

Detroit—an organization that, following the US *Fugitive Slave Act* of 1850, helped fugitives cross the Detroit River; and Margaret Washington's biographical study of such women activists as Sojourner Truth and Mary Ann Shadd. The following three chapters by Kimberly Simmons and Larry McClellan, Debian Marty, and Carol E. Mull, which make up Part IV, "Resilient Families," discuss the journeys of Black families who escaped slavery in the South and made their way to Michigan. There, these families were forced to cross the Detroit River into Upper Canada/Canada West due to the lack of safety in the North caused by marauding slavecatchers. Part V, "The Trumpet Sounds," includes one chapter, entitled "The Useful Frontier: John Brown's Detroit River Preface to the Harper's Ferry Raid." In this chapter, Louis A. Decaro Jr. sheds light on a little-known episode in the life of the foremost abolitionist. During his youth, John Brown briefly lived in Ohio and even visited Detroit in 1812, where he saw Black slaves being abused by their owners. Decaro describes how this traumatic experience had a profound impact on Brown and how it later led him to become an antislavery freedom fighter. The book concludes with a section by the editors on sources and resources.

A Fluid Frontier is a stirring and long-awaited contribution to the history of the Underground Railroad in the Detroit River borderland. It will certainly be of great interest to professors in the United States wishing to further discuss the transnational implications of slavery during the Antebellum era. In Canada, in addition to providing a valuable tool for local history classes at institutions like the University of Windsor and Western University, it will be valuable to professors teaching black history to provide a cross-border perspective.

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STEWART, Geoffrey C. – *Vietnam's Lost Revolution: Ngô Đình Diệm's Failure to Build an Independent Nation, 1955-1963*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017, p. 228.

In *Vietnam's Lost Revolution*, Geoffrey Stewart, Assistant Professor of History at the University of Western Ontario, analyzes the Republic of Vietnam's nation-building efforts through its Civic Action Committee between 1955 and 1963. Unlike many other nation-building institutions, the Civil Action Committee worked across ministries, was highly mobile and operated at the village level. Its main purpose was to bring the 'national revolution' directly to the peasantry.

The book's six chapters study this initiative chronologically. The first explores the origins of the Civic Action Committee, which was originally to serve as a local propaganda unit preparing the ground for a 1956 referendum. Once it became clear that the vote would never take place, the Civic Action Committee had new objectives: to improve the peasant's moral and material standards. Chapter two studies the conflicting views exchanged in redefining the Committee's

mission, while chapter three examines how the Committee translated its mission into practice. Chapter four covers the period 1957-59, when the Civic Action Committee provided economic and infrastructure support at the village level—the “apotheosis” of its program. The last two chapters turn to its downfall, from the resumption of the Communist insurgency to the creation of a National Liberation Front in December 1960, and underline its failure to reinvent itself into a counter-insurgency organization.

The book contributes to the scholarship which has appeared in the last fifteen years, challenging historians’ earlier tendency to belittle Vietnamese actors as passive puppets. Stewart’s study portrays Vietnamese as protagonists with strong views about what constituted modernity, political or social revolution, and possessing the means and methods to achieve these goals.

The author offers substantial historical context so that anybody, not just specialists, can appreciate the book. Sometimes, however, it becomes overwhelming. Chapter two, for example, starts with an anecdote and then summarizes Jessica Chapman’s *Cauldrons of Resistance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and the 1950s Southern Vietnam* (2013) and Edward Miller’s *Misalliance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States and the Fate of South Vietnam* (2013) for more than eight pages before Stewart makes his own argument. With such an extensive reference to the existing literature, a sceptical reader might wonder: is Stewart’s research really changing our understanding of nation-building in the Republic of Vietnam or is the Civic Action Committee merely a variation of a project which is already known? Even the book’s title, *Vietnam’s Lost Revolution: Ngô Đình Diệm’s Failure to Build an Independent Nation*, evokes recent scholarship: to Chapman and Miller’s volumes one could add, for example, Philip E. Catton’s *Diem’s Final Failure* (2002), David W. P. Elliott’s *The Vietnamese War: Revolution and Social Change in the Mekong Delta, 1930–1975* (2007), and David Hunt’s *Vietnam’s Southern Revolution* (2008). A close reading of Stewart’s study, however, should reassure the reader: the book unveils a new dimension—the grassroots level of nation-building—differentiating it previous studies, which had focused on the Republic’s creation, its partnership with the United States, or the peasants’ support for the Communist Revolution.

There is another strength to this book. The author did his research in archives both in North America and Vietnam. Access to the archives in Vietnam is difficult because of political, institutional and linguistic barriers. Yet Stewart uses an impressive array of the Civic Action Committee’s reports. He reveals important points of disagreements between the Vietnamese government and American bodies involved in Vietnam, such as the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), the U.S. Operation Mission (economic and technical assistance), and the U.S. Information Service. While the author has obviously read these reports ‘against the grain’ in order to reveal those tensions, additional sources might have been useful in order to truly appreciate the work of the Civic Action Committee on the ground. Stewart includes the impressions of a key CIA operative, Rufus Philips, but the reader might wonder whether there is another way to better appreciate the Civic Action Committee’s effectiveness among the peasantry. This question underlines

a problem, common to the study of rural societies and peasant agency: how can historians study peasants' political consciousness? Written sources are scarce because newspapers remained an urban phenomenon and peasants were illiterate. While Stewart is certainly not responsible for the lack of available sources, other possible documents, such as the Communist Party's provincial histories, memoirs of infiltrated agents, or interviews by think tanks or non-governmental organizations, could have been useful. At least, a short discussion of the sources or the lack thereof would have been informative.

The author's conclusion on nation-building, nationalism, and peasant political agency also deserves attention. Stewart underscores how Ngô Đình Diệm's attempt to inspire a sense of community by linking peasants, the village, and the nation was ill conceived (pp. 235–237). He associates Diệm's representation with James C. Scott's flawed concept of a moral economy, which claims villagers had traditionally developed solidarity in their community. Stewart argues instead that much of the Southern countryside has become part of the Vietnamese empire as a result of a conquest in the eighteenth century. Therefore, villages in the South cannot compare to those in the North, where the ethnic composition is more homogenous and where common ancestors and cultural practices were established for centuries. This way, Stewart skillfully debunks the myth of peasant communal solidarity. However, he seems to support Samuel Popkin's opposing thesis of the rational peasant. This interpretation of peasant agency has problematic implications on his analysis. If the peasant is rational, and seeks only survival or self-interest, how would he or she be capable of supporting a political vision or a nationalist cause if it meant loss or sacrifice? Does political choice or nationalist involvement emerge only from a personal calculus? Stewart seems to conceive and study nation-building as a top-down project imposed upon the peasantry, rather than a dialectical relationship in which this project is debated, rejected or embraced by the population. Any reader looking for a closer examination of peasant agency and its capacity to support ideas transcending ethnic, social, or religious belonging should look elsewhere.

These comments notwithstanding, Stewart's book enriches the study of American foreign policy's nation-building programs. Along with a recent literature on international relations, it underlines how futile it is to study American power overseas without understanding how it was mediated on the ground. The book also gives a unique look at the Southern Vietnamese countryside, which, to date, had only been studied from the perspective of the Communist insurgency. For both of these reasons, Stewart's book is an important contribution to the understanding of the Vietnam War.

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