

People of Plenty: American Cultural and Economic Programs in South Vietnam, 1954-1963

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In a 1957 address to the U.S. National Commission for UNESCO, Undersecretary of State Christian Herter explained the Eisenhower administration's view of international relations:

So I assert with great earnestness, and a great sense of urgency, that mutual cultural understanding—cultural understanding in breadth and depth—is one of the great needs of this diverse and multinational world of ours.¹

Herter's comments reflected an important aspect of President Eisenhower's foreign policy. Perhaps more than any previous president, Eisenhower understood the value of projecting a positive image of the United States to the rest of the world. In June 1953, Eisenhower streamlined American cultural diplomacy with the creation of the United States Information Agency, or USIA. From 1954 to 1963, U.S. cultural programs constituted an important element of America's effort to create a viable, non-communist government in South Vietnam under the leadership of Ngo Dinh Diem.

In the 1950s, the United States devoted considerable resources to cultural programs in South Vietnam. In 1954, an American official in Vietnam declared:

[The USIS] needs to disseminate information that reaches all groups [in Vietnam]—children, students, women, men, elders, etc. . . . It needs to have information activities which reach every village. Every medium of information should be used—radio, press, tracts, movies, mobile units, loud speaker installations in communities, rallies, etc.²

By the late 1950s, USIS Saigon³ was one of the largest posts in the world, with twenty American employees and over two hundred local staff.⁴

One of the primary objectives of U.S. informational activities in

South Vietnam was to create a message that would foster allegiance to Diem's South Vietnamese regime. In its 1958 "Country Plan for Free Viet Nam," the USIS explained that its priority was to win popular support for the Diem government "by promoting an understanding of the life, institutions, and aspirations . . . of the American and other free world peoples, in order to demonstrate a harmony of interests."⁵ In pursuit of this goal, the USIS administered programs showing the most admirable elements of American culture, including material abundance and democratic political institutions. This strategy failed, largely because Diem's policies were inconsistent with USIS propaganda.

Questions over the appropriate propaganda message for South Vietnam coincided with debates within the United States about the content of cultural diplomacy. In 1954, David Potter suggested that abundance was the characteristic of the United States that was most attractive to people around the world. He explained:

[W]e have been historically correct in supposing that we had a revolutionary message to offer but we have been mistaken in our concept of what that message was. We supposed that our revelation was "democracy revolutionizing the world," but in reality it was "abundance revolutionizing the world"—a message which we did not preach and scarcely understood ourselves, but one which was peculiarly able to preach its own gospel without words.⁶

Potter was not alone in these sentiments. Many other Americans appreciated the role that America's consumer culture and material wealth could play in the country's Cold War foreign policy. In 1955, Palmer Hoyt, editor and publisher of the *Denver Post*, suggested that the United States should "[l]et the world know that we have 58,000,000 automobiles and trucks, 33,000,000 television sets, and 48,000,000 telephones." He also claimed that "the most wanted books in embassies where we have libraries are the mail-order catalogues."⁷ That same year, *The New York Times Magazine* ran an article on the bible of American consumerism, the Sears, Roebuck catalogue. It read, "[t]he fall catalogue of Sears, Roebuck and Company has reached overseas and scored a smash hit. The United States Information Agency reports that it has thus far sent 3,500 copies of the mail-order catalogue to its outposts in foreign lands." The catalogue, the author wrote, "tells the stranger just what we are doing and how we are living today . . .

. No better or more accurate interpreter of our way of life to the people of other lands could be asked." "Our dividend and profit," the article continued, "lie in the fact that the catalogues win friends and influence people."⁸

Not all Americans, however, believed that the nation's wealth was its most endearing characteristic. Many commentators, for example, denounced the materialistic view of American culture. The Roman Catholic magazine *America* specifically criticized emphasizing U.S. material wealth at the expense of its "spiritual appeal." The failure of American propaganda to win allies in the Cold War, *America* asserted, was due in large part to overseas stereotypes of the United States as "materialistic, vulgar, uncultured, [and] dollar-chasing."⁹ According to the article, Soviet propaganda emphasized the idealistic elements of Communism, including peace and social justice. The United States should follow suit and explain the "spiritual and cultural values that *make* the American way of life, of which the mere material advantages are but a by-product."¹⁰

