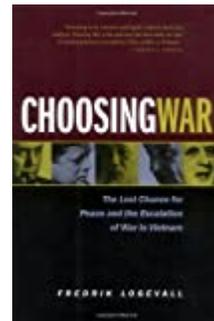




Fredrik Logevall. *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999. xxviii + 529 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-520-21511-5.



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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.

Wars often are puzzling because one if not both sides lose. They are costly and, no matter what the outcome, it is usually easy after the fact to imagine less painful ways for the parties to have reached the outcome on which they finally settled.[1] A common explanation is that one or both sides were over-optimistic about the prospects of victory.[2] This was the original explanation for why the US fought what would prove to be a losing war in Vietnam: the "Quagmire theory" argued that Kennedy and Johnson entered the war through a series of small steps, believing that each measure would have a significant chance of winning.

With the publication of the Pentagon Papers, the question changed and became more disturbing. The documents clearly revealed that Kennedy, Johnson, and their advisors never believed that victory would be quick or easy and, indeed, never thought that the measures they were taking were likely to bring success. This shifts the focus to the reasons the leaders felt it was so important to prevail (or at least not to lose) and presents a greater

puzzle because states rarely fight when the prospects for success are seen as dim. (Here hindsight may be problematic, leading us to think that the Americans were foolish to have had any hopes for victory. But we cannot be sure that different tactics, errors by the Vietcong and North Vietnamese, or greater resolve on the part of the Americans, especially after the Tet offensive, would not have produced a different result. While it is easy in retrospect to say that the Americans should have appreciated North Vietnam's willingness to take an extraordinary degree of punishment, we should remember that experts were surprised when Milosovic retreated from Kosovo in the face of limited air attacks.)

Distinguished by its thorough, multiarchival research and powerful argument, Fredrik Logevall's account makes a strong case that the "long 1964", extending from late August 1963 when Kennedy decided to support the overthrow of the Diem/Nhu regime to February 1965 when Johnson implemented "Rolling Thunder" and sent Marines to protect Danang, was a true turning point. Johnson "chose war", not in the sense that he sought it or relished it, but in the more important sense that he had a choice to make, which is to say that the domestic and international circumstances were not so compelling as to foreclose all alternatives.

The general question of the extent to which history

is contingent or determined is as central as it is familiar. The meaning of choice and contingency is not always clear, however. It can mean that a decision or a course of events was strongly influenced by accidents or small events that did not “have to” occur and without which history would have been quite different. In Vietnam, an argument of this type would be that had the Vietcong not attacked the US base at Pleiku, or at least had not done so when McGeorge Bundy was making a crucial trip to Vietnam, Johnson might not have enlarged the war. Along with most other analysts, Logevall rejects this argument, citing Bundy’s famous remark that “Pleikus are streetcars”—one will always come along to take you to your desired destination (pp. 324-25).

Logevall’s central argument is that contingency of another kind was at work: the pressures on Johnson were not so great that anyone who might have occupied the White House would have made the same decisions. This argument makes American—or Johnson’s—behavior even more puzzling: the US not only entered a war that its leaders knew it had little chance of winning, but did so even though alternatives were available. While I think Logevall’s argument is neither as convincing nor as original as he implies, it still is plausible and, furthermore, is made with unprecedented rigor and documentation. My criticisms are not meant to obscure how much I learned from it.

Logevall demolishes the argument that Johnson “had to” avoid losing because of immediate domestic pressures and calculations.[3] As Vice-President Humphrey wrote Johnson, “nineteen-sixty-five is the year of minimum political risk for the Johnson administration” (p. 347). Logevall’s contribution on this point is to show the degree of domestic opposition to widening the war. While I think that Logevall is correct here, he does not fully engage the more speculative argument that the danger for Johnson was a more long-run one. Although withdrawal might not destroy his domestic agenda or prevent his reelection, it could more firmly tag the Democrats as the party the “lost” countries to Communism. As Logevall notes, the Republicans were almost unanimous in their opposition to withdrawal, and they surely would have argued that more backbone would have stopped the Communist adversaries. As Johnson told George Ball in 1965, “George, don’t pay any attention to what those little shits on the campuses do. The great beast is the reactionary elements in the country. Those are the people that we have to fear.”[4]

Logevall’s discussion of the international environ-

ment represents a sharper break from standard views. Although previous scholars had understood that America’s allies were not enthusiastic about escalation, they had not probed this subject deeply. Drawing on the archives of several European and Asian powers, Logevall shows that only Australia truly supported escalation. British diplomats in Southeast Asia unanimously thought the US could not win and called for a political settlement. Authorities in London agreed with them in private but their need for American assistance on many issues, especially in Malaysia, led to public, if lukewarm, support.

