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## Friend or Foe: Failings of the United States' Modernization Theory in Vietnam

By Emily Vega

Before the United States government employed full-scale military intervention in Vietnam in the 1960s, policy makers sought counterinsurgent means of preventing a revolution and the anticipated communist takeover of the southern region. These strategies were aimed at stabilizing South Vietnam while crafting it into a new nation-state that would be an ally to the United States. Political and economic theorists during the Eisenhower (1953-1961) and Kennedy (1961-1963) administrations formulated that the key to stopping the revolution was to cultivate the modernization of Vietnam. What “modernization” meant will be further examined in the following pages. In collaboration with Ngo Dinh Diem’s South Vietnam regime, the United States implemented a number of strategic programs and poured monetary aid into South Vietnam in an aggressive effort to stabilize the region, pacify and gain the loyalty of local populations, and ultimately prevent communist influence from affecting the people living in the countryside. Efforts made by the United States ultimately proved futile as the National Liberation Front, known to the United States as the Viet Cong, gained control over South Vietnam.<sup>1</sup> Under inadequate theoretical assumptions about development, contradictions in the translation of American ideals into real-world policy, and a lack of cultural understanding, the United States and its modernization strategy clashed with the Vietnamese struggle for self-determination as it reproduced former colonial structures, political conflict and resistance, and South Vietnam’s unwanted dependency on resources from the United States.

### Contextualizing the Problem: Modernization Theory Defined

Although “modernization theory” can be traced back as far as the eighteenth century’s Enlightenment period, along with notions of progress and humanism, ideas on modernization eventually combined in the mid-twentieth century as a compendium for the United States on which leaders based strategies to combat communist expansion on the world stage. One of the best-known enthusiasts of the concept was Walt Whitman Rostow (1916-2003), an economist and political theorist from Yale University who advised several United States presidents on national security from the 1950s through the 1970s and helped shape American foreign diplomacy for Southeast Asia.<sup>2</sup> In his work *The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto*, Rostow draws from the course of world history to redefine modernization theory as a series of periods by which a society moves from an economy marked by limited productivity and an agricultural emphasis to one that features an increase in disposable income and durable consumer goods. Rostow names these five periods traditional, transitional, take-off, drive to maturity, and age of high mass-consumption.<sup>3</sup> An evaluation of how the United States government applied this theory to its foreign relations in Vietnam under Cold War objectives is

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<sup>1</sup> The National Liberation Front (NLF) was a Vietnamese political organization with a military arm that was made of both Vietnamese Communist Party members and noncommunist members and sought to reunify North and South Vietnam.

<sup>2</sup> *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, s. v. “Walt Whitman Rostow,” last accessed April 13, 2015, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/510297/Walt-Whitman-Rostow>.

<sup>3</sup> Walt Whitman Rostow, *The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1960), 4.

the main focus of this paper.

To begin, the application of modernization theory in Vietnam began with the United States assuming the role of an external force that would help precipitate South Vietnam's transition to a "developed" society, which the United States determined to be vital to preventing revolution in the country. In his introduction of the preconditions for take-off, Rostow articulates that in the course of history, an invasive outside source was likely to spawn the conditions for take-off for the society in question, explaining that an oftentimes advanced external society "shocked the traditional society and began or hastened its undoing." Rostow continues, "But they also set in motion ideas and sentiments which initiated the process by which a modern alternative to the traditional society was constructed out of the old culture."<sup>4</sup> Based upon these statements, it can be argued that the United States met Rostow's preconditions. Although the former French colonial activities and control served as the start of this particular set of historical changes in Vietnamese society, the United States acted as an intentional instigator of that progression.

The formulation of strategic programs purposed to modernize South Vietnam derived from a Cold War-minded understanding of what was unfolding in Vietnam in this time. In *The Vietnam Wars 1945-1990*, Marilyn B. Young, New York University Professor of History, explains the line of thinking used by academic experts that aided President John F. Kennedy on Southeast Asian matters. She explains that communist insurgents operated as "the toxic byproduct of the disruptive process of modernization, in the course of which a small band of ruthless outside agitators were able to exploit the poverty and confusion of a passive population through propaganda and intimidation in order to seize state power on behalf of communism."<sup>5</sup> Under this perception of the social and political workings of the Vietnamese society, the United States government formed their tactics to modernize South Vietnam while simultaneously gaining support from the population and separating civilians from alleged insurgents. The best example of this plan is found in the Strategic Hamlet Program, a form of counterinsurgency, much like the Agroville scheme which preceded it and moved the peasantry into villages where they were guarded and separated from the National Liberation Front.

