

South Vietnam's use of the modernization theory to build a nation

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Introduction

Nation building has failed in South Vietnam, which many studies show from an American perspective. Claire Sutherland, a historian who specializes in nation building, gave this brief description of nation building.

“Nation-building ideology thereby goes beyond nationalist party ideology, examined elsewhere, in its aim of legitimating the state itself. (...) The conceptual triad of nation, state and legitimacy is its starting point, with governments understood as agents of a nation-building ideology seeking to link all three.”¹

Nation building describes the process of creating a legitimate and popular supported government within the nation. In South Vietnam, this process was attempted by both the United States and South Vietnam itself. The South Vietnamese government, hereafter the Government of Vietnam (GVN), was aided by the United States in their nation building efforts. The nation building efforts are frequently researched from an American perspective. The GVN's nation building efforts are, in contrast, not researched enough. Although the GVN was heavily aided by the United States, it did have its own nation building projects. The key figure of GVN nation building in the researched period is Nguyễn Văn Thiệu (hereafter Thieu).

In June 1965, Nguyễn Cao Kỳ (hereafter Ky) and Thieu rose to power in South Vietnam. Ky became the Prime Minister with Thieu as Chief of State. Ky and Thieu as leaders would mark the end of political instability in South Vietnam. When former President Ngô Đình Diệm (hereafter Diem) was overthrown in a coup in 1963, the country experienced a series of more coups and political uncertainty. This instability created a wide path for the Communist resistance, the Viet Cong (VC).² While Ky and Thieu took charge in South Vietnam, President Lyndon Johnson increased the United States' presence in the war, which solidified Ky and Thieu's position and increased political stability in South Vietnam. In 1967 Thieu became President of South Vietnam, eventually holding this position throughout the entire researched period.³ Thieu's rise resulted in Ky

¹ C. Sutherland, *Soldered states: Nation-building in Germany and Vietnam* (New York 2010) 4.

² M. A. Lawrence, *The Vietnam War: A concise International History* (New York 2008) 94-97.

³ H. Stur, 'To Do Nothing Would be to Dig Our Own Graves: Student Activism in the Republic of Vietnam', In: *The Journal of American-East Asian relations* 26 (2019) 285-317, 288.

slowly being pushed to the background; however, Ky was Thieu's Vice President until 1971. Thieu and Ky departed on bad terms, resulting in a political feud. Ky and his alliance gradually lost power, starting in 1968, leaving Thieu in charge.⁴

Distinctive of American nation building was the usage of the recent, highly popular, modernization theory. The Americans believed that "Modernization, policymakers concluded, could prevail as a means of counterinsurgency and a weapon of war."⁵ During the Cold War, the American nation builders believed that a modern society would prevail over the Communist threat and unify South Vietnam. Furthermore, South Vietnam was dependent on the financial and military aid of the United States during the war. Therefore, it is not strange that Thieu adopted modernization into his nation building efforts. Thieu's nation building was undertaken with the GVN as well as modernization theory, as they wanted to defeat communism. Did Thieu and the GVN manage to nation build South Vietnam by means of the modernization theory? This thesis question is the core of this research. Focusing solely on the South Vietnamese nation building efforts, Thieu is the most important man, combined with the GVN.

In researching the Land to the Tiller Act (LTTT), Andrew Gawthorpe shed a new light on the effects of this policy. Thieu used this new land reform act as a nation building attempt. Gawthorpe's renewed LTTT conclusion was partly due to the usage of Pacification Research Reports.⁶ I also use these Pacification Research Reports for researching Thieu's nation building efforts.

The United States had many different methods for gathering information in South Vietnam. A vast amount of information came from the network of advisors in the Office of Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS). This agency was responsible for the nation building process in South Vietnam. Agencies like the CIA, the military and the American embassy were also involved in information gathering; however, there was a lack of information on the local Vietnamese perspective. The importance of this information was in the resentment people had for the GVN and the interference of the

⁴ A. Gawthorpe, *To build as well as destroy: American nation building in South Vietnam* (New York 2018) 103.

⁵ M. E. Latham, *The right kind of revolution: Modernization, development, and U.S. foreign policy from the Cold War to the present* (Ithaca 2011) 137.

⁶ A. Gawthorpe, *The United States and Land Reform in South Vietnam* (Unpublished manuscript, 2019) 19-24.

United States in South Vietnam. Thus, a new way of getting information without being affiliated with one of these two parties was necessary.

“Pacification Research Reports are prepared under American Supervision by Vietnamese cadre who are specially trained in indirect questioning techniques designed to overcome the reluctance of a rural population to objectively discuss their attitudes and aspirations.”⁷

The GVN inspectors were tasked to produce these Pacification Research Reports, as stated above, under the supervision of CORDS. The inspectors were trained in taking surveys incognito. Thus, they randomly approached people in villages or hamlets – a hamlet is a sub-unit of villages – and pretended to be interested in politics or other war and government related topics. These inspectors would draw up reports on one of these topics and send them to the GVN and CORDS.⁸ The Pacification Research Reports gave great unfiltered insights into rural life and how this population felt represented by the GVN. These reports show the South Vietnamese opinion on nation building efforts and local needs. This bottom-up method of research also provides a better picture of policy effects and the South Vietnamese nation building attempts. However, nuance should be applied, as not all local problems were related to national policy.

To research this thesis on Thieu’s modernization nation building efforts, I conducted three case studies. These case studies addressed various aspects of South Vietnam and its population to view its nation building from various perspectives. The first chapter provides in-depth research into the definitions and usage of nation building and modernization theory. These definitions are more complex than stated here and must be clearly defined and introduced before researching them in the case studies. The first case study covers social movements. Social movements protested or interfered with the GVN’s nation building attempts. This study also demonstrates the struggles Thieu faced from these movements in attempting modernizing transformations. When creating a unified

⁷ Pacification Research Report: Bac Lieu Corruption, August 30, 1972, Folder ‘Bac Lieu provenance’ Box 116, Headquarter Military Assistance Command Vietnam (hereafter HQ MACV), CORDS: Plans, Programs and Policies Directorate (hereafter PPP), CORDS Historical Working Group Files, Record Group 20D-472 at the National Archives II at College Park, Maryland (hereafter NARA II), 1.

⁸ A. Gawthorpe, *To build as well as destroy*, 150.

nation these social movements had to stand behind the GVN's actions. These protests also show any dissatisfaction with the GVN's course of action.

The second case study covers the elections in the South Vietnam. Democratic elections are a modernization aspect that would aid a tradition society in becoming a modern nation build society, according to the American modernization theory. The fulfillment of these democratic elections illustrates the GVN and South Vietnam stage of a successful modernization. The conduct and evaluations within the Pacification Research Reports indicate how these elections affected the nation building. The last case study addresses the attempts to restore the economy during the United States' withdrawal. This ongoing withdrawal of the United States created a large gap in demand, damaging the South Vietnamese economy and resorting in an increased crime rate.⁹ Urban areas were hit the hardest, which should otherwise be GVN and modernization strongholds according to nation building and modernization experts.¹⁰ This case study demonstrates if Thieu restored and modernized this economic malaise and maintained the GVN's popular support.

The case studies focus on the period between 1968 and 1973. The failed Tet Offensive in 1968 created a viable base for establishing a strong GVN, thus the start of this period.¹¹ The end of this period is 1973, the year the Paris Treaty was signed and the Pacification Research Reports stop being produced. This treaty would include the full withdrawal of all American troops.¹² Before 1973, the withdrawal was already happening gradually, but total American withdrawal meant that, by that time, South Vietnam should have been nation built and modernized.

⁹ Pacification Research Report: Economic Impact of Troop Withdrawal, As seen by local employees in Gia Dinh province, January 28, 1972, Folder 'Gia Dinh, 1972 – 73' Box 111, HQ MACV, CORDS, PPP, CORDS Historical Working Group Files, Record Group 16X-472 at NARA II, 1.

¹⁰ M.E. Latham, *The right kind of revolution*, 140-142.

¹¹ A. Gawthorpe, *To build as well as destroy*, 103-113.

¹² T. Vu, *Vietnam's Communist Revolution: The power and limits of ideology* (New York 2017) 203-205.

This research is important because little research has been done on nation building in the last phase of the Vietnam War, while there is much written about Diem's earlier nation building efforts.¹³ The same can be said about modernization and South Vietnam. Michael Latham dedicates multiple articles and books to modernization in South Vietnam; however, the main focus is always on Diem's period, thereafter Latham states that the end of the Vietnam War was a "painful failure of modernization."¹⁴ In-depth research into Thieu and the GVN's nation building and modernization efforts is lacking in this historiography. This thesis argues for the effect modernization had on the economy, elections and social order. The GVN's American-style modernization attempts demonstrate how these aspects can better nation building efforts or weaken them. This thesis researches the effectiveness of modernization theory as a nation building tool in crucial aspects of society. Extensive archival research, combined with analyses of the Pacification Research Reports, unearthed many primary sources into the historiographical debate.¹⁵ These archival documents in an under-researched area and focus makes this an important historiographical addition.

¹³ Publications about Diem and nation building; G. Stewart, *Vietnam's lost revolution: Ngo Dinh Diem's failure to build an independent nation, 1955-1963* (New York 2016), E. Miller, *Misalliance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and the Fate of South Vietnam* (Massachusetts 2016) and P. E. Catton, *Diem's final failure: prelude to America's war in Vietnam* (Lawrence 2002).

¹⁴ M. E. Latham, 'Modernization', In T. Porter and D. Ross (Eds.), *The Cambridge History of Science* part IV (2003) 721-734, 733.

¹⁵ The archival work is conducted in the: National Archives II at College Park, Maryland; Richard Nixon Presidential Library, Yorba Linda, California; Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, Austin, Texas.

Chapter 1: Nation Building and Modernization Theory

This chapter further defines and explain “*nation building*” and “*modernization theory*.” A clear definition of these two concepts is needed for this research. Thieu’s efforts to build a nation in South Vietnam were aided and abetted by the United States, and the Americans were fond of incorporating modernization aspects in their desired nation building efforts. Nation building is not the only term used to describe a similar phenomenon; however, not all of these terms suit this research. Therefore, in the first part of this chapter, these terms are discussed, combined with a definitive definition of “*nation building*” that is used in this research. The first part also includes the conclusions historians have made on the failure of American nation building efforts. These conclusions demonstrate the connection between nation building and modernization theory.

The second part of the chapter defines and explains the creation and use of modernization theory. Modernization theory is intricately linked to many nation building efforts from the GVN, as well as the United States. This chapter is therefore a historiographical analysis and explanation of the different definitions and terms used to describe nation building and modernization theory. These definitions help to further conclude if the case studies were nation building failures or successes.

1.1 Nation building

Nation building is the term that binds together the case studies of this thesis, and it is an important tool for solidifying South Vietnam as a functioning independent country. Nation building suggests the building of a nation, but it is more complicated. South Vietnam was established in 1954 during the Geneva Conference, which separated Vietnam into a northern and southern nation due to the political duality in Vietnam between Communists and non-Communists and the United States’ interference in the unification.¹⁶ Historians explain the development of South Vietnam and the GVN in various manners. Nation building is not the only term used for this development. Words such as counterinsurgency, pacification and state building are also commonly used by historians. In this research, the term I use is nation building, defined as a goal-oriented process to create a legitimate and nationally supported government free from communism.

¹⁶ M. A. Lawrence, *The Vietnam War*, 45-48.

This definition shares many similarities with the definition Gawthorpe used in his book *“To build as well as destroy.”*¹⁷ Gawthorpe outlines three aspects of nation building. The first aspect of nation building is defining whether it is practiced internationally or domestically, which demonstrates the two sides of attempting to build a nation. In South Vietnam, it is clear that both an international (the United States) and domestic perspective (South Vietnam) on nation building was attempted. This research focuses on GVN nation building, thus domestic. The difference between state building and nation building is highlighted in the second aspect. State building is defined further in this section, but the difference shows the scope of nation building. “(...) Only the use of the term ‘nation building’ to encompass the development of both effective and legitimate state institutions fully captures the hubris of what they set out to accomplish.”¹⁸ The creation of mere state institutes is not enough for nation building. In nation building creating popular support and self-sustainability for these state institutions is a vital part of becoming an “effective and legitimate” nation.

The third aspect is the most important, because it involves the aspects that form the definition of nation building. This third aspect includes the usage and boundaries of nation building. Gawthorpe’s book does not merely state the activities that could involve nation building; it does so in a goal-oriented way. Thus, all activities could be nation building, as long as it supports the end goal. This end goal – both domestic and international – was identified as the defeat of the Communists and a centralized government that is also self-sustaining and legitimized without American aid.¹⁹ The goal-orientated definition surpasses complex definitions and exclusions of the phrase nation building. The goal-oriented definition is also my definition because of its vast inclusiveness; everything is included as long as it was believed to work towards the nation building goal, including modernization theory. This goal-oriented definition is not solely American nation building, but it could also include the GVN and Thieu’s nation building efforts.

¹⁷ A. Gawthorpe, *To build as well as destroy*.

¹⁸ Ibid, 12.

¹⁹ Ibid, 10-12.

State building, as in Gawthorpe's second aspect, is not used. In *"Inventing Vietnam"* James Carter uses the term state building.²⁰ State building, as Carter uses it, is set in the time period from 1954 to 1968. The term here is used to create state institutes – after the Geneva Conference in South Vietnam – and to create infrastructure, in South Vietnam, to fight off the National Liberation Front (NLF). The goal of state building was, beyond the development of South Vietnam, to create something of value for the United States. Carter called this a *"proto-state"* and was a product of recent decolonization.²¹ A *"proto-state"* is supposed to be aided by a foreign state as it becomes modernized. This modernization of a foreign country would portray the United States' strength globally. "I use the phrase state building to describe these processes over many years to create something new and different and useful to U.S. interests in southern Vietnam," Carter says.²² State building is a term that is not used, because the start of this research is 1968, when institutes were already shaped. Carter's state building is also focused too much on American efforts and not on the GVN's efforts, which is the main focus of this research.

Counterinsurgency and pacification are two phases that need a short explanation, as they are often affiliated with nation building. "The Insurgency will attack the legitimacy of the host-nation government while attempting to develop its own credibility with the population."²³ Insurgency created counterinsurgency to prevent these coups. How they fight off these insurgencies can vary between nations, which is also one of the goals of nation building in *'To build as well as destroy'*, for example, to defeat the Communists in South Vietnam. Naturally, the most obvious solution to fight off an attack is to fight back. The process of eradicating a hostile force from an area is called pacification. A region is pacified when the domestic forces remove the insurgents from that region. This process is mostly military but lacks durability in the case of guerrilla insurgency warfare.

