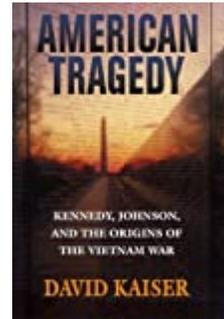


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



**David Kaiser.** *American Tragedy: Kennedy, Johnson, and the Origins of the Vietnam War.* Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2000. 558 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-00225-8.



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Note: H-Diplo recently ran a roundtable in which they reviewed David Kaiser's *American Tragedy: Kennedy, Johnson, and the Origins of the Vietnam War*. The roundtable participants are Lloyd Gardner, George C. Herring, and Edwin Moise. This review is part of that roundtable.

It used to be said that Samuel Johnson held back the Romantic Movement by the force of his personality. David Kaiser believes that JFK held back Vietnam by the force of his skepticism. Surrounded by an outer circle of bureaucrats who had churned out war plans for defeating the Communists in Southeast Asia since Eisenhower's day, and an inner guard composed of "GI" generation top level advisers with an unyielding faith in themselves, Kennedy remained the sole barrier between these powerful forces and the plunge into the canopied jungles of Vietnam with their myriad hidden dangers. Secretary of State Dean Rusk said as much during the fateful July, 1965 discussions about sending General Westmoreland enough men to do the job right. "If we had met the challenge posed in 1961 by sending 50,000 men to South Vietnam, Hanoi may have hesitated to proceed with its actions.... We should probably have committed ourselves heavier in 1961." (p. 475) Not privy to the key debates in 1961, President Johnson was especially sensitive to the arguments of his (inherited) advisers. Not sure in his own

mind exactly how he would maneuver the situation, on the other hand, JFK apparently never confided his doubts to Johnson, never tugged at his sleeve to say, "Lyndon, watch out for Rusk and McNamara, they're hot to go."

It probably wouldn't have made a difference anyway, according to Kaiser. With Johnson in the White House, "Firmness in Southeast Asia had become what Kennedy had never allowed it to be: the centerpiece of administration foreign policy." (p. 329) Gone, taken from the nation by Oswald's bullet, was Kennedy's promising beginning of a new era highlighted by the test ban treaty; also gone was a greater understanding of Third World countries beyond the strangulating confines of Cold War preconceptions. "The first visible shift occurred in December 1963, when Johnson appointed Ambassador to Mexico Tom Mann – a conservative, pro-business Texan – Undersecretary of State for Latin American Affairs, a job Mann held under Eisenhower." (p. 312). LBJ liked to keep things simple. He disliked even meeting foreign leaders. Where Kennedy enjoyed the nuances of international diplomacy, LBJ asked only that the generals keep things quiet – until after the 1964 election. Speaking with the Joint Chiefs as early as March, 1964, the new president laid down his rules of engagement for Vietnam:

Congress and the country did not want war – that war at this time would have a tremendous effect on the

approaching Presidential political campaign and might perhaps keep the Democrats from winning in November. He said that he thought it would be much better to keep out of any war until December...The political situation in December would be stabilized. (p. 304)

These notes of the JCS meeting were taken by General Wallace Greene of the Marine Corps. More about that later. Kaiser thus lays out a powerful case that the war was not Kennedy's legacy, but Johnson's own doing. Unlike Oliver Stone (one of those to whom the book is dedicated), however, Kennedy's most trusted advisers play a crucial role. LBJ is not alone. Halberstam's "Best and Brightest" are not let off the hook. (Indeed, Robert McNamara in particular is painted in much darker colors than other accounts of the origins of involvement.)

Great emphasis throughout the book is placed upon the theories of William Strauss and Neil Howe, who posit an interpretation of recent American history based upon generations. For Kaiser's interpretation, their notion of a "GI" generation imbued with unflinching confidence in their own purposes and programs suits very well. As does the idea of a succeeding "Silent Generation," whose criticisms were ignored by their elders as uninformed opinions. All the more suitable for an interpretation that posits Kennedy as an exception to the rule. JFK was a member of the "GI" generation, but he stood aside always – as if (during the ExCom deliberations in the Cuban missile crisis) he were watching himself and the others – detached and contemplative. True, his somewhat diffident manner, and cautious responses to the civil rights movement, for example, along with a "relatively poor record with Congress," have troubled historians. "Yet these qualities combined with his personal grace also enabled him to maintain his emotional equilibrium during three very turbulent years of American history – and far more important, helped the vast majority of his fellow citizens to maintain theirs as well." (p.266)

