



Diem's Final Failure: Prelude to America's War in Vietnam (Modern War Studies (Hardcover))

Philip E. Catton

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Often portrayed as an inept and stubborn tyrant, South Vietnamese president Ngo Dinh Diem has long been the subject of much derision but little understanding. Philip Catton's penetrating study provides a much more complex portrait of Diem as both a devout patriot and a failed architect of modernization. In doing so, it sheds new light on a controversial regime.

Catton treats the Diem government on its own terms rather than as an appendage of American policy. Focusing on the decade from Dien Bien Phu to Diem's assassination in 1963, he examines the Vietnamese leader's nation-building and reform efforts-particularly his Strategic Hamlet Program, which sought to separate guerrilla insurgents from the peasantry and build grassroots support for his regime. Catton's evaluation of the collapse of that program offers fresh insights into both Diem's limitations as a leader and the ideological and organizational weaknesses of his government, while his assessment of the evolution of Washington's relations with Saigon provides new insight into America's growing involvement in the Vietnamese civil war.

Focusing on the Strategic Hamlet Program in Binh Duong province as an exemplar of Diem's efforts, Catton paints the Vietnamese leader as a progressive thinker trying to simultaneously defeat the communists and modernize his nation. He draws on a wealth of Vietnamese language sources to argue that Diem possessed a firm vision of nation-building and sought to overcome the debilitating dependence that reliance on American support threatened to foster. As Catton shows, however, Diem's plans for South Vietnam clashed with those of the United States and proved no match for the Vietnamese communists.

Catton analyzes the mutually frustrating interactions between Diem and the administrations of Eisenhower and Kennedy, highlighting personality and cultural clashes, as well as specific disagreements within the American government over how to deal with Diem's programs and his hostility toward American goals. Revealing patterns in this uneasy alliance that have eluded other observers, he also clarifies many of the problems, setbacks, and miscalculations experienced by the communist movement during that era.

Neither an American puppet, as communist propaganda claimed, nor a backward-looking mandarin, according to Western accounts, Catton's Diem is a tragic figure who finally ran out of time, just a few weeks before JFK's assassination and at a moment when it still seemed possible for America to avoid war.

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