



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

Modernization, Agricultural Economics, and U.S. Policy towards Land Reform in South Vietnam

Gawthorpe, A.J.

Citation

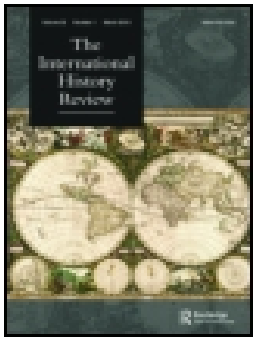
Gawthorpe, A. J. (2022). Modernization, Agricultural Economics, and U.S. Policy towards Land Reform in South Vietnam. *The International History Review*, 44(2), 282-299.
doi:10.1080/07075332.2021.1953108

Version: Publisher's Version

License: [Creative Commons CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 license](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3209216>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).



Modernization, Agricultural Economics, and U.S. Policy towards Land Reform in South Vietnam

Andrew J. Gawthorpe

To cite this article: Andrew J. Gawthorpe (2021): Modernization, Agricultural Economics, and U.S. Policy towards Land Reform in South Vietnam, The International History Review, DOI: [10.1080/07075332.2021.1953108](https://doi.org/10.1080/07075332.2021.1953108)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/07075332.2021.1953108>



© 2021 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 26 Jul 2021.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 52



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Modernization, Agricultural Economics, and U.S. Policy towards Land Reform in South Vietnam

Andrew J. Gawthorpe

Institute for History, Universiteit Leiden, Leiden, The Netherlands

ABSTRACT

The issue of land tenure loomed large in the Vietnam War, providing significant motivation to members of the Vietnamese Communist movement. Despite this, the United States never made a serious effort to urge the non-Communist regime in Saigon to carry out a thorough program of land redistribution. This article explains why by tracing the development of post-war U.S. policy towards the question of land redistribution and how this impacted American action in Vietnam. It argues that U.S. policy towards the land in South Vietnam was rooted in the assumptions of modernization theory, which privileged the role of landlords in an unfolding development process while arguing against the empowerment of tenants. But this ideology faced resistance from proponents drawing on a previously-unexplored tradition: the discipline of agricultural economics. Rooted in an acknowledgement of the diversity of historical experiences and institutional arrangements which governed the relationship between land, society, and the economy, agricultural economists were skeptical of or in downright disagreement with many of the key tenets of modernization theory. Although the agricultural economists lost the policy debate, they revealed the limits of modernization theory – especially when the Saigon regime eventually moved to implement a sweeping land reform against American advice.

KEYWORDS

Vietnam war; land reform; modernization; development; U.S. foreign policy

In the 1950s and '60s, the same scene played out again and again in the Mekong Delta of South Vietnam. Soldiers from the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN), perhaps backed by American forces, would seize control of a village in which the National Liberation Front (NLF) or their predecessor the Viet Minh had been present and had run village affairs for years, often as far back as the independence war against France. They came to extend the control of the non-Communist Republic of Vietnam (RVN) and its government, the Government of Vietnam (GVN). But that was not their only purpose – they were also coming to collect rent. 'Hired boys' working for absentee landlords accompanied the soldiers, demanding back rent from farmers who had already rendered taxes and rents to the NLF for the period covered. If the farmers refused to render payment to their landlord – who, in many cases, they had never met – then the collectors would ransack their houses, 'tak[ing] the statues of Buddha, the pictures of ancestors, candlesticks, pots and pans, shoes, any chickens or pigs, and any extra rice.' If the farmers wanted to reclaim their possessions, they had to make a humiliating trip to the provincial capital to deliver

CONTACT Andrew J. Gawthorpe  a.j.gawthorpe@hum.leidenuniv.nl

© 2021 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

the payment. 'Obviously,' noted one American familiar with the practice, 'this doesn't sit too well with a person, seeing the house cleaned out by their 'liberators' in the name of the Americans, the GVN, and their allies.'¹

Land was a central issue in the Vietnam War, providing the motivation for countless villagers to oppose the RVN and even join the revolution. For most of the war, the Saigon government aligned itself firmly with landlords, declining to undertake a sweeping land redistribution. And while landlord-tenant relations varied across time and space in South Vietnam, the GVN often allied itself with landlords to implement a policy of 'negative land reform' – undoing redistribution carried out by the revolution and reasserting landlord dominance when the opportunity arose. For its part, the vast American military, diplomatic and development apparatus in Vietnam never made a concerted effort to persuade the Saigon government to enact a sweeping program of land redistribution. Although proponents of redistribution existed within the American establishment in South Vietnam, its dominant position remained one of opposition – and, when GVN Prime Minister Nguyen Van Thieu himself settled the question in favor of reform, profound skepticism that he had made the right choice.

Although the United States could not simply have decreed that land redistribution in South Vietnam take place, it is notable that little serious attempt was made to try. Americans in South Vietnam had a limited ability to persuade or cajole the Saigon regime into pursuing their favored reform agendas, underscoring the importance of not seeing socio-economic reform 'as something which American officials *did* to South Vietnam', but rather as something that South Vietnamese actors pioneered themselves.² But this insight was often unavailable to contemporary U.S. officials, who invested great energy into attempting to persuade Diem and Thieu to liberalize and decentralize the state apparatus of the RVN, and to revolutionize village life in ways designed to blunt the appeal of the NLF.³

It is hence striking that throughout the war, the dominant position within the American diplomatic, aid and military establishment in South Vietnam remained one of opposition to land reform. The United States had encouraged a spate of land reforms in the Asian countries over which it had the most influence at the end of World War II, and the results were generally believed by American observers to have reduced the appeal of Communism to the populations of those countries. But by the mid-1950s, changing geopolitical realities, domestic anti-Communism and the rise of a new development discourse which privileged the role of landlords led U.S. policymakers to turn against redistribution. Even though proponents pointed to the potentially large political benefits of redistribution and its low cost to the United States – equivalent to just six days of fighting the war in Vietnam – American officials declined to pressure the GVN and even resisted when Thieu himself began to promote the idea.⁴ This was despite the fact that by the late 1960s, decades of war and revolution had already fatally weakened the landlord-dominated socio-political system of rural South Vietnam, creating the political space for the GVN to implement redistribution without crippling opposition.⁵

To understand the United States' resistance to land reform in South Vietnam, we have to reckon with the place of land reform in post-war American debates about development and modernization. South Vietnam was just one of many countries around the world which American academics and policymakers classified as 'underdeveloped', meaning it had a low level of national income compared to the West. By the time American soldiers were arriving in South Vietnam, academic and official thinking on the question of how to encourage the development of these countries had crystallized around the ideology of modernization. Proponents of modernization believed that the underdeveloped (or 'traditional') countries would inevitably go through a period of rapid and integrated change in which their societies, economies and politics would become more and more like the 'modern', 'developed' countries of the West. They also believed that this process could be accelerated through contact with the already-developed West and that it should be a key goal of American foreign policy to usher the underdeveloped into modernity.

Although the ideas encompassed by the concept of modernization are often seen as influential over American policy in Vietnam, they provided little guidance on the question of the land.⁶ Despite the predominantly rural economies and societies of the underdeveloped countries, modernization theorists preferred to chart a course to an urbanized, industrialized future in which such questions would be irrelevant.⁷ Here, modernization theory reflected the enduring influence of the postwar discipline of development economics, which saw the chief role of the agricultural sector as being to release capital and labor into more productive sectors. This shift from farm to factory would eventually lead to the dominance of the modern, industrial sector of the economy. This idea was eventually repackaged as Walt Rostow's 'take-off into sustained growth'.⁸ The beneficiaries of a Rostovian take-off would see the patchwork fields of the agricultural sector only out of the window and far away down below, dwindling steadily in size as their jet-powered economy roared into the air. They would have little time or energy to worry about such a provincial question as land tenure.

But despite their dominance, modernization theorists were not the only post-war intellectuals writing about development and the land. Agricultural economists, many of them clustered around the University of Wisconsin and its journal *Land Economy*, were writing prolifically on the question of land reform from the 1950s through to the end of the Vietnam War. A heterodox field rooted in the study of agriculture in the United States, agricultural economics increasingly turned its attention to the underdeveloped countries as the agricultural sectors of Western economies shrank as a percentage of GDP in the post-war period.