It is along in here that historians less committed to Kennedy "exceptionalism" might begin to have difficulties with Kaiser's account of how the tragedy occurred. There is very little about how Kennedy came to power, as strident critic of Eisenhower's supposed lassitude. The theme of the 1960 campaign, it will be remembered was, "Who Lost Cuba?" Adopting Lincolnian rhetoric, Kennedy pictured the world as half-slave and half-free, with the balance teetering ever more towards the "Communists." Kennedy's fascination with counter-insurgency and the Green Berets, his famous speech at the Berlin Wall, his promise that he would pay any price

to win the struggle for freedom – were these designed to help his fellow citizens maintain their equilibrium? One need not be an Eisenhower revisionist to ponder the rhetorical objectives of the two presidents. As for Southeast Asia itself, Kaiser succeeds in demonstrating that JFK successfully held back the warhawks from going to war in Laos. In Averell Harriman he apparently found a man who instinctively understood what Kennedy wanted – and what he wanted to avoid. Vietnam was different. Ho Chi Minh was far bigger on the world scene than Sihanouk or Souvanna Phouma. While the dominoists could try to build a case for Laos or Cambodia, world attention had been focused on Ho's revolution since September, 1945, when he raised a "red flag" (figuratively at least) over Hanoi. He could not take a defeat in Vietnam, JFK confided to counselors, like Ike slipped out of Korea. Did he ever really change his mind on that crucial point?

In the dramatic months of 1963, Vietnam suddenly filled American television screens. The first war to be fought in living color. Buddhist monks burned themselves to death. Rumors flew about secret negotiations with the North. Would President Diem ever wake up to the destructive path he was on? In 1954, John Foster Dulles had made it clear that the United States would not stand by and see Vietnam "go Communist" by any means – including the elections scheduled by the Geneva Accords. Later, Henry Kissinger would say much the same thing about Chile. A nation foolhardy enough to choose that path – well, what would happen, would happen. In 1963 it was a coup. The idea made Kennedy queasy, to be sure. At times he felt his government was coming apart over Vietnam. "And in this case the President's equivocal position reflected a fundamental truth: that Diem's fate was really in Diem's own hands." (p.265) Yes and no, another might conclude. Diem's years in power had never really demonstrated his suitability for the task of nation-building. But could anyone have done better – given what the internal and external constraints were on the idea of a South Vietnamese nation? When the French left, the Americans moved in. Diem always chafed at his assigned role. He might be celebrated, as he was, as the George Washington of South Vietnam. But what would Washington have had to offer the people if the Marquis de Lafayette headed a MACA for Paris after the war? The comparison is obviously far-fetched, intentionally so, because any comparison of what Diem was, and what he faced, with Washington and the first new nation is far-fetched.

Kennedy's "equivocal position" was a dire threat to

the Vietnamese military, many of whom had by this time received training in the United States. Were they to suffer a defeat because the Americans had lost faith in Diem? We need to know much more about the internal debates among that group, what they imagined Washington would do, how they hoped to avoid forfeiting their new status in the international legions being trained in the USA. In the end, of course, it became a case of “Let Henry do it.” Ambassador Lodge, as Kaiser tells us, was a headstrong man, not given to listening to the parsimonious caviling of the timid back in Washington. We are launched on a course, Lodge would declaim, from which there is no turning back. So he was, and so they were.

Kennedy’s shock at Diem’s ultimate fate was genuine. A fellow Catholic, the Vietnamese ally of the United States had paid a terrible price for his errors. I remain convinced that JFK’s horror at the death of Diem was at least in part a recognition that now the United States, and he, personally, bore a profound moral responsibility for the fate of the successor regime in Saigon. To think otherwise, I would also argue, is to see Kennedy as a cynical manipulator on a grand scale. Garry Wills has written of the “Kennedy Imprisonment” – and perhaps that was the real legacy that fell to Lyndon Johnson. LBJ often spoke, even in the heady days of the Great Society, of driving into the White House through those iron gates that locked behind him – a prisoner of sorts. Kaiser and previous historians such as Fred Logevall have demonstrated, to my satisfaction, that there was no great pressure on Johnson to expand the war, in Congress or in

Allied capitals. The “GI” generation, with its somewhat Freudian implications, provides an important insight into the mindset of the New Frontiersmen who manned the watchtowers of freedom scanning the earth and sky for the dreaded enemy’s minions around the world. If not, perhaps, as he frequently asserts, the first book to put Vietnam into its full international and domestic context, “American Tragedy” is indeed full of new research in both printed and archival materials. As he acknowledges in his introduction, however, the Foreign Relations series constitutes the bedrock of any study of Vietnam. However much we complain about all the other lapses of the government in meeting its obligations to make the record public, the series is unique in the world, and the Historical Office of the State Department deserves praise for its high standards of professionalism. Among other sources, Kaiser used the Wallace Greene Papers at the Marine Corps Historical Center in Washington to great advantage. Greene’s notes of JCS meetings with Johnson are often revealing, and do show LBJ as determined not to lose. I am not going to be the president who lost Vietnam, LBJ vowed in the aftermath of the coup and Kennedy’s death. The line could have been taken from the speech Kennedy planned to deliver in Dallas, on November 22, 1963.

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