"Pacification was both a program and a process - a military, political, and socioeconomic method designed to systematically eliminate communist

²⁰ J. Carter, *Inventing Vietnam: The United States and State Building 1954-1968* (New York 2008).

²¹ J. Carter, *Inventing Vietnam*, 14-16.

²² *Ibid*, 14.

²³ A. Gawthorpe, 'All counterinsurgency is local: Counterinsurgency and rebel legitimacy', in: *Small Wars & insurgencies* volume 28 (2017) 839-852, 840.

insurgency, establish government control over territory and population, and, ultimately, develop a national political community.”²⁴

Martin Clemis defines pacification in the quote above. Pacification is not solely the answer when it comes to fighting off a guerrilla enemy. It is impossible to defeat all enemies without the ability to identify them after they have retreated and blended back into society. Robert Thompson, a former British soldier and counterinsurgency expert, therefore described a different approach in his book “*No exit from Vietnam.*”²⁵ In it, pacification was not the way to liberate South Vietnam from the Communists, neither was nation building. Thompson divided the operations in South Vietnam into three categories: nation building, military operations and pacification. These sections only worked if they worked together and combined their outcomes.

“(…) nation building was the offensive constructive program designed to strengthen the government’s assets and eliminate its weaknesses, while the military operations were defensive and destructive designed to hold the ring for the constructive program and, in so doing, to weaken the enemy’s military assets. The program which linked these two together was pacification, because on the one hand it was designed to restore government control throughout the county and to establish a permanent link between the central government and the villagers and, on the other hand to destroy the hold which the Vietcong’s political underground organization had on the population.”²⁶

Thompson suggests here that pacification was the tool for beginning on nation building and military operations. Gawthorpe agrees with the notion that nation building is paramount for the success of lasting pacification, because “Without achieving true nation building, the gains of pacification are likely to prove ephemeral(…)”²⁷ The military focus of counterinsurgency and pacification lacks the diversity needed to fully assess the GVN and Thieu’s nation building efforts. The goal-oriented approach of nation building in

²⁴ M. A. Clemis, *The control war: The struggle for South Vietnam, 1968-1975* (Norman 2018) 67.

²⁵ R. Thompson, *No exit from Vietnam* (New York 1969).

²⁶ R. Thompson, *No exit from Vietnam*, 149.

²⁷ A. Gawthorpe, *To build as well as destroy*, 190.

Gawthorpe's and my definition is therefore more inclusive, also including a military focus if needed.

Nation building was tasked with creating popular support and legitimizing the position of the new GVN. Thieu received immense nation building support from the United States. Traditional rural areas are usually the main focus of nation building, because most of the time, the urbanized areas are expected to be more modernized, thus rejecting communism.²⁸ Thus, Thieu should have had strong support in the cities and only needed to focus his nation building efforts on the more traditional and decentralized rural areas. The truth of this nation building assumption in South Vietnam is also researched in the case studies. An important conclusion on why American nation building failed in South Vietnam is stated below.

“(..) US policy makers too often failed to pay sufficient attention to local history, culture, and politics, and, as a result, recent modernizing schemes produced mixed results at best.”²⁹

This quote from Jessica Elkind shows her view on the American nation building efforts. The mismatch between the Western way of thinking from the United States and Eastern culture created problems in the process of nation building. This mismatch was a problem. Simultaneously, the United States' unwillingness to change their policy fueled this problem. Elkind claims that multiple mid- and low-level American nation builders in Vietnam noticed this mismatch. The United States government, however, was unwilling to listen to them and change their failing policies. To conclude, according to Elkind, nation building failed due to a mismatch of cultures and traditions that stood in the way of a modernized South Vietnam. The miscalculation – of the United States – in thinking that the Vietnamese population would simply discard their tradition, combined with American unwillingness to change policy, resulted in failure.³⁰

²⁸ M. E. Latham, 'Redirecting the revolution? The USA and the failure of nation-building in South Vietnam', *Third World Quarterly* 27:1 (2006) 27-41, 34.

²⁹ J. Elkind, *Aid under Fire: Nation Building and the Vietnam War* (Kentucky 2016) 168.

³⁰ J. Elkind, *Aid under Fire*, 165-169.

Elkind was not the only historian who noticed this mismatch. Latham based part of his conclusion on the same disconnect. The problem started during the French colonial period in Vietnam, as the French did not mix their Western culture with local traditions. By the time the Americans arrived in Vietnam, the country was still very traditional. The United States focused their nation building efforts on modernization with the '*modernization theory*'. This theory placed "(...) emphasis on the ability of an 'advanced' society to catalyze the rise of a 'stagnant' or 'backward' one up the universal socioeconomic ladder,"³¹ which resulted in the United States pressuring Vietnam and its population to change their habits drastically. To strengthen his conclusion on why nation building failed, Latham quoted Nils Gilman with the analogy presented below on American modernization efforts in South Vietnam.

"Represented the intellectual equivalent of hitting the gas pedal on a skidding car: an attempt to accelerate out of a problem. As moderate solutions to development failed again and again, hard-core solutions found more and more advocates."³²

The efforts to modernize South Vietnam by applying American policies failed due to huge cultural differences. This failure, according to Elkind and Latham, resulted in nation building failures as well. The blame was placed on the Americans for their incompetence in understanding the local situation. In these conclusions, the modernization efforts are a main aspect of the failure. The theory is, however, more elaborate than just applying American policies to South Vietnam. The next part therefore defines modernization theory and explain its connection to nation building.

1.2 modernization and the connection to nation building

Modernization theory is believed to be more complex than just upgrading a society. This theory defines two different societies, traditional and modern. These societies can be defined by their differences in economic dealings, policies, psychology and social aspects. When a society transforms or evolves one of these aspects that define their

³¹ M. Latham, *Redirecting the revolution?*, 32.

³² Ibid 31.

society, it could begin the modernization process.³³ If modernization occurred in both traditional and modern societies, it would “kick-start” a modernizing chain reaction. “Although societies moved at different rates, they ultimately traveled towards the same destination. Despite differences of culture or history, they would eventually converge on common fronts.”³⁴ When modernization reaches its final stage, a country would be fully modernized.

The problem that arose in the 20th century was the United States identifying themselves as the first modernized nation. Before the United States claimed superiority, the theory was compiled out of broad concepts involving modernizing. Modernization theory did not have an example for its ultimate form or the factual layout of such a country. The United States crowned their society as the final stage of modernization. Gilman researched modernization theory extensively. His opinion on why the United States was suddenly obsessed with the modernization theory in the 1940s and 50s is presented below.

“On the one hand, the language and practice of modernization expressed a confidence that the United States *should* be a universal model for the world and a sense that the United States had a duty to promote this model. On the other hand, “modernization” arose at a moment when Americans felt both unsure about how to define themselves, and challenged by geopolitical ideological competitors.”³⁵

This quote demonstrates the Cold War was one of the main reasons the United States defined themselves as the “top dog” of the world. The United States struggled, after playing dominant roles in both World Wars, with identifying their new place and role in the world order. This uncertainty combined with rapid global decolonization, the industrialization of third world countries and the formation of newly founded governments drove the United States toward a new global purpose. The United States tried to use economic aid, after the war, to influence and steer the changing world.³⁶ These economic

³³ N. Gilman, *Mandarins of the Future: Modernization Theory in Cold War America* (Baltimore 2004) 3-4.

³⁴ M. Latham, *The right kind of revolution*, 3.

³⁵ N. Gilman, *Mandarins of the Future*, 4.

³⁶ M. E. Latham, *Modernization as Ideology: American social science and “Nation Building” in the Kennedy Era* (Chapel Hill 2000) 21-25.

aids were not always effective, so a new plan had to be formed. The emergence of “Modernization theory represents the most explicit and systematic blueprint ever created by Americans for reshaping foreign societies.”³⁷

The United States even collaborated with universities, resulting in social scientists researching modernization theory. “Systematic inquiry, they promised, could identify the advantages that enabled America to emerge as the world’s most modern nation, explain the deficiencies that caused other societies to lag behind (...).”³⁸ The United States, in the middle of the Cold War, believed that modernization theory could benefit the world. They wanted to fight against communism and control any vast changes in the world. They believed that they were the ultimate modernized country, which resulted in helping other countries reach the same level of modernization. Modernization theory thus became a modernization ideology. The ideology’s main effect for the United States was aiding traditional countries in becoming more like them, like Carter’s “*proto-states*.” The modernization theory’s dual purpose prevented other nations from joining a Cold War Communist nemesis like the Soviet Union or the Peoples Republic of China.³⁹

The United States believed that one of Thieu’s best chances to nation build in South Vietnam was to modernize the country. From an American perspective, being fully modernized included “democratic politics, high living standards, and individual freedom.”⁴⁰ These aspects would occur when South Vietnam was modernized, and they were believed to create popular legitimized support for the GVN. A modernized society, according to the United States, started with economic development. This development was only possible through capitalism because capitalism fueled the success story of the United States, which meant that there was a need for free trade and a position in the world market. To sustain a capitalist economy, the government needed to be a democratic liberal government, which was a representation of the population.⁴¹ Urbanization was a tool for creating support for this liberal government in a modern society. An urban society would create a consumer economy, causing a need for mass production and industrialization. The urban societies’ “rising living standards would give citizens the sense of progress and social mobility on which democratic institutions could

³⁷ N. Gilman, *Mandarins of the Future*, 5.

³⁸ M. Latham, *Modernization as Ideology*, 7.

³⁹ M. Latham, *The right kind of revolution*, 37-44.

⁴⁰ M. Latham, *Modernization as Ideology*, 19.

⁴¹ N. Gilman, *Mandarins of the Future*, 35-41.

be fostered, and new values would promote entrepreneurial initiatives and popular participation in liberal civil life.”⁴² Urbanization, liberalism, democracy and capitalism would elevate a society into modernity.

To develop a modern South Vietnam and safeguard them against the Communist NLF, both the Americans and the GVN practiced modernization theory. In this practice, there were two approaches, high and low modernists. Jess Gilbert defines the difference as centralized (high) and decentralized (low) approaches.⁴³ Low modernists tend to focus on a local scale, attempting to generate change at a slower rate and incorporating local wishes. High modernists push modernization from a top-down perspective, thus more oppressive and drastic in their modernization efforts.⁴⁴ The United States, according to Latham, even went so far as to use modernization theory almost as a modern-day form of imperialism.

“(…) American nation builders approached Vietnam with distinctly imperial (or Neo-imperial) goals — they actively sought to extend US control and influence while promoting economic development and a fundamental transformation of South Vietnamese society.”⁴⁵

The transformation of a political theory into policy brought some challenges. Modernization theory was, first, not specifically about the United States being the ultimate modernized nation. Modernization critics stated that characteristics of the American modernization theory already had better existing definitions. Modernization characteristics like an industrial economy and individual thinking would be better defined as industrialization and rationalization than features of American modernization theory.⁴⁶ There was much more objective research needed into defining what modernizing should be.

⁴² M. Latham, *The right kind of revolution*, 56-57.

⁴³ D. Immerwahr, *Thinking small: The United States and the lure of community development* (Massachusetts 2015) 44.

⁴⁴ D. Immerwahr, *Thinking small*, 40-47.

⁴⁵ J. Elkind, *Aid under Fire*, 166.

⁴⁶ D. C. Tipps, ‘Modernization Theory and the Comparative Study of Societies: A Critical Perspective’, In: *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 15.2 (1973) 199-226, 218-222.

This research was funded massively in the United States, but it came with a disadvantage, because the research was funded by the state. “The question that the Center for International Studies (CIS) scholars sought to answer, therefore, were often driven at least as much by the perceived needs of the state as by the internal debates and dynamics of scholarly inquiry.”⁴⁷ Thus, most policies were created from an “America is ‘number one’” perspective, such that the main modernization goals for South Vietnam embodied an American society. The growing amount of violence in the 60s because of the Vietnam War was not a problem for American modernization policies. Some modernization theorists even praised the violence because it would speed up South Vietnam’s modernization. They argued that rural violence would cause increasing urbanization. In the cities, the benefits of modernization were more visible, causing a structural change in traditional – mainly rural – Vietnamese society.⁴⁸ The traditional society would then transform itself to benefit from the same modernized benefits the United States already enjoyed.

Modernization theory received significant criticism, though there were two main points. Critics of modernization theory believed that the origin of the theory was linked to an ethnocentric worldview. The American modernization theory seemed to give the impression that traditional societies were more barbaric and uncivilized and therefore must be modernized.⁴⁹ According to the critics, the theory was too Western-oriented. The definition, according to American modernization theorists, had to do with the fact that these societies were falling behind in the modernization process, not that they were barbaric. South Vietnam was – according to theorists – an example of a traditional country where culture and religion dictated the values shaping the economy and political organization, which had to modernize.⁵⁰ This research calls South Vietnam traditional, as Thieu’s attempt to modernize the nation occurred through American modernization theory, thus presuming his nation was traditional.

⁴⁷ M. Latham, *Redirecting the revolution?*, 56.

⁴⁸ M. Latham, *The right kind of revolution*, 151-155.

⁴⁹ D. C. Tipps, *Modernization Theory and the Comparative Study of Societies: A Critical Perspective*, 206-211.

⁵⁰ M. Latham, *The right kind of revolution 2*.

A second criticism was linked to the notion that applying modernization in a traditional society would modernize that society. Critics believed this notion to be uncontrollable, because of “the inadequacies (...) of the nature of tradition and modernity, their dynamics and interrelationships.”⁵¹ The effect modernization could have on a traditional society was unpredictable and could go in any direction, even the opposite one.

Previous studies have shown that American modernization efforts to nation build in South Vietnam failed. In the following case studies, we see Thieu’s nation building efforts and the struggles he had to overcome. Many of Thieu’s nation building efforts aligned with modernization theory. Did Thieu succeed in applying modernization to nation build where the United States failed? Thieu at least had the advantage of a cultural background similar to his population, as opposed to the Americans. When nation building is needed on a national scale instead of just rural areas, Thieu would have more problems succeeding in the modernization of South Vietnam. Convincing a whole country to change their traditional core without urban modernized examples would create a massive challenge for Thieu and the GVN.

⁵¹ Ibid, 216.

Chapter 2: Social Movements Against Thieu and the GVN

This chapter is a case study on the social movements against Thieu and the GVN. Nation building involves convincing the population that a central government is the best direction for the country. The GVN had hoped that nation building would only be necessary in rural areas. Unfortunately, social movements also protested frequently within the urban areas, causing the need for nationwide nation building. This need and the raging war made it difficult to focus on every social group. The Americans attempting to modernize the Philippines did not think social differences would be a struggle for the modernization process.