Religious commentators were concerned that advertising American prosperity would lead to resentment in poorer countries, especially in Asia. Critics argued that appeals to materialistic desires would offend the "deep spirituality" of the East. An Indian bishop, for example, criticized the Voice of America and Hollywood films for portraying life in the United States as "artificial, frivolous, materialistic and repulsive."¹¹ A more effective message, he continued, would emphasize American spirituality over its crass materialism. In the words of another critic, the West should not try to substitute "Coca-Cola for Confucius" when dealing with Asia.¹²

In 1955, USIA Director Ted Streibert explained that the Cold War would be fought in "the arena of ideas."¹³ Success for the United States hinged on presenting the rest of the world with "a clear and accurate view of [America's] character and its purposes and of the broad range of its life and culture."¹⁴ USIA officials recognized the challenge of projecting an appropriate image of the United States to other parts of the world. Economic strength and material wealth certainly demonstrated the success of the American system, but they could also lead to charges of cultural imperialism. George Allen, Director of USIA, explained:

We continue to act like adolescents. We boast about our richness, our bigness, and our strength. We talk about our tall buildings, our motor cars, and our income There is considerable concern in many quarters lest they be swamped

by American “cultural imperialism”—by a way of life characterized by Coca Cola, cowboys, and comics.¹⁵

In spite of Allen’s warning, USIA programs in South Vietnam advertised the most important elements of American society and culture. USIA programs showed the success of the American economy and the high standard of living enjoyed by many Americans. USIA balanced this message of abundance with information showing the “deeper” elements of American life, namely democracy and freedom.

In the 1950s, U.S. informational programs underscored the success of America’s economic system. USIA drew attention to the strength of the American economy after World War II, but it also emphasized the fair distribution of wealth in the United States. In 1956, the Agency joined these characteristics in the concept of “People’s Capitalism.” According to one USIA publication, People’s Capitalism “[d]ebunked the ‘Wall Street rules the U.S.’ concept so long preached abroad by Soviet propagandists.” The United States had created “a modern form of capitalism which benefits the many.”¹⁶ People’s Capitalism had helped the United States realize the type of society only promised by communism: one in which all people could enjoy a comfortable standard of living. According to one USIA publication, even Moscow “now admits that the masses in America are well fed, well clothed, and well housed.”¹⁷ USIA director George Allen also made clear that People’s Capitalism created benefits outside of the economic sphere; it fostered “self respect and freedom of cultural and intellectual expression.”¹⁸

In South Vietnam, USIS used a number of techniques to illustrate People’s Capitalism. In 1958, the USIS post in Saigon opened “These Are Our People,” an exhibit depicting the lives of American steelworkers. According to U.S. reports, South Vietnamese were most impressed by images of the interiors of workers’ homes, which showed women using sewing machines and families planning recreational activities.¹⁹

Hollywood films also displayed America’s great wealth. In 1958 alone, viewers in Saigon had access to over sixty American films, including “Gentlemen Prefer Blondes,” “The Seven Year Itch,” “From Here to Eternity,” and “Gone with the Wind.”²⁰ USIS officials were convinced that these films influenced Vietnamese impressions of the United States. According to a USIS-sponsored survey of Saigonese moviegoers, over 80 percent of respondents said that viewing Hollywood films had contributed “a great deal” or “somewhat” to their impression of the United States. When asked to give

examples of what they learned about the United States from Hollywood films, the number one response was “high standard of living.”²¹

U.S. informational activities also indirectly conveyed American abundance. The USIS post in Saigon, for example, concretely displayed the economic strength of the United States. One report boasted:

USIS occupies excellent, roomy quarters in three floors of a street corner building at a prime location in downtown Saigon, about a mile from the Embassy. It is completely air-conditioned. The facilities include a library (ground floor); 150-seat auditorium; radio studios; and film editing and recording rooms. The square footage totals 33,454.²²

U.S. economic aid reinforced the message of American abundance. From 1955 until 1963, the Commercial Import Program (CIP) provided almost \$2 billion in aid to South Vietnam. At least 80 percent of American aid came in the form of goods exported directly into Vietnam, most of which were consumer goods.²³ As early as 1955, the United States Operations Mission (USOM) in Saigon tried to reduce the number of products ineligible for CIP importation. Officials asked for permission to import passenger vehicles, air conditioners, freezers, motion picture equipment, outboard motors, radio receivers, household refrigerators, and canned goods.²⁴ By the end of the decade, imported goods included stereos and water skis.²⁵

