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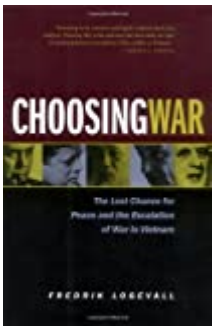

Fredrik Logevall. *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999. xxviii + 529 pp. $35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-520-21511-5.

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Note: H-Diplo recently ran a roundtable in which they reviewed Fredrik Logevall's Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam. The roundtable participants are Lloyd Gardner, Robert Jervis, Jeffrey Kimball, and Marilyn Young. This review is part of that roundtable.

It would not be too far off the mark to suggest that Vietnam has already become America's most analyzed war. Even so, almost everything about the war remains highly controversial. Before the Cold War ended, Vietnam was variously regarded as the place where "Containment" went off the deep end into the unforgiving swamps of Southeast Asia, the logical culmination of a counter-revolutionary policy, a tragedy of cultural hubris, or simply, "Mr. Johnson's War." In the post-Cold War era, Vietnam is variously understood as a lost battle in an ultimately successful struggle with the "Evil Empire," a war lost because of a failure of will, a necessary war that should be regarded as a triumph because it allowed time for the dominoes to gain strength, a tragedy of misperceptions on all sides, or, again simply, "Mr. Johnson's War." In *Choosing War*, Fredrik Logevall makes a sophisticated case for "Mr. Johnson's War."

Men make their own history, begins a famous saying by Marx, but not just as they please. Logevall's argument runs – Men make their own history, pretty much as they please. Rejecting "structural" arguments that would give the most weight to ideological continuity, economic compulsion, or bureaucratic drive, the author finds that Lyndon Johnson had a real choice to make during what he calls the "long 1964," which actually lasted from late August 1963, in his interpretation, to February or March of 1965. During that time period the crucial decisions were made, and the future all but sealed. JFK's increased build-up to 15,000 "advisers," and his temporizing, made things more difficult for his successor to be sure, but did not force him to start the bombing or send American soldiers to do the actual fighting. Some responsibility rests with three of the "Awesome Foursome," Mac Bundy, Bob McNamara, and Dean Rusk; but by far most of the blameworthiness falls on LBJ himself.

George Reedy, who had some very perceptive insights not only into Lyndon Johnson the man, but about the White House atmosphere in the days and weeks after Dallas, concluded that it was likely LBJ believed (as he later claimed to Doris Kearns) that the Kennedy advisers were all for broke for Vietnam, and for the advisers, on the other hand, to believe that the new president would settle for nothing less. Not surprisingly, policymakers who advised both presidents remember things differently. George Ball (who comes in for some fairly heavy criticism in Choosing War) contended that it was

the advisers who pushed the new president at every opportunity, while Cyrus Vance sees LBJ in full command, calling all the shots.

How does Logevall settle the argument? Johnson took office in a deeply emotional time, and enjoyed considerable leeway in his decisions. There were many indications that the public was largely indifferent to Vietnam, indeed, up until the time he sent massive "reinforcements" to a constantly faltering series of regimes in Saigon. He had the advice of several of the most knowledgeable men in the U.S. Senate, who urged (at the very least) that he retain an open mind on deepening the "commitment" to Vietnam, and who (had they been given the opportunity) would have supported his decision to withdraw. Foreign leaders likewise counseled against American involvement. Charles de Gaulle was anathema to Washington for his contrary ideas about Europe, but his arguments made sense – and were voiced by several others of equal stature. Britain's Harold Wilson could have done more (a lot more) to make his views known before it was too late, but British doubts were nevertheless well known in the Administration. The deeply ambivalent statements of support coerced out of Germany and Japan actually demonstrated opposition to a war that would draw off American resources, and threaten to spill over into other areas. The most respected "pundits," with a few exceptions like Joe Alsop, were almost unanimously opposed to making Vietnam a test-case of "Containment." Even the Communist superpowers, even North Vietnam, and even succeeding governments in South Vietnam – before Johnson's expansion of the war – had enough flexibility to find another solution rather than the war that cost everyone so much, and settled so little other than a reunion of the Vietnamese people.