“They (Americans) envisioned development as a kind of social engineering and viewed the transformation of Filipino society primarily as a technical matter, Americans tended to view local cultural practices, beliefs and social relationships as transitory phenomena.”⁵²

This would be different in South Vietnam because it had been a traditional country for centuries. Even after French colonial rule, many Vietnamese people had the same values and principles as before French rule. Westernized culture was not adapted into Vietnamese society.⁵³ Modernizing or changing these principles would be a difficult task to fulfill. South Vietnam was a very decentralized diverse country; this chapter therefore focuses on the main social movements against the GVN. Due to the necessity of nationwide nation building, this chapter contains two parts. The first part focuses on the rural movements, and the second part on the urban movements. In urban areas, there was a vast amount of smaller protests; thus, I focus on one large movement, the veterans, and incorporate other larger groups of protestors when they overlap. This chapter mainly covers the resistance from social movements that Thieu and the GVN faced in their modernization and nation building efforts. Resistance need not always be detrimental to modernization if it pressures a stalemate government towards modernizing reforms.

⁵² M. Latham, *The right kind of revolution*, 16.

⁵³ D. Biggs, *Footprints of war: Militarized landscapes in Vietnam* (Washington 2018) 100-111.

2.1: Rural protest against the GVN

Early on American modernizers assumed war and nation building had to be focused on rural areas. One of Diem's first action, in 1962, to safeguard the rural areas was the foundation of Strategic Hamlet to control and secure rural groups. The actual formation failed horribly, and popular support for the creation of these hamlets was non-existent. To make matters worse, there was a growing NLF presence because of the forced move into these hamlets. The NLF gained significant support with the North and South Vietnamese rural youth merely because the youth were more influenceable.⁵⁴ The Americans implemented CORDS in 1967 to further focus on rural nation building development. A few years before the foundation of CORDS, Roger Hilsman, Kennedy's State Department Intelligence Chief, wanted to modernize the countryside by linking rural government to the central government.

“Hilsman's goal was to “set up village government and tie it into the district and national levels assuring the flow of information on village needs and problems upward and the flow of government services downward.” (...) It would also transform rural consciousness and become part of a process in which “traditional” loyalties to family and formerly isolated, largely autonomous villages would be replaced by “modern” identification with a specifically South Vietnamese nation-state.”⁵⁵

The radical modernization Hilsman suggested would not be efficient in traditional, decentralized rural South Vietnam. Edward Miller, for example, suggested the “low modernist” way to modernize the rural areas, such that there was still modernization but “via small-scale, locally based initiatives aimed at particular groups and communities.”⁵⁶ This would support local differences in the South Vietnamese villages, which was needed in the decentralized, diverse rural landscape.

⁵⁴ M.E. Latham, *The right kind of revolution*, 133-138.

⁵⁵ Ibid 139.

⁵⁶ T. Richardson, *Destroy and build: Pacification in Phouc Tuy, 1966-1972* (Cambridge 2017) 11.

The largest social movement that threatened rural modernization, and thus nation building efforts, was the NLF. The NLF tried to convert, kill and abduct people. They even managed to capture and control villages in South Vietnam. The support for the NLF was mid 60s even three times higher than the GVN support in South Vietnam.⁵⁷ This great disadvantage to the GVN's nation build efforts in the beginning of Thieu political career (1965) was problematic. The Tet Offensive change this disadvantage, eventually, into something positive for the GVN. The VC - NLF soldiers - combined with North Vietnamese soldiers, launched a nationwide attack January 30, 1968. This attack caused devastating destruction throughout rural and urban South Vietnam.⁵⁸ It resulted in many casualties for North Vietnam and the NLF.

Massive recruitment was needed, because the NLF had lost many supporters in the Tet Offensive. They could not continue their massive guerrilla insurgencies as before, so they had to find different ways to convert people in South Vietnam to communism. The NLF used the pacification programs of the GVN and the United States to their advantage. "Knowing this program is going to be set up in any village, VC immediately round up the people, especially the young men, remove them to another area, dispersing them and distort the program of the government with the attempt to push these elements to fight against the national side."⁵⁹ Communist propaganda was also used to show and increase NLF support in the rural population.

This massive vacuum of NLF support was not the only one in its history. During the French colonial period, nearly 150,000 Vietnamese fought on the French side. These Vietnamese did so, besides the pay, because they wanted independence but not the VC version of independence.⁶⁰ With the massive destruction the NLF created after the Tet Offensive, many South Vietnamese despised their actions, causing the NLF to lose a tremendous amount of rural support. Many South Vietnamese people stated that they

⁵⁷ M. A. Lawrence, *The Vietnam War*, 108-110.

⁵⁸ J. Carter, *Inventing Vietnam*, 240-242.

⁵⁹ Draft Report: VC recruits manpower in Kien Hoa Provincence, December 5, 1969, Folder "Kien Hoa, '70" Box 24C - 13, HQ MACV, CORDS, PPP, General Records, Record Group 472 at NARA II, 1.

⁶⁰ R. Thompson, *No exit from Vietnam*, 22.

supported the GVN, because they had a greater dislike for the NLF. A pacification assessment states that; “People prefer GVN over VC and are taking a hand in the fight.”⁶¹

This lack of NLF personnel resulted in the GVN being able to drastically reduce their presence in South Vietnam. Even though the NLF was creative with recruitment, numbers stayed low. In 1972 in a peaceful area, called Co Cong, a VC offensive occurred. Due to the stability of the country, life continued without interference. People in Co Cong would panic buy supplies; however, with this offensive, no significant increase in purchases was shown.⁶² Not only was the NLF losing influence in South Vietnam, in North Vietnam “(...) The “poisonous culture of imperialism” in the South had somehow spread to Northern youth, causing Party officials losing the grip of communist morality on society”.⁶³ Thus, the North Vietnamese had domestic problems struggling to unify the population under Communist ideology and show their strength.

The United States feared that communism would be seen as the ultimate modernization, because the Soviet Union was enjoying economic prosperity.⁶⁴ The NLF could use this prosperity to deploy modernization against the GVN and win over rural areas. The increase in GVN support safeguarded their modernization efforts, not communism. The Tet Offensive created heavy losses for the NLF, causing them to decline in presence during this period. Even though their presence declined, in certain rural areas, the NLF still opposed the GVN and tried to gain support. The stability created by the GVN and the United States after the Tet Offensive gave the GVN a real opportunity to garner support. This base of GVN support was not yet as strong as hoped. Nation building still had a long way to go but Thieu managed to turn it in the right direction. In the period of this research, only one massive offensive broke the relatively peaceful period, the 1972 Easter Offensive.

⁶¹ An assessment of pacification, July 26, 1969, Folder“ Republic of VN Prime Minister’s Office Central Pacification Development Council” Box 3C-70, NSC Files: Vietnam Subject Files, the Richard Nixon Presidential Library, Yorba Linda, California (hereafter NPL), 36.

⁶² Pacification Research Report: The Economy effected by the VC offensive in MR-4, July 15, 1972, Folder “Go Cong prov” Box 20J-117, HQ MACV, CORDS, PPP, CORDS Historical Working Group Files, Record Group 472 at NARA II.

⁶³ T. Vu, *Vietnam’s Communist Revolution*, 197.

⁶⁴ M. Latham, *The right kind of revolution*, 123-124.

The Easter Offensive was another vast North Vietnamese military operation, damaging South Vietnam immensely. However, “The current enemy offensive is not a repetition of TET ’68. (...) Nor has this North Vietnam attack, despite its partial objective of dealing pacification a lethal blow, set the GVN back to a portion at all comparable to that of 1968.”⁶⁵ The GVN lacked security but was stronger than during the previous attack. This result would be positive for Thieu and the GVN’s nation building efforts if the United States had not defeated the majority of the Easter Offensive, showing that the GVN personally did not generate that much progress, because it still relied on massive international help.⁶⁶

The NLF was an immensely influential social movement in the beginning of the war. The disruption the NLF caused in South Vietnam made Thieu and the GVN’s nation building tasks almost impossible. After the Tet Offensive, Thieu caught a break and was able to attempt modernization and nation building in the rural areas. Low modernist modernization would be the best way for Thieu to attempt modernizing the rural areas. Unfortunately, as demonstrated by the Easter Offensive, the GVN was unable to fight the NLF without international assistance. This section shows that, in the period of this research, Thieu had significantly less interference from the NLF in the rural areas and could start his nation building attempts. The rural area was expected to be the focus of nation building, but the GVN also faced challenges in urban areas. The next section illustrates these challenges and how Thieu and the GVN addressed them.

2.2 Urban movements protesting against Thieu and the GVN

This section contains the urban social movements that protested against the GVN or its policy. The main focus is veterans in South Vietnam. Modernization efforts sometimes failed within the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN). The modernization efforts of the GVN, and the United States, for example, did not pay enough attention to the food culture. An ARVN corporal said, “Their lack of understanding of rural Vietnamese culture made me sick every day.”⁶⁷ The modernization of the “*family system*” to liberate women

⁶⁵ Evaluation Studies: The current political and security situation in the countryside, 1972, Folder “Eval / Studies 1972 / Book I, folder II” Box 9Z-414, HQ MACV, CORDS, PPP, CORDS Historical Working Group Files, Record Group 472 at NARA II, 10.

⁶⁶ A. Gawthorpe, *To build as well as destroy*, 127-128.

⁶⁷ R. K. Bringham, *ARVN: Life and death in the South Vietnamese Army* (Lawrence 2006) 59.

was also not a success. It was said that the wives of soldiers would rather focus on a peaceful household than the dangers of war.⁶⁸ These failed ARVN modernization efforts did not result in large protests in the urban areas. Veterans, however, did protest frequently in the cities.

This case study also tries to address an omission in Vietnam War historical research about disabled South Vietnamese veterans. During the Vietnam War, there were already significant amounts of veterans. Among those veterans were also soldiers who were forced to retire due to combat injuries, making these soldiers disabled. Post-traumatic stress disorder is a commonly researched topic for veterans, but mainly American and Australian veterans post-Vietnam War. The GVN's care combined with the influence and protests of disabled veteran during Thieu's career in South Vietnam are omissions in the literature.

Veterans not only protested for their own needs, they also joined other urban protests. Buddhists and students were other social movements that also protested frequently in urban areas. Even though the largest Buddhist protests were before the researched period, the Buddhists continued being a social movement often protesting the GVN.⁶⁹ Veterans, Buddhists and students were the social movements that protested the most in the urban areas, and they are thus the focus of this section. The GVN had to resolve the issues of these movements to generate peaceful, modernized urban centers as an example of their modernization attempts. If nation building failed in the cities, the idea that traditional areas would be drawn towards the modernized centurms would make the modernization of South Vietnam more difficult.

“In post-war Vietnam, South Vietnam's military cemetery was razed after 1975 and southern war dead 'have been erased from public memory'. The surviving soldiers of the South are ghosts of the war – unseen, unheard and unacknowledged by the Vietnamese government.”⁷⁰

⁶⁸ R. K. Bringham, *ARVN*, 115.

⁶⁹ American embassy Saigon to Secretary of State Washington, telegram: Cambodian monks demonstrate in Vinh Binh, January 3, 1970, Saigon 25092, Folder “Vietnam Vol. XIV-I: 1 – 15 January 70. [2 of 2]” Box 5F-142, NSC Files: Vietnam Country Files, NPL.

⁷⁰ N. H. C. Nguyen, 'War and Diaspora: The Memories of South Vietnamese Soldiers', *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 34:6 (2013) 697-713, 700.

The situation after the capitulation of South Vietnam into a unified Communist Vietnam had a devastating effect on South Vietnamese veterans. Their sacrifices and bravery vanished, even becoming punishable, because they resisted the Communist regime. Veterans had a hard time after the war but why did they protest when the GVN was in charge? Anti-government protests occurred often. Psychological treatment, medical care, financial support and acclimatizing back into society were the main issues plaguing disabled veterans. Veterans needed the GVN to create a welfare state to resolve these problems.⁷¹ Modernization theorists believed that “the welfare state would complete the transition to modernity.”⁷² A disabled veterans’ protest occurred when a policy was implemented to aid suffering disabled veterans.

The GVN policy had to do with disabled veteran employment. Disabled veterans were medically assessed on how much their disability affected their life, ranging from not being affected at all – 0% – to being unable to function at all, a score of 100%. Before 1970, the amount of “disability disruption” had to be 30% or less to be eligible for employment in government offices to prevent disabled veterans becoming unemployed and struggling financially. Veterans also received allowances from the government related to their percentage. Thieu changed this policy February 27, 1970, with Decree 1019. In the new policy, the government employment and allowance remained the same, but the percentage for eligible employment was widened. From 1970, veterans could be employed by the government up to being 80% disrupted by their disability due to this change.⁷³

Thieu’s extensive adjustment of the policy was not enough for many veterans. Allowances were considered too low but what generated the most disapproval within the veteran’s community was the limit of 80%. This limit excluded aid for veterans whose disability affected their life more than 80%. While veterans did not agree, the South Vietnamese Veterans Association also labeled it unjust. The jobs that eventually were assigned to disabled veterans did not always fit with their disability. Finding a job that would work with their disability was not the only struggle disabled veterans had to endure. Many disabled veterans preferred treatment in private hospitals over public ones

⁷¹ N. H. C. Nguyen, *War and Diaspora*, 709.

⁷² N. Gilman, *Mandarins of the Future*, 17.

⁷³ Pacification Research Report: The Disabled Veterans in Saigon, Gia Dinh and Bien Hoa, May 7, 1970, Folder “Bien Hoa, folder I” Box 110, HQ MACV, CORDS, PPP, CORDS Historical Working Group Files, Record Group 16S-472 at NARA II, 1-2.

because of the shorter waiting times and better care. High costs, no job and few skills for finding new work impacted not only their life but also that of their families. In a veteran village - An Xuyen - the number of unskilled veterans meant that there was no teacher to educate the children, creating two hundred illiterate children.⁷⁴ Disabled veterans without a home were hit the hardest.

The veteran protests began by occupying sidewalks and other peaceful protests. The GVN did nothing to help the veterans, so they had to try something more radical. The LTTT was the South Vietnamese land reform act. The government compensated landowners then took their land, distributing it equally to farmers. This act would not help the disabled veterans, because farming involved physical labor. The veterans did use this act to 'legitimize' raiding pieces of land to occupy and build houses on. They were not proper houses, more wooden structures; however, it gave the veterans a home. In the province Bien Hoa, a large piece of land was inhabited by a couple of hundred veterans. The veterans picked this land because the landlord was extremely rich and would not be financially affected by their occupation. To solidify their position, the veterans sent a petition to Thieu to legalize their created village.⁷⁵ This action was not only reserved for Bien Hoa; it was a movement growing within the nation. Veterans wanted these areas to be legalized and close to urban cities due to their handicap. A second demand was the need for higher allowances from the government for their disability. Last came the demand that after veterans completed their time in the National Rehabilitation Institute, they would be offered a job and housing.⁷⁶ The creation of modern welfare state elements did not create order and stability with the veterans, because it lacked full inclusivity. American modernization theorists labeled themselves as fully modern; however, they had massive social welfare problems themselves. Poverty, inequality and racism got worse due to neglected American domestic social welfare in the 60s and 70s.⁷⁷

⁷⁴ National Development Research Report: Activities at the war veterans village (An Xuyen), January 26, 1973, Folder "A02 - An Xuyen" Box 91, HQ MACV, CORDS, PPP, CORDS Historical Working Group Files, Record Group 14F-472 at NARA II, 1-2.

