

---

# Review Essays

---

## Choosing Tragedy in Vietnam

by Francis J. Gavin

*American Tragedy: Kennedy, Johnson, and the Origins of the Vietnam War.* By David E. Kaiser. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000. 576 pp. \$29.95.)

*Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam.* By Fredrik Logevall. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999. 443 pp. \$35.00.)

Historical analysis, at its best, tries to answer two fundamental questions about the past: why did certain events happen, and what agent or agents, be they persons, institutions, or impersonal forces, caused them to happen? This may sound like an easy task, but given the complexity of social and political interactions, ever changing over time, it is nearly impossible. The assignment of causality is further complicated by the natural human desire for the past to make sense and have a deeper logic. Hence, historians are expected to speak with authority, impose order, and discover patterns among infinitely varied and seemingly random human experiences. Finally, consumers of history invariably demand value judgments about the agents of historical change. Was John F. Kennedy an inspirational leader or a capricious scoundrel? Was industrial capitalism exploitative and polluting or the greatest force for human advancement? Such moral demands on the historian are made in the (perhaps naive) belief that by understanding the past we can avoid its mistakes in the future and find some sense of justice and reason where, at first glance, none exists.

Nowhere is this desire for understanding, order, and judgment stronger than when the origins of wars are at issue. Wars often seem to be entirely irrational acts. Innocent people are killed, wealth is destroyed, and rarely (in modern times) does any belligerent nation, even the winner, emerge better off than it was before the conflict. Why, then, do nations fight each other, and how can individual policymakers “choose” to risk or provoke war when to do so flies in the face of the national interest?

---

**Francis J. Gavin** is an assistant professor at the LBJ School of Public Affairs at the University of Texas at Austin. He would like to thank Andrew Erdmann and Moira O'Brien for their helpful suggestions.

---

© 2001 Foreign Policy Research Institute. Published by Elsevier Science Limited.

Consider the historiography on the origins of the First World War. Since no convenient culprit such as a Hitler, Napoleon, or Stalin could be blamed for that tragic conflict, scores of historians have focused instead on impersonal forces beyond the power of human agency to control. Shifts in the balance of power, misperceptions, arms races, imperial ideologies, simmering domestic political forces, and even military railroad schedules have all been blamed for World War I, implying that policymakers were helpless to stop them from pushing Europe toward an inevitable or inadvertent conflagration. It all seemed as if Sir Edward Grey, Tsar Nicholas II, and Kaiser Wilhelm II, not to mention their dozens of advisers and the millions of citizens who cheered the declarations of war, did not want to fight, but were in no position to prevent war.

Many historians have likewise advanced structural explanations, broadly defined, to account for U.S. military policy in Vietnam, a war that almost everyone agrees was a debacle. Did America's domino theory about states' falling to communism, or the need to reinforce the "credibility" of Cold War commitments, or a racist ideology, or a capitalist quest for new markets, or some domestic political dynamic somehow "cause" U.S. military involvement in Southeast Asia? All these and other impersonal forces have been suggested as the key to understanding what otherwise seems inexplicable—how an enormously popular and powerful president, seconded by the wisest and most talented men in the land, could initiate a tragic conflict in the very years when the Cold War appeared to be entering a more stable and less dangerous phase.

There is a certain appeal to these structural, impersonal explanations for war. The idea that a panoply of intelligent and democratically elected or duly appointed statesmen could consciously undertake, with the support of their citizens, actions that would bring the nation and their own political careers near to ruin is very unsettling. Furthermore, to focus on impersonal historical forces makes the evaluative part of the historian's job simpler. Putting capitalism, racism, or train schedules in the dock is much more comfortable than indicting Dean Rusk as a war criminal.

But structural, impersonal explanations simply cannot adequately explain U.S. military escalation in Southeast Asia. As an economic endeavor, the Vietnam War was an obvious disaster, begetting a decade of stagflation and decline. There was no real market worth fighting for in Southeast Asia, and no natural resource worth the cost. Japan, on whose economic behalf it is often claimed we fought the war, had already lost two more important markets (China and Russia) and reoriented its economy toward the American market with tremendous success. If racism were to blame, then why did the United States not insert ground troops or initiate massive strategic bombing campaigns in Africa during the Cold War? The credibility argument is also unconvincing, because America's European allies consistently *opposed* escalation, and even their fears of the Soviet Union were declining dramatically in the 1960s.

