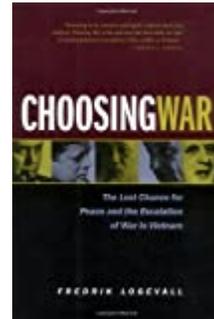




**Fredrik Logevall.** *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999. xxviii + 529 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-520-21511-5.



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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.

Had he known Michael Lind was coming, Fredrik Logevall might have called his book, *The Unnecessary War*. As it stands, *Choosing War* is the best antidote to a variety of noxious interpretations of the war, not least the notion that it was necessary. For over 400 pages of closely argued text, Logevall holds the decisions of Kennedy and Johnson up to the light, turning them this way and that in an effort to understand their logic. And what he finds, over and over again, is that their logic lay not in the significance of Vietnam for American national security, nor the working out of a U.S. commitment to self-determination, nor indeed in any good or honorable intention. Rather, the ruling premises were domestic politics and the fear of personal humiliation.

Logevall begins with a question Walt Rostow once called "sophomoric." Why was the U.S. in Vietnam? It is a question undergraduate students continue to ask – often even after taking a course designed to answer it. At the heart of the question is a desire not only for historical explanation but for justification. The overwhelming

disparity between the means employed to fight the war and its putative ends overwhelms them, as indeed it does Logevall himself. "The certainty that this was an unnecessary war," he writes in his conclusion, "not merely in hindsight but in the context of the time, makes the astronomical costs that resulted from it that much more difficult to contemplate." (412)

The chronology of *Choosing War* is confined to what its author calls "the Long 1964," the period between mid 1963 and early 1965, and its context, unlike most accounts of the war, is international. An international approach is dictated not only by the current historical resistance to American solipsism but more specifically by U.S. policymakers' constant claim that "standing firm" in Vietnam was essential to maintaining credibility abroad. If the claim was false and moreover known to be false, then how are historians to understand U.S. failure to deal with Vietnam through negotiations rather than force?

As Logevall explains in an admirably concise preface, *Choosing War* pursues three connected themes: in the period under consideration, events were fluid; nevertheless, the U.S. rigidly refused opportunities to negotiate; finally, the voices of powerful people opposed to escalation, domestically and internationally, failed to act forcefully on their convictions. "The first theme suggests that the American war in Vietnam was an unnecessary war;

the second and third themes help explain why it nevertheless occurred.” (xvi)

All three themes were present in the period with which Logevall begins his narrative. In the late summer of 1963, both the French and the British had expressed their concern over U.S. policy and their preference for a political solution to what was already taking on the shape of a U.S. war in Vietnam. Moreover, the governments of both South Vietnam and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam indicated a readiness to pursue a negotiated settlement. As in similar circumstances later in the book, Logevall asks two sets of questions: why did the U.S. respond so negatively to each initiative and why did not those opposing the US course of action press their views with greater force? Obviously, responsibility for escalation rests with the U.S., but the quiescence of America’s allies created the “permissive context” within which the pursuit of military victory worked could occur. The Kennedy administration response to De Gaulle, the British and the DRV was entirely negative. As for South Vietnam, efforts were begun to find a regime more amenable to American direction.

Moderate domestic commentators, such as Walter Lippmann, Hans Morgenthau, and the editorial writers for Newsweek, U.S. News & World Report and the New York Times all expressed support for negotiations, including those which might yield neutralization of Vietnam. No doubt the right wing Republicans and Democrats would have charged betrayal but if Kennedy and his advisers had been interested in an early and honorable solution, substantial political support was available. Instead, the State Department anxiously reported regularly all the “withdrawal talk” and instead of using it, the administration sought to combat it. Logevall does not exaggerate the degree of domestic opposition to Kennedy’s Vietnam policy. Most skeptics, in and out of Congress, “were still focused more on salvaging a bad situation than on initiating immediate disengagement,” he writes. Instead of pressing their criticism, they allowed themselves to be co-opted, to give the administration the rope it claimed to need.

Because Logevall does such a good job demonstrating administration lack of interest in negotiation and its concomitant commitment to victory, his conviction that, in his presumptive second term, Kennedy would have pursued negotiations, comes as a surprise. He bases his case on an appreciation of Kennedy’s character, his behavior during the Cuban Missile crisis and his policy in Laos. Kennedy was, Logevall argues, more flexible and

less insecure than Johnson, more worldly. He had faced down those who urged stronger military action in Cuba and had resisted the advice of those, like Eisenhower, who sought a military solution in Laos. The most that can be charged against Kennedy is that he delayed diplomatic action until after the elections, an understandable if morally dubious choice. What he might have done after an electoral victory, Logevall believes, is quite another matter. Historians and journalists convinced that Kennedy’s post-election policies would have been much like those Johnson adopted “do not persuade.” (74)

