41</sup>

Such events as Gitelson's death and incidents of Vietnamese civilian casualties reminded people, Vietnamese and American alike, of the violent boundaries that separated everyday, civilian life in An Giang from the war raging at the fringes of the province's watery borders. The Tết Offensive demonstrated the vulnerability of American civilians working in rural areas, and it marked an effective ending point for President Johnson's vision of an "other" war winning over Vietnamese hearts and minds in the countryside. While the NLF did not strike any installations in An Giang in its coordinated attacks on bases and cities, devastating strikes in virtually every other delta province ended most experiments in agriculture. The Vietnamese architect of Revolutionary Development, General Nguyễn Đức Thắng, took on the post of senior commander in the delta region and thus led military-centered approaches to pacification, such as the Phoenix Program. Increasingly after 1968, the advisory team in An Giang devoted more of its energy toward the expansion of the national police as well as assisting in delta-wide counter-insurgency operations and psychological warfare. Reports on the national police revealed expected resistance from Hòa Hảo leaders who resented any diminishment of their authority within the province.

### **Nation Building in Vietnamese Perspective**

Beginning in 1968, "pacified" An Giang was again featured in a new wave of studies that aimed to explain how this geographically open province had achieved the success that had proven so elusive in almost every other part of South Vietnam. In a highly controversial *Foreign Affairs* article published in that year, Harvard political scientist Samuel Huntington argued for the hidden merits of what he described as "forced-draft urbanization" in South Vietnam. He also cited An Giang as proof that the efforts to assimilate all of

South Vietnam into a single, nation-based approach to modernization had failed. The solution, he argued, was not assimilation to a single set of standards. Instead, the US and the Sài Gòn governments needed to tolerate and even exploit cultural and religious differences:

Rural areas which have been continuously secure are those organized by religious or ethnic communities. The most secure province in South Viet Nam is An Giang, in which there have been no major U.S. or Government combat units. The security of An Giang results from the political control of the Hoa Hao. The Hoa Hao in the surrounding provinces have achieved similar areas of security, as have the Cambodians elsewhere in the Delta. Catholic and Cao Dai villages tend to be more scattered geographically and hence more vulnerable to attack. None the less, many isolated villages belonging to one of those faiths remain relatively secure in otherwise highly insecure areas, simply because the Viet Cong know that they will be tough nuts to crack.<sup>42</sup>

By incorporating An Giang into an argument that foreshadowed the ones he later advanced in *The Clash of Civilizations*, Huntington (and other conservatives like him) sought to situate the province in yet another type of globalized frame. While very different from the frame endorsed by Johnson, Huntington's still bore little similarity to conditions in the province. In effect, Huntington asserted the irreducibility of cultural, religious, or communal affiliations and wrote off the possibility of integrating rural areas into an urban-based, cosmopolitan state. Instead of assimilation to a universal norm of modernity, Huntington called for a policy of accommodation.<sup>43</sup>

In retrospect, it is clear that Huntington's accommodationist formula obscured much more than it revealed about An Giang. His coding of Hòa Hảo social and cultural practices as "traditional" made no allowance for the myriad ways in which adherents of the faith were continuing to integrate their communal activities into various global economic and political networks. It is perhaps unsurprising to find that the complex political, social, and environmental details of a place such as An Giang were lost on Washington insiders such as Huntington. It is worth noting, however, that one of his students, Frances R. Hill, subsequently produced an impressively nuanced study that refuted some of the more simplistic claims that her mentor had advanced. Hill surmised that the successes of the Hòa Hảo and other South Vietnamese millenarian groups and "secret societies" (she

included in this category the NLF) were not the product of an isolationist stance vis-à-vis Sài Gòn, as Huntington suggested. On the contrary, she argued that the local success was born from an intense engagement with outside authorities and with external sources of knowledge and aid. Thus, the leaders and inhabitants of An Giang not only accepted modern technologies and ideas but also frequently adapted and transformed them to suit their own objectives. Although Hill was unable to follow up her initial study with additional fieldwork, the observations recorded in the reports by members of Advisory Team 69 in An Giang confirmed many of her conclusions, especially with regard to agricultural modernization.<sup>44</sup>

While even today researchers still face difficulties when seeking to conduct detailed research on the Hòa Hảo communities in An Giang, the American and Vietnamese materials gathered by US provincial advisers and held in US government archives are readily accessible. The social and environmental legacies of the war are also accessible via the volumes of photographs and maps produced by the Americans and via interviews with individuals still living who experienced nation building firsthand. Such methods can provide effective alternative approaches to the study of nation building in South Vietnam during the war years—approaches that are not predicated on nationalist or teleological historical frameworks. Given recent American difficulties with nation building in Iraq and Afghanistan, now is perhaps a good time to revisit earlier programs in Vietnam and consider nation building in broader contexts.