The implications are two-fold. First, the views held by American government leaders cannot be explained as the only response to the situation. Other countries with roughly the same information and the same interests saw the world very differently. Not only were they more pessimistic about the prospects for escalation, but, more importantly, they rejected the domino theory and did not see escalation in Vietnam—especially in a losing cause—as an index of American resolve. Second, these countries’ beliefs undercut the argument that the US had to escalate because others demanded it. The potential dominoes did not avert the fears the theory attributed to them. Furthermore, as far as available records indicate, the allies were correct in their argument that the PRC, USSR, and North Vietnam would welcome a political solution and, more crucially, would not use it as a springboard for additional adventures.[5]

Here too I agree with Logevall, and indeed have criticized the domino theory on several grounds.[6] But some doubts must remain. National leaders who downplayed the consequences of a Communist victory in South Vietnam might have reacted differently had the US in fact withdrawn. Unfortunately, people cannot always predict how they will react.[7] Similarly, the fact that leaders in Moscow, Beijing, and Hanoi said that they would not increase their efforts to expand their influence in the wake of an American withdrawal does not provide strong evidence for how they would have behaved. Furthermore, Logevall never mentions that during the period he analyzes Southeast Asia looked to American leaders to be particularly dangerous because of supposed growing Communist influence over Sukarno’s Indonesia.

Having argued that neither domestic nor international pressures are sufficient to explain Johnson’s escalation, Logevall turns to the inner circle of decision-makers. While he distributes some blame to the advisors, he correctly sees that the crucial question is why Lyndon Johnson acted as he did. He finds the answer in

Johnson's personality. His demand for loyalty and his intolerance of dissent created an environment in which he was not exposed to the full range of opinions; his intellectual style scorned probing discussions of fundamental assumptions in favor of deciding what had to be done immediately; his anticommunism was "more deeply ingrained, more unalterable" than was true of many others in the political elite (p. 76). Most importantly, the combination of his enormous ego and insecurity came to the fore: "what he really feared was the personal humiliation that he believed would come with failure in Vietnam. He saw the war as a test of his own manliness" (p. 393). This argument has been made by others such as Robert Dallek and has been developed in detail by Blema Steinberg.[8]

There certainly is something to this, but Logevall does not develop the argument in enough depth to make it truly convincing. Such a personality-based explanation needs to show that the same pattern can be found in many areas of the person's life, or in areas that are marked by common psychological characteristics.[9] Furthermore, I think Logevall is too quick to dismiss the impact of the domino theory, misguided as he and I believe that it was. It was widely held by people without any ego stakes in the war and may have had particular resonance for Americans.[10] In part, Johnson may have used it to provide psychological cover for his refusal to accept a personal defeat. But in part he simply believed it as many of his generation did, supported as it seemed to be by the "lessons" of the 1930s.[11] Indeed, he espoused the theory long before he became committed in Vietnam. Furthermore, Johnson's political fortunes and self-image became entangled with the war in part as a consequence rather than as a cause of the decisions in the "long 1964". Had he believed that the foreign policy consequences of withdrawal would be less than disastrous, he could have disengaged in early 1965.

As Logevall shows, everyone thought American prospects were dim. But whereas opponents of escalation thought they were nil, those who favored escalation thought they were not so small as to be disregarded. These judgments are difficult to make and it is not surprising that people should disagree about them. But it is interesting that those who thought that there were no chances of victory also believed that the consequences of withdrawal were manageable, whereas those who felt this course of action would lead to disaster believe victory was at least possible. In other words, both groups minimized the value trade-off they perceived; no one argued that while withdrawal was indeed necessary, the consequences would be truly dreadful, or that victory

could indeed be obtained, but was not needed.[12] To avoid a painful judgment, those who felt that the war could not be won may have been driven to view the prospects for a neutralized Vietnam in a rosy light and those who thought that withdrawal meant disaster may have felt psychological pressures to believe that victory was at least possible.