I am myself more persuaded by the case Logevall himself builds for Kennedy’s rigidity in Vietnam than by his counter-factual case for a Kennedy withdrawal. That Kennedy was capable of disagreeing with advisers whose policy might have resulted in nuclear war does not speak to what he might have done in Vietnam, where continuing the war and yet avoiding a clash with either China or Russia was a viable policy choice. Negotiations in Laos, essential to avoiding the humiliating collapse of the U.S. backed regime, resulted in an agreement quickly violated by the U.S. as well as by the Pathet Lao and thus a deepening war; provocative naval action along the North Vietnamese coast had been approved by Kennedy, though it was Johnson who reaped the dubious benefit of the Tonkin Gulf “incident.” The most telling evidence against Logevall’s thesis, however, is the coup against Diem. The feelers the Diem regime put out to Hanoi provided a serious opportunity for U.S. disengagement. It was Kennedy’s decision, as it would later be Johnson’s, not only to ignore but to actively block South Vietnamese efforts to end the war. A November 1964 interdepartmental working group memo on Vietnam puts the decision to prevent negotiation very directly: “We will oppose any independent South Vietnamese move to negotiate.” (388)

The bulk of *Choosing War* is devoted to a detailed discussion of Johnson’s Vietnam policy from November 1963 through the summer of 1965 with a particular focus on the period immediately following the 1964 election. It was in these months when Johnson, freed at last of the fear of a Republican victory, might have chosen disengagement and instead chose war. It is an endlessly discouraging account. Time and again Johnson flirts with peace; time and again he rejects the possibility. Because the reader knows what happens next, the cumulative effect of Logevall’s account is to restore, in full force, an anger that, for those of us old enough to remember the period, is never very far beneath the surface; an anger alternating with sadness.

By January, 1965, with the exception of Australia, the administration was isolated internationally on the issue of Vietnam and under steady attack from critics in and out of Congress. Why, then, the Americanization of the war? Logevall finds the answer in a single word: credibility. It was, however, credibility at three different but mutually reinforcing levels: national, political and personal. Against the evidence, the conviction persisted that national prestige lay in standing "firm" in Vietnam and that the Democratic Party would suffer from any shift in long-standing commitments to an anti-communist South Vietnam. Equally basic, were the personal reputations of Johnson and even his most skeptical advisers. McNamara and Bundy had for over three years "counseled the need to stand firm in the war and to go against that now would be to expose themselves to potential humiliation and to threaten their careers." (389) The major responsibility, Logevall insists, lies with Johnson, who "saw the war as a test of his own manliness." (393) The answer to the question, why Vietnam, in the end seems to be a very old one. In a private conversation with some journalists who asked him to explain, Johnson is reported to have "unzipped his fly, drew out his substantial organ, and declared, 'This is why!'" (Robert Dallek, *Flawed Giant: Lyndon Johnson and His Times, 1961-1963*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1998, p. 491). To be sure, without the "permissive context" provided by the failure "of western proponents of a political solution in Vietnam to challenge the administration in Washington directly with their views on the conflict," Johnson's manhood might not have carried such weight. Still, Johnson was the president; he alone had the power to act. Yet, to some extent, Logevall's case for Johnson's primary responsibility seems to rest on the counter-factual case he makes for a Kennedy policy of withdrawal. Would Kennedy really have followed the alternative Vietnam scenario laid out by Hans Morgenthau in January 1965? Logevall does not persuade.

One need not accept the argument on Kennedy, however, to appreciate Logevall's overall achievement in this book. He has, as he intended, restored a sense of contingency to the decisions taken in this period. He allows us to follow the incremental decisions made for short-term, dishonorable gains which led, with a false sense of inexorability, to full-scale war. Why these decisions were seen as gains requires another step, or several. Logevall seems to limit his understanding of contingency to the personality and actions of individuals, hence the what-if case for Kennedy. But there is a broader context, no less contingent, that needs to be considered. For this task, the work of historians of the cold war such as Lloyd Gardner and Michael Hogan, along with historians of the Vietnamese side of the story such as Mark Bradley, Robert Brigham and David Marr is required. There is no contradiction between an assertion of presidential agency and an acknowledgment of the systems (not god-given, but themselves historically produced) within which such agency operates. Systems, as well as individuals, are subject to pressure (this after all was the point of the anti-war movement). We may not make our history just as we please, but we do make it. In a recent column, Richard Reeves puts the foreign policy problem of the country at the end of the century this way: "we can't figure out where America ends and the world begins. So we are willing and usually able to take on the whole world - often for no particular reason or for reasons we will figure out and explain later, after the deed is done." The question Reeves poses today, do "we control our power or [does] our power controls us.," might not still be with us had it been posed fifty years ago.

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