The volume of commodities was also high. From 1952 to 1960, the total number of vehicles in South Vietnam, including passenger cars, trucks, motorcycles, and motor scooters, jumped from 22,000 to almost 100,000. A Committee on Foreign Relations report described Saigon as “crowded with passenger automobiles, including many late model European and U.S. cars.”²⁶ As of January 1958, South Vietnam had enough typewriters to satisfy five years of consumption and enough calculating machines, including electric calculators, for eight years. It also had a stock of textiles “sufficient to give about two suits of clothes to every Vietnamese man, woman, and child.”²⁷

Leland Barrows, head of the American aid program in Vietnam, hoped that the program would foster support for Diem. The CIP, he explained, “served the political value of supplying the Vietnamese middle-class with goods they wanted and could afford to buy,” providing “a source of loyalty to Diem from the army, the civil servants and professional people, who

were able to obtain better clothes [and] better household furnishings and equipment than they had before.”²⁸ Another observer was more explicit: the purpose of American aid was to “keep the people from rising up against the government” by increasing the standard of living.²⁹

Some American officials worried that a message highlighting America’s economic might would alienate South Vietnamese. In 1958, the USIS listed “French-fostered opinions of [Americans’] . . . preoccupation with material goods” as a factor limiting the success of U.S. informational programs.³⁰ A pamphlet from the People-to-People program, however, suggested ways that America’s wealth and political ideologies could complement one another in informational activities. It recommended responding to the question, “Are you Americans as materialistic as some people say you are?” by answering:

If by being materialistic you mean that Americans want to live as well and comfortably as they can, we plead guilty. But a high standard of living is not proof of a materialistic outlook on life [M]any . . . of us are deeply concerned with the spiritual and cultural side of life.³¹

The United States Information Agency used the tropes of freedom and democracy to illustrate the “cultural side” of American life. One USIA pamphlet explained that “[t]he American story . . . has the most compelling theme of all—human freedom. The story of freedom, in contrast to the story of life in a police state, appeals powerfully to people everywhere.”³² In the words of USIA director George Allen, freedom was “the solid rock on which American ideals were founded.”³³ In South Vietnam, USIS stressed that Vietnamese, working in conjunction with the “Free World,” could “assure the continued sovereignty, independence and national growth of Free Vietnam.”³⁴

USIS Vietnam organized a number of programs to illustrate American freedom and democracy. In 1959, USIA had initiated a program to show “the American aspirations—shared with freedom-loving people everywhere—of individual freedom and human rights.”³⁵ In February 1960, the USIS library in Saigon followed suit with an exhibit on President Abraham Lincoln. The displays included a bust of the president, the text of the Gettysburg Address, and “various books and pamphlets, in both English and Vietnamese, illustrative of Lincoln’s life and times.” The library also screened a UCLA-produced documentary film, “The Face of Lincoln,” in both English and Vietnamese. For

two weeks the USIS showed the movie three times daily to sold-out crowds. In about one month, over 36,000 people attended the exhibit. For those who could not attend the exhibit, the radio division of USIS Saigon broadcast the opening ceremonies and a documentary about the president.³⁶

The USIS library used other means of introducing Vietnamese citizens to America's political traditions. During the 1960 U.S. presidential election, the USIS organized a display of voting returns to illustrate "Democracy in Action." The Public Affairs Officer in Saigon described the election special as the "biggest thing we had [in 1960]."³⁷ The USIA was proud to announce that the event "drew 10,000 people within 11 hours."³⁸

USIS attempts to show American material wealth and "democracy in action" failed to win widespread support for Ngo Dinh Diem. While American programs described freedom and democracy, Diem's regime was characterized by repression and corruption. The 1955 presidential election, in which Diem received over 98 percent of the vote, was only the most famous example of Diem's aversion to democracy. Besides rigging elections, Diem passed legislation that severely restricted individual liberties. The infamous Law 10/59 allowed for quick executions of virtually anyone suspected of disloyalty or opposition to the regime.³⁹ As one historian explained, Diem "self-righteously followed a highly authoritarian route, marked by heavy and often indiscriminate repression."⁴⁰ Of course, the United States generally acquiesced to Diem's policies. The USIS country plan for Vietnam noted:

[T]he primary and fundamental concern of the United States is, of course, Free Vietnam's survival as an independent state, and not, for example, that it put into practice immediately all the tenets of democracy.⁴¹

USIS programs that described People's Capitalism created a similar dissonance. While Vietnamese learned of the high standard of living in the United States, the South Vietnamese economy remained weak and reliant on American assistance. At the same time, attempts to "buy" support for Diem created the materialistic image of the United States that the USIA had tried to avoid. Perhaps more strikingly, American economic aid through the Commercial Import Program highlighted the economic inequalities in South Vietnam. As American aid contributed to what one official described as the "extravagant standard of living" of wealthy Vietnamese, the economic discrepancies between rich and poor became even more pronounced, or at least more noticeable.⁴² While the upper class drove around Saigon in

late-model cars and stocked their kitchens with American appliances, one-quarter of the city was unemployed. As one journalist noted:

The nature of the aid certainly produced an impression of progress. Half the imports were in the form of consumer goods and their display in the shop windows, and their use by the well-heeled minority distracted attention from the lack of well-being and the mounting unemployment, or underemployment, among the majority.⁴³

During the Ngo Dinh Diem administration the United States orchestrated an intensive cultural and informational program in South Vietnam. American officials hoped that this campaign would promote support for Diem's presidency and win adherents to America's political and economic values. Shortcomings in the program, however, led to its failure. Conditions in Saigon belied America's message of People's Capitalism. Furthermore, America's message of democracy was overshadowed by Diem's anti-democratic government. In fact, America's positive messages of economic abundance and political freedoms may have increased disaffection with Diem's regime in South Vietnam.

It was clear by the early 1960s that American cultural and informational programs had failed to win widespread support for the Diem regime. As one American Public Affairs Officer in Saigon explained:

I think we did manage to inculcate the Vietnamese with some ideas about how the United States worked, particularly in the media area, and in some measure: democracy [sic]. Now, Ngo Dinh Diem himself was not a democrat by any means. He was about as autocratic and dictatorial as anybody could be. . . . Our principal problem . . . was to present our concepts of democracy and political and economic theory and practice in the face of the dictatorial oppression that Diem laid on his people.⁴⁴

In 1960, Diem thwarted a coup attempt, but in the next three years opposition to Diem and his family continued to grow. In November 1963, South Vietnamese army officers successfully orchestrated a coup against Diem and his brother Ngo Dinh Nhu. Over the next two years, the United States would shift to a primarily military strategy in its attempts to prevent

the spread of Communism to South Vietnam.

NOTES

1. Christian Herter, "New Dimensions in Diplomacy," *Department of State Bulletin*, 25 November 1957, 831-834.
2. Memo from Kurt Falk to William Dymysz, September 16, 1954. Subject Files 1950-1957, Program and Requirements Division, Mission to Vietnam, Records of the Office of Far Eastern Operations (Record Group 469), United States National Archives II, College Park, Maryland (hereafter RG 469, USNAII).
3. The United States Information Agency (USIA), created in 1953, was the federal agency responsible for America's overseas information programs. United States Information Service (USIS) refers to the overseas offices of the USIA.
4. Oral history interview with Chester H. Opal, January 10 and 12, 1989, 109. Foreign Affairs Oral History Project, Special Collections Division, Georgetown University Library (hereafter FAOHP, GUL).
5. "USIS Country Plan, Free Vietnam," 10. Vietnam Subject Files 1955-59, RG 469, USNAII.
6. David Potter, *People of Plenty: Economic Abundance and the American Character* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1954), 134.
7. Palmer Hoyt, "Getting the Real Story Across," *The Saturday Review*, 17 September 1955, 15-16.
8. Frank Sullivan, "Our Best Seller Abroad," *The New York Times Magazine*, 13 November 1955, 30.
9. "Foreign Aid and Communist Propaganda," *America*, 20 October 1956, 65.
10. "Selling Democracy to the East," *America*, 28 March 1953, 699.
11. Ibid.
12. Quoted in Victor Lasky, "Can Propaganda Make Friends?," *The Saturday Review*, 17 September 1955, 48.
13. United States Information Agency, *5th Review of Operations* (Washington, 1955).
14. United States Information Agency, *15th Report to Congress* (Washington, 1960), 23.
15. George V. Allen, "The Image of America." Transcript of this speech in a memo dated October 23, 1958. Records, 1959-61, U.S. President's Committee on Information Activities Abroad (Sprague Committee), Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library (hereafter DDEPL).
16. United States Information Agency, *6th Review of Operations* (Washington, 1956).
17. United States Information Agency, *13th Review of Operations* (Washington, 1959), inside cover.
18. United States Information Agency, *9th Review of Operations* (Washington, 1957),

8.