⁷⁵ Pacification Research Report: The Disabled Veterans in Saigon, Gia Dinh and Bien Hoa, 5-7.

⁷⁶ Ibid, 9.

⁷⁷ M. Latham, *The right kind of revolution*, 159-162.

The quote below is from a memorandum written by D. A. Strasser, Special Assistant for Political Affairs, to the Deputy of CORDS area two. South Vietnam was divided in four areas, called Corps Tactical Zones, from 'one' up north to 'four' down south.⁷⁸ This shows the influence the veterans could have on a region.

“Since last year, the veterans of Nha Trang have been the most successful group in the county in organizing, occupying lands, and forcing demands on two successively weak province administration.”⁷⁹

Modernization towards a satisfactory welfare state was believed to prevent veteran protests and maintain social stability. Veterans in this province even went as far as immolation to draw the attention of the government. The problem was that the creation of a welfare state was considered the last phase of modernization, but social stability was needed to reach this last phase.⁸⁰ This paradox combined with the lack of a proper welfare state in America itself raises the following question: was modernization theory even the best option to nation build South Vietnam?

Students also occasionally enjoyed the help of veterans in their protests. The problem with the student protests was their disunity. Students were usually from the urban upper- and middle-class because of the high cost of studying. The increased urbanization and economic prosperity caused this group to increase with rural migrants.⁸¹ Student protests usually involved marches, letters and drawing up action plans to unite the various student groups. The reason for the high number of different student opinions was the easily influenceable mind of these young students. Student movements varied from anti-war to pro-NLF movements. The influenceable youth were also the focus of the NLF, who attempted to attract students towards their ideology as part of their urban terrorism.⁸² Clandestine Communist study groups were founded in South Vietnam. The

⁷⁸ T. Richardson, *Destroy and build*, 30.

⁷⁹ Memorandum: The situation in Nha Trang two weeks, before the Presidential elections, September 20, 1971, Folder “MR 2 – File” Box 107, HQ MACV, CORDS, PPP, CORDS Historical Working Group Files, Record Group 16F-472 at NARA II, 2.

⁸⁰ N. Gilman, *Mandarins of the Future*, 16-17.

⁸¹ H. Stur, *To Do Nothing Would be to Dig Our Own Graves*, 290-291.

⁸² *Ibid*, 313-316.

GVN attempted to dismantle these Communist groups, which often became protests.⁸³ The majority of the student movements were not pro-NLF, just mainly critical about GVN policy and their own freedom.

Within the Buddhist religion, there were also variations, causing different protest objectives. A group of scholars suggested that the core of the different Buddhist protests is actually the same. These scholars think that the reason Buddhists protested during the war was because “Buddhist leaders were traditionalists who were pushing back against an onrushing modernity.”⁸⁴ This assertion suggests that the Buddhists were opposed to modernization theory but not necessarily nation building. During the researched period, Buddhists mainly protested peacefully. In the early 60s, these protests were different. Immolations were also common in Buddhist protests, sending a vivid message to the government. Veterans, students and Buddhists joined each other’s protest to strengthen protesting numbers and voice each other’s concerns.

When Thieu tried to resolve the veteran issues, he sat down with their representatives to discuss their demands. After one of many conversations, Thieu spoke with the ambassador of the United States in Saigon. In a report from the ambassador, he says that Thieu realizes the veterans had “legitimate grievances.”⁸⁵ Thieu wants to address these problems, but he cannot immediately give them homes. In this conversation with the ambassador, Thieu suggested that American veteran organizations could help the disabled veterans in South Vietnam.

This need for international aid in a nation issue shows the GVN backlog in the nation building process. An increasing American presence in the GVN’s national dealings could also increase the anti-government protests. Many people disliked the foreign presence of the United States in South Vietnam. Anti-American protests were therefore common. This shows that a modern society’s presence could interfere modernization, like critics of modernization suggested. An example of an anti-American protest was Qui

⁸³ Memorandum For Dr. Kissinger, from John H. Holdridge: Student Protests in Saigon, April 2, 1970, Folder “Vietnam: April 1, 1970. [2 of 3]” Box 5J-145, NSC Files: Vietnam Country Files, NPL.

⁸⁴ E. Miller, ‘Religious Revival and the Politics of Nation Building: Reinterpreting the 1963 ‘Buddhist crisis ’in South Vietnam’, In: *Modern Asian Studies* 49,6 (2015) 1903-1962, 1906.

⁸⁵ American embassy Saigon to Secretary of State Washington, telegram, June 23, 1970, Saigon 9884, Folder “Vietnam: 1 June, 1970. [5 of 5]”, Box 5V-147, National Security Council Institutional Files (hereafter NSC Files): Vietnam Country Files, NPL, 1.

Nhon City when an American soldier shot a student. Vehicles and some windows were destroyed during this protest.⁸⁶ This possible international solution was not the only opposition Thieu endured. His political rival Ky stated that “(...) if President Thieu had taken his advice the problems of the disabled veterans and students would have been solved long ago.”⁸⁷ The political war seems to have been fueled by this veteran’s dispute. Despite this conflict, the American ambassador notes that “Thieu is in full control.”⁸⁸ On July 6, 1970, Thieu approved a new law to help the struggling veterans. Henry Kissinger – Secretary of State of the United States – summarizes the new law in a memorandum for the President of the United States, Richard Nixon.

“(…) It provides pensions, vocational training, preferential employment conditions, medical care and housing assistance. It covers veterans of the regular armed forces - particularly those who are disabled - as well as war widows and orphans, the inclusion of paramilitary veterans under the law is also being considered.”⁸⁹

The majority of the veterans were pleased with this adjustment. The reason a small group of veterans evolved from peaceful protesting to a more violent approach was wildly speculated. Not only was there speculation in the Pacification Research Reports, thus reflecting the Vietnamese population, the United States government also speculated. “There is some evidence that these recent demonstrations by small groups of militants may have the support of Vice President Ky or other political groups, including the Communist, who are opposed to Thieu.”⁹⁰ A part of these violent protestors can be identified. The new law applied to regular armed forces, not the Civilian Irregular Defense Group (CIDG) and Provincial Reconnaissance Units (PRU). The CIDG and the PRU

⁸⁶ Intelligence Information Cable, Situation Report: End of Anti-U.S. student demonstration in Qui Nhon City, Binh Dinh province, December 9, 1970, Folder “Vietnam: December 1970. [3 of 3]” Box 6L-151, NSC Files: Vietnam Country Files, NPL.

⁸⁷ American embassy Saigon to Secretary of State Washington, telegram, July 29, 1970, Saigon 11967, Folder “Vietnam: 1 July, 1970. [1 of 3]”, Box 5W-148, NSC Files: Vietnam Country Files, NPL, 2.

⁸⁸ American embassy Saigon to Secretary of State Washington, telegram, June 23, 1970, Saigon 9884, 3.

⁸⁹ Memorandum For the President, from Henry A. Kissinger: Disabled South Vietnamese Veterans, October 2, 1970, Folder “Vietnam: 1 October, 1970. [2 of 2]”, Box 6E-149, NSC Files: Vietnam Country Files, NPL, 1.

⁹⁰ Memorandum For the President, from Henry A. Kissinger: Disabled South Vietnamese Veterans.

wanted to be included in the new law. A memorandum from the National Security Council was therefore sent to Kissinger with the advice to pressure the GVN in adjusting the law. The cost to include the CIDG and the PRU would be insignificant compared to the consequence of extended protests.⁹¹ The GVN could redeem the mistake it had made.

It is unclear if the GVN adjusted the law to allow the CIDG and PRU to benefit. The protests, however, continued in the Pacification Research Reports until at least 1973. The increased violence resulted in the loss of popular support from the South Vietnamese population. Before this influx of violence, even government members of the GVN expressed sympathy for the protestors. The loss of popular support resulted in military GVN forces being used to defuse the protests. Before this escalation, defusing protests was done carefully in fear of repercussions. Occasionally, even the Americans troops were the center of the protestor's violence.⁹² In "*The South Vietnamese Society*" prominent GVN officers share their opinion on events in South Vietnam. It was written post-war, in the United States, to show a Vietnamese perspective on events.⁹³ According to the GVN members in the book, Thieu used the loss of popular support – for the protestors – to eradicate them. They state that nobody was bothered that the veterans' leaders were being arrested after the increased violence.⁹⁴

Miller, in light of the Buddhist protest, expressed the following on nation building: "(...) nation building and development were fields of contest in which multiple leaders and groups put forward diverse and conflicting visions of South Vietnam's future."⁹⁵ The many protests could be viewed as visions against the GVN's nation building attempts, suggesting that the GVN's modernization efforts were not the preferred course of action to unify South Vietnam. On the other hand, it seemed the GVN's ability to tackle social problem increased throughout the period. Social movements interfered with Thieu's nation building attempts in both rural and urban areas. With international support, the GVN was able to attempt nation building. This international relation causes a paradox,

⁹¹ Memorandum For Dr. Kissinger, from John H. Holdridge: Disabled Veterans Benefits, September 10, 1970, Folder "Vietnam: 1 September, 1970. [1 of 2]", Box 6B-149, NSC Files: Vietnam Country Files, NPL.

⁹² American embassy Saigon to Secretary of State Washington, telegram, September 1, 1970, Saigon 14561, Folder "Vietnam: 1 September, 1970. [2 of 2]", Box 6C-149, NSC Files: Vietnam Country Files. NPL, 1-3.

⁹³ N. D. Hinh, *The South Vietnamese society* (Washington 1980) III.

⁹⁴ N. D. Hinh, *The South Vietnamese society*, 145-146.

⁹⁵ E. Miller, *Religious Revival and the Politics of Nation Building*, 1961.

where anti-American protests disturbed the peace and the military support created a peaceful period in South Vietnam. The modern presence of the United States in traditional South Vietnam thus had positive and negative effects on the social movements interfering with the nation building efforts. The problem of nation building being needed on a national scale did create a larger challenge for Thieu and the GVN. The social movements often forced the GVN into a more reactive governing style. Aligned with modernization, reactive governing does help resolve the national need for certain changes. However, the government must contain some parental governing level to govern towards a national better South Vietnam. Kissinger said that the high amount of protests in Saigon “places a higher premium on effective government performance.”⁹⁶ The GVN needed stability to modernize South Vietnam and draw closer to a unified nation. A welfare state as the final phase of modernization showed that the United States was not fully modernized. Their domestic problems questioned their modernization theory. The limited effect of stabilizing the South Vietnamese veterans showed that a policy towards a modernized welfare state was perhaps not the only social order and stability solution needed.

⁹⁶ Memorandum For Dr. Kissinger, from John H. Holdridge: Student Protests in Saigon, April 2, 1970, 2.

Chapter 3: Elections in South Vietnam

The traditional rural areas are the main focus of nation building, because most often, the urbanized areas are more modernized.⁹⁷ Therefore, the GVN would have seen more support in the urban areas and less support in rural areas. Thieu was the President of South Vietnam throughout the period researched in this thesis. However, was Thieu's position legitimate? Was there a large difference in support for Thieu between urban and rural areas, and did Thieu modernize South Vietnam's elections?

Vietnam's history did not always involve an electorate system. For centuries, rulers in Vietnam changed the governing system, varying from the Tay-son bandit brothers who ruled Vietnam as military-politicians in the late 18th century to French colonial times. This does not mean that none of these rulers included elections in their politics. Elections were encountered in pre-Vietnam War Vietnam, but on a local scale or with voter limitations. Some elections were national, but coups and cheating resulted in discontinuing the elected government. Howard Penniman states that "(...) In 1966, the Vietnamese people were getting their first taste of national politics and elections."⁹⁸ Traditional Vietnam was not fully democratic; the 1966 Constituent Assembly election suggested a more modernized approach.

Before the 1967 election of Ky-Thieu, Ngo Dinh Diem was the President of South Vietnam. Diem ruled from 1954 to 1963. In this period, there was one presidential election in 1961. The elections in 1956, 1959 and 1963 were to form a National Assembly. These elections were part of modernizing the nation building efforts but were dominated by Diem's oppressive regime.⁹⁹ The election favored Diem, due to the feeble presidential candidates or lack of parties able to compete against Diem's large party. The parties that competed were almost all parties transformed by the government to appeal to the whole population.

⁹⁷ M. Latham, *Redirecting the revolution?*, 34.

⁹⁸ H. Penniman, *Elections in South Vietnam* (Washington 1972) 13.

⁹⁹ M. Latham, *The right kind of revolution*, 139-141.

“The minor parties (...) are variations on the same theme, designed to appeal to special groups in the electorate, and for the most part they are former opposition groups which have been cleansed and taken over by the government.”¹⁰⁰

Penniman concludes, because of Diem’s interference and feeble opposition, that the 1966 election was the first national representative election because of the variation of parties that were elected, representing the divided opinions within a nation. The first election held by the Ky-Thieu regime marked the start of representational national elections. The turnout in the September 11, 1966, elections was considerably lower compared to Diem’s elections. Diem’s turnout, in reality, was likely lower due to a lack of accuracy. The background of the candidates that won in 1966 varied greatly. Different religions were represented, as well as military and non-military candidates. These variations suggest, according to Robert Shaplen, that “the winners represented a fair cross section of the population of South Vietnam under government jurisdiction.”¹⁰¹ Thus, this election could be a possible successful modernized nation building effort.

This case study evaluates the elections held during Thieu’s presidency between 1968 and 1973. The Pacification Research Reports illustrate the local views towards these elections and their fairness. The first section includes local and presidential elections and how the government informed the public about the elections. This section thus contains how the elections were held, the political information provided to the voters and their political knowledge. From an American modernized perspective, elections had to align with participatory democracy.¹⁰² Therefore, proper information and voluntary participation were important. The second section evaluates Thieu’s legislation for the local and presidential elections. This case study indicates if the elections were successfully modernized, demonstrate elective support for Thieu – and the GVN – and if the claim about urban-government support with nation building is accurate.

¹⁰⁰ R. G. Scigliano, ‘The Electoral Process in South Vietnam: Politics in an Underdeveloped State’, In: *Midwest Journal of Political Science* Vol. 4 No. 2 (1960) 138-161, 149.

¹⁰¹ H. Penniman, *Elections in South Vietnam*, 37.

