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Heather Marie Stur. *Saigon at War: South Vietnam and the Global Sixties.* New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020. ISBN: 9781107161924 (hardback, \$89.99); 9781316614112 (paperback, \$29.99).

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South Vietnam was a “democracy lost” (3). That is the intriguing premise that lays at the heart of Heather Marie Stur’s latest book, *Saigon at War: South Vietnam and the Global Sixties*. She suggests that the myriad groups that comprised the vibrant political culture of Saigon in the 1960s and 1970s—students, Catholics, journalists, peace activists, social critics, and diplomats—constituted “a politically interested and engaged citizenry” which harbored their own visions of what a modern, viable and unified Vietnamese nation should look like. Collectively, this diverse group of actors, each with their own political opinions and agendas, formed the bedrock of a healthy democracy that could have paved the way for a more peaceful reunification of Vietnam following the death of President Ngô Đình Diệm had the governments of the Republic of (South) Vietnam, the United States, and the Democratic Republic of (North) Vietnam been willing to risk engaging it. Unfortunately, Stur contends, “both the United States and North Vietnam felt threatened” by it, perceiving this political dynamism as “political chaos” and opting instead to ignore its potential as a path to reconciliation and continue to fight the war out (3). Meanwhile, Nguyễn Văn Thiệu, the eventual successor to Ngô Đình Diệm, feared that these groups might jeopardize the survival of his regime if he attempted to bring them into the political fold. He was far more content to imprison or deport their members. Consequently, the war dragged on, the American people grew tired of the fighting, any domestic support the Thiệu government had turned increasingly to apathy, if not outright opposition, and more and more South Vietnamese reached the conclusion that it would be better to live in a unified nation at peace under a Communist government than locked in a futile war under a regime that was democratic on paper but dysfunctional and authoritarian in practice.

As the title suggests, Saigon itself plays a commanding role in this drama. It serves as the arena where the activists, associations, and movements that comprise its central characters could advance their agendas. Though much of the sentiments animating their political activism were present beyond the bustling streets and dense neighbourhoods of South Vietnam’s capital, Stur indicates that as the seat of power, Saigon created a focal point that amplified this energy to a level where an equally as engaged global community of political activists took notice and became a captive audience.

Saigon at War brings both the city and these activists to life over eight chapters, plus an introduction and a conclusion. In the first chapter, Stur sets the scene by exploring the turbulent political situation in Saigon following Ngô Đình Diệm’s assassination; daily life for both the Americans and Vietnamese in the city; and the constant threat posed by the National Liberation Front (NLF). This is followed by two chapters that discuss, respectively, the older activists and social critics who agitated against the Diệm regime and the younger student activists who were clamoring for civilian rule and more representative government under its successor regimes. In the fourth chapter, Stur looks at the efforts taken by the various groups under discussion to draw international attention to the conflict in South Vietnam and gain support for their particular stance on the war—positions that ranged from peace at all costs to increased military assistance for the beleaguered Saigon government. The fifth chapter brings the story back to Vietnam, and looks at a government initiative to build bridges with the people by promoting a new conception of modern Vietnamese womanhood, while considering the efforts of local citizens’ groups to obtain greater government aid to contend with the disruption caused to their daily lives by

the war. This is followed by a look at NLF efforts to capitalize on the uncertainty that settled over Saigon in the wake of the Tet Offensive and bring about an uprising that would force the Southern government to capitulate. The next chapter examines the segments of Vietnam's Catholic population that attempted to shed light on the plight of political prisoners who were unjustly locked up in South Vietnam's jails for their opposition to the government. Finally, the book closes with a sweeping exploration of Saigon's chaotic political scene amidst the American withdrawal and the collapse of the Southern regime in the spring of 1975.

By "giving voice" to such a diverse array of groups for the first time, Stur's study has tremendous potential for the field of Vietnamese studies (5). It situates itself among those works on the Vietnam War that consider the conflict as a postcolonial struggle, where local actors competed with one another on the Indochinese peninsula to realize their vision of a modern, viable, and independent Vietnamese nation.¹ Drawing on American and Vietnamese archival sources, she reveals how diplomats, Catholics, and student and peace activists harbored alternative views of democracy and Vietnamese identity to the South Vietnamese government and lobbied to have their voices heard either in streets of Saigon or the court of world opinion. Such a perspective makes, in Stur's telling, the Vietnam conflict not one, but three wars that were "entangled in a global war of ideas over which side rightfully represented the future of South Vietnam": the military war fought by the Army of the Republic of Vietnam and the American military against the NLF; the political war between the various groups within Saigon vying over the future of an independent Vietnam; and the propaganda war they waged over international public opinion (7).

Running throughout the narrative of *Saigon at War* are the themes of social and political fragmentation, nationalism, sovereignty, and postcolonial identity. The fact that these themes are what bound this coterie of activists together highlights the complexity of Saigon's political scene. For all the ideological, philosophical, and religious differences that separated these groups, they were all, for the most part, clamoring for the same things: national self-determination, representative government, free elections, reunification, and, ultimately, peace. In a few cases, these groups supported the South Vietnamese Government. The executive board of the Saigon Students Union, for example, was vehemently anti-Communist. In 1964, they were among delegates at South Vietnam's National Students Committee Conference in Dalat who "called upon their fellow young people to serve the nation, through both military service and support of the troops" (86). Later that year, they attempted to dampen student protests against both the war and American intervention, fearing that demonstrations could lead to riots which could "be susceptible to NLF infiltration" (91). Above all, they wanted an end to the fighting, national independence, and some form of republican government under a non-Communist regime.