While many agricultural economists shared with modernization theorists a desire to produce policy-oriented research which could guide development, here the consensus largely ended. Rooted in an acknowledgement of the diversity of historical experiences and institutional arrangements which governed the relationship between land, society, and the economy, agricultural economists were skeptical of or in downright disagreement with many of the key tenets of modernization theory. More interested in the lived condition of farmers today rather than in their contribution to a process of development, they questioned modernization's relentless focus on productivity increases and its assumption that 'all good things go together' in unfolding processes of economic, social and political development. Modernization theorists sought to maintain and even strengthen the economic and political power of landlords in service of future development while promising tenants an improvement in their condition only once they took their place in a modernized, urbanized future. By contrast, agricultural economists' prescription for developing countries like South Vietnam was for a quick transfer of land to tenants. Recognizing that land was a key source of political power in developing countries, agricultural economists believed that redistribution would create a new class of owner-operators who could play a vital economic role in their country's development and become a source of political stability and support for post-colonial regimes. In countries like South Vietnam, this new class could also serve as a valuable bulwark against Communism.

In South Vietnam, a debate raged between those operating within a framework of modernization and those operating within the tradition of agricultural economics. Studying this debate illuminates the ways in which some of the weaknesses and erasures of the modernization paradigm were challenged right from the moment of its creation. Scholars have fruitfully mined academic texts in order to illuminate the ways in which the ideology of modernization informed and influenced U.S. foreign policy, even without claiming that policymakers were directly influenced by the texts themselves.⁹ The same approach is necessary to understand the trajectory of American policy on the question of land reform in the post-war period. Combining a consideration of the place of land reform within modernization theory with an analysis of the critique posed by agricultural economics provides the context necessary to understand how U.S. policy on this question developed in the postwar period and was applied in the case of South Vietnam. The worldview of modernization provided few policy prescriptions concerning a rural population which was prevented by war and revolution from participating in economic take-off. Faced with

this silence, proponents of land reform operating within the alternative tradition of agricultural economics urged that the U.S. pressure the GVN to take immediate steps to satisfy the social and political demands of Vietnamese farmers. Although their arguments were mostly sidelined, they highlighted a key weakness in modernization theory's utility as a policy tool – foreshadowing some of the later critiques which ultimately weakened, without fully displacing, modernization's grip on U.S. development policy.

The land situation in South Vietnam

When Ngo Dinh Diem took the reins of power in South Vietnam in the mid-1950s, the rural situation in the country was one of profound inequality, widespread tenancy, and powerful landlords, contributing significantly to rural discontent. Although there were differences in land use patterns between the two most densely-populated areas of South Vietnam, the Mekong Delta and the Central Lowlands, they shared an economic system which was heavily weighted towards the interests of landowners. Inequality was most pronounced in the Mekong Delta, where the French imperial administration had carved large estates out of newly-cultivated areas and granted them to French colonialists and Vietnamese collaborators.¹⁰ Some of these estates numbered in the thousands or, as in one case in the province of Can Tho, tens of thousands of hectares. In 1960 – 1, 77% of the residents of the Delta were reliant on rented land, and 47% owned no land at all. The average size of land worked per household in the Delta was 1.8 hectares.¹¹ In the Central Lowlands, by contrast, landholdings were smaller and inequality less stark. In 1960 – 1, 79% of holdings in the lowlands were one hectare or less in size. The typical family – 403,000 out of 695,000 – worked 0.8 hectares, with half of it rented and the other half owned, while 74,000 rented all of their land. The small size of holdings meant that the economic condition of landlords was often barely distinguishable from that of their tenants.¹²

Although the situation was most pronounced in the Delta, landlords in both regions wielded political and economic power proportionate to their control over the means of production. Conditions of tenancy reflected this. In the Mekong Delta, rent was levied on the expected rather than actual output of a plot of land, and landlords had the right to unilaterally dictate the expected level of output.¹³ This meant that farmers bore the risks of fluctuations in crop yields and the markets for both agricultural inputs and the commodities they produced.¹⁴ Although rents varied, they were reported to be as high as 40 – 50% of expected output prior to World War II.¹⁵ Rents in the Central Lowlands were typically 50%, although in this region they were set on actual rather than expected output.¹⁶ Most farmers were forced to borrow at high rates to afford the inputs for each growing season, locking them into a perpetual cycle of debt. In his travels around the province of Long An, Jeffrey Race reported that landlords sometimes took the daughters of their tenants as concubines for their sons if they failed to pay their rent.¹⁷ Control of land also gave landlords control of village governance, and the legal status of tenancy agreements reflected this. In both regions of the country, landlords were customarily able to eject tenants at will, a fact which made it extremely difficult to negotiate better conditions of tenure.

These circumstances were a product of the French colonial period and had played a decisive role in the rise of the Viet Minh insurgency. RVN rulers, starting with Diem, often acted to reinforce this tenancy regime, leading many rural South Vietnamese residents to transfer their hostility to the new authorities.¹⁸ Diem's vision of development was mostly expressed in his idea of a 'Personalist Revolution' – based on a reimagining of Vietnamese tradition blended with the Catholic doctrine of Personalism – which envisaged development primarily as a psychological striving towards self-reliance and responsibility. Rather than being passive recipients of state benevolence or self-actualizing agents of modernization, the ideal Personalist citizen was one who would willingly mobilize and make sacrifices in the service of the GVN's own vision of development. This vision entailed the nurturing of self-reliant village communities which could

provide for themselves economically and furnish manpower for the struggle against Communism. Land redistribution played a relatively modest role in the Personalist revolution, which eventually found its purest expression in the creation of entirely new model communities which would mold farmers into loyal, obedient citizens. Farmers were coerced into abandoning their ancestral homes altogether and moving into these communities under programs such as the Land Development Program (1957), the Agrovillage Program (1959) and the Strategic Hamlet Program (1962 – 3).

Diem did, however, promulgate two ordinances affecting tenancy in existing villages, and these became the basis of South Vietnamese land policy until the late 1960s. The first, disseminated in 1955 as Ordinance no. 2, was a tenancy reform which on paper appeared to shift the balance of power towards tenants but which in reality reinforced the position of landlords. It mandated the nationwide adoption of legally-binding written tenancy agreements with a fixed length of five years and heavily regulated the terms of the rental.¹⁹ While this move was progressive by the standards of the prewar period, by 1955 it served as a tool for the reassertion of landlord political dominance. During the war against the French, landlords had generally fled to the cities or been coerced by the Viet Minh into softening tenancy agreements. Many tenant farmers had enjoyed better terms than those specified under Ordinance no. 2 or had been granted use of the land outright. The ordinance hence appeared in the villages as a counterrevolution, allowing landlords to formalize the reassertion of rights over land which they had previously abandoned or been forced to grant to the revolution. Tenants also had to negotiate the key clauses of the new contract – including the precise setting of the rental rate and the expected output that it was based on – in a situation in which the political power of landlords was being reasserted. The minister Diem placed in charge of the program, Nguyen Van Thoi, was himself a substantial landowner with over 15,000 hectares of holdings.²⁰ At the local level, Diem's security forces were driving Viet Minh cadre into hiding and allowing landlords to reestablish their traditional control of village affairs. As would remain the case well into the 1960s, the local village and provincial committees and courts which ruled on land matters fell back under the control of landed interests.²¹ Although the GVN claimed to have issued over 650,000 contracts by 1965, enforcement of other aspects of the ordinance, particularly rent-reduction, was never seriously attempted by either the central GVN or its local representatives in the 1960s.²²

Diem's limited program of land redistribution, Ordinance no. 57, was likewise implemented in such a way that it protected the interests of all but the very largest of landlords. Under the ordinance, landlords could retain up to 115 hectares of land for their own use and were obliged to sell the rest to the Saigon regime, who would then sell it to tenants. Although Diem claimed that a lower retention limit would risk eliminating South Vietnam's 'middle class', 115 hectares was 22 times higher than the average size of land worked per household in the Delta and 50 times higher than the amount of land worked by the typical family in the Central Lowlands.²³ The reform hence targeted only the estates of the largest and most powerful landlords, particularly those who might pose a threat to Diem's fledgling regime. The lack of a detailed cadastral survey of the countryside meant the law had to rely on an 'honor system' in which landlords voluntarily self-reported the size of their holdings.²⁴ Unsurprisingly, many failed to do so. Given their control over village affairs, landlords were also able to retain their holdings by dividing them among family members or through other means. Even when the RVN did acquire land under Ordinance no. 57, local officials often merely stepped into the shoes of the expropriated landlord and continued to rent the land out rather than redistributing it.²⁵ By the end of 1967, only 285,000 hectares of land had been distributed to 130,000 families. These figures accounted for just one-eighth of the country's cultivatable land and one-tenth of the total families dependent on tenancy for their livelihoods.²⁶ Meanwhile, the government itself had become the largest landowner in South Vietnam.

