In *Inventing Vietnam*, James Carter attempts to counter “the near-total neglect of state-building efforts that began in 1954 and continued through the…late 1960s” in the historiography of American involvement in Vietnam. (p. 13) Carter persuasively argues that “the war in Vietnam resulted from the failure of the state-building experiment and the related refusal to recognize that failure.” (p. 13) Carter further argues that South Vietnam never evolved into a self-sufficient state that could survive without American aid. When American policy-makers finally admitted this in the 1960s, they were confronted with two options: America had to jettison state-building for military preparation or pull out and face the humiliation of losing Vietnam during the height of the Cold War. Carter claims his contribution to scholarship is in refuting the revisionist view that the United States went to war in the 1960s to defend South Vietnam. Based on new evidence, he argues that the United States tried to create a new state out of Vietnam (south of the 17th parallel) long before the decision to go to war was made. (p. 17) He claims revisionists have attempted to rehabilitate the image of Ngo Dinh Diem and the United States by insisting that liberal journalists undermined noble U.S. efforts. (p. 17)

Carter’s claim that the United States invented Vietnam is unique. Convention has it that the United States financially supported the French colonial rule of Indochina well before the 1954 Geneva Convention. After the French defeat, the United States assumed the French colonial infrastructure and administration. But Carter insists that the French colonial system was designed to limit development and keep the Indochinese in a subservient state. In addition, the infrastructure was in tatters and unemployment loomed. The United States reluctantly chose
Ngo Dinh Diem as president, an anti-French, anti-Communist nationalist, who practiced the Catholic faith. (p. 84) He appealed to American officials, but his Catholic faith immediately instilled doubt in a people of mostly Buddhist faith.

For Carter, the Michigan State University Vietnam Advisory Group (MSUG) played a key role in building a South Vietnam state. Carter’s scholarship follows that of Andrew Rotter’s *Path to Vietnam* that intervention was based on ideology. For Rotter, Truman’s ideology was containment. For Carter, MSUG’s ideology was modernization, however, Carter does not make the case that Eisenhower favored modernization. In *Trapped by Success*, David L. Anderson states that Eisenhower lacked a clear ideology and that he was intent on stopping communism. This fits nicely into Carter’s narrative. Diem was a friend of Wesley R. Fishel of Michigan State University. John Foster Dulles, Eisenhower’s anti-Communist Secretary of State, asked Fishel to become an advisor to Diem. MSUG took on a consulting role with the U.S. government and South Vietnam, focusing its efforts on modernization. (p. 49)( Andrew Rotter, *Path to War: Origins of the American Commitment to Southeast Asia* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. Press, 1987); David L. Anderson, *Trapped by Success: The Eisenhower Administration and Vietnam, 1953–61* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1991)

Carter posits that academic experts regarded modernization as a way to bring former colonial states, with their traditional societies, into the modern Western world. The Vietnamese needed to reject their historical and cultural past and embrace Western technology and capitalism. (pp. 32-33) MSUG stated that South Vietnam needed an emergency plan to keep the newly founded Diem government in place. (p. 59) MSUG suggested a cornerstone of modernization and economic development, along with strengthening the police force. (p. 64)
Both of these efforts proved initially successful, but ultimately disastrous in building a successful state. On the one hand, the economic aid started a never ending cycle of South Vietnamese dependence on the United States. On the other hand, Diem used the new police force to squash his enemies, terrorize innocent Vietnamese, and secure his leadership position. As the 1950s came to a close, the United States gave increasing aid to keep Diem in power.

Carter argues that during the Kennedy administration “the American role in southern Vietnam shifted from advice and aid to direct assistance and preparation for war aimed at military victory. In state-building terms, these policy shifts also required the reinvention of Vietnam.” (p. 114) Kennedy did not want to be the president to lose Vietnam and approved a counterinsurgency plan to increase Diem’s forces, thereby expanding economic (mostly military) aid to Vietnam. Outlying communities needed to be brought into contact with Saigon in order to modernize them. Kennedy initiated the hamlet program to attempt to relocate peasants into secured hamlets. (p. 125) The plan did not work and Diem incurred the wrath of the rural Vietnamese. Diem’s unpopularity grew until eventually he was murdered.

After the death of Diem and Kennedy, President Johnson attempted to hold South Vietnam together against the National Front for the Liberation of Vietnam (NLF). To prepare for war, American construction corporations Raymond International and Morrison-Knudsen (RMK) began a mammoth military construction effort that would reinvent South Vietnam. (p. 157) In addition, economic aid mostly kept the South Vietnam economy from experiencing runaway inflation.

This is where Carter makes his contribution to the historiography of U.S. intervention in Vietnam. He painstakingly reveals the hopelessness of the financial situation in South Vietnam.
because of a failed U.S. economic policy and the effects of U.S. and Vietnamese corruption. He also gives a thorough examination of U.S. military construction not found in other nation-building texts. Photographs show the complexity of the ports and warehouses constructed.

While this buildup occurred, the United States engaged in pacification efforts to rebuild Vietnamese society, especially in the rural areas where the NLF was endemic. But pacification was thwarted by a lack of funding, which was mostly devoted to military operations. (p. 217) Combat operations, which were expected to show faster results than pacification efforts, turned many Vietnamese into angry refugees. Public opinion in South Vietnam and the United States turned against the war.

Eventually, Richard Nixon faced the same issues as the presidents before him. U.S. economic policy continued to make South Vietnam dependent on the United States. U.S. military operations became excessively costly in lives and money. The war came to a close.

While some of Carter’s arguments are covered in other texts (Christopher T. Fisher, “Nation Building and the Vietnam War” Pacific Historical Review, Vol. 74, No. 3 (August 2005), pp. 441-56.), he brings them forth in a clear, concise narrative. He is strongest when detailing the effects of economic aid on South Vietnam and explaining the RMK construction efforts. Overall, his work contributes to understanding the Vietnam War and to the questioning of the role of the United States in future state-building efforts.

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