### Literature Review

A considerable amount of books and scholarly articles center on early United States involvement in Vietnam and focus on foreign aid policies and counterinsurgent strategies. Indeed, scholars have explored the shortcomings of modernization theories and programs in South Vietnam, and most rely on presidential archives to research the topic. Many have critiqued the works and policies of Walt Whitman Rostow and other influential social scientists of the 1950s to 1970s as they trace the development of modernization theory and study its implementations. Other works devote attention to specific counterinsurgency programs to examine the subject. Of the substantial material available for research, historians Michael E. Latham, Phillip E. Catton, and David Biggs present the most compelling evaluations of the impact of modernization programs in South Vietnam because each scholar delivers crucial emphases on different facets of modernization theory as the United States government applied it to South Vietnam. Although the works touch upon or encompass various dimensions of the development strategies used in the Southeast Asian country, they contain considerable attention to a specific point of interest—the social, political, and environmental dimensions of

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<sup>4</sup> Rostow, *Stages of Economic Growth*, 6.

<sup>5</sup> Marilyn B. Young, *The Vietnam Wars 1945-1990* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1991), 290.

modernization projects.

Michael E. Latham, Professor of History and Dean of Fordham College at Rose Hill, provides an extensive examination of the modernization theory in his work, *Modernization as Ideology*, which delivers a cogent critique through the social aspect of its implementations in Vietnam.<sup>6</sup> Latham's research includes a large amount of archival information, such as material from the Agency for International Development, the John F. Kennedy Library, National Security Files, and the United States Peace Corps Library, as well as popular magazines and secondary sources. In chapter five, he presents a thorough critical analysis of counterinsurgency and modernization strategy by providing a detailed use of sources and a concrete focus on the Agrovilles and the subsequent Strategic Hamlet Program. As he describes the lack of success of the experimental Agrovillage program in 1960, Latham informs, "Corrupt administrators often denied peasants the supplies that the government promised them, and villagers bitterly resented being driven from their homes and forced to pay rent on the small agrovillage parcels."<sup>7</sup> In an examination of this specific modernization project, Latham offers attention to the local-level effects of modernization methods and uncovers the reactions of populations these programs provoked. This makes Latham's work integral to analyzing the problems found in the application of the modernization theory. His attention to the social attitudes of the strategy reflects the ineffectiveness of the concepts.

Another important contributor to the field, Philip E. Catton, Associate Professor of History at Stephen F. Austin State University, takes careful consideration to the condition of the political relations involved in the United States government's efforts to influence Vietnam. In "Counter-Insurgency and Nation Building," Catton best examines this dimension of the field by providing a deep analysis of Ngo Dinh Diem's goals of governance, revealing the conflict between him and American interests.<sup>8</sup> Using speeches and press interviews of Diem, United States government reports, and Lansdale Papers, Catton conveys a revised perception of Diem, emphasizing his independent-mindedness in governance over South Vietnam. In this work, Catton delves into Diem's value of autonomy in the implementation of the strategic hamlets, stating, "The Ngos deemed self-reliance a virtue because they believed that people forced back upon their own resources would develop the inner strength and common bonds of unity necessary to defeat the nation's enemies."<sup>9</sup> In this statement, Catton unearths an important understanding of the difficulties involved for the political leadership of South Vietnam. Unlike other sources, Catton seems to portray Diem as the mastermind of his programs in South Vietnam. This blurs the distinction between manipulation from the United States and Diem's autonomous objectives, yet it offers that Diem might have been more of a Vietnamese nationalist in his own autocratic way than the pro-United States puppet that other sources have implied. Taken together, Catton's work is indispensable as it insightfully shows the conflict of political interests involved in the United States government's aim to harness the modernization of Vietnam for its own Cold War, economic, and diplomatic purposes.

