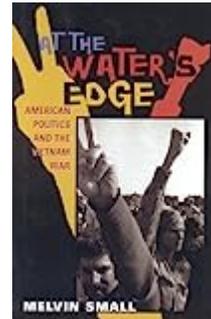




Melvin Small. *At The Water's Edge: American Politics and the Vietnam War.* Chicago: Ivan R. Dee Publisher, 2005. xi + 241 pp. \$14.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-56663-647-6; \$26.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-56663-593-6.



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Even though politics and partisanship supposedly stop “at the water’s edge,” this was not the case during the Vietnam War. Domestic debates and political pressure, argues historian Melvin Small, not only occurred in abundance during the war, they influenced American policymakers. Small, the nation’s pre-eminent scholar on the United States during the Vietnam War era,[1] provides readers with a brisk and well-told account of the interconnectedness between events in Southeast Asia and the United States.

While most of the study deals with the effect of the war on domestic politics, particularly those of the presidential variety, there are several examples which show the impact political pressure had on foreign-policy decisions. Small points out that since it would be “unseemly” for American leaders to admit they considered domestic factors when formulating plans related to national security, direct evidence of such deliberations in archival documents or in memoirs is rare. But by reading “between the lines,” as Small puts it, he shows how concerns over poll numbers and upcoming elections frequently influenced decisions (p. ix). Small is sensitive to not portray every foreign-policy decision as being solely dictated by domestic electoral events, and he avoids being unduly cynical towards politicians concerned with political self-preservation.

Early U.S. involvement in Vietnam did not provoke much public debate or discussion. But by 1963, when South Vietnam started showing signs of faltering, President John Kennedy was worried that he and the Democratic Party could suffer in the 1964 elections if his administration appeared soft on communism. Kennedy appointed Republican Henry Cabot Lodge, Jr., as ambassador to South Vietnam partly to insulate the administration from anticipated criticism from hawkish Republicans. Small quotes allies of Kennedy who subsequently claimed the president planned to withdraw American advisors from Vietnam, but only after the 1964 election had passed. Ambivalent over whether Kennedy would have indeed withdrawn from Vietnam had he not been assassinated in late 1963, Small writes simply that “there is no doubt the election of 1964 figured prominently in his calculations” (p. 21).

The impact of domestic politics on Vietnam policy (and vice versa) heightened as the U.S. military presence in Southeast Asia increased under President Lyndon Johnson. Johnson’s attention was focused on the Great Society, and he escalated in Vietnam in part because, like Kennedy, he did not want to be distracted by accusations of having “lost” Vietnam. The anticommunist hawks, as opposed to antiwar doves, gave Johnson his greatest cause for concern. Johnson hoped to placate

his critics on both sides with a gradual escalation so that he could effectively propose and manage the domestic programs he cared about most. His desire was that the military battle would be a low intensity affair that would not, in the words of Defense Secretary Robert McNamara, “arouse the ire” of the American public (p. 39).

Unfortunately for Johnson and the nation, the quagmire of Vietnam only deepened. Loath to choose between guns or butter, and reluctant to raise taxes, Johnson’s deficit spending eventually overheated the economy, resulting in inflation. And by the end of 1967, prominent leaders, including Martin Luther King, Jr. and Democrat Eugene McCarthy, publicly soured on the war, which in turn gave more credibility to the burgeoning antiwar movement. When Johnson decided to not run for reelection in 1968, the Vietnam War loomed as the most important reason why.

The war figured prominently in the 1968 presidential election. Small writes, “Few elections in American history were so dominated by foreign policy, and few elections so strongly influenced foreign policy during a campaign” (p. 124). Late in the contest, President Johnson was working on peace talks, the news of which helped bring his vice-president, Hubert Humphrey, within two points in public opinion polls. Republican operatives, unhappy with candidate Richard Nixon’s shrinking lead, used back channels to secretly encourage South Vietnam to reject Johnson’s latest peace offer because they feared a peace agreement could hand victory to Humphrey. Nixon’s vague involvement in this meddling, which Small labels “unprecedented” and possibly treasonous, highlighted how closely linked were domestic politics and diplomacy (p. 121). After all, it was not just Nixon who had his eye on the political calendar when his aides intervened. Every other party in the negotiations—the Johnson administration, the North Vietnamese, and the South Vietnamese—also considered the upcoming U.S. presidential election when calculating their bargaining positions. (Once elected, Nixon reversed course and unsuccessfully urged South Vietnam to accept the terms outlined in Johnson’s peace proposal.)