So with so many in opposition why did the war happen? For want of a nail? Logevall goes back to "Mr. Johnson's War" for his final answer. In the long 1964, perhaps the most crucial time was immediately after the election. Swept back into office, already planning the legislative agenda of the Great Society, LBJ stood at the pinnacle of power. But just as he had wanted to defeat Goldwater at every remote polling place in America, so he wanted to defeat the Communists at every break out place around the world. Efforts to convince him, or even to get him to listen to arguments, about the specifics of Vietnam's centuries-long struggle for independence failed. Just as did those stressing the unwieldiness of the terrain to traditional American methods of warfare. Logevall does not delve deeply into LBJ in the manner of a psychohistorian; there is enough on the surface to explore, and to convince him that egomania or pig-headedness, or, their opposite, insecurity, provide the answer. No, he writes, Johnson did not wish to go into a war like Vietnam turned out to be, but he did want to show the world that what America (his America) desires, it gets – Victory on all fronts.

It is an impressive piece of work. He has found especially useful, as have other historians, the files of the British Foreign Office and the Prime Minister's office. He has used archival sources in France and Canada. And he has mined the Johnson Library files effectively, including the famous tapes that have started showing up in various works on the era. One comes away from reading the book feeling good, as well, about the writing skills of this generation of historians. The concluding chapter summarizes the argument, and offers some interesting speculations, about what might have happened had Oswald missed. Kennedy probably would not have gotten out right away, he suggests, but as the war developed, his greater flexibility and less ego involvement would have permitted him to choose other paths. And Logevall suggests as well how a new Geneva Conference might have gone to achieve a solution without a war that cost 50,000 American lives, 3-4 million Vietnamese lives and a hundred billion dollars.

All in all, the book presents the strongest case that has been (and probably can be) made for the Standing Alone hypothesis. I don't think I can ever look at the evidence in quite the same way as before. It strikes me now, certainly, that LBJ's career as Senate Majority Leader revealed in him not only a marvelous capacity for getting things done, but also for bullying those who dared to oppose him. He would grab lapels and shout at allied leaders – though only at those he thought less manly than himself. You got bombed before breakfast, one of Logevall's sources remarks, if you tried to oppose him on Vietnam. Since the book refers to arguments I made in Pay Any Price, to take strong issue with most of them, I find here the makings of a good dialogue.

I suppose I would begin by posing a question about the long 1964. Is it long enough (or wide enough) to stretch over decisions and events that a different author might argue have a very formative influence on policymakers, and on LBJ specifically, and that concern matters other than personality? Of course, the answer to that question that I would give edges us over into the matter of "structure" in decision-making. But leave that for a moment. I have argued in Pay Any Price that until very late, perhaps mid-1966 or thereabouts, the Johnson

Administration was operating on a "Crisis Management" plateau, confirmed by the events of the Cuban Missile Crisis. If we are to talk about a long 1964, why not then a long 1962? The successful end to the Cuban imbroglio, we traditionally understand, got the Bay of Pigs off JFK's back. At the same time, however, it suggested that other Cold War crises might be handled the same way. Indeed, Robert McNamara was convinced that "crisis management" would take the place of war. For all of LBJ's quirks, he was surrounded by men who gave him assurances that Vietnam was enough like Cuba that the same formulas would work. Sure, there were all those who said no, but as Mac Bundy and others could point out (as Bundy in fact did in his televised debate with Hans Morgenthau), these doubters had been wrong so many times in the past. Heirs to John Kennedy's cool, existential leadership, they convinced themselves (albeit perhaps wrongly), that the mechanism had been set in place and would run pretty much of itself.

Are we to assume, as well, that men who had served JFK, and who had gotten to the top elsewhere, whether, at Harvard College or a suburb of Detroit, Michigan, did not know how to make their opposition to a course of action known? Having had nearly three years of "inside stuff" on Vietnam, they were certainly able to chart a way around LBJ's ego, had they chosen to do so, to present him with very different conclusions about how the war was going. Indeed, when LBJ thought about responding favorably to a request to resume the Op-34A patrols a few weeks after the Gulf of Tonkin events, George Ball's argument that it was needless provocation carried the day.

But, go beyond the long 1964, for a few months, to the decisions of June and July. Can we say also that Dean Acheson was intimidated by Texas bravado, and afraid to take on LBJ at the Wisemen's meeting just before the fateful decision was taken to send the first 100,000? Acheson later admitted that he only really studied the specifics of what the Vietnam War was costing after Tet, when he led the president to override Dean Rusk, and Taylor, and Rostow. He had not studied Vietnam in 1965, precisely because of the structural issue. Whether one wishes to put it in realist terms, or ideological terms, or what have you, at that time the Americans considered Vietnam in relation to Europe – and the world – not necessarily a psychological domino effect, but more of a concern about accusations that the United States did not have staying power, brought by deGaulle and others. It is useless to argue, it seems to me, that these were wrong-headed, the point has to do with LBJ's forcing his opinions on others. He did not.