U.S. post-war land policy and South Vietnam

At the time of Diem's presidency, American policy towards land reform was in flux. After supporting broad-based, villager-directed redistributions in a number of Asian countries which fell within its sphere of influence after World War II, the United States was shifting to a less radical stance. Although American officials did not directly oppose Diem's mild redistribution, they evinced little interest in seeing it thoroughly implemented. Instead, they embraced a vision of rural transformation rooted in the ideology of modernization, a vision which actively discouraged radical land redistribution. Beginning in the Diem period, this led them to sideline officials like Wolf Ladejinsky, an American agronomist who was an early proponent of an alternative approach rooted in the discipline of agricultural economics.

In the immediate postwar period, the United States encouraged land redistribution in a number of Asian countries, including those in which it was most influential. These programs had often been justified by drawing on the Jeffersonian tradition to illustrate the link between widespread landownership and democracy, as President Truman did in 1950. 'We know that the peoples of Asia have problems of social injustice to solve,' he declared. 'They want their farmers to own their land and to enjoy the fruits of their toil. That is one of our great national principles also. We believe in the family-size farm. That is the basis of our agriculture and has strongly influenced our form of government.'²⁷ Yet at the same time that they were explicable in terms of American history, more significant was the fact that the land redistributions in Japan, South Korea and Taiwan had also meshed easily with American geopolitical goals. In Japan, land reform destroyed the power and prestige of a landlord class who were believed to have been a key pillar of Japanese militarism.²⁸ In Taiwan the lands belonged to native Taiwanese whose power the American-allied government wanted to reduce, and in South Korea to Japanese imperialists.²⁹ In these circumstances, redistribution was politically and geopolitically cost-free, strengthening anti-Communist governments at the same time they reduced the power of groups opposed to them.

Yet as land reform rose up the international agenda in the 1950s, the United States faced much more difficult choices. In other countries, such as the Philippines and South Vietnam, anti-Communist regimes were deeply entwined with landed interests, and any assault on the latter threatened to undermine the former.³⁰ American officials were increasingly unwilling to push U.S. allies further than those allies themselves wished to go. In 1951, policy guidance issued to all American embassies made clear that the United States was not making the encouragement of land redistribution a central plank of its foreign policy. Instead, U.S. officials should focus on promoting policies which would improve the economic condition of farmers through tenancy reform and productivity increases – a set of policies which became known as 'integral reform' or 'agrarian reform'.³¹

At the same time, other American officials were also downplaying the importance of redistribution in American land policy. Speaking in 1951, Assistant Secretary of State Willard Thorp allowed that while 'many... think of land reform primarily as the redistribution of land', in fact this only 'may be part of a land-reform program, but certainly only one part – and not the most important one at that'.³² Another U.S. representative told the United Nations Economic and Social Council in the same year that 'the United States is not advocating any particular form of land tenure'.³³ Price Gittinger – who served with the International Cooperation Administration in South Vietnam – later wrote that 'a clear understanding existed that United States funds could in no instance be used to finance redistribution of land, even on a loan basis'.³⁴ Instead, U.S. officials in South Vietnam were instructed in the late 1950s to focus on 'maximizing economic development,' which they sought to do by encouraging a program of integral reform which would improve 'all economic and social institutions connected with farm life' – but not make any structural attack on concentrations of landownership and the political power which went with it.³⁵

This shift in policy meshed with the conclusions of the emerging discipline of classical development economics, which in turn was one of the intellectual wellsprings of modernization theory. Early development economists like W. Arthur Lewis and Ragnar Nurkse viewed the agricultural sector as vital to development insofar as it could release underemployed labor and capital into other sectors of the economy.³⁶ But they were strictly opposed to measures aiming to improve the welfare of farmers themselves. While Lewis, Nurkse and later Rostow all noted the potential for underdeveloped countries to increase their agricultural productivity, the purpose of them doing so was to generate extra wealth which could be siphoned off through increased taxes and rents and then invested in the modern sector. Because they lacked the mindset of a 'modern capitalist farmer', Lewis explained, farmers could not be trusted to use extra income responsibly. Rather than investing it, they would use it to 'pay off debt, or to buy more land' rather than 'improv[ing] their farms'.³⁷ They might also simply use it on increased consumption, especially if their diets were poor. This, Nurkse warned, was to be avoided. 'There is no question of asking the peasants who remain on the land to eat less,' he explained, 'only of preventing them from eating more.'³⁸ Prodigious wealthy farmers would also have less incentive to migrate to the factories, raising industrial wages and slowing the process of capital accumulation further.

When modernization theorists began to broaden their understanding of development to encompass cultural, social and political change, they nevertheless retained this image of the agricultural sector as transitional and merely instrumental in the larger process of modernization.³⁹ Lewis had recognized that suppressing the economic gains of farmers would also entail suppressing their political power, and this meshed neatly with the desire of modernization theorists to see the affairs of developing nations administered by modern, capitalist-minded citizens.⁴⁰ Land redistribution might be a key political demand of the great mass of tenant-cultivators, but it was not a priority at all in the process of modernization. To Rostow, the key problem was to ensure that 'surplus income derived from ownership of land' was 'transferred out of the hands of those who would sterilize it in prodigal living into the hands of the productive men.'⁴¹ Land redistribution would have the opposite effect, and it logically followed that the premature political empowerment of tenant farmers could derail the process of development before it achieved take-off. Improving the economic condition of farmers too precipitously could even choke off development by discouraging migration into the industrial sector. The logic of modernization suggested that creating owner-cultivators through land redistribution would not only fail to produce modern, urbanized citizens, but might even derail the larger process of development.

Even as both U.S. policy and its intellectual underpinnings militated against the encouragement of land reform, it was clear throughout the 1950s and '60s that South Vietnam was not on the developmental path theorized by the classical writers. Diem's successors kept his regressive land policy intact, but failed to make major strides in economic development. Diem himself placed emphasis on the role that rural productivity increases could play in fulfilling what his budget director referred to as the 'material, cultural and spiritual needs' of farmers – and hence their ability to resist Communism – as opposed to contributing to industrialization.⁴² The intensifying war of the 1960s and the distortions introduced into the South Vietnamese economy by American aid further undercut any drive towards industrialization. Nor was there much appetite in the GVN for the sort of consolidation of landholdings into more efficient and productive units which classical development theory recommended. One such suggestion from the U.S.-Vietnamese Joint Development Group was left 'collecting dust on the shelves of our Ministry of Planning', the GVN economic official Nguyen Duc Cuong later noted, not least because reducing the labor requirements of agriculture in this way would render farmers not only 'landless' but also 'jobless'.⁴³ American officials in the provinces also realized the inapplicability of mechanization to a country at war, given the risk of destruction to capital equipment.⁴⁴

Not every American with an interest in land issues in South Vietnam accepted this bind, with the farmer caught between a present situation in which he was denied fundamental reform and

a future industrialization which looked like it would never come. A small number of American officials and advisors spoke up in favour of redistribution. One of these Americans was Ladejinsky, who had been pivotal in the design of Japan's land reform program and became one of the most vocal proponents of redistributive land reform in South Vietnam. An anti-Communist who had fled the Soviet takeover of his native Ukraine, Ladejinsky believed that land redistribution was the only way to prevent Communism from coming to power across Asia. He arrived in 1955 attached to the U.S. mission, before transferring into service as Diem's personal advisor.