A final vital yet otherwise overlooked component to understanding the issues within the implementation of modernization theory is an analysis of the material, environmental, and

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<sup>6</sup> Michael E. Latham, "Modernization at War: Counterinsurgency and the Strategic Hamlet Program," in *Modernization as Ideology: Americans Social Science and "Nation Building" in the Kennedy Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), np.

<sup>7</sup> Latham, "Modernization at War," 170.

<sup>8</sup> Philip E. Catton, "Counter-Insurgency and Nation Building: The Strategic Hamlet Programme in South Vietnam, 1961-1963," *The International History Review* 21 (1999): np.

<sup>9</sup> Catton, "Counter-Insurgency and Nation Building," 927.

infrastructural impacts of modernization programs on the Vietnamese population. In the article “Breaking from the Colonial Mold,” David Biggs, Associate Professor of History at the University of California at Riverside, provides in-depth research into this dimension of the theory’s application to Vietnam as he strongly considers the colonial legacy of the region and contributes the most concrete means of critiquing the theory.<sup>10</sup> Similarly to Catton, Biggs draws contrasts between Diem and the United States approaches to the modernization of South Vietnam. He shows how these differences and the obstacles within the Vietnamese infrastructure and geography impeded the success of the United States in its foreign aid policies. With particular attention to the Plain of Reeds wetland region in southern Vietnam, Biggs uses evidence in the landscape, settlements, and machinery, as well as memoirs, monographs, declassified American and Vietnamese reports, and information generated from travel to demonstrate the complex colonial past that aggrieved many Vietnamese. Through this analysis, Biggs argues that the United States and Diem’s regime in some ways perpetuated the French structures. Even before delving into the development activities of the United States and Republic of South Vietnam governments, Biggs provides striking context for the nation-building efforts, stating, “As in many present-day war zones, much of the trouble in the Plain of Reeds started with colonial rule - and not just with the violence of the conquest, but in response to built colonial environments that disrupted traditional livelihoods and separated the rich from the poor.”<sup>11</sup> Although Biggs’s approach diverts focus toward logistical matters in Vietnam while neglecting an examination of shortcomings in the objectives of American foreign aid policy, he still covers the social effects of and reactions to the material infrastructure and developments in Vietnam made by the French, the United States, and Diem. This addition to the field is unique and invaluable in connecting the material cues of modernization to the lives of the population.

### **Shortcomings of Modernization Theory**

From a theoretical standpoint, modernization theory’s simplistic understanding of world cultures inhibited government officials from considering the unique histories and conditions of the country that they intended to influence. Kimber Charles Pearce, Assistant Professor of English at Saint Anselm College, analyzes the translation of modernization theory into foreign aid policy through Rostow’s use of rhetoric and narrative, explaining “Rostovian theory stressed the commonalities in the evolution of developing nations, but masked significant social, political, and economic differences among nations.”<sup>12</sup> Pearce communicates the error of assuming a standard, universal model of modernization while overlooking the complexities and unique dynamics of different countries. Rostow himself reinforces this assertion as he disclaims in the beginning of *The Stages of Economic Growth* that his model of history is “arbitrary” and “limited.” At the same time, Rostow expresses that the economic models “are designed, in fact, to dramatize not merely the uniformities in the sequence of modernization but also—and equally—the uniqueness of each nation’s experience.”<sup>13</sup> Here in order to clarify his evaluation, Rostow both pulls back from his disclaimer and qualifies that his model exaggerates the process

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<sup>10</sup> David Biggs, “Breaking from the Colonial Mold: Water Engineering and the Failure of Nation-Building in the Plain of Reeds, Vietnam,” *Technology and Culture* 49 (2008): np.

<sup>11</sup> Biggs, “Breaking from the Colonial Mold,” 605.

<sup>12</sup> Kimber Charles Pearce, *Rostow, Kennedy, and the Rhetoric of Foreign Aid* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2001), 118.