American sociopolitical experiments in An Giang clearly did not achieve the objective of assimilating the “perfumed” countryside into an odorless, cosmopolitan, and urban state. Nor did they ever prove that communal and millenarian religious leaders in the province were better equipped to maintain peace and prosperity than secularly minded provincial authorities. What the records do illustrate is both the dynamic complexity of the American effort and the myriad challenges faced by Americans and Vietnamese in efforts to use the abstract goals of modernization to produce concrete results. Advisory team records, especially the *Resources Inventory*, emphasized the powerful agency of the landscape, as floods and other natural events routinely limited the teams’ movement and their ability to conduct experiments. At the same time, the assorted records of Advisory Team 69

also confirm the relative autonomy of many Vietnamese individuals and groups, and they point to the ability of many to move beyond the modernizing gazes of Americans. At both a material and an abstract level, this brief history of US-sponsored nation-building programs in An Giang suggests that such programs cannot be reduced to mere inscriptions of American design. Instead, the rich and largely unexplored collections of American records from this period, combined with a similarly unexplored Vietnamese archives, promises to reveal a more richly variegated picture of villages, provinces, and communities in transition. Legacies of American intervention can be seen all over Vietnam even today, but these legacies are specific to the local places in which they occurred.

Finally, returning to the big end question that Marquis and other diplomatic historians have struggled to answer—did any of these development strategies matter to the outcome of the war?—it should be apparent from this essay that arriving at a simple answer for all of Vietnam’s different communities and landscapes cannot be reached. Such programs as rural electrification, fertilizer imports, or counterinsurgency measures mattered differently in different places. What is clear in An Giang is that the civilian programs had little to do with the province’s security. However, they at least had a powerful indirect effect on patterns of agricultural development and in the buildup of urban areas. Even through the records of American advisors, we are able to see more complex, emergent visions of the Vietnamese nation as articulated by revolutionaries, religious groups, and others that still resonate in the present. In time, historians may begin to move past the question of “failure” to consider the more complicated legacies of American intervention in Vietnam’s social, cultural, and environmental past. ■

DAVID BIGGS is Assistant Professor, Department of History, at the University of California, Riverside. He wishes to thank the readers and the editors, in particular Edward Miller, for their careful reading of and improvements to this essay.

#### ABSTRACT

*In recent years, American diplomatic and military historians have begun to reexamine Cold War-era nation-building efforts in Vietnam and elsewhere. This essay explores the contested and contingent meanings of some*

*US-sponsored nation-building programs established in the Republic of Vietnam during the 1960s. By focusing on nation-building activities in the Mekong Delta province of An Giang during the peak years of the Vietnam War, this essay suggests how historians may begin to assess these indirect effects of the war within a more nuanced, local Vietnamese historical framework. Such a history necessarily focuses on particular places and on the specific social and environmental conditions that shaped the course and outcome of nation-building projects undertaken there. Despite the universalist aspirations inherent in nation building, its effects varied widely from one place to another. In assessing the course and fate of these nation-building initiatives, this essay draws from the varied archival documents produced and collected by American provincial advisors during their stays in An Giang. A close reading of these reports reveals why the history of American nation-building programs in the Republic of Vietnam cannot be explained solely by reference to ideologies of modernization and counterinsurgency.*

KEYWORDS: *An Giang, nation building, CORDS, Long Xuyên, place, Hoà Hảo*

#### Notes

1. The counterinsurgency component of CORDS has figured prominently in both English- and Vietnamese-language histories of the war. For institutional and military histories of the CORDS program, see Thomas W. Scoville, *Reorganizing for Pacification Support* (Washington, DC: US Army Center for Military History, 1982), and Richard Hunt, *Pacification: The American Struggle for Vietnam's Hearts and Minds* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995).
2. Michael E. Latham, *Modernization as Ideology: American Social Science and "Nation Building" in the Kennedy Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Nils Gilman, *Mandarins of the Future: Modernization Theory in Cold War America* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003).
3. Jefferson P. Marquis, "The Other Warriors: American Social Science and Nation Building in Vietnam," *Diplomatic History* 24, no. 1 (Winter 2000): 79–105.
4. *Ibid.*, 105.
5. For Scott, the quintessential example of this has to do with the use of modern chemical pesticides, which over time, serve to erase local memories of traditional means of responding to pests. See James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 1998).