¹⁰² M. Latham, *Modernization*, 722-724.

3.1 The local elections and informing the public

Between 1968 and 1973, a number of elections were held; the most important for Thieu was the 1971 presidential election. On a village level, there were numerous elections. These elections are important in understanding local political knowledge and the conduct of elections, and these elections were frequently the focus of the Pacification Research Reports. Before talking about the elections and how they were conducted, it is important to identify the group of people that were allowed to vote in South Vietnam, illustrating how representative and democratic the elections were for the population.

In March 1966, militant Buddhists controlling the cities Hue and Danang demanded a Constitutional Assembly to create a constitution. The Buddhists and their allies wanted to have a constitution to create legislative powers that would prevent the use of military actions when voicing their concerns.¹⁰³ This occurrence was one of the first public dissatisfied outings towards Thieu and Ky's lack of producing a constitution. Thieu and Ky were pressured to construct a constitution. Sociologist Talcott Parsons suggests that a functioning social structure would generate order and stability within the population. "Values and cultural norms, transmitted through different institutions, played vital roles by regulating behavior and ensuring individual action consistent with the social order."¹⁰⁴ The creation of a constitution, elections and a democratic legislative government would benefit this social stability, making nation building efforts for Thieu less of a struggle. After elections to form a National Assembly, it was finalized on April 1, 1967.¹⁰⁵ The connection between the elections and the constitution is important, because these were the basic regulations for all elections held in South Vietnam until its collapse. The section below was included in the constitution.

"(...) Every citizen is guaranteed the right to meet and from associations, vote, run for office and participate in public affairs on a basis of equality, petition freely, and

¹⁰³ *Vietnam: Policy and Prospects, 1970: Hearings, Ninety-first Congress, Second Session on Civil Operations and Rural Development Support Program*, United States. Congress. Senate. Committee on Foreign Relations (Washington 1970) 739-741.

¹⁰⁴ M. Latham, *Modernization*, 724.

¹⁰⁵ R. Devereux, 'South Vietnam's New Constitutional Structure', in: *Asian Survey* Vol. 8, No. 8 (1968) 627-645, 628.

engage in overt, non-violent and legal opposition. (...) Military personnel on active duty are forbidden to engage in political party activity (...)"¹⁰⁶

The constitution made every adult eligible to vote, run for office and protected from military and governmental interference. The only restriction was if an individual broke the law by doing any of the stated activities. According to American modernization theory, the constitutional unrestricted democracy was a modern development in politics.

The Pacification Research Reports used in this section are all from elections conducted in villages or rural areas. This information demonstrates how elections were experienced by the rural population. The popularity of the GVN in these rural areas provides a baseline for the nation building claim that nation building must primarily focus on the countryside. The Pacification Research Reports are not the only document used, though; CORDS used various names for reports that were conducted in a similar way, like the Local Survey Detachment Reports.¹⁰⁷ These reports, used in this section, will also solely contain rural elections.

The percentage that voted was high in all reports; however, the reasons for voting varied widely. Some reports suggest that contribution to the democratic elections was the main motivation for people to vote.¹⁰⁸ The majority of the reports state that voters were not completely free in the voting process. A report even stated, "People went to vote under strong pressure of the government more than they felt free to elect those whom they like."¹⁰⁹ The elections discussed in all the reports varied from the Province Council elections to the Senatorial elections. Most findings are not necessarily linked to a particular election but the local electoral process in general.

The high turnout was not always followed with diversity in who to vote for. In every village, there was the opportunity to vote on GVN candidates. Besides the GVN candidates, there were also a large number of independent candidates. The majority of

¹⁰⁶ R. Devereux, *South Vietnam's New Constitutional Structure*, 642.

¹⁰⁷ Local Survey Detachment Report: Hamlet elations in Phu Tho Hoa and Tan Phu villages, Gia Dinh, July 19, 1969, Folder "Gia Dinh, 1970 – 71" Box 111, HQ MACV, CORDS, PPP, CORDS Historical Working Group Files, Record Group 16W-472 at NARA II.

¹⁰⁸ Local Survey Detachment Report: Hamlet elations in Phu Tho Hoa and Tan Phu villages, 1.

¹⁰⁹ Rural Survey Team: What do people expect of Mr. Le Van Thanh and Mr Nguyen Hoang Lio recently eclectic to the Province Council, July 2, 1970, Folder "Vinh Long, '70" Box 12, HQ MACV, CORDS, PPP, General Records, Record Group 23K-472 at NARA II, 1.

these independent candidates were either local “celebrities,” military personnel, council members up for re-election or religious candidates.¹¹⁰ The GVN was not the only party; it was, however, the largest compared to the number of smaller parties. What people voted was not a representation of their opinions, due to the lack of political knowledge. In the reports, it is stated repeatedly that people were unaware of what they had voted on or who their current province leader was. The decentralized villages considered the elections too far from home and were therefore unaware of the dealings in centralized government. In some cases, over 80% were unaware of political parties, and over 50% did not know their current province leaders.¹¹¹

The information provided by the government was also minimal. The information that was provided was usually to promote one candidate or party, creating an unfair playing field. Village councils pressured people into voting for their candidates or even ordered military personnel to vote for them.¹¹² This coercion was not only unfair but also against the constitution. Bribes and pressure from different groups steered the elections down an undemocratic path. The voters felt that their vote did not matter due to the pressure to vote and the disbelief in change. For fear of the local authorities, people “concluded that they were satisfied with the results of these elections and had no complaints to register” in the Pacification Research Reports.¹¹³ The fear for repercussions when one did not vote combined with the disbelief that the elected candidates could generate change resulted in elections without representative results. The supposed modernization into a participatory democracy and the transmission of values through institutions was therefore not happening. Thus, modernization of the electorate process was failing at rural level.

¹¹⁰ Pacification Studies Group: Villages Elections in Sa Dec, March 24, 1970, Folder “PSG studies 1970 / Book I, Folder II” Box 5U-16, HQ MACV, CORDS, PPP, CORDS Historical Working Group Files, Record Group 472 at NARA II, 4-6.

¹¹¹ Pacification Research Report: Elections and Political Organizations in Buon Tlung-Krong, Ma Rong Ho village, Phuoc An district, Darlac, January 17-19, 1971, Folder “Darlac prov, 1971” Box 15F-103, HQ MACV, CORDS, PPP, CORDS Historical Working Group Files, Record Group 472 at NARA II, 1.

¹¹² Rural Survey Team: What do people expect of Mr. Le Van Thanh and Mr Nguyen Hoang Lio recently eclectic to the Province Council, July 2, 1970, 3-4.

¹¹³ Pacification Research Report: Elections in Buon Kram hamlet, Cu Edru village, Ban Me Thout district, Darlac province, January 14-16, 1971, Folder “Darlac prov, 1971” Box 15F-103, HQ MACV, CORDS, PPP, CORDS Historical Working Group Files, Record Group 472 at NARA II, 1.

The people elected were mainly GVN candidates. "Province Council members who are friends to the government usually lack people's support."¹¹⁴ Therefore, elected council members were disconnected from their voters and their needs. These candidates are called "*intercultural commuters*."¹¹⁵ The problem is that these Western-educated individuals had to connect with the rural environment, which usually fails. It is possible that "a Western-educated urban elite at the province level which is aware of and empathetic with traditional rural concerns can serve as a transitional cultural bridge."¹¹⁶ If created, a transitional cultural bridge would mean nation building succeed in the rural areas. This cultural bridge can have a dual purpose, exposing the traditional rural areas to modernization and at the same time nation building. This approach would aid the modernization efforts, because it was believed modernized societies could tempt traditional societies into modernizing, stemming from the American notion that traditional countries could only imitate and not create modernization on their own.¹¹⁷

This analysis so far shows only one side of the elections, the voter's side. For a more objective grasp of the electoral process, a second perspective is important. The United States investigated rural elections themselves as well, with American personnel. The GVN gained the most support due to their vast amount of resources. A second group elected frequently were An Quang Buddhists, who first opposed the GVN, but after the constitution was formed, they were pleased with the electoral system.¹¹⁸ The Buddhists were not the only religion enjoying increased representation in the government; Catholics were elected as well. The GVN's overwhelming majority was not threatened by these religions. Some even said that "The Roman Catholics had always been taking the government's side and enjoying the government's favors."¹¹⁹

¹¹⁴ Rural Survey Team: What do people expect of Mr. Le Van Thanh and Mr Nguyen Hoang Lio recently eclectic to the Province Council, July 2, 1970, 6.

¹¹⁵ J. M. Silverman, 'Political Elites in South Vietnam: A National and Provincial Comparison', in: *Asian Survey* Vol 10 No 4 (1970) 290-307, 305-307.

¹¹⁶ J. M. Silverman, *Political Elites in South Vietnam*, 307.

¹¹⁷ M. E. Latham, 'A Critical Look at Foucault: The Problem of Modernization Theory', In: *UCLA Historical Journal*, 15 (1995) 24-36, 25-26.

¹¹⁸ H. Penniman, *Elections in South Vietnam*, 194-196.

¹¹⁹ N. D. Hinh, *The South Vietnamese society*, 149.

In the electorate process, the Americans also discovered many irregularities. “Additional intrigue was provided when an unidentified man accidentally dropped from his Honda motorcycle a sack containing 600 envelopes with ballots (...) to stuff the boxes.”¹²⁰ Other irregularities included the removal of ballot boxes before the locals could count them and doubled voter registration cards. Other irregularities beyond government ones occurred. The VC also bombed voting stations to prevent voting.¹²¹ Irregularities or cheating in the elections were not solely the GVN’s fault. The local, province and religious groups all interfered in the elections, preventing true democratic elections. Even though Thieu was not directly connected to these rural irregularities, the GVN candidates did enjoy far more resources and support than other candidates. Thieu also had many friends in high places.

“There is no evidence that the Province Chief directly interfered in the elections, though he must have known about some of the fraudulent activities. He is close (...) to President Thieu, due to his marriage to one of Thieu’s cousins.”¹²²

Traditionally, the countryside in Vietnam was nearly disconnected from the urbanized areas. Therefore, the village heads were more important than the national government. The nation building process tried to centralize all these decentralized remote communities. However, problems occurred when central rules clashed with the local regulations.¹²³ The same happened when elections were held at a provincial or national scale. The people simply did not believe that these elections would change their community for the better and that their demands would be heard. Voting for the GVN was therefore not popular. It is not possible to govern a country where people all vote for their local leaders/landlords, so the GVN had to address this problem. It seems therefore that for the GVN and other individuals, “tampering and manipulation of elections undercut

¹²⁰ Pacification Studies Group: Province Council Elections in Long An and Vinh Long, July 25, 1970, Folder “PSG studies 1970 / Book II, Folder I” Box 16, HQ MACV, CORDS, PPP, CORDS Historical Working Group Files, Record Group 5W-472 at NARA II, 5.

¹²¹ John P. Vann to Creighton W. Abrams, Telegram, August 30, 1971, Folder “Messages” Box 36, HQ MACV, CORDS, PPP, CORDS Historical Working Group Files, Record Group 8P-472 at NARA II.

¹²² Pacification Studies Group: Province Council Elections in Long An and Vinh Long, July 25, 1970, 8.

¹²³ T. Richardson, *Destroy and build*, 206-211.

much of the value of democratic governance.”¹²⁴ The rural areas where the GVN gained strong support were sometimes related to voter pressure or a lack of political knowledge. The GVN had a long way to go in becoming a popular factor within the rural areas.

Nation building failed in the rural areas, raising a question about if urban areas did support the GVN and Thieu. Next part demonstrates if the urban areas supported the GVN. The last chapter showed that urban social movements protested in the cities. The election problems in rural election can also occur in urban areas. Pressuring voters, double votes, GVN interference and a lack of political knowledge occurred on such a vast scale that it is unlikely to be absent in urban relations. Modernization critics suggested that any attempts to increase political participation had counterproductive effects on democracy and nation building.

“Social structures often remained unaffected by changes of national government and that, rather than stable democracies, increases in political participation produced volatile situations that frequently ended in military regimes, oligarchies, ethnic conflict, or civil war.”¹²⁵

3.2 Thieu’s legislations and political dealings involving elections

The United States focused part of their nation building efforts on modernizing the electoral process in South Vietnam. Modernization theory focused on transforming the electoral system into a democratic-representative system.¹²⁶ There had to be complete freedom to vote or be a candidate. This democratic freedom seemed to be constructed in 1967 by Thieu and Ky. This new constitutional electorate freedom should exist in rural and urban locations; however, it did not fully appear in rural areas. Pressuring voters and other irregularities resulted in election results that were not representative of the voters’ personal choice. Even though the GVN was the winner in most of these elections, it was a hollow victory. If the urban areas also lacked voluntarily democratic GVN support, it would result in failed nation building efforts for Thieu. Thieu would be a leader who did not represent the population, and he would be unable to govern the country without the

¹²⁴ Ibid, 210.

¹²⁵ M. Latham, *Modernization as Ideology*, 4.

¹²⁶ M. Latham, *Redirecting the revolution?*, 32-33.

United States' support. The modernization of the electoral system would be the reason Thieu's democratic nation building attempt failed. One option would be for Thieu to use the high modernist method to modernize the country, thus still attempting nation building through modernization theory. The high modernist "ruthless willingness to apply unrestrained state force to achieve their modernist dreams" was undemocratic and would disrupt the political climate.¹²⁷ Centralizing power, creating a undemocratic regime, could help speed up modernization but could also create an illegitimate, unpopular GVN, causing nation building problems.

"Early 1969 "Thieu had settled into the presidency, he had begun to identify with the former dictator (Diem)."¹²⁸

This quote suggests that Thieu felt threatened in his position. It is true that before Thieu rose to power, coups occurred frequently. This quote is out of "*Facing the Phoenix*,"¹²⁹ a book constructed from war-related interviews from various people, made into one story, meaning it is not an actual quote but an interpretation from interviews. This section researches the legitimacy of this quote and the GVN electorate support in urban areas. Another focus is on GVN legislation and Thieu's actions involving the elections. Are these legislation and actions for the greater good or towards high modernist ways of ruling? To evaluate Thieu's nation building, these are the last pieces of the puzzle.

Elections do not follow normal procedure during wartime, especially with guerrilla warfare. Extra security was needed for the presidential election in 1971. An anti-inflammatory/security campaign was therefore used to secure the election. This campaign dealt with an increasing amount of booby traps to obstruct the election.¹³⁰ The military threat from the North was not the GVN's largest problem during this election.

The presidential election in 1971 was the most important election for Thieu in our period. This election was personally important for Thieu, but it was also an election that caused many disputes. The American Pacification Studies Group even reported that

¹²⁷ N. Gilman, *Mandarins of the Future*, 11.