## Tragic Choices

These and other impersonal forces may well have played a role in America's policy in Southeast Asia, either as motivations or justifications. But as David Kaiser and especially Fredrik Logevall reveal, there was much more room for "contingency" and choice than previous histories have allowed. Obviously, the global Cold War against communism and the particular fears of its spread in the postcolonial world framed the options available to U.S. policymakers. However, both *Choosing War* and *American Tragedy* systematically undermine the argument that America's military escalation in Vietnam was in any way inevitable or necessary. Kaiser and Logevall even rewrite the traditional timelines of the U.S. descent into Vietnam, and in the process reassess the causal weight of the two events previously seen as key to America's military escalation: the overthrow of South Vietnamese president Ngo Dinh Diem in the fall of 1963 and the decision to send U.S. Marines to Da Nang in the spring of 1965. It has often been argued that the Kennedy administration's approval of the coup against Diem irrevocably bound the United States to supporting an increasingly hopeless struggle against the Viet Cong. But Logevall and Kaiser convincingly demonstrate that while this event was important, it was not determinative, and numerous opportunities existed to shift American policy away from increased military commitment throughout 1964. Similarly, both authors underplay the importance of the much-studied July 1965 discussions within the administration about escalating the conflict in Vietnam. They demonstrate that the decision for war had been taken much earlier, during the weeks and months after Johnson's landslide victory in the 1964 elections.

Fredrik Logevall's *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam* is a major scholarly work that will become the touchstone for any future discussion of the origins of America's military escalation in Vietnam. The book is well written, accessible, and based on a wide array of new sources that place Vietnam policy in an international context. Logevall's concept of the "long 1964" (roughly from August 1963 through the summer of 1965) also provides a useful way to examine one of the great counterfactual questions of the Cold War: how would U.S. policy in Vietnam have evolved had Kennedy not been assassinated? Logevall's nuanced answer departs from both extremes in the "what if JFK had lived" debate. Kennedy was not committed to escalation after his government encouraged a coup against Diem; there was still enough room to maneuver for a negotiated withdrawal. On the other hand, Logevall does not believe that Kennedy had definitely decided to pull out of Vietnam completely. American policy would have been different, and escalation less likely, but beyond that it is unclear exactly what policies Kennedy would have pursued in 1964 and 1965 had he lived.

As it happened, Logevall contends that the Johnson administration's

decision to go to war was the result of a series of discrete choices made by top American policymakers, and those choices were not forced on either the Kennedy or Johnson administration by domestic political pressures. Following the assassination of Kennedy, and especially after Johnson's own electoral landslide, the Democratic administration had a great deal of room to maneuver and in fact was more free than ever to shape American public opinion on Vietnam. Nor were Vietnam policies the distorted product of bureaucratic politics. The key people involved in those choices did not fool themselves. They understood that achieving victory in Vietnam would be extremely difficult even in the best-case scenarios (an admission made by Robert S. McNamara in his latest apologia).<sup>1</sup> The policymakers pursued escalation despite what they knew to be long odds against meaningful victory. Indeed, many people outside of the executive branch of the U.S. government, including important senators, most elite journalists, academics, and America's allies, all thought that escalation was a terrible idea. But not only did their warnings go unheeded, the Johnson administration went to great lengths to muzzle, muffle, or discount dissenting voices. Perhaps the

---

**The key people understood that victory in Vietnam would be extremely difficult.**

---

most depressing of Logevall's arguments is that the most urgent task facing the United States during the "long 1964" was *not* defeating the Viet Cong or North Vietnam, but preventing the government of *South* Vietnam from ending the war. One of the terrible ironies of the Diem coup is that both the Minh and Khanh governments that followed seemed more inclined to pursue negotiations with the North than had Diem. The Johnson administration desperately wanted a stable government that would enthusiastically fight the Viet Cong. At the same time, no real Saigon government could

survive for long if it was too closely associated with the United States and its policies. The Johnson administration eventually ended this dilemma when it shifted American policy away from stabilizing the South Vietnamese government toward escalating employment of U.S. military power.

