

Author Henderson, William (ed.)

Title Southeast Asia: Problems of United States Policy

Source Cambridge, Mass: The M I T Press

Date 1963 (last qtr?)() Editorial

() Book

() Magazine

() Newspaper

A volume of papers growing out of a conference jointly sponsored by
the Asia Societ & the SEA Committee of the AAS.

In War a Value Near Nil

SOUTHEAST ASIA: Problems of United States Policy, edited by William Henderson. The M.I.T. Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1963; 273 pp., \$6.75.

The increasing number of books dealing with Southeast Asia is failing to add proportionately to American knowledge about that area. The main reason, probably, is that the range of topics that can usefully be dealt with for the area as a whole is severely limited; or that, if detailed treatment is attempted, the limited space of one book enforces superficiality. Mr. Henderson's book can serve as evidence. Although it focuses on problems of United States policy, this limitation has little value, for the simple reason that these problems differ from state to state, and that what can be said of them in relation to the whole area is bound to be most general and by now likely to be known.

In accordance with strict etiquette for books of this type, this book starts with a highly condensed historical survey that fails, in its barely 26 pages, to demonstrate any significant relationship between events many centuries ago and, say, how Washington should handle the guerilla problem in South Viet Nam or stop Sukarno's confrontation policy toward Malaysia. The point is: if 26 pages are not enough to provide such a demonstration, why waste them?

The contributors of the subsequent chapters never refer to history and, indeed, their explicit or implicit conclusions are that not ancient history but the most recent experiences of the ruling elites and the principles valid for all nations (survival, power, sovereignty) are the determining forces and factors.

how a nation can assist in internal development without interfering in internal affairs is not even considered -- except in the thought-provoking concluding chapter by the editor, where at last some of the significant questions as to American policy are raised, too late to be answered or even discussed.

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History's Role

History's role has been, of course, to have brought forth initially some of the contemporary problems and affected their solution. This is very well pointed out by the contributor who shows the major task of Asian nations to be to convert themselves into viable political states since they can no longer operate successfully on the pretense (in many cases) of being cultural or ethnic units. This raises a question as to what the United States is dealing with in this area - states, individuals, tribes - and why?

In answer, another contributor develops a pretentious "analytical framework" for determining the "value" of Southeast Asia to the United States that yields, after tortuous and torturous elaborations by the author, the fairly obvious conclusion that in a thermonuclear global war this value is near nil, but that, if the United States wishes to save any one Southeast Asian nation, she better be concerned with the fate of that nation's neighbors.

'Not in Depth'

While several good essays plow over familiar ground in outlining problems confronting American policy makers - the appeals of Communism, unfavorable Asian attitudes toward the United States, an inadequate SEATO, limits to American diplomacy inherent in regional or local conditions - not any aspect of these problems is explored in depth and related to American capabilities or interests. Most suggestions for an American policy amount to commonplace advocacy of help in political, economic, and social development with studious avoidance of interference in internal affairs. That such development will conform with American interest is, in accordance with prevailing fashion, tacitly assumed rather than spelled out. And