6. See Tania Murray Li, *The Will to Improve: Governmentality, Development, and the Practice of Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007). See also Timothy Mitchell, *Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-Politics, Modernity* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002).
7. Takashi Oka, "Journey to the Hoa Hao Regions: Part II," August 20, 1965, written as letter to Richard H. Nolte, Institute of Current World Affairs Web site, [www.icwa.org/ArticlesMap.asp?r=14](http://www.icwa.org/ArticlesMap.asp?r=14) (accessed October 30, 2008).
8. On the northern Catholic refugees and their movements to and within the South, see the article by Peter Hansen in this issue.
9. Pierre Paris, "Anciens canaux reconnus sur photographes aériennes dans les provinces de Tak Ev et de Châu Đốc" [Ancient Canals Recognized in Aerial Photographs in Tak Ev and Châu Đốc Provinces], *Bulletin de l'École française de l'Extrême-Orient* [Bulletin of the French School of the Far East] 31 (1931): 221–223.
10. Louis Malleret, *L'Archéologie du Delta du Mékong* [Archaeology of the Mekong Delta], 4 vols. (Paris: Publications de l'École française d'Extrême-Orient, 1959–1962).
11. Nguyễn Văn Hân, *Đức Cố-Quản hay là Cuộc Khởi-Nghĩa Bảy-Thưa* [Saintly Leader or the Bảy Thưa Uprising] (Sài Gòn: Tân Sanh, 1956), 38–41.
12. Hue-Tam Ho Tai, *Millenarianism and Peasant Politics in Vietnam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), 47–48.
13. For a more detailed history of the Hòa Hảo actions after 1945, see Pascal Bourdeaux, "Emergence et constitution de la communauté du Bouddhisme Hòa Hảo: contribution à l'histoire sociale du delta du Mékong (1933–1955)" [Emergence and Structure of the Hòa Hảo Buddhist Community: Contribution to the Social History of the Mekong Delta], tome I (PhD dissertation, École pratique des hautes études, 2003). For a French-American perspective on the Hòa Hảo paramilitary sects in the First Indochina War, see Bernard Fall, "The Political Religious Sects of Viet-Nam," *Pacific Affairs* 28, no. 3 (Sept. 1955): 235–253.
14. There are two extensive collections of documents on Cái Sắn: those belonging to the United States Operations Mission (USOM) records at the US National Archives and the records of the Prime Minister's Office of the Republic of Vietnam at the Vietnam National Archives II in Hồ Chí Minh City (VNA-II). See Mr. M.H.B. Adler, Chief, Field Service, to Ray A. Nichols, Field Representative, Cantho, August 31, 1956, Mission to Vietnam: Resettlement & Rehabilitation, Box 4, RG 469, National Archives and Records Administration Center II, College Park, MD (NARAC-II); John A. Hackett to D.C. Lavergne on Cai-San Project, February 16, 1956, Mission to Vietnam: Resettlement & Rehabilitation, Box 1, RG 469, NARAC-II; May 4, 1956, Report on the Works at Cai-San, USOM – Vietnam-Security Classified Files, Box 13, RG 469, NARAC-II.



15. Robert Alden, "535 Refugees in South Vietnam Turn the Earth in Vital Project; They Dig Canal that Not Only Will Give Them a New Life, but Also Will Enable Settlement of Foes to Red Penetration," *New York Times*, February 9, 1956. Alden mistakes 535 refugees for 535 households, approximately 3,700 people.
16. Philip Catton draws on Vietnamese sources to suggest that Ngô Đình Diệm and Ngô Đình Nhu understood that the Vietnamese and Malayan insurgencies were fundamentally different and had already designed the agrovillage program long before meeting Thompson. See Catton, *Diem's Final Failure: Prelude to America's War in Vietnam* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002), 97.
17. "Religious Organization – Hoa Hao," Box 5, Advisory Team 69 (An Giang), Military Assistance Command Vietnam, RG 472, US Forces in SE Asia (hereafter known as "Advisory Team 69"), NARAC-II.
18. Gerald Hickey, *Accommodation and Coalition in South Vietnam* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, 1970), 18–19.
19. Oka, "Journey to the Hoa Hao."
20. "Religious Organizations – Hoa Hao," Box 5, Advisory Team 69, NARAC-II.
21. "An Giang Priority Area Development Program," March 15, 1966, Box 1, Advisory Team 69, NARAC-II.
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