¹²⁸ Z. Grant, *Facing the Phoenix* (New York 1991) 313.

¹²⁹ Z. Grant, *Facing the Phoenix*.

¹³⁰ Mr Funkhouser to Gen. Weyand: III Corps anti-inflammatory/security for election campaign (U), August 9, 1971, Folder "Messages" Box 36, HQ MACV, CORDS, PPP, CORDS Historical Working Group Files, Record Group 8P-472 at NARA II.

“Vietnam’s political development has been sharply halted by what can only be seen as a constitutional crisis. (...) Thieu’s political failure is both personal and national.”¹³¹ What happened with Thieu and the GVN during this election?

In the previous presidential election, Thieu won with 35.7% of the vote. This result was from eleven presidential candidates spreading the vote immensely.¹³² The 1967 elections haunted Thieu and his presidency, because he did not have a majority of the country wishing he were their president. In the 1971 election, Thieu wanted to win by a landslide. To do so he wanted to bring down the number of candidates to prevent the spread of votes.

In the beginning of 1971, Thieu managed to pass an election law though the Lower House. The Senate opposed the law on the first try, so a 2/3 majority of the Lower House was needed to overrule the Senate. The law stated that every presidential candidate had to be “sponsored by 40 members the National Assembly or 100 Provincial and Municipal Councilmen.”¹³³ This law made it harder for candidates to enter the race, because there was a limited amount of people that could sponsor them. Thieu made sure it was even harder for other candidates to find support and forbid dual support. He thereafter secured 104 people from the National Assembly and 452 Councilmen to support him in the elections.¹³⁴

The limitations on possible candidates worked, leaving two presidential election candidates. Ky – who wanted to be re-elected – and General Duong Văn Minh, better known as Big Minh. Minh led the coup against Diem in 1963 and was a high-ranking and respected ARVN General. Minh’s connection with the ARVN meant he could possibly generate significant military support. Ky disliked both Thieu and Minh, but it did not stop

¹³¹ Pacification Study Group Binh Dinh to Adam’s Internal Political: Minh’s Withdrawal: The view from MR2 (CNF), Telegram, August 21, 1971, Folder “Messages” Box 36, HQ MACV, CORDS, PPP, CORDS Historical Working Group Files, Record Group 8P-472 at NARA II, 3.

¹³² W. W. Rostow to the President, Memo, September 4, 1967, Folder “Vol 40. Sept 1 – 10, 1967. [2 of 4]” Box 44O-22 [1 of 2], NSF: Memos to President Lyndon Johnson, Walt Rostow, Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, Austin, Texas (hereafter LBJL).

¹³³ American embassy Saigon to Secretary of State Washington, telegram, May 29, 1971, Saigon 08462, Folder “Vietnam: 1 May ’71 – 31 May ’71. [2 of 2]” Box 6I-154, NSC Files: Vietnam Country Files, NPL, 2.

¹³⁴ H. Penniman, *Elections in South Vietnam*, 128.

Ky from collaborating with Minh, because he disliked Thieu even more.¹³⁵ In 1970 Minh announced his candidacy for the presidential elections under the conditions that the elections were not “rigged.”¹³⁶ Minh and Thieu managed to receive the needed governmental support to run, but Ky did not. Ky had some signatures that Thieu also had, making his candidacy invalid. Ky went to court, where eventually – after the preliminary ruling was overruled by the full court – he was allowed to run. Minh saw the new law and the fact that Ky was not allowed to run as “rigged,” terminating his candidacy.¹³⁷ Shortly after Ky was allowed to run, he revoked his candidacy, due to the undemocratic behavior of Thieu's administration.

The presidential elections turned into a one-man election. The GVN did not change the election date due to constitutional rules, making Thieu turn the election into a referendum. This referendum would show if the people wanted Thieu to continue to govern. The United States had already predicted that “if an election is held, one can predict large scale voter non-participation out of disgust and in protest especially in the urban areas.”¹³⁸ The referendum campaign did indeed create protests in the city. Some of these protests involved the students, Buddhists and disabled veterans from the previous chapter. Violence occurred during these protests, including firebombing cars, burning election posters and demonstrations in Saigon. Police used tear gas to deal with the protestors. Saigon was not the only stage for these protests; other cities were involved as well.¹³⁹ Thieu had major support in the referendum results, but it was not always democratic. Voting numbers were high due to feeling obliged to vote or out of fear. The villagers in rural areas usually voted for what their village head wanted. Most of the high positions were for GVN personnel, even on a local level, thus supporting Thieu. Urban areas were less favorable of Thieu, which was expected with the protests and the less direct connection with local officials.¹⁴⁰ The presidential election law created undemocratic elections, re-electing Thieu.

¹³⁵ National Security Council, Memorandum for Dr. Kissinger from Morris F. Edmundson: The coming presidential election in South Vietnam, January 14, 1971, Folder“ Vietnam: 1 Jan '71 – 10 Feb '71. [2 of 3]” Box 6N-152, NSC Files: Vietnam Country Files, NPL, 2-4.

¹³⁶ H. Penniman, *Elections in South Vietnam*, 128.

¹³⁷ Pacification Study Group Binh Dinh to Adam's Internal Political: Minh's Withdrawal: The view from MR2 (CNF), Telegram, August 21, 1971, 1-4.

¹³⁸ *Ibid*, 3-4.

¹³⁹ H. Penniman, *Elections in South Vietnam*, 144-146.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 146-151.

The presidential election law was not the only legislation that impacted the electoral system of South Vietnam. In 1972, Thieu created a new election law. The circumstances around the formation of this law were again suspicious. The law's main goal was to limit the number of political parties. Thieu explained that with the upcoming Paris peace talks in 1973, "nationalist political unity is essential."¹⁴¹ This limit would prevent possible Communist or anti-government parties from gaining support in upcoming elections. The new law meant parties had to have nationwide supporters and even contain 20% of the vote in the Lower House. These standards were impossible for regional parties, resulting in the official dismantlement of those parties.¹⁴² Just before this new law, Thieu also issued an executive order changing the electorate law for village officials.

"In conclusion, although the administration process at the village and hamlet level has made some progress, it is no longer appropriate and capable of meeting the nation's requirements at the present stage of struggle against the Communists."¹⁴³

Province chiefs could appoint village officials without an election after Thieu's executive order. The increasing dismantlement of the democracy instigated by the constitution, involved the "special powers" given to Thieu in 1972. Thieu acquired "special powers" from the GVN after the 1972 Easter Offensive. These "special powers" gave Thieu the ability to issue executive orders, surpassing governing institutions. It did not grant Thieu dictator-like abilities, because the "special powers" were restricted to certain affairs. The affairs within the "special power" were security, economy, defense and finance. These affairs were chosen to help the country recover from attack and not be bound to slow political procedures. Opponents were therefore mad that Thieu used these powers to consolidate his political power.¹⁴⁴ The new party regulations also aligned

¹⁴¹ CORDS/PSG input to the commander's staff conference (CSC): Political Parties Decree Law # 060, January 11, 1973, Folder "Mr Sweet's files / Political / Jan - Mar '73" Box 14T-99, HQ MACV, CORDS, PPP, CORDS Historical Working Group Files, Record Group 472 at NARA II, 1.

¹⁴² CORDS/PSG input to the commander's staff conference (CSC): Political Parties Decree Law # 060, January 11, 1973, 1-2.

¹⁴³ N. D. Hinh, *The South Vietnamese society*, 147.

¹⁴⁴ CORDS/PSG input to the commander's staff conference (CSC): Political Parties Decree Law # 060, January 11, 1973, 3.

with the American modernist vision, to prevent communism from entering the democratic politics.

“The danger facing the republic, as many of them understood it, now came from the possible subversion of its accomplishments by communism, a “disease of the transition” and a “peculiarly inhumane form of political organization” that, while producing economic growth and an expansive state, denied the “possibilities of progressive, democratic development.”¹⁴⁵

As seen above, democratic development was an important aspect in fighting against the Communist threat. The legislation formed by Thieu and the one-man presidential election seem to indicate the high modernist method of modernization. Over time, Thieu did govern more individually than the intended collective democratic government. During the presidential election, Thieu was probably up for re-election without interfering excessively in the electoral process. This electoral interfering made Thieu loss popularity in the urban areas. The continuation of Thieu’s individual consolidation of his power with the “special power” legislations did not help regaining popularity.

The rural areas in elections seemed to be strong supporters of Thieu and the GVN. This support for Thieu and the GVN should be viewed with nuance. People voted in high numbers, although not always out of democratic tendencies. Fear, pressure from the ruling institution and the feeling of national obligation to vote were dominating reasons for voters. The number of rural electorate irregularities prevented a truly democratic election. Thieu was not solely responsible for these irregularities. Many local or province chief were responsible as well, wanting to stay in power or support a candidate, creating unfair odds for the rest. Many of these chiefs were also GVN officials.

The GVN had to consolidate their power to govern a decentralized county. The CIA once said that “Ignorance of the world beyond the village were dominant factors which shaped the election results.”¹⁴⁶ Thieu’s oppressive laws and the almost fraudulent rural

¹⁴⁵ M. Latham, *Modernization*, 728.

¹⁴⁶ Intelligence Information Cable: Appraisal of the 30 August 1970 Senate Elections in South Vietnam, September 14, 1970, Folder “Vietnam: 1 October, 1970. [1 of 2]” Box 6D-149, NSC Files: Vietnam Country Files, NPL, 4.

elections did not create a popularly supported GVN or change rural voting incentive towards a national perspective.

Thieu did not completely fail to gain support in the rural and urban areas. Fewer Buddhist protests occurred with the new constitution because Buddhists could be elected as a part of the government. The LTTT was a popular policy in some rural parts, strengthening the support for the GVN. Thieu did, however, fail to create a fair democratic electorate process. The rural areas were still very keen on local issues and did not care a lot about national elections. The Buddhists were briefly pleased with Thieu, until the new law limited political parties. The city's protests continued throughout Thieu's administration. The GVN's achievements became overshadowed by their failures. The 1967 constitution seemed to be a step towards a modern society, but the positive results of the constitution were removed by multiple adjustments to the law and rural electorate irregularities. Not only did rural areas need nation building, but urban areas lacked popularity for the GVN and Thieu as well. Modernization critics stated that "(...) Modernizers often wound up helping to create authoritarian dictatorial regimes instead of liberal states," which seems to have happened with Thieu's adjustments to the democratic electoral system.¹⁴⁷ Thieu's switch to high modernist modernization alienated him from the South Vietnamese population. Modernization critics are partly right that the adjustments – made to create more political participation – backfired against democratic intentions, causing Thieu to adopt high modernism. Thieu's high modernism eventually caused large parts of the population to see the GVN as unpopular and illegitimate. Modernization failed, resulting in the failed GVN nation building efforts.

¹⁴⁷ M. Latham, *The right kind of revolution*, 4.

4.0: United States withdrawal and how the GVN coped with the new situation

From 1965 onwards, the United States increased aerial bombing of the rural areas of South Vietnam. This increase was due to the United States' lack of progress in the inland fighting. This increasing destruction created a change in South Vietnam's landscape. Originally, the population of Vietnam lived mainly in rural areas, but the American bombings changed much for the rural population, resulting in an increase of people moving to the cities. These refugees could not afford proper housing in the cities, combined with the increasing demand for urban living, creating massive slums around the cities. The urbanization level was so high that it was comparable to that of "Sweden, Canada, and all of Southeast Asia except Singapore."¹⁴⁸

The urbanization of South Vietnam combined with the United States' enormous military presence resulted in a change of lifestyle throughout the country. The move from their rural farming communities meant that the refugees had to learn new ways of earning an income. This was hard because most of these refugees were badly educated. The educational system in South Vietnam was changing. The enrollment for primary schools was as high as 80.8% in 1972.¹⁴⁹ Unfortunately, there were two problems that resulted in badly educated people despite this high attendance rate. The first one was an educational problem. While enrollment in primary school was high, the percentage that eventually graduated was not even half of the enrolled number, due to the old ways of examination – like the Confucian method of reciting ancient texts – and the lack of relating education to the modern world. The Vietnamese youth were more involved in Western culture than Vietnamese culture because of the involvement of the United States in their daily life. The United States' involvement in daily Vietnamese life created the second problem for the educational level of the refugees. Many parents had so little income that they relied on their children to earn money. The modernized capitalistic economy – created by the United States in South Vietnam – made them believe that their children were better off competing on the market than being educated.¹⁵⁰ This increased urbanization, even though it was involuntarily, and the formation of a capitalist economy

¹⁴⁸ D. Biggs, *Footprints of war: Militarized landscapes in Vietnam* (Washington 2018) 134.

¹⁴⁹ O. Dror, 'Education and Politics in Wartime: School Systems in North and South Vietnam, 1965–1975', *Journal of Cold War Studies* 20.3 (2018) 57-113, 98.

¹⁵⁰ O. Dror, *Education and Politics in Wartime*, 96-110.

meant that aspects of American modernization were imbedded in South Vietnamese urban society.

The United States disrupted South Vietnam massively with their involvement, creating an influx of rural refugees to the city, changing the landscape of South Vietnam and affecting education and the economy before the Americans started their Vietnamization. Vietnamization was initiated in 1970 by the United States. The Vietnamization had two components; the first was the training of Vietnamese soldiers to fight the Communists. The second component was to increase pacification efforts in South Vietnam. These two components were formed by the United States but with an entirely different purpose; Vietnamization meant the incremental withdrawal of United States' troops from Vietnam, as ordered by President Richard Nixon.¹⁵¹ This case study demonstrates how the GVN coped with these modernized aspects in their society after American withdrawal. The aftermath could be massive when a modern influential partner leaves a traditional society. This case study therefore focuses mainly on the economical struggles and security issues of South Vietnam after the withdrawal of the United States. How did Thieu and the GVN cope with this modernized part in society and the withdrawal? Could Thieu – in light of nation building – create more support for himself and the GVN with this modernization or would it create more problems? The previous chapter illustrates that urban support for Thieu and the GVN was not as high as hoped. Was this withdrawal an opportunity to show the renewed strength of the GVN after consolidating its powers with the elections?

4.1: The situation in South Vietnam before the withdrawal of the United States

Various historians – like Sorley – state that the United States pulling out of the war left South Vietnam high and dry.¹⁵² During the Vietnamization period, many Pacification Research Reports were conducted to estimate the effects of withdrawal on South Vietnam. The change within the population when the United States entered the South Vietnamese society created more than refugees and increased urbanization. The American's Westernized influence impacted the Vietnamese way of life. To understand

¹⁵¹ M. Clemis, *The control war: The struggle for South Vietnam*, 192-197.