Like Presidents Kennedy and Johnson before him, Nixon weighed domestic concerns when making Vietnam policy. Vietnamization, whereby American troops came home as Southern Vietnamese troops took on more responsibility, helped quiet antiwar critics. It also decreased the amount of U. S. combat troops available for fighting in Southeast Asia, however. As a result, the North Vietnamese enemy had less incentive to negoti-

ate a settlement since they merely had to wait for their adversaries to leave their country.

The desire to manage perceptions of the Vietnam War led presidents Johnson and Nixon to take part in questionable and sometimes illegal activities. Small shows how Johnson exhibited an astonishing level of animosity toward critics of the war and was prone to abusing the investigatory powers of executive agencies for political purposes. The unethical and illegal behavior of the Nixon administration, though, surpassed even what Johnson had done. Nixon’s enemies list, the break-in of the office of the psychiatrist of Daniel Ellsberg (who leaked the Pentagon Papers), the secret bombing of Cambodia, the harassment of antiwar groups, and the ensuing cover-ups of these various activities were all connected by a single issue: the Vietnam War. A particular strength of the book is how Small so succinctly describes and clearly connects the scandal known collectively as Watergate to the war in Southeast Asia.

The book contains a bibliographic essay which discusses secondary source material, but the text itself lacks footnotes. Thus, Small will summarize a “study” or quote a “scholar” without always identifying the source by name (pp. 22, 115). Of course, most readers of the book will not be specialists, and they probably will not mind the lack of footnotes. Since the book is concise, is about an important topic, and features Small’s compelling narrative style, this synthesis is a worthy candidate for assignment in undergraduate courses.

The book ends with a chapter devoted to legacies. Small traces how aspects of recent American culture and politics—hostility toward the mainstream media, controversies over what candidates did during the 1960s and 1970s, general distrust of the federal government, the polarization of the country between “red” and “blue” states—owes much to the Vietnam War era. The connection between today’s unpopular Iraq war and yesterday’s war in Southeast Asia has only strengthened since Small published *At The Water’s Edge*. Perhaps the most direct and relevant example comes from the disclosure that former Nixon advisor Henry Kissinger has been doling out foreign-policy advice to President George W. Bush in part by teaching him the supposed lessons of Vietnam. In one meeting with a Bush aide, Kissinger presented a memo from 1969 in which he warned Nixon against further troop withdrawals from Vietnam. The basis for Kissinger’s advice to Nixon (and now Bush) was that such withdrawals “will become like salted peanuts to the American public: The more U.S. troops come home, the

more will be demanded.”[2] Kissinger’s counsel suggests that the domestic political considerations of the Vietnam War era are perhaps influencing today’s U.S. foreign policy in Iraq. If so, it only bolsters the last line from Small’s book about U.S. involvement in Southeast Asia: “Its effects have lingered into the twenty-first century in ways that could hardly have been imagined when President Eisenhower decided in 1954 to save South Vietnam for the Free World” (p. 216).

Notes

[1]. See his previous books: *Johnson, Nixon, and the*

Doves (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1988); *Covering Dissent: The Media and the Anti-Vietnam War Movement* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1994); *The Presidency of Richard Nixon* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1999); *Antiwarriors: The Vietnam War and the Battle for America’s Hearts and Minds*. (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, Inc., 2002).

[2]. Bob Woodward, *State of Denial: Bush at War, Part III* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006), 407-410. For the so-called salted peanuts memo itself, see: <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/news/20061001/peanuts.pdf>.

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