Logevall believes that the decisions to bomb the North and send two battalions of marines to Danang not only foreshadowed but foreordained the 500,000 American troops that followed. I am not so sure. His discussion of the February decisions slights the February 26th meeting in which George Ball presented his dissent most fully. Furthermore, I think the spring and summer deliberations were as real as those of February. Johnson agonized over what to do in a way that Logevall's account does not fully capture and his freedom of action, especially in April, was not much less than it had been two months earlier. By truncating the story Logevall underestimates the extent to which the decision were made incrementally. The fact that they moved step-by-step made it easier for them to hope that each successive measure might bring success.

Logevall also underplays the constant military pressure on Johnson to escalate and McNamara's role in deceiving both the President and the military about what each other believed (the military leaders were also less than candid in telling the President what they thought would be necessary for victory).[13]

Throughout the period those who opposed escalation called for a political solution. Although they were often vague as to what this meant, the general outlines were clear and agreed upon by both opponents and proponents of the war: a coalition government would be established in South Vietnam, American forces would withdraw, and eventually Vietnam would be re-unified. There were different estimates as to how long it would be before the Communists dominated the South Vietnamese government and joined with the North. Pessimists thought it would be months, optimists expected the neutralized regime to last at least two years and maybe five or even ten. More importantly, the optimists expected the unified and Communist regime of Vietnam to act like Tito's Yugoslavia; the pessimists saw it as Castro's Cuba. I think it is clear that the latter underestimated the strength of Vietnamese nationalism and the hostility between Vietnam and China, which gave the US more leverage than it realized. But Johnson and his advisers refused to consider the arguments of the optimists and actively discouraged

members of the administration from exploring the issue. While no one can be sure who was right, Johnson's pessimism would have been hard to shake.

Did those who called for a political solution really see neutralization as only temporary or were they fooling themselves? The French and perhaps the British seem to have understood where their approach would take them, but the views of the American opponents of escalation are not entirely clear, and Logevall does not focus on this important point. It is not without interest that these people did not publicly argue that a unified, communist Vietnam would not harm fundamental US interests. I suspect that just as the perceived costs of defeat drove Johnson and his colleagues to see some chance of victory, so the perceptions that the war could not be won drove the opponents to see at least "a glimmer of hope" (p. 85) for lasting neutralization. No one was being entirely honest with others because they were not—and could not be—entirely honest with themselves.

Logevall's argument for contingency must be rejected by those who see US policy as structurally determined, whether by the requirements of a bipolar world or by the needs of the US politico-economic system. Kenneth Waltz, the father of structural realism (also known as neorealism), need not be disturbed: he argues that "overreactions" (which is what he considers Vietnam to be) are characteristic of bipolar systems and that his theory cannot predict specific foreign policies.[14] But those who believe that the superpower competition left the participants with little room to maneuver will have to see the war as necessary, if unfortunate.[15] Similarly, those who see a dominant role of domestic sources of foreign policy, most obviously strong revisionists, also must reject the notion that something so important as the Vietnam war can be attributed to a President's views and personality.[16] Arguments based on economic interest and the necessity for keeping the world open for American capitalism face the same problem as do those based on the imperatives of the international system: if the domino theory is incorrect and was rejected by many informed observers, then it is hard to see how the war could have been required by the needs of the system, be it capitalist or international.

But was the war really contingent? Or, to put it differently, what might have happened to have led to a negotiated settlement? Logevall points to one intriguing possibility: if the domestic and foreign opponents of the war had brought their objections to the surface instead of holding back out of either misplaced loyalty or fear

of Johnson's reaction, things might have been different. If Mansfield had called for Senate hearings, George Ball had resigned, or the British government had made known its opposition, Johnson might have been deterred. Hanoi also could have made a contribution by an adroit diplomatic campaign. But Logevall's account undermines McNamara's recent claim that if he and the President had understood the NLF's proposal better, had realized that there was no second attack in the Gulf of Tonkin, or had known that the attack on Pleiku was a local initiative rather than being ordered by the North, they would not have escalated.[17]

