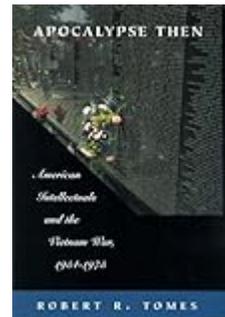




Robert R. Tomes. *Apocalypse Then: American Intellectuals and the Vietnam War, 1954-1975.* New York: New York University Press, 1998. xi + 293 pp. \$50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8147-8234-7.



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None of the Way with LBJ: American Intellectuals and the War in Vietnam

Robert Tomes has written a solid, old-fashioned history of American intellectuals and their changing attitudes toward American involvement in Vietnam. His focus is “on the evolution and analysis of ideas themselves” (p. 6) rather than on individual thinkers. This places him squarely in the tradition of Frank A. Warren[1] for the 1930s and William O’Neill[2] for World War II and the cold war. His sources are mainly journals and monographs, although occasionally he makes use of a less conventional piece of analysis like Barbara Garson’s play, *MacBird*. The book’s intellectual categories range from traditional conservatives to Communists, although he rightly devotes most of his energy to mainstream liberal factions. In some ways, Tomes’ is a thankless task, for while the details of his study are not always predictable, his ultimate conclusion is. He persuasively argues that the end of the war marked a crucial moment for cold war liberal thought, one that resulted in disintegration and—in some cases—disengagement and despair. The New Left, meanwhile, rose and fell, unable to hold itself together, while neoconservatism emerged as a potent new force.

Tomes’ history starts long before most Americans knew where Vietnam was and ends after the fall of Saigon. In-between, he addresses not only the complex history of the war itself, but “sidebar” issues like the Chicago Convention of 1968, the emergence of the Counterculture, and the creation of *The New York Review of Books*. One of the most striking things about the narrative is how quickly the cold war consensus dissipated. The most intriguing part of Tomes’ presentation is the prolonged gap between what the Johnson administration said and believed and what intellectuals thought about American participation in the war. While most of us who lived through the war could easily guess his conclusion about the impact of the war on American liberalism, this gap, as Tomes shows, forced intellectuals to be introspective about their opinions. They ended up asking larger questions about the role of the intellectual and the nature of power as a result.

Yet a lot of this exists without much broader analysis or contextualization. At points Tomes hints at some tantalizing themes, sometimes on his own and sometimes citing other authors: generational differences, the dif-

ference between “pure” intellectuals and those who also overlap into the public sphere (like Henry Kissinger), and the force of personal vendettas that had little to do with intellectual understandings of the war. Any reader familiar with twentieth-century intellectual history will recognize that the intellectual generations confronting the war in Vietnam were the same as other intellectual generations in some ways, but very different in others. These are generations more likely to be specialists, more likely to be bound to institutions (universities, think tanks, government), and more diverse in terms of race, religion, class, ethnicity, and gender than previous ones. Do any of these realities make any difference here? And what about the impact of peripheral matters on evaluations of the war? Within the span of time Tomes discusses, there is a sexual revolution, a women’s movement, a Black power movement, and an amendment to grant eighteen-year olds the right to vote. Whether or not these changes much affected older, liberal thinkers is an open question; however clearly they had a substantial impact on New Left attitudes, not to mention the rise of the neoconservatives.

Tomes is strongest when discussing liberals. His discussion of the left relies too heavily on critical secondary sources and it is clear from a few errors that this is not a subject he knows well. He has Irving Howe, for example, belonging to the Socialist Labor Party (p. 72), when, in fact, he belonged to the Socialist Worker Party. And, *The National Guardian* was never an “official publication” of the American Communist Party, as he alleges on page 78. His discussion of the New York intellectuals also sometimes fails to capture the complexity of their views, es-

pecially the merging of their anti-communism with their politics. His identification of the American Committee for Cultural Freedom as the American Committee on Cultural Freedom throughout makes me wonder about his understanding of the diverse group.

Apocalypse Then is not the kind of book that is going to make a big splash because its subject is too familiar and this rendering isn’t broad enough to attract many non-specialists. Nevertheless, this is traditional intellectual history at its finest and Robert Tomes has executed a book with few surprises, but readable prose, a nice flow, and excellent organization. In part this book feels so familiar because it is so graceful in its presentation and supported by ample evidence. Readers will not find a lot to quarrel with. One of the advantages of writing a comfortable, logical, uncontroversial book is that it is likely to remain a standard work for a long time.

Notes

[1]. *Liberals and Communism: The “Red Decade” Revisited* (New York City: Columbia University Press, 1966, revised edition 1993).

[2]. *A Better World: The Great Schism: Stalinism and the American Intellectuals* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982).

This review was commissioned for H-Pol by Lex Renda <renlex@uwm.edu>

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