Many other groups assessed in Stur's account, however, appear more aligned with the positions held by Father Trần Hữu Thanh and Ngô Bá Thành. Father Thanh had a long history of political activism and, like most Catholics in Vietnam, was vehemently anti-Communist. He was also strongly opposed to the government of Nguyễn Văn Thiệu, particularly its corrupt practices. Father Thanh led the People's Movement Against Corruption and, while it was more interested in bringing an end to the unethical practices of the Southern government than its demise, associated with groups that demanded Thiệu's resignation. Ngô Bá Thành, on the other hand, was far more left-leaning than Father Thanh and maintained contacts with members of the NLF. Her position was more consistent with Vietnam's "third force," what the foreign press labeled the "anti-Thieu and pro-national reconciliation movements" (17). Madam Thành was a lawyer who received her education at the University of Paris and Columbia University. She was affiliated with numerous citizens' groups that opposed both American intervention and the war, including the Committee for Peace, the Movement for Self-Determination, the Women's Movement for the Right to Live, and the Committee for Prison Reform. She was a fierce advocate of self-determination, a vocal critic of the Southern regime, and was repeatedly arrested and imprisoned for her

¹ See, for example, David Hunt, *Vietnam's Southern Revolution: From Peasant Insurrection to Total War* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2008); Mark Philip Bradley, *Vietnam at War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); and Geoffrey C. Stewart, *Vietnam's Lost Revolution: Ngô Đình Diệm's Failure to Build an Independent Nation, 1955-1963* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

views. Given her cosmopolitan pedigree, she was one of the higher-profile advocates for peace and reconciliation who used her celebrity to raise international awareness to the repression that the Thiệu government had brought upon its own people.

For all of its potential *Saigon at War*, unfortunately, falls just short of the mark. Beyond contending that “government repression was more effective at bringing down South Vietnam than the NLF’s agenda, and local and political activists were key players in South Vietnam’s fate,” Stur’s assessment offers very little in terms of a meaningful conclusion (6). The introduction is brimming with possibilities such as her assertion that South Vietnam “contained a political milieu that reflected what happened when citizens struggle to establish a nation in the midst of war and under the burden of foreign intervention that was ambiguous in its purpose and goals” (3) or claim that “the political activism, the press diversity, and the variety of attitudes about Vietnam’s future made for a chaotic yet proto-democratic culture” (7). Unfortunately, these bold, intriguing, and promising ideas remain largely undeveloped in the ensuing chapters and quickly become lost in the array of characters, associations, and movements that are introduced and re-introduced throughout the narrative. This is symptomatic of a few larger problems in this work.

The book appears to have been rushed to completion. There are numerous grammatical errors, disjointed passages, inconsistent use of tenses, and repetitious introductions of the same piece of evidence within a matter of pages. These are more than the simple mistakes that are annoyingly found only after the book has gone to press. They are mechanical flaws that, at times, create confusion in the narrative and undermine the considerable work that went into producing the book.

There is little discussion of South Vietnam’s 1971 presidential election in which Nguyễn Văn Thiệu ran unopposed due to the boycotts of his two main competitors. Given that many of the activists discussed in this work were advocating for representative government, their response to this election should have been explored. Neither candidate ran against Thiệu in protest to what they believed would be a rigged election. How did anticorruption activists like Father Trần Hữu Thanh respond? What was the student reaction, or the tone in the local press, for instance? This election was a significant test for democracy in a country at war and needs ample consideration here.

Stur does not cite Sean Fear’s important scholarship on Nguyễn Văn Thiệu’s regime that resonates with some of the themes her study addresses. One of Fear’s articles, which examines Ngô Đình Diệm’s “contested legacy” in the Thiệu era, argues the former South Vietnamese president was a “symbolic wedge” that reinforced “South Vietnam’s all but intractable fragmentation.”² Another, focusing on South Vietnam’s “diplomatic ambitions” in the early 1970s would serve as a nice counterpoint to Stur’s discussion of the efforts of Saigon’s political activists to reach a global audience.³

The book also lacks an analytical focus. Though Stur contends that South Vietnam was a “democracy lost” in her introduction, she does not harness this or any of the other provocative contentions mentioned above as a central argument around which to develop the book’s analysis. Consequently, it is difficult to discern Stur’s opinion on all of this. There is no discussion of what alternative possibilities for South Vietnam’s future existed within the matrix of competing ideas about democracy, national self-determination, and Vietnamese identity that animated Saigon’s activists or their significance for the field of Vietnamese studies.

Despite these missed opportunities, Heather Marie Stur’s book does shed light on Saigon’s frenetic political scene in the 1960s and 1970s. It offers centre-stage to some of the colorful characters that, until this point, have only earned fleeting mention in the scholarship. Stur reminds us that student leaders like Huỳnh Tấn Mẫm and Nguyễn Hữu Thái or the youth of Vietnam’s “Partridge Family,” the CBC Band (Con Bà Cụt, or Mother’s Children) each contributed in their own way to

² Sean Fear, “The Ambiguous Legacy of Ngô Đình Diệm in South Vietnam’s Second Republic (1967-1975),” *The Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 11:1 (Winter 2016): 1-75, 3.

³ Fear, “Saigon Goes Global: South Vietnam’s Quest for International Legitimacy in the Age of Détente,” *Diplomatic History* 42:3 (June 2018): 428-455, 429.

Saigon's political milieu as the war raged around them (245). Though they may not have made the decisions governing whether Vietnam would be a nation at war or peace, there is much to be learned about the consequences of those decisions by listening to what they had to say.

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