

Thesis Abstract: Modernization and Nation-Building in South Vietnam 1968-1975

My dissertation examines the degree to which modernization theory influenced the Government of the Republic of Vietnam's (GVN) nation-building programmes from the aftermath of the Tet Offensive in 1968 to the fall of Saigon in 1975. The theory emerged in the late 1950s and 1960s when social scientists attempted to create a guide for the United States' development efforts in the postcolonial world. Theorists argued that state-driven growth and science and technology would rapidly speed up the transition from tradition to modernity. My dissertation goes beyond what have ordinarily been the temporal boundaries of the history of modernization in American foreign relations. Several studies have examined the influence of the theory on US development efforts in the Third World prior to 1968. A growing literature examines the impact of the theory on the development plans of postcolonial leaders but few studies have examined the influence of modernization in the Third World after 1968. No study of nation-building in South Vietnam during this period exists. Nation-building in Vietnam between 1968 and 1975 occurred during a crisis of liberalism in the United States and at a time of dwindling political will and economic resources for the United States' war in Vietnam. Furthermore, it coincided with a sustained attack on modernization theory within the social sciences. Thus many historians have seen 1968 as the death knell of modernization theory and certainly its influence in US policymaking circles declined greatly in the years that followed. Yet for many Third World political elites modernization remained the dominant development paradigm well into the 1970s. My hypothesis is, and my research to date has confirmed this, that for South Vietnam's government leaders, modernization remained the most promising formula for counter-revolutionary nation-building. My dissertation will be divided into four thematic chapters: agriculture, public health, education and urban planning. These were areas that theorists saw as crucial to the modernizing project and which the South Vietnamese regime realised were critical development areas if the country was ever to end its dependence on American aid. Each area required state intervention and projects of social engineering that would jolt the peasantry out of its 'traditional torpor' and produce a modern psychological outlook. The dissertation will move away from examining 'modernization as an intellectual framework' and to an examination of 'modernization on the ground'. Basing my dissertation on Vietnamese and American archives, as well as the archives of intergovernmental organisations, I hope to discover to what extent the South Vietnamese government engaged in projects aimed at winning people away from the revolution and creating modern, loyal and productive citizens. I believe I will find that modernization theory remained important but that the GVN had a uniquely Vietnamese vision of modernization. While accepting many of the central tenets of the doctrine, South Vietnamese leaders sought to create a modern nation that the modernization theorists might not have recognised. Modern South Vietnam would not look like the United States because the United States' experience did not fit neatly with that of South Vietnam. Instead the GVN tried to abolish some traditions while building a modern nation that preserved others.