19. Foreign Service Dispatch #91 from USIS Saigon to USIA Washington, 9 August 1958. Exhibits Division, Records of the USIA (RG 306), National Archives II, College Park, Maryland (hereafter RG 306, USNAII).

20. Results of IMG Movie Survey (untitled), 32, 77-78. Enclosure no. 3 to Dispatch no. 147 from USIS Saigon, April 14, 1959. Office of Research, Country Project Files, 1951-1964, Vietnam 1959-1962, RG 306, USNAII.

21. *Ibid.*, 37, 33, 52, 57.

22. John J. Slocum, "Inspection Report: USIS Vietnam," March 8-31, 1956, 9. Special Reports, 1953-1963, Office of Research, RG 306, USNAII.

23. Robert Scigliano, *South Vietnam: Nation Under Stress* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1963), 103. Estimates vary on what percentage of American aid came in the form of commodities. Bernard Fall puts the figure at 80 percent. Another contemporary source estimates that 87 percent of the \$1.3 billion in American aid from 1954 to 1960 came in the form of commodity imports. See Bernard B. Fall, "Will South Vietnam be Next?" *The Nation* (May 31, 1957), 490 and Denis Warner, *The Last Confucian* (New York: MacMillan, 1963), 114.

24. TOUSFO 757 [no date], USOM SAIGON to SECSTATE WASHINGTON, Subject: Financing Commercial Imports. Classified Subject Files 1950-1958, Program and Requirements Division, Mission to Vietnam, RG 469, USNAII.

25. Scigliano, *South Vietnam*, 124.

26. Committee on Foreign Relations, *Report of the Staff Survey Team of the Subcommittee for Review of the Mutual Security Programs on United States Aid to Korea, Vietnam, and Turkey* (Washington, 1962), ii.

27. Fall, "Will South Vietnam Be Next?," 492.

28. George McT. Kahin, *Intervention: How America Became Involved in Vietnam* (New York: Anchor Books, 1986), 116.

29. Douglas Dacy, *Foreign Aid, War, and Economic Development: South Vietnam, 1955-1975* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 22.

30. *Ibid.*, 5.

31. "Americans Abroad: Spokesmen for the United States," 37-38. Records, 1959-61, U.S. President's Committee on Information Activities Abroad (Sprague Committee), DDEPL.

32. United States Information Agency, *9th Review of Operations* (Washington, 1957), 3.

33. *Ibid.*

34. "USIA in Indochina Since Geneva," January 27, 1955, 2-3. United States Information Agency, J. Lawton Collins Papers, 1896-1975, DDEPL.

35. United States Information Agency, *12th Review of Operations* (Washington, 1959), 4.

36. Foreign Service Dispatch #77E from USIS/Saigon to USIA/Washington, March 19,

1960., 2-3. Records Concerning Exhibits in Foreign Countries, 1955-1967, Exhibits Division, RG 306, USNAII.

37. Oral history interview with John M. Anspacher, March 22, 1988, p. 28. Foreign Affairs Oral History Project, Special Collections Division, GUL.

38. United States Information Agency, *15th Report to Congress* (Washington, 1960), 11.

39. Kahin, *Intervention*, 97-98.

40. *Ibid.*, 93.

41. "USIS Country Plan, Free Vietnam," 1. Vietnam Subject Files 1955-59, RG 469, USNAII.

42. Lawrence Morrison, "Industrial Development Efforts" in Richard W. Lindholm, ed., *Viet-Nam: The First Five Years; an International Symposium* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1959), 215.

43. Warner, *The Last Confucian*, 115.

44. Oral history interview with John M. Anspacher, March 22, 1988, p. 30. Special Collections Division, Foreign Affairs Oral History Project, GUL.