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Wed 15 November 2017
13:00 – 14:00, Lecture Theatre C



Part of the Centre for Imperial and Post-Colonial Studies
Seminar Series:

“The Ablest Man in South East Asia”: Nguyen Huu Tri, Ngo
Dinh Diem and the U. S. Mission in Indochina, 1950-54

This paper focuses on one of the most hotly debated topics of early U.S. involvement in Vietnam: Ngo Dinh Diem’s appointment as the prime minister of the State of Vietnam in mid-1954. While some scholars stress the decisive intervention of American actors in the chief of state Bao Dai’s decision to appoint Diem, others place greater importance on the changing political situation in Vietnam and the efforts of Diem’s brother Ngo Dinh Nhu to build up domestic support for his sibling. However, in their effort to establish the extent of American involvement in Diem’s rise to power, historians have ignored the attempts of U.S. officials in Vietnam to promote an alternative candidate in this period: Nguyen Huu Tri. Killed in mysterious circumstances in the early stages of Diem’s prime ministership, Tri was a leading figure in the Dai Viet, a Vietnamese nationalist group with considerable influence in the north of the country, and served as governor of northern Vietnam through much of the early 1950s. Like Diem, Tri’s anti-colonial outlook, fierce anti-communism and openness to American support impressed U.S. officials in Indochina, many of whom described him as the most impressive political figure in Southeast Asia. When a change of government appeared in the offing in the late spring of 1954, U.S. diplomats pressed their government to use U.S. influence to install Tri rather than Diem as prime minister. Utilising British and American archival material, the paper explores the reasons behind U.S. interest in Tri and the efforts of the U.S. mission to promote his candidacy between 1950 and 1954. In doing so, it reveals the limits to the U.S. mission’s ability to shape Vietnamese domestic politics and contends that Diem’s ascension owed far more to the efforts of his brothers in Vietnam than to that of U.S. sponsorship.

All Welcome