<sup>13</sup> Rostow, *Stages of Economic Growth*, 1.

by which nations experience a sequence of history. As the rudiments of the model place the United States' implementation of the theory on a cursory foundation, Pearce's assertion provokes concern for the meticulousness required in assuring that foreign nations steadily progress. Thus, in the formulation of modernization theory, discrepancies between the model and reality already existed. Relying on an assumption of inevitability, the theory could not account for the singular events of history that determine the course of nations.

To exemplify this concept further at the political level, modernization theory's way of framing revolution as a problem of development rather than as an issue of governance disregarded Vietnam's struggles over political representation and control of resources. In "Decolonisation, Modernisation and Nation-Building," Mark T. Berger, Historian of Modern International History from the University of New South Wales and Lecturer at Murdoch University, explains in his critique of the United States' involvement in South Vietnam's governance during the 1960s, "Furthermore, in the effort to build a modern nation-state in the southern half of Vietnam, American policy makers overlooked the fact that many Southerners identified with the culturally and historically delineated nation of Vietnam that was larger than the post-1954 polity presided over by Diem and his successors."<sup>14</sup> Berger's statement reveals that modernization projects could not achieve the support of local populations when the South Vietnamese government and its backers in the United States immediately alienated the people by ignoring their voice and sense of identity. Berger also delivers that the more traditional cultural identity of the Vietnamese formed the basis of cohesion, even stability within the society, regardless of its material infrastructure and economy. American policy-making proponents of the theory failed to apply the value and strength of the bedrock that cultural heritage constituted for the Vietnamese. New regimes could not easily or quickly eradicate such an identity, and the failure to represent it further exacerbated social and political instability.

In magnification of the shortcomings of modernization in its practical use and despite counterinsurgency's material development efforts, the United States neglected to fully ameliorate the central problems and needs of the South Vietnamese rural majority. As he critiques the United States government's inability to stimulate economic growth as it worked with Diem's regime in South Vietnam, Latham explicates, "In 1954, one-quarter of 1 percent of the rural population owned approximately 40 percent of rice lands in the South, but conservative land reforms did little to address that disparity or compete with the revolution's practice of redistributing landlord holdings."<sup>15</sup> Latham not only shows the emulating strategies of the South and the North to reform the country, but he also reveals that the United States and the Republic of South Vietnam blundered when governments estranged their connection with the majority of the population. Efforts to modernize South Vietnam could not generate support from the Vietnamese populations when the strategy failed to alleviate, and even aggravated, the grossly disproportionate allocation of resources in the country.

Despite the United States government's ambition to prevent influence from the majority communist North from taking over the South, developments from modernization programs paled in contrast to the North's efforts at reforming the country. Frederick Logevall, Cornell University professor and Yale University graduate, explains in *Embers of War* that the North Vietnamese government implemented land reform with its goal "to alleviate food shortages (the 1945 famine was still fresh in the mind) and break the power of the large landowners—to bring about, as the

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<sup>14</sup> Mark T. Berger, "Decolonisation, Modernisation and Nation-Building: Political Development Theory and the Appeal of Communism in Southeast Asia, 1945-1975," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 34 (2003): 440.

<sup>15</sup> Latham, "Modernization at War," 161.

regime put it, equality for the greatest number among the rural masses.” He continues, “Over the long term it achieved considerable results in this regard.”<sup>16</sup> Logevall demonstrates that the North actively sought to address the contemporary issues plaguing the majority of the Vietnamese population after the end of French colonialism. Merely constructing the appearance of modernization in South Vietnam with experimental programs and a large supply of monetary aid proves extraneous to the particular grievances of the large rural populations. As Logevall asserts, the North’s slow but steady efforts at reform indeed served as a competitive threat to American influence on the South. Industrial and economic development, by American understanding, missed the mark on the key to influence and gain the support of the South’s large rural population.