¹⁵² L. Sorley, *A Better War: The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America's last years in Vietnam* (Orlando 1999) 381-384.

the challenges Thieu and the GVN faced, first we must establish South Vietnamese society with the United States present. In the second section, the impact of the United States' withdrawal is researched. This section thus contains the change the United States created within South Vietnamese society.

“No country could be modern without being economically advanced or progressive. To be advanced economically means to have an economy based on modern technology, to be industrialized and to have a high standard of living.”¹⁵³

The above quote - including capitalism - formed the economic modernization goal presented by the Americans. The GVN wanted economic prosperity as well and hoped that the presence of the United States would help them reach this goal. A significant difference between Americans and Vietnamese societies was the amount of money they possessed. The Americans earned vast amounts of money. The American military operations in South Vietnam also generated many jobs and economic opportunities for the local population. Refugees therefore chose to position themselves near American military bases, resulting in increased urbanization around the bases.¹⁵⁴ ““The refugee camps,” one U.S. pacification officer maintained, “bring the people in closer to the urban centers, where they can have modern experiences and learn modern practices. It is a modernization experience.”¹⁵⁵ Not only South Vietnamese employed by the United States and its allies increased the cashflow in Vietnamese cities. American troops on leave intended to enter the cities and spend their wage in bars, restaurants and on prostitution.¹⁵⁶ The increase in wealthy clients in the city brought prosperity to the Vietnamese population.

¹⁵³ N. Gilman, *Mandarins of the Future*, 2.

¹⁵⁴ Pacification Research Reports: Demographic impact of allied troop withdrawals on the Cam Ranh city area, 28 April - 06 May, 1972, Folder “ Cam Ranh, 1971 – 1973” Box 17G-114, HQ MACV, CORDS, PPP, CORDS Historical Working Group Files, Record Group 472 at NARA II, 1-2.

¹⁵⁵ M.E. Latham, *The right kind of revolution*, 142.

¹⁵⁶ Memorandum for the President from Henry A. Kissinger: Analysis of American Conduct in Vietnam, January 14, 1970, Folder “Vietnam Vol. XIV-I: 16 – 30 January 70. [1 of 2]” Box 5G - 142, NSC, Files: Vietnam Country Files, NPL.

The downside to all this new money was an increase in urban living cost and inflation. The high cost of living in the cities and increased urban population created slums. The urban landscape also changed, creating more entertainment branches than needed for the Vietnamese alone. The presence of the United States in the cities created division in the South Vietnamese society. While the merchants and GVN officials wished Americans would enter the cities, because they and the city personally profited from the American presence, intellectuals, teachers and religious leaders were afraid that the American presence would pollute Vietnamese traditions.¹⁵⁷

Vietnamese children would adopt American “Hippie” culture, resulting in drug use, public kissing and free sex. Vietnamese youth was tempted towards American culture.¹⁵⁸ The GVN youth’s nation building efforts – to promote themselves over communism – eventually interfered with their initial plan.

“Southerners did not discipline their youth to maximize state power. They fought for individuals to be free of projects to remake society into a mass and so they gave to their youth freedom from coercive state control over thought and life choices.”¹⁵⁹

This freedom, given by the government, created opportunities for the youth to freely adapt the American lifestyle. The blending of cultures even went so far that some of the American soldiers conceived children with Vietnamese women.¹⁶⁰ The possible loss of Vietnamese cultural traditions was problematic for this group. This change in culture from traditional to the American modern followed the plan of the American perspective of the modernization ideology, but there was strong opposition from the traditional population. A physical threat of American troops in the cities occurred as well.

¹⁵⁷ Local Survey Detachment Report: Bien Hoa city on limits to US soldiers: The pros and cons, February 3, 1970, Folder “Bien Hoa, folder 1” Box 16S-110, HQ MACV, CORDS, PPP, CORDS Historical Working Group Files, Record Group 472 at NARA II, 3-6.

¹⁵⁸ O. Dror, ‘Raising Vietnamese: War and youth in the South in the early 1970s’, in: *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* vol 44, no 1 (2013) 74-99, 85-90.

¹⁵⁹ O. Dror, *Raising Vietnamese: War and youth in the South in the early 1970s*, 98.

¹⁶⁰ Memorandum for the Chairmen, Senior Review Group: Vietnamese Children Fathered by Americans, November 19, 1971, Folder “Vietnam: Nov – Dec 1971. [1 of 2]” Box 7I - 158, NSC Files: Vietnam Country Files, NPL, 1.

The American troops increased the nightlife in the cities, resulting in more bars and prostitution. Drunk Americans often caused problems, like bar fights and other provocations. Dangerous driving and an increasing amount of drugs are some non-violent examples of Americans interfering in city and village life.¹⁶¹ South Vietnamese people feared that some Vietnamese would “take advantage of their weapons to extort money from the American soldiers at dark alleys.”¹⁶² The Americans leaders realized their impact on the Vietnamese society was dangerous for themselves and the Vietnamese.

The solution, according to the Americans, was limited city and village access for Americans. In Bien Hoa, it was concluded to be impossible to limit the city for soldiers. The reasons given were the large number of troops still stationed there and the latest offensive. The region was deemed safe; however, the Americans still would not limit Bien Hoa to their troops. The Americans disrupted Bien Hoa and other local economies. Despite the withdrawal being active for a couple of years, the Americans would not limit troop access to the city. This limitation would lead people, according to the Americans, to “suffer from an inflationary spiral”.¹⁶³ The inflationary spiral was inevitable with the upcoming withdrawal, so why not give Thieu and the GVN time to restore the cities with outside American security? Local life was severely disrupted, or modernized, by the presence of the Americans, both cultural and economic. The withdrawal thus shows if these modernizations helped nation building and South Vietnamese society.

4.2: The situation in South Vietnam after the withdrawal of the United States

Carter uses the “paradox of construction and destruction” to talk about the creation of military infrastructure to destroy the enemy.¹⁶⁴ The United States created those infrastructures to free the South Vietnamese, but the United States’ presence created another paradox. Their presence constructed a relatively safe environment while

¹⁶¹ Memorandum for the President from Henry A. Kissinger: Analysis of American Conduct in Vietnam, 1.

¹⁶² Local Survey Detachment Report: Bien Hoa city on limits to US soldiers: The pros and cons, February 3, 1970, 2.

¹⁶³ Pacification Research Report: People’s opinions about putting Bien Hoa City on-limits to US servicemen, September 5, 1972, Folder “Bien Hoa, 1972, ’73” Box 16V - 110, HQ MACV, CORDS, PPP, CORDS Historical Working Group Files, Record Group 472 at NARA II, 1.

¹⁶⁴ J. Carter, *Inventing Vietnam*, 230.

destroying the local economy. After the Americans withdrew, the destruction of their presence was even greater.

There were several problems in South Vietnam after the United States withdrew. Before the withdrawal, inflation caused high prices, which became even worse when there was significantly less American money being spent in the villages and cities. People simply could not afford basic needs. The withdrawal of the United States and their allies also meant a decrease in jobs. The withdrawal resulted in massive unemployment. Drivers, carpenters and plumbers were local people in the service of the United States. These now unemployed people had to find new jobs. One Pacification Research Report states that some even lost more than 50% of their old income with their new job.¹⁶⁵

Not all unemployed people were lucky enough to quickly find a new job. Most of the work, for the United States, was handled by unskilled people. Thus, these unemployed people had a harder time finding new employment in an economically crippled country. The group that struggled the most were refugees. Most refugees were farmers who came from rural areas that were not safe. These refugees were often unskilled for work in the city and not familiar with the surroundings. Most refugees lost their income when the United States withdrew, and they were unable to go back to a “pre-war” scenario because their homes were not safe.¹⁶⁶

High inflation, loss of income and unemployment resorted in an increasing amount of crime. Stealing food, looting, burglary and muggings were becoming common crimes in the cities. The economic state even forced parents to “send their children off as maids, or encourage them to beg or steal” if the situation grew worse.¹⁶⁷

The civilians were not the only criminals. South Vietnamese soldiers also indulged in criminal activities. For soldiers, “low pay and inflation wreaked havoc on ARVN morale. Instead of caring for their families, as custom dictated, many ARVN enlisted men became

¹⁶⁵ Pacification Research Report: The withdrawal of FWF and its effect on the inhabitants of Nha Trang City, December 21-23, 1971, January 9-13, 1972, Folder “Khanh Hoa prov, 1972” Box 15E - 102, HQ MACV, CORDS, PPP, CORDS Historical Working Group Files, Record Group 472 at NARA II, 2.

¹⁶⁶ Pacification Research Report: The economic effects of the US withdrawal has had on the local employees in Danang City, April 21, 1972, Folder “Da Nang, 1972” Box 16L - 108, HQ MACV, CORDS, PPP, CORDS Historical Working Group Files, Record Group 472 at NARA II, 2-3.

¹⁶⁷ Pacification Research Report: The economic effects of the US withdrawal has had on the local employees in Danang City, April 21, 1972, 1.

dependent on them.”¹⁶⁸ Thus, soldiers began committing crimes upon the people they had sworn to protect to provide for their family. A New York Times article about ARVN soldiers said that “South Vietnamese infantry men, underpaid and underused, are turning increasingly to murder, looting and highway robbery of other South Vietnamese, according to American pacification workers in all parts of the county.”¹⁶⁹ Besides a lack of pay, the South Vietnamese soldiers were also under an increasing amount of pressure. The withdrawal of a strong ally meant they had to fight the war alone.

To fight crime, a strong government was needed. The problem was that corruption was common among government officials before Thieu rose to power. The corruption was never fully eradicated, although it was limited. In tough times, it is more likely that people will act selfish, thus reviving corruption. Cases occurred where GVN personal prevented criminals from being tried, resulting in distrust in the community.

“The apparent unconcern of both military and civil police distresses law-abiding citizens who accuse Councilor Buute of abetting the law-breakers to the point of freeing those taken into custody, with the assistance of influential GVN and military figures. Thus eyewitnesses and victims alike are reluctant to testify for fear of reprisals.”¹⁷⁰

This quote clearly shows corruption on a governmental level. Cam Ranh City’s - where this corruption occurred - population increased 205% because of the allied military presence. The GVN officials there profited from this growth; however, the withdrawal affected their income massively.¹⁷¹ All city programs were useless without the allied presence. The GVN officials were therefore more tolerant of criminal activities in lining the city’s and their own pockets. In various reports, people state that the GVN was not helping them. The United States was actually still slowly withdrawing during these

¹⁶⁸ R. K. Bringham, *ARVN*, 64.

¹⁶⁹ B. G. Herbert D/A CofS, CORDS, Saigon, Vietnam to Mr. Dean, acting DEPCORDS, MR 1, Danang, Vietnam: Following story filed by Iver Peterson New York Times, September 7, 1971, Folder “Messages” Box 8P - 36, HQ MACV, CORDS, PPP, CORDS Historical Working Group Files, Record Group 472 at NARA II, 1.

¹⁷⁰ Pacification Research Report: Demographic impact of allied troop withdrawal on the Cam Ranh City area, April 28 - May 06, 1972, 2.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid*, 2-3.

reports; however, the cities were becoming increasingly displeased with the GVN's non-existent actions. The people who lived around American military bases – in Quang Tin – expected the GVN to provide land, government job training centers and government industrial or business enterprises to create employment and help them. If the government did not help their livelihood, more than half would migrate to secure cities or pacified areas, to seek out other opportunities.¹⁷² The unskilled and unemployed refugees would have a tough time surviving in the newly migrated area when that happens. Modernization critics predicted this destruction after a “modernized” society leaves a “traditional” society.

“Rejecting the ethnocentric assumption that those living in “traditional” societies could only absorb techniques and not innovate on their own, dissenters argue that, far from producing a beneficial “demonstration effect”, contact with the industrialized world often left a legacy of destruction and violence.”¹⁷³

The American inability to adjust modernization to fit within the traditional South Vietnamese society created a direct transfer of economy and culture. The mismatch of cultures and economies had a destructive effect on South Vietnam after the United States gradually withdrew. Thieu and the GVN had to find a solution to the poor economical state of South Vietnam and the spike in crime and corruption. The withdrawal resulted in cities being displeased with the GVN, causing modernization to be counterproductive for the nation building efforts.

¹⁷² Pacification Research Report: Local National employees feelings regarding US troop withdrawals from Chu Lai Base, March 5, 1971, Folder“ Quang Tin prov, 1971” Box 15Y - 105, HQ MACV, CORDS, PPP, CORDS Historical Working Group Files, Record Group 472 at NARA II, 3-4.

¹⁷³ M. Latham, *Modernization as Ideology*, 5.

4.3: The Government of Vietnam and Thieu's attempts to restore peace and prosperity

Modernization efforts and the presence of the “modern” United States caused massive economic problems in South Vietnam's urban areas.

“Saigon's key economic concerns were therefore to raise revenue by increasing domestic production, taxation, and exports; curb inflation; and reduce consumption through austerity measures. If reforms proved too harsh, the regime's support base might desert it or it might face urban, non-Communist opposition. If reforms did not go far enough, the regime might face economic collapse.”¹⁷⁴

The modernization of the economy created an urban society that imported goods more than they exported, causing a trade deficit. “American aid and GVN policy privileged urban dwellers and short-term stability over rural producers and long-term development.”¹⁷⁵ The only option for Thieu and the GVN was thus massive economic reforms, which would cause opposition. Economic modernization at this point seems to have caused counterproductive effects on nation building.

Thieu's personal option to counter the economic malaise and increased crime rate were the “special powers” he received after the 1972 Easter Offensive. Thieu received these powers to quickly resolve these problems without governmental interference. These powers would be categorized as high modernist modernization efforts, if Thieu used them for modernization. Thieu formed 60 decree laws devoted to security and restoring the economy. His laws on security mainly involved the ability to invoke martial law and even “transfer civil power to the military authorities” if needed.¹⁷⁶ These measures were solely to defuse the current crimewave, not to resolve the issues that caused them. Thieu's economical laws were more promising in restoring the economy. Thieu consolidated most of the existing tax laws, also forming two new tax laws in the proses. The most significant of the two was the addition of a new Value Added Tax. This decree taxed an extra 10%

¹⁷⁴ S. Toner, ‘Imagining Taiwan: The Nixon Administration, the Developmental States, and South Vietnam's Search for Economic Viability, 1969–1975’, In: *Diplomatic History* (2017) 3.

¹⁷⁵ S. Toner, *Imagining Taiwan*, 8.

¹⁷⁶ CORDS/PSG input to the commander's staff conference: Review of special powers legislation, January, 1973, Folder “Mr Sweet's files / Political / Jan – Mar '73” Box 14T-99, HQ MACV, CORDS, PPP, CORDS Historical Working Group Files, Record Group 472 at NARA II, 4.

on all consumer goods, aiding a government revenue increase.¹⁷⁷ This new tax would hopefully also decrease the massive import.