Structural issues in historical writing are the easiest to poke holes into. The real question would seem to be whether these are fatal holes? Logevall points out that in all the material he read, he sees little evidence of economic motives in the long 1964. While admitting that sophisticated treatments of the so-called "economic" question stress matters other than narrow special interest economics, and view American policymakers as conscious of the Cold War system as a whole, he still finds such explanations lacking. The problem here is that the long 1964, if it won't stretch back to 1962, certainly won't reach to 1954. There he will find all the evidence he might wish to sustain a structural argument about America's initial big step into Vietnam. One need only read Eisenhower's famous domino press conference, especially the concern expressed about Japanese trade, to get the idea that managing the capitalist world was not something that allowed for picking and choosing. At least not at that stage – and stages are important. A decade later, in 1964, the world looked very different than it did in 1954. The commitment to Vietnam was there, however, having taken on other meanings, certainly, but now a part of the "outpost" system in a rather shaky area. Here was an inheritance not necessarily wished for, costly to the treasury certainly – but more costly if the fiduciary failed to carry out its responsibilities, perhaps most costly to the sense of self. A terrible dilemma. Not all imperial outposts seem worth it for themselves to the metropolis, but (given the imperial mindset) not easy to dismiss. Take the Falkland Islands as an example of the way it is supposed to work even for a post-imperial power still capable of interposing its will, still convinced its world role required it do so. It may not work that way, obviously, and did not in Vietnam.

Finally, a few words about what might have been had Oswald missed. Logevall argues that Johnson's feeling that he could not get out of Vietnam without giving the Kennedys a chance to criticize him did not compel him to move as he did toward deeper involvement during the long 1964, nor did the American-supported coup really make the United States responsible for what followed, because there were so many governments after the Minh regime collapsed. While Kennedy still would have had to face a different stage of the war, Logevall argues he could have used his nimbleness and self-confidence to shrug off the warhawks' advice as he had done in 1961. He would likely have beaten Goldwater in 1964, and had the same opportunity as LBJ to disengage – and would have been more inclined to that choice. But what if it had been another 1960 campaign, with the tv debates now centered

on: Who is in the process of losing Vietnam? Who killed Diem? What if Goldwater focused on Kennedy's speech on November 22, 1963, promising once again to stand on all the watchtowers of freedom?

Probably it is necessary to counterpose JFK to LBJ to tie-up the Standing Alone argument. In a curious fashion, Logevall has validated LBJ's fears that historians would write books about his decisions, always speculating on what the Kennedys might have done. He was afraid to "lose" Vietnam, but he was not alone. At the press conference immediately after he announced the decision to send 100,000 men to Vietnam, a reporter asked if it was a lonely decision? Johnson said no, he had plenty of advice. I think he was right.

My colleagues in this roundtable have started us off with thoughtful impressions of Logevall's important contribution to the literature on Vietnam. It is obvious we are all concerned about circumstance and choice. Presumably there will be a good deal of discussion about structures and individuals. Bob Jervis reminds us that, in a bipolar world, structure does not predict specifics so much as frame options. He also reminds us of the perils of hindsight. Are some structures more porous than others? Jeff Kimball points out that in all the earlier instances, presidents and policymakers invariably chose the option that pointed towards deeper involvement, thereby tightening the frame, hardening the structure. Marilyn Young raises the central problem in discussing contingency: what are the limits? She suggests that the title of Logevall's book might have been, "The Unnecessary War," as it demonstrates the wilfulness of policymakers, the impermeable Tuesday Lunches where a small structure produced huge policy decisions.. And yet, she concludes, there was an external reality as well, an outer rim of Cold War structure. Where does the Vietnam War's historicity fit in (or not fit in) in all these places? Did decisions radiate outward from the Tuesday lunches, or inward from years past - or both ways - while bending as light waves do around massive gravitational attractions? Finally, perhaps we might speculate on whether the Vietnam War was a culminating episode near the end of colonialism, for both Western and Soviet empires; or, on the other hand, a uniquely controversial chapter in the ultimate outcome of the Cold War?

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