In retrospect of the work of developing South Vietnam, the outcome of the projects shows that the modernization theory was ineffective in its objectives to expand the economy. Describing the complications that urbanization created for the South Vietnamese government, Young states, “From 1966 to 1972, the United States had pumped \$2 billion into the local economy, employed, directly or indirectly, some 300,000 people, and, through the workings of the Commercial Import Program, more or less controlled inflation.” She states that in the aftermath of the war, “Combined with the global economic downturn of 1973, inflation rates in the South began to climb precipitously, urban unemployment reached 40 percent of the workforce, and there were severe food shortages.”<sup>17</sup> Young conveys that the United States government contributed a considerable amount of resources to stimulate the South Vietnamese economy. However, she points out that massive attempts to develop the region generated little return in the immediate decades following. This is a direct indication that the use of the modernization theory to transform the society into a pro-American industrialized nation did not achieve the expected results in the second half of the twentieth century. This marginal contribution to the economic hardships of the Vietnamese, which triggered a reliance on the superpower to prop up the South Vietnamese economy and government, resulted in a paucity of success in ensuring that the population aligns itself with the United States.

### **Signs of the United States’ Political Struggle with a Self-Determined Vietnam**

In some ways, modernization strategies employed by American advisors and government officials clashed with Vietnam’s ambitions for autonomy by perpetuating the preceding colonial structures in the country. As Biggs describes the United States’ undertaking of nation-building projects, like the relocation of northern refugees, after the passing of the Geneva Accords in the 1950s, he asserts, “Despite the rhetoric of Walt Rostow and others who characterized aid to South Vietnam as enabling that country’s ‘take-off’ from an agrarian to an industrialized economy, American aid projects in the mid-1950s relied heavily on former colonial businesses, technicians, and documents.”<sup>18</sup> Although the matter is complex, Biggs’s insight into the Plain of Reeds illustrates that, in some aspects, the United States’ efforts at modernizing Vietnam merely picked up where France left off. In this way, modernization projects, which involved uprooting populations, was counterproductive in winning the hearts and minds of the Vietnamese population; not only did it disrupt the way of life of the people, but the appearance of the projects

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<sup>16</sup> Fredrick Logevall, “‘We Have No Other Choice But to Win Here,’” in *Embers of War: The Fall of an Empire and the Making of America’s Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 2012), 632.

<sup>17</sup> Young, *Vietnam Wars*, 290.

<sup>18</sup> Biggs, “Breaking from the Colonial Mold,” 612.

revived the former French colonial enterprises in the country. This effort would have re-incited the invariable resentment that provoked the Viet Minh to push French forces out of Vietnam. Thus, the modernization concept marginally contributed to the revolution it sought to prevent.

In addition to evidence that draws from the colonial markings of Vietnam's past, tension and resistance to American interference manifested from different political figures of the country. While revolutionary leader Ho Chi Minh's awareness of American interference becomes an obvious point of opposition—even as early as he states in a 1952 review, “The U.S. interventionists have nurtured the French aggressors and the Vietnamese puppets, but the Vietnamese people do not let anybody delude and enslave them,”<sup>19</sup>—a more provocative source of resistance came from Ngo Dinh Diem, the political figure whom the United States supported and helped raise to power. Catton describes Diem's administration of the first Agroville or strategic hamlet experiments in the early 1960s, stating, “While US officials had been developing a series of counter-insurgency proposals in 1960 and 1961, the Diem regime had proceeded to fashion its own response to South Vietnam's problems, without seeking to align its plans with those of its superpower ally.”<sup>20</sup> Catton shows that even as the United States government depended upon Diem to carry out its development projects in order to stabilize and build up the South, Diem's Republic of Vietnam was obstinate in establishing its own development of the country. Not only did American modernization strategies to prevent a communist takeover lose traction because of the despotic stubbornness of Diem's leadership, but the conflict with Diem served as a wakeup call that the superpower could not expect to carry out its objectives independently from the country in which it intervened. In the same way that the United States endeavored to manage the Southeast nation against the threat of losing its influence there, Vietnam was in a struggle to govern itself independently from outside control.