Although Ladejinsky has been called a 'transitional' figure representing a worldview which would be eclipsed by the rise of modernization theory, he might instead be seen as the representative of an alternative tradition which predated and then coexisted with the modernization synthesis.⁴⁵ This alternative discourse existed within the discipline of agricultural economics, a branch of economics which was becoming increasingly alienated from mainstream macroeconomics in the post-war period.⁴⁶ As was the case with modernization theory, the origins of agricultural economics were deeply entwined with the state. The discipline had emerged in the nineteenth century following the establishment of land-grant colleges and the Department of Agriculture during the Civil War. Decades of research into American agriculture by the land-grant colleges and the department's Office of Farm Management shaped the emerging discipline. By the time the Farm Economic Association was founded in 1919, agricultural economics was defined by a focus on the microeconomics of farm management. This implied sharply different priorities to mainstream economics, with its macroeconomic view and overriding interest in achieving national growth. An intimate knowledge of the great variation in agricultural practices and farming cultures across the United States also imparted to the discipline a tendency to be suspicious of generalizations about the agricultural sector. As the discipline turned its attention to the underdeveloped countries in the postwar period, this tradition of being alive to local variation and voices continued.⁴⁷ As well as publishing many empirical studies of the microeconomics of agriculture in the developing countries, the discipline also engaged directly with academics and officials from these countries. Economists from countries such as Lebanon and Mexico published in American journals, and a 1951 World Land Tenure Problems conference at the University of Wisconsin brought together representatives of 38 countries, the majority of which were underdeveloped.⁴⁸

Agricultural economics was not a homogenous discipline, and nor was it unaffected by the rise of modernization theory after World War II. But due to its broader conception of the role of agriculture in society, it was well-placed to question the assumptions and contradictions of modernization theory. This was particularly meaningful for the discipline's stance towards land reform, a topic which engendered significant debate in the journal *Land Economics* in the 1950s and '60s. By advocating land reform for its social and political benefits while also acknowledging that it may negatively impact productivity, agricultural economists challenged the ideology of modernization at one of its weakest points – the idea that 'all good things go together' in development.⁴⁹ Rooted as they were in the tradition of institutional economics, agricultural economists refused to view farms as purely economic units and instead insisted on studying their relationship to society more broadly. Whereas modernizers were only willing to allow farmers the political and social goods of modernity *after* they had left the farm and become modern citizens, agricultural economists saw value in advancing the economic, political and social condition of farmers themselves.⁵⁰ Agricultural economists saw an innate value in the agricultural way of life and wished to sustain it, in contrast to modernizers who wished to see workers leave farms in service of the goal of development. As George I. Christie explained in 1919 at one of the discipline's earliest conferences: 'The idea of it all is that we want to have a planned and organized farm of that character which is not only giving a man returns but is going to make country life a satisfying and happy one... such as will retain our people on the land.'⁵¹ This orientation led them to question the mainstream's acceptance of the idea that continued rural penury and rising income inequality were necessary byproducts of modernization.⁵² Rather than waiting for these

problems to be solved in the modernized future, many agricultural economists saw redistribution as a way of addressing them in the present.

Despite its rejection of the tenets of modernization theory, agricultural economics still shared some important characteristics with mainstream postwar development thought. The first was in seeing the United States as a model for the rest of the world. While modernization theorists held out America as the pinnacle of an industrial civilization which the underdeveloped countries wished to join, agricultural economists evangelized the universal applicability of the traditional American family farm. Tapping into a Jeffersonian tradition which lionized and romanticized the white freeholders who had dispossessed the indigenous inhabitants of North America, they saw family farms as incubators of national virtue, capitalist efficiency and democratic values – a model which might have its origins in the United States but could be reproduced on a wide scale throughout the world.⁵³ Despite engagement with non-Western agronomists and economists, this model was developed primarily with the American example, as opposed to the actual lived experience of farmers in the underdeveloped countries, in view. Although this meant that the agricultural economists could sometimes slip into reproducing Orientalist tropes about Asia's benighted masses, their interest in studying and improving the actual lived experience of rural farmers made them less prone to do so than the modernization theorists – especially in the case of Ladejinsky, who traveled Asia extensively. Yet despite the fact that their plans called for reform through villager engagement and participatory democracy, the initial impetus for reform would have to come from the top down. The members of the village committees who would actually carry out redistribution at the grassroots would still be subordinated to the state bureaucracy of a highly undemocratic regime.⁵⁴ For policy entrepreneurs like Ladejinsky, this meant an inevitable focus on persuading and manipulating autocratic rulers who did not share their broader goals of creating a vigorous villager democracy.

Ladejinsky's strong advocacy of redistribution came from squarely within the agricultural economics tradition. In the 1930s, Ladejinsky had worked for the Department of Agriculture's Foreign Agricultural Service, specializing in the study of Asian agriculture. His experiences had given Ladejinsky a deeply personal understanding of the significance of land redistribution for its beneficiaries. He explicitly rejected the focus on productivity increases which dominated the writings of most development economists, arguing that priority should be given to the 'social, political and psychological' elements of land reform. 'Narrow concentration on material output... runs the risk of not providing the people of the underdeveloped countries with the lasting values which in the long run determine the success of the program and of underdeveloped countries,' he wrote.⁵⁵ Ladejinsky considered it vital that village class structures be broken down in order to transfer political power to the mass of tenants, whose new social standing would give them confidence to participate in government. This not only ensured that the redistribution would not peter out or be bent to the interests of traditionally dominant groups, but could also prove transformative for the farmers themselves. 'As the tenants step up, the landlords step down. As the landlord loses much of his affluence, he loses much of his influence.' The result was the emancipation of farmers and their emergence as independent political actors who would wish to defend their newfound property and hence be reliable allies against Communism.⁵⁶ Recognizing that industrialization would take too long to make a meaningful difference to farmers today, and working from within a tradition which saw inherent value in rural life, Ladejinsky's focus was on rural income and power inequalities in the present.⁵⁷

Ladejinsky's ideas proved too much for both his fellow Americans and for Diem. Just before arriving in South Vietnam, Ladejinsky had been subject to a McCarthyite security scare in which his security clearance was revoked.⁵⁸ His forceful advocacy of redistribution – which he said 'will not take place in the spirit of the due process of law as understood and practiced in the Western world' – combined with his Jewish and Ukrainian background to create suspicions about his loyalties in the Department of Agriculture.⁵⁹ Postwar liberal economic thought drew a sharp distinction between democratic and totalitarian socio-economic systems, with the violent

redistribution of land in the Soviet Union serving as the exemplar of both the economic inefficiency and moral turpitude of totalitarian systems.⁶⁰ Although the endpoint of Soviet reform was collectivization rather than the sort of redistribution which Ladejinsky advocated, U.S. officials found it difficult to justify any coercive redistribution at all within this anti-Communist framework.⁶¹ Given that North Vietnam had itself carried out a land reform which the United States had criticized as murderous and unjust, proposing redistribution in South Vietnam became a risky venture. The political situation in South Vietnam in the late 1950s and early 1960s further limited Ladejinsky's ability to gain traction for his ideas. The worsening insurgency focused the attention of Diem and his American advisors increasingly on the security situation, culminating in his embrace of population relocation schemes. To the extent that Diem and advisors like Edward Lansdale did consider further village reform, it was through the lens of 'community development' schemes which did little to challenge existing structures of political and economic inequality.⁶² Although they had embraced Diem's limited land reform, most Americans in Saigon showed little willingness to get ahead of Saigon in pushing further measures. Ladejinsky ultimately left South Vietnam in a state of disillusionment in 1961.

Resistance to redistribution in the 1960s

Between 1961 and 1965, the U.S. divested itself of concern over land issues, providing no advice or support to the GVN on the topic.⁶³ The arrival of American combat troops from 1965 onwards spurred a new interest in pushing the GVN to reform its state apparatus at all levels, culminating in the creation of the Office of Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS) in 1967. Although American officials sometimes mentioned 'land reform' alongside dozens of other programs which they sought to pressure the GVN to enact, they continued to define this as meaning an implementation of Diem-era ordinances and a program of integral reform.⁶⁴ In September 1966, the Embassy announced that the focus of GVN land reform efforts should be to 'improve farmer living standards, strengthen institutional relationships between government and rural population, eradicate traditional land abuses and develop [the] base for increased productivity.' Expropriation and redistribution remained off the table; instead, farmer income should be increased *via* the provision of credit, agricultural inputs, and assistance with the growing of secondary crops and marketing.⁶⁵ This policy enabled the GVN to continue to extend its rule into areas newly-conquered from the NLF in alliance with the landlord class, leading to the scenes of 'negative land reform' with which this article opened.