There are other surprises in Logevall's thoughtful book. Senator Mike Mansfield and especially George Ball at the State Department are taken to task for not articulating their concerns about escalation more forcefully when opportunities arose. Ball, one of the heroes of Kaiser's account, is revealed by Logevall to be an ambitious schemer who willingly played the role of devil's advocate but never made a real effort to steer U.S. policy away from escalation. Furthermore, *Choosing War* paints a picture of American foreign policymakers as men obsessed with undermining French efforts to bring about negotiations. The Kennedy and Johnson administrations' almost pathological distrust of Charles de Gaulle prevented the United States from pursuing

<sup>1</sup> See Bruce Kuklick, "McNamara's Struggle for Understanding," *Orbis*, Winter 2000, pp. 166–74, a review of McNamara's *Argument Without End*.

several respectable avenues out of the conflict. *Choosing War* proves that the costs of Franco-American acrimony were very high.

David Kaiser's *American Tragedy: Kennedy, Johnson, and the Origins of the Vietnam War*, by contrast to Logevall's, is merely a good book. Kaiser effectively connects U.S. policy toward Laos with developments in Vietnam and gives a far more detailed account of military operations in Vietnam than does Logevall. He also makes an original argument to the effect that the incrementalism that characterized U.S. escalation was dictated by logistical constraints rather than the limited-war strategies supposedly associated with flexible response. Kaiser is far less restrained than Logevall on the "what if JFK had lived" counterfactual. For Kaiser, Kennedy alone tore off the blinders imposed by his generation's worldview to recognize that South Vietnam was not worth heavy American casualties.

While *American Tragedy* covers much of the same ground as Logevall's study and posits many of the same arguments, it has some shortcomings, not least a lack of humility. Kaiser claims to have "provided by far the most thorough and best-documented account yet of the American decision to go to war," but a footnote comparison makes it clear that Logevall would have been more justified in that boast. Logevall also does a better job of making a "thorough attempt to place the issues of Vietnam and Laos within a broader international and domestic context," though it is Kaiser who makes that claim (p. 7). In any case, it is probably asking for trouble to compare oneself, as Kaiser does, to Thucydides.

Such self-promotion only makes genuine flaws less excusable. For instance, Kaiser lays most of the blame for the Vietnam War, after Johnson, at the foot of Dwight D. Eisenhower. This seems unfair, since Eisenhower essentially inherited a U.S. commitment to Vietnam that began in 1950, when the Truman administration decided to recognize the government of Bao Dai and provide massive assistance to the French military effort in Vietnam. Furthermore, that commitment must be seen in the context of the early and mid-1950s, when Japan was still weak, the Korean Peninsula was explosive, and the United States was pressing France to accept the distasteful medicine of West German rearmament. None of those factors was as potent by the time Johnson came to power. While Eisenhower's policies were not beyond reproach, he did in the end avoid a war in Southeast Asia, and the restraint he demonstrated during the 1954 Dien Bien Phu crisis would have served the country well during the "long 1964."

Kaiser likewise writes about Eisenhower's nuclear policy as if he were unaware of the scholarship that provides a more nuanced view of the New Look,<sup>2</sup> and on several occasions confuses contingency plans for policy. The

<sup>2</sup> For an excellent analysis of Eisenhower's complex and evolving ideas of nuclear weapons while president, see Andrew Erdmann, "'War No Longer Has Any Logic Whatever': Dwight D. Eisenhower and the Thermonuclear Revolution," in *Cold War Statesmen Confront the Bomb: Nuclear Diplomacy since 1945*, ed. John Lewis Gaddis

mere existence of plans, either to use nuclear weapons in Southeast Asia or to pull troops out of South Vietnam, does not mean that they constituted the actual policy of the administration involved. During the 1920s and 1930s, the United States even had contingency plans for wars against the United Kingdom and Canada, but those plans hardly reflected true policy. As Eisenhower himself often pointed out (citing Helmuth von Moltke the elder), at the time of decision “plans are nothing, but planning is everything.”<sup>3</sup>

On balance, however, Kaiser has written a compelling and important study that has already provoked much discussion. At a time when historical examination of high-level foreign policymaking is held in disrepute in some circles and political scientists dominate scholarly discussions of international relations, we should be grateful for *American Tragedy* and *Choosing War*. Both reveal how detailed historical work can bring to life the contingent and time-bound nature of policymaking and the sovereignty of policymakers, however imperfect, in the face of impersonal forces.