Thieu alone could not resolve all the urban problems; he needed the GVN. The problem with the GVN was, beyond corruption, the lack of control and collaboration between different institutes. One such example is the usage of the Rural Development (RD) Cadre in the cities May 12, 1970.¹⁷⁸ These RD cadres had already been in use in villages for a couple of years. The RD cadre's job in rural areas was to promote the GVN, eradicate the NLF and help the villagers with small projects or economic aid.¹⁷⁹ With the current problems in the city, deploying the RD cadre in the city could be a step in the right direction. In the rural areas, the RD cadres were sometimes faced with religions ruling the village, taking village control away from the GVN appointed official, or miscommunication between RD cadres and government officials. In urban areas, organizational problems occurred as well.

“In doing their job, the RD cadre face the problems of corruption, and in Danang their presence is not welcome in some khu phos (villages) because of this. The indifference of khu pho chiefs is sometimes complemented by incompetence.”¹⁸⁰

Thus, the RD cadres were not able to complete their objectives. The corruption and behavior of chiefs in urbanized khu phos was not the only problem. To develop the city, the RD cadres could not help the city population with their usual aid like creating a well or fishery. What the city needed, besides deflation and lower crime rates, were better living conditions. The spike in refugees created poor living standards on the outskirts of the city, which needed an upgrade. The RD cadres “are not presently equipped to satisfy some of the more technical needs of urban areas such as electrification, sewage systems,

¹⁷⁷ CORDS/PSG input to the commander's staff conference: Review of special powers legislation, January, 1973, 7.

¹⁷⁸ Pacification Study Group: Rural Development Cadre in urban areas, September 10, 1970, Folder “PSG studies 1970 / Book II, Folder I” Box 5W - 16, HQ MACV, CORDS, PPP, CORDS Historical Working Group Files, Record Group 472 at NARA II, 1.

¹⁷⁹ A. Gawthorpe, *To build as well as destroy*, 70-71.

¹⁸⁰ Pacification Study Group: Rural Development Cadre in urban areas, September 10, 1970, 10.

and basic road engineering.”¹⁸¹ Deploying the RD cadre in the cities would not solve the problems in the city.

Rural areas were less affected by the American economic presence. Inflation was less noticeable because many rural societies produced their own food and living costs were lower. Rural economies were affected when harvests suffered from bad crops or insects. The high inflation caused farmers to struggle with buying essential goods due to the higher prices and loss of trading commodity. In many Pacification Research Reports, the recommendation for bad harvests was improving farming with new technology.¹⁸² However, doing so would not protect the farmers from increasingly higher prices due to the inflation. The investment for these new technologies was also expansive, causing the farmers to borrow money and suffer from debt. Many farmers hoped that the GVN would control the prices, safeguarding them from inflation.¹⁸³ Market regulations were against the modernized open capitalist market. It seems that the farmers were against modernization due to the struggling economy. Increasing inflation was not only the problem for farmers. The wages of the South Vietnamese army were fixed. The hyperinflation in South Vietnam meant that those wages got exponentially more worthless, resulting in poor moral within the ARVN at a time they had to become more independent in the war against the NLF.¹⁸⁴ The ARVN soldiers’ options to spiral into crime or abandon the army became more attractive than supporting the GVN. Black market activities and the speculation of essential goods happened on a massive scale due to the problematic economy.¹⁸⁵ In several surveys, the GVN was losing popularity rapidly.

¹⁸¹ Ibid, 11.

¹⁸² Pacification Research Report: Economic situation of Dalat City after the enactment of the “Parallel Rate Exchange Law”, November 8-9, 1970, Folder “Tuyen Duc prov, 1970” Box 16G-108, HQ MACV, CORDS, PPP, CORDS Historical Working Group Files, Record Group 472 at NARA II, 7.

¹⁸³ National Development Research Report: Economy; Report number 4/DT/6/73, April 16, 1973, Folder “A07 – Dinh Tuong” Box 14K-92, HQ MACV, CORDS, PPP, CORDS Historical Working Group Files, Record Group 472 at NARA II, 2-3.

¹⁸⁴ Pacification Research Report: Effect of new economic policy of the GVN, November 3, 1970, Folder “Quang Tin prov, 1970” Box 15X-105, HQ MACV, CORDS, PPP, CORDS Historical Working Group Files, Record Group 472 at NARA II, 1-4.

¹⁸⁵ Pacification Research Report: Opinions of the people in Dalat City and Lac-Nghiep village about the GVN “Spring” economic policy, March 11-22, 1972, Folder “Tuyen Duc prov, 1972” Box 16I-108, HQ MACV, CORDS, PPP, CORDS Historical Working Group Files, Record Group 472 at NARA II, 1-3.

“Most respondents blamed the government for not solving the economic difficulties and allowing dishonest merchants to increase prices illegally, adding a crisis to the economic situation which has been aggravated by the long war.”¹⁸⁶

The economic problems grew worse after 1973. “Beyond specific complaints of deprivation, corruption, and banditry, there seems to be an increasing malaise, a declining faith in the GVN survivability, and the beginning of an inclination to cut and run whenever possible.”¹⁸⁷ The situation was so bad that if this continued, American advisors speculated that widespread demonstration, the collapse of the GVN’s authority or even a military coup were not impossible.¹⁸⁸ Thieu’s modernization efforts failed and following the economic malaise was the faith of the population. The struggling situation within South Vietnam caused people to distrust the GVN. Nation building failed to unite the country behind a central government, even with Thieu’s authoritarian high modernist efforts.

“Many economic indicators including receipts from exports and taxation rose considerably. These reforms often generated domestic backlash, both popularly and in the National Assembly. Nonetheless, the reforms initiated were never radical enough to address the economy’s fundamental inadequacies.”¹⁸⁹

Simon Toner states here that the reforms were unpopular, creating a need for more nation building. Toner also states that in the GVN and Thieu’s vision for South Vietnam, political stability was their first priority, not economic reforms. In the American perspective of modernization, solely prioritizing political stability was not possible. To acquire political stability, one had to modernize the economy and other aspects of a traditional society. This process would gradually move towards a modern politically stable

¹⁸⁶ Pacification Research Report: Economic life in three district towns of Hau Nghia Province, July 12, 1971, Folder “Hau Nghia, ’71” Box 17E-114, HQ MACV, CORDS, PPP, CORDS Historical Working Group Files, Record Group 472 at NARA II, 1.

¹⁸⁷ Vietnam Working Group, Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, Department of State (hereafter EA/VN), Political Repercussions of Economic Deterioration, February 26, 1974, Folder “POL 13: Economic, 1974” Box 18Y-21, Subject Files of the Office of Vietnam Affairs (Vietnam Working Group), 1964 – 74, Record Group 59 at NARA II, 3-4.

¹⁸⁸ Vietnam Working Group, Political Repercussions of Economic Deterioration, February 26, 1974, 4.

¹⁸⁹ S. Toner, *Imagining Taiwan*, 39.

society. The economic modernization efforts to benefit nation building were too hesitant in fear of losing the marginal popular support the GVN enjoyed.

Failure to adapt modernization theory, because of the notion that traditional societies could only adapt and not create, meant modernization never fit Vietnamese society. Because modernization would cause a chain reaction of modernized events, once started, political stability was the main focus. “In Washington and Saigon, policymakers continued to cling to the hope of economic take-off.”¹⁹⁰ The lack of focus on national problems and more on establishing the GVN backfired into a negative spiral, and the GVN lost almost all their support. Nation building failed due to the economic modernization efforts of the GVN and the United States. The vacuum after American withdrawal accelerated the demise of the economy and the declining support for the GVN.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid, 38.

Conclusion

Nation building was the main goal for Thieu in South Vietnam. The GVN had to become a popular, legitimate government while simultaneously defeating the Communist threat. Modernization theory was a highly popular method for the United States to aid and accomplish these nation building wishes.

“The final collapse of the Saigon government in 1975, and the total failure of a war whose fundamental purposes were initially framed in terms of democratic development and nation building, would also do great damage to the ideology of modernization itself.”¹⁹¹

This quote suggests that Thieu and the GVN’s attempts to apply modernization theory to nation building failed. The case studies show that South Vietnam suffered protests, economic malaise and authoritarian politics, the complete opposites of what the Americans envisioned the effect of modernization theory would be. The existence of democratic politics, capitalism and an urbanized population with high living standards – which would embody a modernized society – did not occur in South Vietnam. The Vietnam War caused modernization theory to come under fire. The failure to cause a modernization “kick-start,” not only in South Vietnam but other decolonized counties as well, resulted in a hard look at the American perspective of modernization.¹⁹²

The first case study showed that Thieu’s nation building efforts would be significantly more difficult. Instead of the traditionally presumed singular need for rural nation building, Thieu had to nation build in both urban and rural areas. Urban areas were expected to be more modern and pro-government. The massive number of social movements protesting in the cities demonstrated this misconception from modernization theorist. The urban protests, combined with the constant rural Communist threat, caused the GVN to govern reactively. This reactive governing complicated the creation of modernization legislation to speed up the modernization process. The American presence caused a paradox of peace and protest, which created support and hate towards the GVN’s ally. Inventing universal modernization policies that would please the general

¹⁹¹ M. Latham, *The right kind of revolution*, 142.

¹⁹² M. Latham, *Modernization*, 732-733.

public was a challenge in South Vietnam, with its many social groups. The attempts to aid and stabilize the veterans by creating a welfare state was a modernized policy. This policy – to restore the social order and stability – failed, leaving the question if modernization was the right tool. The lack of a fully functioning welfare state in the United States questioned the effectiveness of the American modernization theory even more. South Vietnam really needed the premium effective governing that Kissinger suggested to keep the population pleased. The absence of an equal welfare state in the United States was a sign that American was possibly not fully modernized; thus, the GVN could be doomed to fail in their American modernization approach to nation building.

The elections were an important aspect of the nation building process, in light of the diversity and national task to nation build. In the second case study, the formation of the 1967 constitution suggested that a modernized participatory democracy was founded in South Vietnam. These elections could bring political stability and prosperity because all social movements could be represented and become pro-government. It was swiftly discovered that local elections were filled with fraudulent activities. Voter coercion, double voting cards and other irregularities resulted in undemocratic elections. The distance between local politics and national politics was considered too distant. People's disbelief in actual local change made them vote without confidence in the elected candidates. Elected "*intercultural commuters*" would resolve the cultural heterogeneity but would be extremely hard to accomplish.¹⁹³

The presidential election and electoral legislations showed that Thieu was moving towards undemocratic, high modernist modernization. Thieu's meddling in the presidential elections and abuse of his "special power" to consolidate his power and the GVN's was highly undemocratic. The critics of modernization had already predicted that efforts to create a participatory democracy would eventually result in the opposite, undemocratic regimes and dictatorships. Thieu and the GVN did develop undemocratic, regime-like characteristics in their governing. The modernization efforts to create a participatory democracy failed. This undemocratic electoral climate also damaged nation building efforts. Protests occurred in light of this legislation and the election irregularities. These protests – especially about the presidential election – would again damage the

¹⁹³ J. M. Silverman, *Political Elites in South Vietnam*, 306-307.

intended urban pro-modernization strongholds, which should support the modernization process.

The last case study shows the final nail in the GVN's nation building coffin. The economic modernization attempt to create a higher living standard in South Vietnam left the country in an economic malaise. South Vietnam had already suffered immense inflation and higher costs of living before the United States withdrew. The massive influx of money created an urbanized society focusing on importing goods and entertainment, which aligned with modernization. Thus, problems arose when American money disappeared, resulting in unemployment, loss of income and customers, a spike in crime and hyperinflation. The critics of modernization predicted again that modern economic interference in a traditional society would cause problems instead of a transition into a modernized economy.¹⁹⁴ The population grew accustomed to their wealthy beneficiaries, not building their own adaptive economic system.

Thieu's task to save the GVN's popularity in the country, which was increasingly getting poorer, was growing more challenging. Drastic economic reforms would generate national opposition, thus crippling nation building efforts, but reforms were needed. The solutions the population themselves offered – in Pacification Research Reports – did not usually align with the modern capitalist open-market vision – like, for example, government restrictions on prices. The economic laws Thieu managed to formulate, due to his “special power,” were not enough to rescue South Vietnam from its suffering economy. The American embodiment of modernization theory destroyed South Vietnam's economy. The constant hope for a modernization “kick-start,” which would start the modernizing chain reaction, never came.¹⁹⁵

Modernization theory was perceived by Americans as the tool to create a modernized uniform society. Modernization would, in light of the Cold War, fend off communism and bring prosperity to the population and government of a traditional society. This vision was exactly what the GVN tried to accomplish with their nation building efforts in South Vietnam. Modernization was therefore the chosen GVN tool to nation build in South Vietnam. The enormous amount of aid and support from the United States made it extra tempting for GVN leaders to follow the modernization path. Thieu wanted to create a legitimate central government that was supported throughout the

¹⁹⁴ M. Latham, *Modernization as Ideology*, 4-5.

¹⁹⁵ N. Gilman, *Mandarins of the Future*, 30-41.

nation. The modernization of South Vietnam would show the population that a nation-built modern country was the best direction towards a prosperous future.

The three case studies in this research show that it was not so easy to modernize South Vietnam or even attempt nation building. Many social movements stood in the way of this progress. The failure to modernize the economy and political climate resulted in the strong unpopularity of the GVN. The Pacification Research Reports helped immensely with showing local opinions and the effects of GVN dealings. To answer the thesis question “Did Thieu and the GVN manage to nation build South Vietnam by means of the modernization theory?”, the simple answer would be no. The commitment to an American version of the modernization theory was problematic from the start. The ethnocentric base caused the theory to focus on transferring aspects and not adapting them, resulting in a lack of support for modernizing change.

Thieu’s nation building attempts started democratic and were favored by the population over the NLF’s prospects. The high modernist road Thieu took negatively impacted popular support towards the GVN, worsening with the economic malaise after the Americans withdrew. The relatively peaceful period, due to heavy NLF losses during the Tet Offensive, gave the GVN nation building options. Urban areas lacked GVN support, causing modernization to lack a stronghold whereupon it could build this transformation. South Vietnam declined rapidly after the withdrawal. American and South Vietnamese modernization nation building efforts failed, leaving a broken country being transformed post-war into a Communist nation – the outcome both parties fiercely tried to prevent. The critics of modernization were proven to be correct, leaving modernization theory with a tough evaluation. Thieu and the GVN’s strong belief in successful nation building by applying the American perspective of the modernization theory ended in failure.

This research and its conclusions were limited to English sources, leaving a vast number of Vietnamese sources left for future research. This research also attempted to partly close the South Vietnamese veterans’ omission in the historiography. The focus, however, was mainly on their protests, leaving many other aspects of South Vietnamese veterans’ war-life for future research.

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