As long as the administration's leaders held the views they did, the outcome could not have been different. Negotiations and a political solution would have brought a Communist regime to power in South Vietnam, surely before Johnson completed his expected second term, if not his first, and this result was unacceptable, either because of the personal humiliation it represented (as Logevall argues) or because of the foreign policy consequences that were expected (as I believe). In the former case, additional information and better analysis would have been ineffective; only overwhelming political pressure would have sufficed. In the latter case, we are dealing with inherently uncertain predictions about the future, and these stem from deep-seated beliefs if not instincts that cannot readily be changed. Johnson was explicit in his rejection of any approach that would lead to what he called "surrender on the installment plan." He would have accepted this only if he had had very different beliefs about what its international consequences would have been, and these turn only in part on the question of how long the interval between US withdrawal and Communist control would have been. His expectations that even a delayed defeat would embolden the PRC and USSR, inspire revolutionaries, and dismay allies were reinforced by his personality. Johnson then did indeed "choose war," but given who he and his advisors were, it is hard to imagine a different outcome. "Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past." [18] In the end, Gelb and Betts are right that "the system worked" in the sense of developing a typical compromise among the competing views and values held by the domestic actors, with a large role for the preferences and beliefs of the President, misguided as they may have been.[19]

Notes

- [1]. James Fearon, "Rationalist Explanations for War," *International Organization*, vol. 49, Summer 1995; Erik Gartzke, "War Is in the Error Term," *International Organization*, vol. 53, Summer 1999, pp. 567-88.
- [2]. Geoffrey Blainey, *The Causes of War* (New York: Free Press, 1973).
- [3]. The classic argument for the importance of domestic incentives is Daniel Ellsberg, *Papers on the War* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972).
- [4]. Quoted in Clark Clifford, *Counsel to the President* (New York: Random House, 1991), p. 417.
- [5]. For the argument that the bold Soviet policies of the late 1970s, especially in Africa, were a product of their reading of how US domestic opinion reacted to the defeat in Vietnam, not to the events in Vietnam themselves, see Ted Hopf *Peripheral Visions: Deterrence Theory and Soviet Foreign Policy in the Third World, 1965-1990* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994); for greater stress on Soviet perceptions of the "correlation of forces," see Andrew Bennett, *Condemned to Repetition: The Rise, Fall, and Reprise of Soviet-Russian Military Interventionism, 1973-1996* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999); for the claim that the post-Vietnam events vindicate the domino theory, see Michael Lind, *Vietnam: The Necessary War* (New York: Free Press, 1999).
- [6]. Robert Jervis, "Domino Beliefs and Strategic Behavior," in Jervis and Jack Snyder, eds., *Dominoes and Bandwagons* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 20-50; Jervis, *System Effects: Complexity in Political and Social Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), pp. 165-76, 266-71.
- [7]. See, for example, Ernest May, "The Nature of Foreign Policy: the Calculated vs. the Axiomatic," *Daedalus*, No. 91, Fall 1962, pp. 653-67.
- [8]. Robert Dallek, *Flawed Giant: Lyndon Johnson and His Times, 1961-1973* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); Blema Steinberg, *Shame and Humiliation: Presidential Decision Making on Vietnam* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1996).
- [9]. The classic if disputed study is Alexander George and Juliette George, *Woodrow Wilson and Colonel House: A Personality Study* (New York: John Day, 1956).
- [10]. Patrick Morgan, "Saving Face for the Sake of Deterrence," in Robert Jervis, Richard Ned Lebow, and Janice Gross Stein, *Psychology and Deterrence* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), chapter 6.
- [11]. For a thorough discussion of how incorrect beliefs can lead to war, see Stephen Van Evera, *The Causes of War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999).
- [12]. For a general discussion of this psychological propensity, see Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), p. 128-42.
- [13]. H.R. McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty: Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Lies That Led to Vietnam* (New York: Harper Collins, 1997).
- [14]. Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, Ma: Addison Wesley, 1979), chapter 8; Waltz, "International Politics is Not Foreign Policy," *Security Studies*, vol. 6, Autumn 1996, pp. 54-57
- [15]. See, for example, Lindt, *Vietnam: The Necessary War*.
- [16]. See, for example, Gabriel Kolko, *The Politics of War: The World and United States Foreign Policy, 1943-1945* (New York: Random House, 1986).
- [17]. Robert McNamara, *Argument Without End* (New York: Public Affairs Press, 1999), which is a fascinating but fundamentally misleading account that reveals that McNamara still has as much trouble understanding opposing viewpoints as he did when he was Secretary of Defense. The book seems to accept a great deal of blame while really being, at a deeper level, self-exculpatory.
- [18]. Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (New York: International Publishers, 1969), p. 15; the participants in this symposium fastened on this quotation independently.
- [19]. Leslie Gelb with Richard Betts, *The Irony of Vietnam: The System Worked* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings, 1978).

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