As in Ladejinsky's day, this stance remained contested by advocates of redistribution operating within the tradition of agricultural economics. In 1966–7, opponents of both GVN and U.S. policy put forward several proposals urging the immediate implementation of redistributive land reform in South Vietnam. The first was advanced by the U.S. Agency for International Development's John Cooper and the Department of Agriculture's Lawrence Hewes.⁶⁶ Both officials had been involved with the Japanese land reform program and with subsequent U.S. overseas agricultural policy. The second proposal came from Roy Prosterman, an energetic assistant professor at the University of Washington's School of Law.⁶⁷ Both proposals focused on the potential of redistribution to act as a 'weapon' in the war and save U.S. resources and lives, but implicit within them were many of the arguments advanced by agricultural economists in their dissent from modernization.⁶⁸ Rather than promising productivity increases, redistribution would lead to a revolution in the villages which would see political and social power pass from landlords to their former tenants, with the latter then having a stake in defending the current order. By couching their arguments in this way, the authors followed in the tradition of earlier agricultural economists who had argued that redistribution could be an effective tool in advancing U.S. security interests.⁶⁹ In 1952, John T. Haggerty, the director of USDA's Office of Foreign Agricultural Relations had written that land tenure reform was 'inextricably tied up with the basic

question of our national security.' Even if economic development could 'conceivably double or treble the production of agriculture and of industry,' he continued, 'it will be of no avail ... unless we give the people who work the land a vital stake in democracy.'⁷⁰

Doing so meant – in contrast to the classical development economists and their modernization-oriented successors – trusting farmers to exercise their social and political power responsibly. In the South Vietnam of the late 1960s, this implied trusting them to become firm anti-Communists who would aid in the war against the Communists. Hewes believed that the Japanese land reform had 'sp[oken] well for the inherent capacity of Japanese farmers to govern themselves and to participate in national affairs', and the two land reform proposals advanced in late 1960s South Vietnam were based on the same premise.⁷¹ Cooper and Hewes placed particular emphasis on using land reform as a way to bolster the political power of villagers and to end 'landlord domination of tenants'.⁷² Both proposals argued that villagers themselves should play a key role in administering the redistribution process, ratifying their entry into the political life of the country.⁷³ By implementing this program in areas newly-occupied by government forces, the allies would both avoid the negative political repercussions of enacting negative land reform, but also create a satisfied, rural population aligned with the anti-Communist side. Prosterman, a skillful campaigner with a talent for vivid imagery, reinforced this point with a reference to recent American experience. But rather than invoking America's conquest of the commanding heights of modernity, he instead turned to the American urban riots of the late 1960s, which at that time were undermining liberal confidence in the ideology of modernization.⁷⁴ Prosterman argued that attempting to address the causes of unrest in the Vietnamese countryside without redistribution would be 'equivalent to "solving" the problems of the Negroes by stationing brigades of paratroopers in every urban slum. Either approach would be negative, costly, morally appalling, and, in the long run, probably unworkable.'⁷⁵ In both cases, Prosterman was calling for structural reform which would address the plight of a suffering population now – not deferring it until some modernized future while suppressing discontent in the meantime.

Both the Cooper/Hewes and the Prosterman proposals were rejected by the American authorities in Saigon. Although the chaos and bloodshed of wartime meant it made little sense to portray landlords as agents of development, the mainstream American position continued to follow the ideology of modernization in investing rightful political and economic agency in landlords. 'The key political and social figures at the village level on whom we are relying in this effort are usually small-holder resident landlords or their close relatives or associates,' one critic noted.⁷⁶ The GVN was also closely aligned with the class of larger, absentee landowners, who remained loyal in the hope of one day benefiting from negative land reform. Americans believed that this class remained firmly opposed to redistribution. One American official recalled attending a provincial council which was dominated by wealthy landowners who still clung the idea of reclaiming estates which they had not visited in over 20 years. Even though 'their holdings were gone' because the NLF had long ago redistributed them, they reacted angrily to the idea of the Saigon government ratifying this reality through land reform. 'If those farmers want land, let them go out into the U Minh forest and the swamps of Ha Tien,' they told the official. 'You Americans can help them dig ditches and canals.'⁷⁷ Such arguments – along with their contempt for tenants – proved persuasive. Americans back in Saigon worried that alienating elites like this would fatally undermine the GVN, and that the Saigon government might not even survive an attempt to do so.⁷⁸

Sceptics of land reform also inverted arguments from within the tradition of agricultural economics by arguing that stability required keeping political power in the hands of landlords, rather than passing it to their tenants through redistribution. The Political Section of the U.S. Embassy commissioned a study by the RAND Corporation which purported to show that inequality in land tenure was positively correlated with government control, hence suggesting that redistribution would undermine the traditional elite and lead to gains for the Communists. The 'greater power of landlords and relative docility of peasants' was hence a positive thing for the

GVN, and the transfer of economic and political power to tenants by redistribution could only undermine it.⁷⁹ Other officials denied that rural tenants even had grievances concerning land ownership. According to Jim Rosenthal, a State Department officer with an interest in the land question, any concern farmers had with 'social justice' had been ground down by years of war, and they now yearned for 'physical security (above all), order, and immediate economic development.'⁸⁰ Martin Herz, the head of the Embassy's Political Section, told Prosterman that 'the back of the land-owning class was broken in the '50's and that land reform is not a burning issue.' He also repeated the view that the 'paramount consideration' for farmers was security rather than tenancy.⁸¹ Many of the comments reflected the ideology of modernization's focus on the interests of landlords, with some officials arguing that tenants should be made to pay for their land in any redistribution, rather than the cost being covered by U.S. aid.⁸²

South Vietnam implements redistribution

While U.S. officials were laying out this litany of reasons to oppose redistribution, Thieu was moving the GVN towards it. Throughout 1968, Thieu sidelined his main rival, Vice-President Nguyen Cao Ky, consolidated his own control over the Saigon regime, and moved to take advantage of the Communist movement's military weakness in the aftermath of the Tet Offensive. Thieu's post-Tet approach to development was inextricably bound up with the GVN's need to mobilize resources and village manpower to continue the battle against the Communist movement even as the U.S. withdrew from South Vietnam. Thieu aimed to construct a new apparatus of rural power based around reformed village institutions which would allow the GVN to levy villagers into service in local militias. He was aided in this goal by the fact that, unlike Diem, he was willing to accept vast quantities of American aid and the presence of thousands of American advisors throughout the countryside. After 1968, the GVN moved away from the forcible relocation of the population which had been common in earlier phases of the war, including under Thieu, and began instead to encourage urban refugees to repopulate the countryside.⁸³

In the immediate aftermath of the Tet Offensive, Thieu was keen to capitalize on the military weakness of the Communist movement. Even with the vast military and developmental resources at the disposal of the GVN and its American allies, Thieu recognized that the willing participation of the rural population would greatly ease the GVN's consolidation of power over rural areas. Although he still regarded villagers primarily as a resource to be mobilized rather than a constituency to be listened to, Thieu believed that socio-economic and political reforms could persuade villagers to align themselves with the GVN. As South Vietnam's 1970 Pacification and Development plan explained, the key aim of development activities was to 'concentrate on getting the people actively involved in the national struggle' and to 'emphasize political mobilization'.⁸⁴ Like Cooper, Hewes and Prosterman, Thieu favored decentralization and a revitalization of the village level of government as a means of giving villagers a stake in the defense, development and governance of their local communities.⁸⁵ While Thieu followed Diem in not considering Western democracy appropriate for South Vietnam, he also recognized the importance of delivering concrete reforms stemming from 'the people's interests'.⁸⁶ Land reform could form a key part of this agenda - especially as the earlier depopulation of the countryside had left vast tracts of unused and underutilized land available for redistribution. Throughout 1968 and 1969, Thieu moved to place a temporary freeze on the system of negative land reform by imposing a moratorium on evictions and rents.⁸⁷ He also set the American-trained economist Cao Van Than to work on a comprehensive program of redistribution. Brushing aside American squeamishness at the idea of redistribution, Than recognized that the inherited system of landholding had to be abolished in order to address rural inequities.⁸⁸

The program which Than eventually designed and Thieu endorsed abolished tenancy as a legal category in South Vietnam. Dubbed the Land-to-the-Tiller program, it aimed, according to Than, to 'create a nation of farm owners.' Tenants would receive title to the land they tilled at no cost to themselves, and the retention limit of 15 hectares, all of which the landlord had to personally cultivate, provided much less room for abuse than the Diem-era reforms. Recipients could receive up to a maximum of three hectares in the Delta and one hectare in the Central Lowlands. Current tillers had first priority on the land, with the excess to be distributed to landless individuals. Landlords were to be compensated for the loss of their land through a mixture of cash and bonds which would be financed mostly by the United States.⁸⁹

Although it stemmed from his desire to consolidate rural support for the regime, the program which Than designed was much more compatible with the prescriptions of agricultural economists than the proponents of modernization. It recognized the importance of addressing the grievances of tenants in their current situation, rather than putting off the realization of their desires into a far-off, modernized future. Along with many American agricultural economists, Than viewed farms as microeconomic units embedded in a particular social, economic and political context which it was important to acknowledge while crafting reforms. While he stressed the importance of an agenda of integral reform, like most agricultural economists he believed that it should come only *after* redistribution had taken place. Providing farmers with the credit, production inputs and marketing opportunities which they needed to increase productivity was important, but only after they were incentivized to increase production through the knowledge that they would have the economic and political power to reap the rewards. The goal of increased productivity was to make 'the people prosperous and the country strong', not to be siphoned off in pursuit of industrialization. Farmers would be much more likely to invest in increasing production – such as by the introduction of new 'miracle rice' crop strains – on land which they owned rather than rented.⁹⁰