### **The Discipline of Responsibility**

In fact, it is just that conclusion that renders Kaiser’s and Logevall’s accounts of American military escalation in Vietnam so deeply disturbing, and for reasons that go beyond the death, destruction, and injustice that besmirch all wars. Pursuing a military solution in South Vietnam was not in America’s national interest, as realists such as George Kennan, Walter Lippmann, and Hans Morgenthau pointed out at the time. Kaiser and Logevall convincingly argue that the war was *not* forced on Lyndon Johnson by bureaucratic, domestic political, economic, balance-of-power, or other structural factors. Domestically, those on the far right were politically impotent. America’s Cold War policies to stabilize Western Europe and Japan had succeeded beyond the wildest hopes and dreams of leaders in the late 1940s. The Sino-Soviet split was an open secret, and the only thing preventing its full fruition was U.S. policy in Vietnam. Soviet foreign policy was a shambles, and China was entering the chaotic period of the Cultural Revolution. Why, then, did Lyndon Johnson and his advisers “choose war,” especially since many of these same advisers had worked diligently in 1962 to avoid nuclear war during the Cuban missile crisis and helped initiate a “mini-détente” with the Soviets through the signing of the Nuclear Test-Ban Treaty in 1963? These were not, after all, mindless warmongers or ideologues.

Perhaps the answer to this apparent puzzle lies precisely in the fact that Vietnam was *not* so important. Consider that throughout the Cold War U.S. policymakers showed remarkable restraint and good judgment during crises over issues that really mattered, that is, crises in which a blunder could

and Jonathan Rosenberg (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Gen. Andrew Goodpaster, foreword to *Waging Peace: Eisenhower’s Strategy for National Security*, by Richard Immerman and Robert Bowie (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. vii.

have undermined core American interests or sparked a large-scale war with the Soviet Union. When forced to concentrate and weigh real risks, American strategists exercised what might be called a “discipline of responsibility.” Hence, in policy toward Germany and Japan, European reconstruction, arms control, the Berlin crisis, the missile crisis, and the end of the Cold War—that is, truly important questions—U.S. policymakers achieved excellent outcomes and advanced national interests while minimizing the risk of war. But for every Cuban missile crisis successfully surmounted there was a Bay of Pigs adventure utterly botched. For every test-ban or nonproliferation treaty wisely concluded, there was a half-baked coup such as that against Diem. For every stunning opening to China, there was an ill-conceived bombing of Cambodia. What is more, the same dynamic seems to be at work in U.S. foreign policy today. Since no life-or-death issues or balance-of-power constraints serve to enforce the discipline of responsibility, the United States has entered willy-nilly into military commitments in Africa, the Balkans, the Middle East, and South America for a mixture of transitory and minor reasons. Whenever the stakes are small, it seems, American foreign policy comes unhinged.

No vital Soviet or American interest was threatened in Vietnam. No matter what he claimed, LBJ had to understand that the conflict in Vietnam presented almost no danger of global war. What is amazing in retrospect is how unimportant Vietnam was to the United States, how in geopolitical terms it did not matter whether we won or lost. By 1979 the United States was allied with the Chinese, who were themselves at war with the Vietnamese. To be sure, Laos and Cambodia went communist, but the other dominoes, instead of falling, became very wealthy. The implications of *American Tragedy* and *Choosing War* are not easy to take. No great historical force compelled U.S. escalation in Vietnam, and one searches in vain for a deeper logic, larger meaning, or convenient moral to draw from the American experience there. Kaiser and Logevall, by confronting such disturbing realities head on, remind us that good history can, and perhaps should, confront deeply troubling questions that elude easy answers.

## **Radios, Rebels, and Rollback**

**by Kevin J. McNamara**

*Operation Rollback: America's Secret War behind the Iron Curtain.* By Peter Grose. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000. 256 pp. \$25.00.)

---

**Kevin J. McNamara**, a former journalist and congressional aide, is an adjunct scholar of the Foreign Policy Research Institute and associate vice president of Drexel University, Philadelphia.