Serving both in protraction and hindsight of the modernization theory applications in Vietnam, another way by which the United States government counteractively frustrated its relations with Vietnam was through the aid that the superpower poured into the southeastern part of the country. Specious in its benevolent nature, American aid programs and funds to South Vietnam increased tension between the states as it incited the Vietnamese to amass a greater dependency on and obligation to the superpower. Christopher T. Fisher, Assistant Professor of History and African-American Studies at The College of New Jersey and author of “The Illusion of Progress,” describes the Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support program during the Johnson Administration. In reference to the President, Fisher states, “Johnson's closest advisers were confident that South Vietnam rested on the brink of a developmental breakthrough and needed only a large-scale lending institution like the ADB to jumpstart its infant economy.”<sup>21</sup> Fisher shows that, although the creation of the large bank would help Vietnam to develop its infrastructure, the United States failed to mention “strings” attached to the institution: South Vietnam's acquisition of loans would mean economic dependence from increased indebtedness to the institution. This is the crux of the neocolonial semblance of the United States' modernization undertakings. Instead of becoming the stable and autonomous nation it desired to be—capable of providing for and representing itself on the world stage—South Vietnam would be financially bound to an economic institution. Interestingly, the United States, along with Japan, still holds ten percent of the vote and fifteen percent of the capital

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<sup>19</sup> Ho Chi Minh, “The Imperialist Aggressors Can Never Enslave The Heroic Vietnamese People,” *Selected Works of Ho Chi Minh Vol. 3*, April 4, 1952, <http://www.marxists.org>

<sup>20</sup> Catton, “Counter-Insurgency and Nation Building,” 924.

<sup>21</sup> Christopher T. Fisher, “The Illusion of Progress,” *Pacific Historical Review* 75 (2006): 33.



today.<sup>22</sup>

A final consideration delves into the core quandary of implementing modernization in Vietnam. Ultimately, even if historians interpret the theory as a benevolent effort to help the post-colonial country grow economically while simultaneously thwarting communism, the efforts of the United States government to modernize Vietnam, especially at the speed at which it aspired to achieve results, could not implicitly be congruous with a self-determined Vietnam. This understanding reflects what the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy elucidates on the essence of war: “It’s not just that war is the continuation of policy by other means; it’s that war is *about the very thing which creates policy*—i.e., governance itself...it is about which group of people gets to say what goes on in a given territory.”<sup>23</sup> A war was already looming between the United States and Vietnam when the United States ventured to assertively accomplish its own geopolitical objectives in the region. Rather than mutual, non-communist allies, the countries became potential adversaries due to the American assumption of indirect power (or the ability to influence and make changes) in Vietnam nearly superimposed over the Vietnamese polity’s own efforts to govern the nation. This is the inherent impasse in American efforts to implement the modernization theory in Vietnam. Such a pursuit to develop the Southeast Asian country would require that the equitably represented Vietnamese people carry out American-like concepts and mechanizations of their own will and exertions. Even with an abundance of philanthropic supply, without the exercise of home rule, the push for modernization becomes an offensive maneuver of foreign control.

## Conclusion

The United States’ application of modernization theory to South Vietnam in its twentieth century history drew out the menacing nature of presumptuously intervening in the affairs of a foreign nation, even when resting on benevolent inclinations. With contributions to the field by Latham, Catton, and Biggs, as well as a number of other scholars, research demonstrates that the use of the modernization model had theoretical, political, and practical shortcomings in its effort to shield South Vietnam from communist influences. Moreover, signs indicating the potential and actual ineffectiveness came from the post-colonial context of the society, resistance from different political figures, and dependency-inducing aid. The failures in implementation of the modernization theory call to question the basic assumptions that Americans made and continue to make in evaluating the conditions and living standards of other cultures. It is in essence an ethnocentric error in foreign diplomacy. However, the study of Vietnamese political figures, like Ho Chi Minh and even Ngo Dinh Diem, demonstrates that Vietnam was not hopelessly difficult to understand or different from the United States—a country with a colonial past that revolted and established for itself a national identity. Although the American colonial experience differs historically from the Vietnamese experience, the United States did not have to look far to study revolutionary ideology and realize that modernization development cannot pacify a matter that is ultimately rooted in governance, political representation, and control of the country’s resources.

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<sup>22</sup> Asian Development Bank Annual Report 2013: Promoting Environmentally Sustainable Growth in Asia and the Pacific, December 31, 2013, <http://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/ar2013/oi-appendix1.pdf>.

<sup>23</sup> Brian Orend, “War,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, July 28, 2005, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2008/entries/war/>.

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