The implementation of LTTT was made possible by changes to the Vietnamese rural scene which most Americans, blinkered by the landlord-centric worldview of modernization, had missed. By the late 1960s, decades of war and revolution had overturned rural life. Landlord power had been dramatically weakened not only by revolutionary coercion, but also by severe rural depopulation which had strengthened the bargaining position of tenants. A survey of 697 village officials and hamlet chiefs in five Delta provinces in late 1969 and early 1970 found that only 10% were landowners, while 29% were tenants and 18% were owner-operators. Over a third were neither tenants nor landowners.⁹¹ The weakness of landlords at the village level was confirmed by Communist sources, one of whom remarked of the Delta in 1970 that 'the majority of the landlord class has fled, and the cruel and wicked landlords and bullies have had their land confiscated. Here only a few small landlords remain, and they are economically dependent and not a significant factor.'⁹² At the same time, the RVN had constructed a new apparatus of rural power at the province and district level which relied less on local landed interests and more on politically-connected army officers. Particularly in the aftermath of the Tet Offensive, this apparatus acted to mobilize manpower and resources from the villages in service of the RVN, and often undermined the authority of elected village councils. Political power had passed not from landlords to tenants as the agricultural economists had hoped, but rather from landlords to Thieu's state apparatus, creating the conditions in which land redistribution became possible so long as the GVN willed it. But this also underlined the limitations of achieving democratic rejuvenation at the grassroots by working through autocratic regimes, a fact which was driven home when Thieu rolled back village self-governance even further during the 1972 Easter Offensive.⁹³

Nor did the large class of absentee landlords in the cities, who did still have some influence within the GVN, stand in the way of LTTT. Notwithstanding individuals like those who had told American officials to go dig ditches for the landless themselves, surveys in the Delta in 1967 revealed that three-quarters of absentee landlords would not oppose redistribution if adequate compensation was paid.⁹⁴ Many were happy to receive cash and bonds in exchange for assets

which they had largely given up hope of ever reaping a profit from again. As they told investigators in Chuong Thien province, 'a rather big sum of money... could be used for business.'⁹⁵ Landlords who had already been forced out of their village and into the urban economy could benefit more from liquid capital than from land which the revolution had kept them away from for years, if not decades. While the South Vietnamese economy of the 1970s provided few opportunities for these former landlords to act as agents of modernization and development, the compensation did at least buy their acquiescence in the program.

Conclusion

By the time Thieu's land reform was implemented, the ideology of modernization was coming under sustained attack in the United States. Critics took particular aim at the idea that 'all good things go together', as exemplified by Samuel Huntington's claim that there existed an autonomous sphere of 'political development' which could degrade even as economic development proceeded.⁹⁶ Yet the debate over land reform demonstrates how there was a tension on this point right from the beginning of the period in which modernization dominated U.S. development discourse. By arguing against the immediate pursuit of rural equality through measures such as land redistribution, the classical development economists and their successors had inscribed both a hierarchy of interests and particular temporal sequence into the process of modernization. The accumulators of capital would receive all good things together, but everyone else would have to wait. Even when the process of modernization was interrupted by war, as it was in South Vietnam, the hierarchy privileging the interests of landlords over those of tenants remained. American officials believed that challenging this hierarchy could mean the collapse of South Vietnam's governing institutions – in Huntington's terms, a sharp degradation of the country's level of political development. Even the officials defending South Vietnam's rural status quo hence implicitly questioned whether the good of equality was compatible with the good of stability, a question to which the ideology of modernization had no clear answer.

Even as modernization's star waned, those who viewed the question of land reform from within the tradition of agricultural economics emerged from the 1960s more confident than ever before. In June 1970, AID convened 300 land reform experts and interested individuals to survey a decade of research into the topic. The task of summarizing the conference's findings fell to Erven J. Long, director of AID's Office of Research and University Relations. In the 1950s, Long had worked on land reform in India, where he had become convinced that the widespread assumption held by development economists and even many agricultural economists that redistribution would often reduce agricultural productivity was wrong.⁹⁷ Now, he announced, consensus had been reached on the reverse position – 'the social and political goals of wider distribution of opportunity, power, and employment among farm people is not in conflict with increased agricultural productivity and efficiency.' Contrary to the assumptions of a decade of U.S. government policy, 'countries can eat their cake and have it too.'⁹⁸

This view gained more credibility in U.S. foreign policy circles going forward as the LTTT program came to be seen as a success for achieving rapid and widespread redistribution, despite the fact the United States ultimately lost the war. Although this loss did a great deal to undermine the legitimacy of the ideology of modernization, in the field of land reform LTTT both provided a positive model and helped propel individuals who viewed the problem from the perspective of agricultural economics into positions of influence. When El Salvador's junta decided to enact land reform in the early 1980s, U.S. officials called in Prosterman to help apply the lessons he had learned in Saigon – so much so that he reportedly tired Salvadoran elites by constantly comparing their country to South Vietnam.⁹⁹ The agricultural economists' vision of land reform – rooted in a desire to increase farmer welfare and political satisfaction, not to use productivity increases to accumulate capital for development – hence emerged from the conflict

in much better shape than its rival. This tradition had existed before the ideology of modernization, contended with it during its heyday, and now emerged more influential than it on the question of land reform. Recognizing its significance hence allows us not only to better understand the development debates of the 1950s and '60s, but also the subsequent history of American involvement in overseas land reform initiatives.

Notes

1. 'Debrief of a USAID Agriculturalist', Vietnam, 1967 – 8, folder "USAID Agriculturalist", box 100, Allen E. Goodman Papers, Hoover Institution Archives, Palo Alto, CA (hereafter HIA), 59–60. For a corroborating source, see Robert L. Samson, *The Economics of Insurgency in the Mekong Delta of Vietnam* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1970), 67–8.
2. Simon Toner, 'Imagining Taiwan: The Nixon Administration, the Developmental States, and South Vietnam's Search for Economic Viability', *Diplomatic History* 41, no. 4 (September 2017), 775.
3. On Diem, see Edward Miller, *Misalliance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and the Fate of South Vietnam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013); on Thieu, Andrew J. Gawthorpe, *To Build as well as Destroy: American Nation-Building in South Vietnam* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018).
4. On the cost, see Roy Prosterman, 'Briefing paper on land reform in Vietnam', 25 September 1969, folder 'Vietnam: land reform thru March 1970', box 75, Vietnam Subject Files [hereafter VSF], Richard Nixon Presidential Library, Yorba Linda, CA [hereafter RNL], 5.
5. The argument in this paper is hence different to that made by David A. Conrad, who argues that U.S. officials were forceful advocates of land reform. From the perspective of this paper, such an argument focuses too much on the rare forceful advocates of redistributive land reform among Americans in South Vietnam, while neglecting the much broader mass of American officials. The same can be said of Ethan B. Kapstein's conclusion that Thieu's Land-to-the-Tiller law of 1970 had the 'strong support' of the United States. See David A. Conrad, 'Before is it Too Late': Land Reform in South Vietnam, 1956 – 1968', *Journal of American-East Asian Relations* 21, no. 1 (March 2014), 34–57; Ethan B. Kapstein, *Seeds of Stability: Land Reform and US Foreign Policy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 152.
6. On the influence of modernization generally, see Michael Latham, *Modernization as Ideology: American Social Science and "Nation-Building" in the Kennedy Era* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 151–208; David Ekbladh, *The Great American Mission: Modernization and the Construction of an American World Order* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), 153–89.
7. Following their source material, historians of the ideology of modernization have likewise had little to say about land reform, with the standard monographs containing only scattered references. See Nils Gilman, *Mandarins of the Future: Modernization Theory in Cold War America* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 2007), 1, 180; Michael Latham, *Modernization as Ideology*, 99, 100, 161; Michael Latham, *The Right Kind of Revolution: Modernization, Development, and U.S. Foreign Policy from the Cold War to the Present* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011), 42, 79, 117–8, 129, 136, 147–9; Ekbladh, *The Great American Mission*, 206, 216; Nick Cullather, *The Hungry World: America's Cold War Battle Against Poverty in Asia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), esp. 94–106.
8. W.W. Rostow, *The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960), 21–4, 47, 64.
9. On this point, see Cullather, *Feeding the World*, 76; Latham, *Modernization as Ideology*, 8; Daniel Immerwahr, *Thinking Small: The United States and the Lure of Community Development* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 2.
10. Charles Robequain, *The Economic Development of French Indo-China*, trans. Isabel A. Ward (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1944), 182–6, 220; Ngo Vinh Long, *Before the Revolution: The Vietnamese Peasants under the French* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973), 11–12.
11. 'Land Tenure Situation in the Republic of Vietnam', 25 February 1965, folder 'Land reform [6 of 7]', Box 12, National Security File: Komer-Leonhart File, Lyndon Johnson Presidential Library, Austin, TX (hereafter LBJL), 2; Roy L. Prosterman, 'Land Reform in Vietnam', 24–5 April 1970, Box 6, Folder 10, John Donnell Collection, The Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University (hereafter TTU), 4; Wolf Ladejinsky, 'Field Trip in Southern Vietnam' in Louis J. Walinsky (ed), *Agrarian Reform as Unfinished Business: The Selected Papers of Wolf Ladejinsky* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977) (hereafter SPWL), 230 –1.
12. 'Land Tenure Situation in the Republic of Vietnam', February 25, 1965, LBJL; Stuart Callison, *Land-to-the-Tiller in the Mekong Delta* (Lanham, MA: University Press of America, 1983), 57; Ladejinsky, 'Field Trip Observations in Central Vietnam' in SPWL, 220, 224.
13. Ladejinsky, 'South Vietnam Revisited' in SPWL, 262.

