

Defending and Building South Vietnam: The Accomplishments of the Second Republic

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The Ken Burns film

• Recent Ken Burns film on Vietnam has continued the depiction of the war as a hopeless cause • Continues long-standing criticisms by those opposed to the war • Hardly mentions the South Vietnamese, and when they do, portrays them as corrupt or cowards • Paints the Communists as moral revolutionaries determined to unite the country against immoral colonial puppets.

Defending South Vietnam

• Due to the courage and sacrifice of American and South Vietnamese soldiers, Saigon sought to build a country that could defend itself, live in freedom, and improve the lives of its people • However, this state-building effort has received little review. Yet much progress was made behind the shield of U.S. and South Vietnamese soldiers • Let's review some of those impressive accomplishments that so few talks about or know.

Building South Vietnam

Five areas: • *Political Development* • *Land Reform* • *Economic Restructuring* • *Health/Education/Refugee Care* • *Diplomatic Efforts at peace.*

Political Developments

• President Ngô Đình Diệm ruled from 1955-1963 but became authoritarian and was overthrown in Nov. 1963 • Two years of political chaos and increasing Communist attacks destroyed many of Diệm's state-building efforts • Two generals, Nguyễn Văn Thiệu and Nguyễn Cao Kỳ, took over in June 1965 when the situation was grim • Thiệu/Kỳ requested U.S. troops to stem the offensive • U.S. troops (and limited enemy logistics) halt the offensive • Thiệu/Kỳ begin to rebuild the country, despite many political and military challenges.

- Thiệu began the process of returning to civilian rule
- Held an election in Sept. 1966 for a Constituent Assembly – 84% of the eligible voters participated
- Hamlet/village elections held in March/April 1967
- Drafted a constitution that was accepted on April 1, 1967
- Election for a new government held in September 1967
- Elected Thiệu as the new president, and a National Assembly (Lower House and Senate). Elected a Supreme Court
- Tết Offensive hits in early 1968, aimed at collapsing Saigon's institutions. *Failed because over the last several years, SVN had quietly recovered.*

- Continual political/social/economic scandals
- Corruption, Trần Ngọc Châu, "Tiger Cages," heroin addiction, student/veteran's protests, currency rates
- Second election for president held in Oct. 1971
- The scandals and the one-man election seals South Vietnam depiction as an authoritarian state. U.S. support, especially in Congress, rapidly fades
- Funding and restrictions on U.S. troops erode Nixon's ability to help South Vietnam
- However, at the same time, South Vietnam undergoing tremendous changes.

Land Reform

- Land ownership in the Mekong Delta among the lowest in the world. Only about 1000 land owners. Kept most people in deep poverty
- NLF gave land to people - Saigon had to respond
- Saigon's land reform program cleverly designed
- Called "*Land To The Tiller*"
- Compensate landowners for land, give set amount to each farmer
- Use the elected village officials and pacification cadres to verify plots via aerial photos, then use computer to print titles to speed up the process.

- Open rural banks so landlords can deposit their money. Banks can then make loans to farmers to buy mechanical farm equipment
- Miracle rice, land ownership, and mechanization triple rice output
- By March 1973, over 1.1 million acres transferred to farmers
- Fastest, most successful land reform in history
- Unlike North Vietnam, not one person was killed, no public denunciations.

Economic Restructuring

- Inflation a huge issue due to massive U.S. spending
- Increasing size of SVN military to compensate for U.S. troop withdrawals leads to huge deficit spending
- But limited tax base to pay for new troops!
- Attempts at economic austerity cause huge political issues
- In 1970/1971, SVN reforms it's old French economic structure
- Raise interest rates, reduce bureaucracy, increase tax collection, and create floating exchange rate – first in the world!
- Economy rebounds but can never completely adjust.

Improvements in other Key Areas

USAID funding enabled Saigon to dramatically improve government services.

- **Health Care**

- New maternity wards and local hospitals were opened, malaria spraying increased, leprosy eliminated
- Rural electrification was enlarged.

- **Education**

- The number of elementary classrooms was massively boosted
- Thousands of local teachers were hired
- New colleges were opened.

- **Refugee Care**

- Millions of people were helped
- Over 100,000 thousand in Saigon alone during Tet Offensive
- 200,000 ethnic Vietnamese from Cambodia were resettled in 1970.

- **Agricultural**

- Improved strains of fish, chickens, and pigs.

Diplomacy and the Paris Accords

- Saigon developed its peace policies in Feb-May 1965

Keys:

- All Communist troops must leave.
- The U.S. should not negotiate on Saigon's behalf.
- Saigon would not talk directly to the NLF.
- Constitution prohibited Communist or neutralist political activity.
- Thiệu offers in July 1969 elections in which the NLF can participate, but they refuse.
- Various other peace proposals fail.

- Failure of 1972 “Easter” offensive forces Hanoi to compromise. Will allow Thiệu to remain in office but refuses to withdraw troops
- U.S. agrees, but Thiệu balks over troops remaining and other issues
- Nixon, for many reasons, forces Thiệu to accept but promises to maintain economic/military assistance, and to resume bombing if Hanoi launches another attack
- *Paris accords fail because Hanoi never intended to comply, and within months begins planning for a future offensive*
- U.S. aid cutbacks and poor worldwide economic conditions weaken Saigon

Conclusion

- Due to the rapid collapse, the view of South Vietnam as a weak vassal state, propped up by American money and arms, has become an accepted fact among most historians.
- However, South Vietnam, despite a vicious civil war, was making rapid social and economic strides in the last years.
- Allowing Communist troops to remain was the main issue, but Hanoi was not going to remove them.
- The South Vietnamese were far from the incompetent bunglers so often depicted. Many of them demonstrated incredible courage, even in hopeless situations such as the battles of Tân Sơn Nhứt, Hồ Nai, and many others.
- The country could not be defended without adequate American airpower. It simply was a matter of geography, not a lack of South Vietnamese will.
- By 1973, the South Vietnamese military, despite numerous internal and economic issues, had developed into a fighting force quite capable of defeating the North Vietnamese.