14. As famously analyzed in James C. Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1976).
15. Pierre Gourou, *Les Payens du Delta Tonkinois* (Paris: Walter de Gruyter, 1936), 282. Ngo Vinh Long disputes the data behind this calculation and claims that rents were as high as 70%. Gerald Hickey's interlocutors, however, also reported rents of 40% prior to World War II. See Long, *Before the Revolution*, 48 and Gerald Hickey, *Village in Vietnam* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1964), 46.
16. Prosterman, 'Land Reform in Vietnam', 24–5 April, 1970, TTU, 4.
17. Jeffrey Race, *War Comes to Long An* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2010), 7–8.
18. The general discussion of Diem's vision of development and his efforts to consolidate his regime draws on Geoffrey Stewart, *Vietnam's Lost Revolution: Ngo Dinh Diem's Failure to Build an Independent Nation, 1955 - 1963* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Miller, *Misalliance*; Philip E. Catton, *Diem's Final Failure: Prelude to America's War in Vietnam* (Lawrence, KA: University Press of Kansas, 2002).
19. GVN Directorate of Land Reform, "Questions and Answers on Land-Renting Policy", 1966, Box 3, Folder 6, Douglas Pike Collection, TTU; 'Land Tenure Situation in the Republic of Vietnam', 25 February 1965, LBJL, 2–4.
20. Memo, Haney to Mode, October 6, 1955, Box 660, Folder 24, Michigan State University Archives & Historical Collections (hereafter MSUA).
21. 'Field Trip in Southern Vietnam' in *SPWL*, p. 232; Race, *War Comes to Long An*, 56–7; 'Debrief of a USAID Agriculturalist', 1967–8, HIA, 53, 65–7.
22. 'Land Tenure Situation in the Republic of Vietnam', 25 February 1965, LBJL, 3; John Montgomery, 'Land Reform and Political Development', August 1967, folder 'Land reform [1 of 7]', Box 12, Komer-Leonhart File, LBL, 6–7; 'Debrief of a Provincial Agricultural Advisor', Quang Nam, 1966–7, folder 'Provincial Agricultural Advisor: USAID, Quang Nam Province, Vietnam', Box 99, Goodman Papers, HIA, 17; Heaver to Wood, 3 August 1962, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961–1963, Vietnam*, Vol. II, eds. John P. Glennon, David M. Baehler, Charles S. Sampson (Washington DC: Government Printing Office, 1990), 572.
23. Diem quote in William Colby oral history, 2 June 1981, Folder 13, Box 5, William Colby Collection, TTU, I-22; 'Land Tenure Situation in the Republic of Vietnam', 25 February 1965, LBJL, 5.
24. *Land Reform in Vietnam, Twentieth Report by the Committee on Government Operations* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1968), 6.
25. 'Debrief of a USAID Agriculturalist', 1967–8, HIA, 59; *Land Reform in Vietnam*, 8.
26. Roy L. Prosterman and Jeffrey M. Riedinger, *Land Reform and Democratic Development* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1987), 126.
27. 'Address in San Francisco at the War Memorial Opera House', 17 October 1950, *Public Papers of the Presidents: Harry Truman* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1965), VI: 678.
28. Lubin, 'Land Reform Problem Challenges Free World', 470; R. P. Dore, *Land Reform in Japan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959), 115–25; William M. Gilmartin and W. I. Ladejinsky, 'The Promise of Agrarian Reform in Japan', *Foreign Affairs* 26, no. 1 (January 1948), 314.
29. Denny Roy, *Taiwan: A Political History* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003), 99–101; Inhan Kim, 'Land Reform in South Korea under the U.S. Military Occupation, 1945 – 1948', *Journal of Cold War Studies* 18, no. 2 (April 2016), pp. 97–129.
30. On U.S. land policy in the Philippines, see Kapstein, *Seeds of Stability*, 133–63.
31. 'Policy Statement Prepared by the Inter-Agency Committee on Land Reform Problems', 9 March 1951, *FRUS*, 1951, National Security Affairs; Foreign Economic Policy, vol. I, eds. Neal H. Peterson, Harriet D. Schwar, et. al. (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1979), 1666–7. On integral/agrarian reform, see Doreen Warriner, *Land Reform in Principle and Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), xii–xx, 59–63; Edmundo Flores, 'Issues of Land Reform', *Journal of Political Economy* 78, no. 4 (July – August 1970), 890–905.
32. Willard Thorp, 'Address made before the Conference on World Land Tenure Problems', 9 October 1951 in *Department of State Bulletin* (hereafter *DSB*) 25, no. 643 (October 1951), 662.
33. Lubin, 'Land Reform Problem Challenges Free World', 471.
34. Price Gittinger, 'United States Policy Towards Agrarian Reform in Underdeveloped Nations', *Land Economics* 37, no. 3 (1961), 197.
35. Telegram, Reinhardt to State, 21 July 1956, *FRUS*, Vietnam, 1955 – 1957, Vol 1, 722; Telegram, Secretary of State to Embassy, 25 August 1955, *ibid.*, 525.
36. Arthur Lewis, 'Economic Development with Unlimited Supplies of Labour', *Manchester School* 22, no. 2 (1954), 139–91; Ragnar Nurkse, 'Growth in Underdeveloped Countries: Some International Aspects of the Problem of Economic Development' *American Economic Review* 42, no. 2 (1952), 571–83; Ragnar Nurkse, *Problems of Capital Formation in Underdeveloped Countries* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953).
37. Lewis, 'Economic Development', 169.
38. Nurkse, *Capital Formation*, 38.
39. Cullather, *The Hungry World*, 5–6.
40. Lewis, 'Economic Development', 175.
41. Rostow, *Stages of Growth*, 24.

42. Vu Van Thai, 'Our Concept of Development', 23 October 1959, Folder 12, Box 6, Douglas Pike Collection, TTU, 1
43. Nguyen Duc Cuong, 'Coping With Changes and War, Building a Foundation for Growth' in *The Republic of Vietnam, 1955 – 1975: Vietnamese Perspectives on Nation-Building*, eds. Tuong Vu and Sean Fear (Ithaca, NY, 2020), 22.
44. "Debrief of a USAID agriculturalist", 1967–8, HIA, 55–6.
45. For Ladejinsky as 'transitional', see Cullather, *Hungry World*, 95.
46. On the history of agricultural economics in the United States, see Anne Dewees Taylor and Henry Charles Taylor, *The Story of Agricultural Economics in the United States: Men, Services, Ideas, 1840–1932* (Ames, IO: Iowa State College Press, 1952); Deborah Kay Fitzgerald, *Every Farm a Factory: The Industrial Ideal in American Agriculture* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), 33–46; C. Ford Runge, 'Agricultural Economics: A Brief Intellectual History' (2006), Staff Papers 13649, University of Minnesota, Department of Applied Economics.
47. See especially the critique of mainstream macroeconomics in Paul E. Koefod, 'Some General Problems of Economic Development', *Land Economics* 42, no. 3 (1966), 247–59.
48. Akram El-Ricaby, Jose E. Velmonte, Albert Costa, M. L. Dantwala and Claudio Romero, 'First World Land Tenure Conference and Report of Its Steering Committee', *Land Economics* vol. 28, 1 (1952), 75–81; Yusuf A. Sayigh, 'The Place of Agriculture in Economic Development', *Land Economics* vol. 35, no 4 (1959), 297–305; Edmundo Flores, 'The Economics of Land Reform', *International Labor Review* vol. 92, no 1 (1965), 21–34.
49. Jon R. Motheral, 'The Family Farm and the Three Traditions', *Journal of Farm Economics* 33, no. 4 (1951), 521–2; Raleigh Barlowe, 'Land Reform and Economic Development', *Journal of Farm Economics* 35, no. 2 (1953), 175–6, 180.
50. Kenneth H. Parsons, 'Economic Citizenship on the Land', *Land Economics* 30, no. 1 (1954), 21–31; Sayigh, 'The Place of Agriculture in Economic Development'.
51. Quoted in Fitzgerald, *Every Farm a Factory*, 45.
52. On inequality, see Simon Kuznets, 'Economic Growth and Income Inequality', *American Economic Review* 45, no. 1 (1955), 1–28.
53. Motheral, 'The Family Farm and the Three Traditions'.
54. Letter, Ladejinsky to Cong, 24 November 1957, Box 660, Folder 29, MSUA.
55. Ladejinsky, 'Advancing Human Welfare' in *SPWL*, 206.
56. Ladejinsky, 'Land Reform' in *SPWL*, pp. 363–5. See also Ladejinsky, 'Land Commissions in Japan' in *SPWL*, 109–13.
57. Ladejinsky, 'The Industrialization Bias in Economic Development' in *SPWL*, 352–4.
58. Alfred McCoy, 'Land Reform as Counter-Revolution: U.S. Foreign Policy and the Tenant Farmers of Asia' *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* 3, no. 1 (1971), 32–33; Prosterman and Riedinger, *Land Reform and Democratic Development*, 121–2.
59. Ladejinsky, 'Report of the Ford Foundation Conference on Land Tenure' in *SPWL*, 199.
60. Daniel Bell, *The End of Ideology: On the Exhaustion of Political Ideas in the Fifties* (New York, 1961), pp. 397–8; Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Vital Center: The Politics of Freedom* (Boston, 1949), ch. X.
61. For negative characterizations of Soviet-style land reform, see Thorp, 'Address', 661; Isador Lubin, 'Two Patterns for Land Reform: The Free World vs. the Soviet', *DSB* 27, no. 704 (December 1952), 990–5.
62. On American advocacy of community development in South Vietnam, see Immerwahr, *Thinking Small*, 125–9.
63. *Land Reform in Vietnam*, 3–5, 11–12.
64. For instance, CORDS' initial attempt to reform GVN governance – dubbed 'Project Takeoff' in homage to Rostow – listed "land reform" alongside seven other "priorities". See Gawthorpe, *To Build as well as Destroy*, 83.
65. Telegram, Lodge to Secretary of State, 6 September 1966, Folder 'Land reform 1D (2)', Box 62, CF, LBJL, 1 (quote).
66. 'Land Reform in Vietnam', attachment to memo, Freeman to Humphrey et. al., 10 May 1966, Folder 'Back channel cables between Porter and Komer, May–July 1966', Box 4, NSF: Files of Robert Komer (hereafter Komer Files), LBJL; Memo, Hewes to Freeman, 26 April 1966, Folder 'Land reform [6 of 7]', Box 12, Komer-Leonhart File, LBJL.
67. Roy L. Prosterman, untitled, 7 October 1969, Folder 'Vietnam: land reform thru March 1970', Box 75, National Security Council Files: Vietnam Subject Files VSF, RNL; Prosterman, 'Land Reform in South Vietnam: A Proposal for Turning the Tables on the Viet Cong', *Cornell Law Review* 53, no. 1 (November 1967), 26–44.
68. Memo, Hewes to Freeman, 26 April 1966, 1; Prosterman, untitled, 7 October 1969, 1.
69. Motheral, 'Family Farm and the Three Traditions', 514.
70. John T. Haggerty, 'The United States Farmer and the World Around Him', *Journal of Farm Economics* 34, 5 (1952), 602, 603.
71. Laurence I. Hewes, 'On the Current Readjustment of Land Tenure in Japan', *Land Economics* 25, 3 (1949), 259.
72. Telegram, Porter to Rusk, 6 May 1966, Folder 'Vietnam cables (C) 1 of 2', Box 31, CF, LBJL, 1.
73. *Ibid.*, 2 – 3; Prosterman, 'Land Reform in South Vietnam', 40.

74. Latham, *Right Kind of Revolution*, 157–85.
75. Prosterman, 'Land Reform in South Vietnam', 26–7.
76. Tab III, 'Questions', attached to memo, Freeman to Humphrey et. al., 10 May 1966, Folder 'Back channel cables between Porter and Komer, May – July 1966', Box 4, Komer Files, LBJL, p.3
77. 'Debrief of a USAID agriculturalist', 1967–8, HIA, 54, 66.
78. Tab II, 'Land reform in Vietnam', attached to Freeman to Humphrey et al., 10 May 1966 p. 3.
79. Edward J. Mitchell, *Land Tenure and Rebellion: A Statistical Analysis of Factors Affecting Government Control in South Vietnam* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1967), p. 33. The report was later published as Mitchell, 'Inequality and Insurgency: A Statistical Study of South Vietnam', *World Politics* 20, no. 3 (April 1968), 421–38.
80. Letter, Rosenthal to Komer, 14 February 1967, Folder 'Orville Freeman', Box 4, Komer Files, LBJL, 5.
81. Prosterman to Krogh, 2 September 1969, 6.
82. Prosterman to Krogh, 29 August 1969, folder 'Vietnam: land reform thru March 1970', box 75, VSF, RNL, 1; Attachment to letter, Prosterman to Krogh, 24 September 1969, idem.
83. Gawthorpe, *To Build as well as Destroy*, ch. 6.
84. *Plan for Pacification and Development*, 1970, in folder "P + D plan w/ errata added / Maj E. J. Crampton," box 27, CORDS History Files, RG 472, NARA II, 1, 3.
85. Ibid.; *Community Defense and Local Development Plan*, 1971, folder "CD + LD plan / 1971," box 37, CORDS History Files, RG 472, NARA II
86. *Plan for Pacification and Development*, 1970, 3.
87. Cao Van Than, *Agrarian Reform in Viet Nam* (Saigon, 1969), 5
88. Cao Van Than, 'Land Reform and Agricultural Development' in *Vietnamese Perspectives on Nation-Building*, 48 – 9.
89. Than, *Agrarian Reform in Viet Nam*, 7.
90. *Community Defense and Development Plan*, 1971, III-A-1 (quote); Than, 'Land Reform and Agricultural Development', 48.
91. Pacification Task Force, 'Land Ownership and Tenancy Among Village and Hamlet Officials in the Delta', March 1970, Folder 'Study / Land ownership and tenancy / Delta', Box 23, PPP, CORDS History Files, NARA II.
92. Quoted in Elliott, *Vietnamese War*, I, 451.
93. Gawthorpe, *To Build as well as Destroy*, ch. 7.
94. Attachment to memo, Rostow to Johnson, 18 October 1968, Folder 'Vietnam 1D (1). Land reform', Box 61, CF, LBJL, 2; Fallon to CORDS/PSA, April 2, 1969, Folder 43, Box 1237, MSUA, 2.
95. National Development Research Report: Chuong Thien, January 23, 1973, Folder 'Chuong Thien', Box 92, PPP, CORDS History Files, NARA II, 10.
96. Samuel Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1968).
97. Erven J. Long, 'The Economic Basis of Land Reform in Underdeveloped Countries', *Land Economics* 37, no. 2 (1961), 115–20.
98. Erven J. Long, 'A.I.D. Spring Review of Land Reform', *Land Economics* 47, no. 4 (1971), 424.
99. Roy L. Prosterman, Jeffrey M. Riedinger, Mary N. Temple, 'Land Reform and the El Salvador Crisis', *International Security* 6, no. 1 (1981), 53–74; Benjamin C. Schwarz, *American Counterinsurgency Doctrine and El Salvador: The Frustrations of Reform and Illusions of Nation Building* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1991), 44–9.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on contributor

Andrew J. Gawthorpe is a University Lecturer in History at the Institute for History, Leiden University, The Netherlands. He is the author of *To Build as well as Destroy: The American Experience of Nation-Building in South Vietnam* (Cornell University Press, 2018).