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Michael H. Hunt. *Lyndon Johnson's War: America's Cold War Crusade in Vietnam, 1945-1968.* New York: Hill & Wang, 1996. ix + 146 pp. $18.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8090-5023-9; $11.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8090-1604-4.

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Michael Hunt's *Lyndon Johnson's War*, in the Hill and Wang "Critical Issue" series, is designed primarily for use in undergraduate courses, and as such fulfills its teaching mission admirably. It is highly readable, and concise, at 128 pages of text. Brevity does not substitute for richness, however. Hunt provides wonderful brief portraits of major players (like this, of Edward G. Lansdale, "An outgoing cold warrior bursting with fresh ideas, he was literally the stuff from which fiction could be made" (p. 15). And fiction did draw on Lansdale. Hunt's almost off-hand references to the broader context of U.S. policy in Vietnam, whether of McCarthyism's impact on U.S. State Department reporting, or of the devastating influence of Castro's success in Cuba on U.S. policy toward the Third World, provide more than sufficient fodder for lectures, class discussions, or independent student investigations. Although students, who rarely read the preface, will probably miss it, I also appreciated Hunt's personal note which explained his early experiences in Vietnam, and career-long choice, until now, to have "relegated Vietnam to incidental moments" (p. ix).

The structure of the book reflects what most general studies of the U.S. war in Vietnam now include. The first chapter provides an intellectual and policy context for the early decisions to commit U.S. resources to first the French, and then the U.S., struggle to create a non-Communist, European- or U.S.-oriented Vietnam. Hunt uses *The Ugly American* to demonstrate how many Americans viewed the rest of the world, and U.S. responsibility in and for that world, in the 1950s. Passing reference to *The Quiet American* serves well to argue that *The Ugly American* could be read as a hopeful tale. Students born in the post-Vietnam era have difficulty understanding that hopefulness. Having established one of his two main themes, that the Vietnam conflict was at heart a Cold War conflict, Hunt briefly surveys U.S. policy toward Vietnam from 1940 to 1958. Not surprisingly, before and during the early Cold War, Hunt finds that U.S. policy, showed more possibility of nuance than in later years, was sometimes contradictory, and only intermittently important.

The second chapter covers ground similar to most recent surveys of the Vietnam War. Hunt tells the story of Ho Chi Minh's life as a way of exploring the growth of communism in Vietnam, and how communism was the most potent force for resisting the French to 1954. Ho Chi Minh's "brocade bag," an image from a well-known Chinese story, demonstrates well that Ho Chi Minh may not have been a political theorist, but he was a skillful political strategist. Alternative ways of resisting the French are not discussed.

Hunt then returns to the United States, to stay. The third chapter provides a balanced examination of President John F. Kennedy's Indochina policy. Kennedy's "cult of toughness and his anticommunist faith" (p. 70) led him to continue taking the incremental steps which drew the United States ever closer to political and military responsibility for the situation in South Vietnam. The energetic hubris (Hunt uses the word paternalism) of Kennedy and his advisors is forcefully presented. The paternalism of the "best and brightest" was only an exaggerated version, however, of the same sentiment held since the presidency of Franklin D. Roosevelt. Washington policymakers not only knew what was best for the Vietnamese, but thought they had to implement policies on behalf of the incapable Vietnamese. Treatment of Kennedy's proposed withdrawal from Vietnam also receives a dispassionate, and ultimately skeptical look, which will please all teachers whose students believe Oliver Stone is a historian.

Finally, in Chapter Four, Lyndon B. Johnson enters, and Hunt's second theme, that Johnson, hemmed in though he may have been by the direction of U.S. policy to 1963, ultimately himself made the decisions which committed the United States to fighting the Vietnam War. The major arguments and assessments of critics and scholars again receive that careful weighing which characterizes the rest of the book. These include that Johnson was not "candid" (p. 99), was "blissfully unaware of the

dangers" (p. 101), his understanding was "obstructed" by "Cold War axioms" (p. 104), and he was "muddled in his basic policy" (p. 105). The history of the decision, first, to bomb North Vietnam and second, to send combat troops, and dissent from the decisions, are clearly explained and demonstrate that Johnson knew he was making a choice, if among unappealing options.

Chapter Five then races through what most students will wish the whole book explored. The fighting takes up a couple of paragraphs, and we're quickly on to the peace talks and Christmas bombings of the Nixon presidency. These topics all will need to be more fully explained by anyone using this book in class. The concluding section quickly makes the point all Americans need to hear reiterated, that Vietnamese and Cambodians suffered such tragedies during and after this conflict as to make the suffering of Americans, still substantial, seem almost inconsequential.

Hunt's treatment of how and why the United States fought a war in Vietnam equals most other surveys, particularly considering its length, or more appropriately, its brevity. Unfortunately, it often repeats as well the problems with much of the general literature on the American war in Vietnam. Hunt is not alone in believing that Southeast Asia before World War II "had not been even a blip on the U.S. policy radar screen" (p. 5). This assumption leads to a dissatisfying treatment of the "background" to the Vietnam conflict. The chapters (two out of five in this book) which set the context, for the important story which begins sometime after 1954, seem plagued by a myopia inverse to the one which plagued U.S. policymakers during the war. Washington policymakers from at least 1940, as Hunt convincingly demonstrates, believed nothing particularly consequential was decided in Hanoi or Saigon, but only in Washington, Beijing, and Moscow. Historians seem to believe that before World War II, nothing consequential to the future course of events in Indochina happened outside that colony, while after 1945, most of the consequential decisions were made in Hanoi and Washington, and only very rarely in Saigon.

This assumption tends to underestimate the complexity of the situation in Vietnam both before and after 1945. For example, it was by no means clear in 1945 that either Ho Chi Minh, who had after all been absent from Vietnam during most of the serious struggles of the 1930s and 1940s, or the Communists, who constructed a coalition out of necessity rather than love of pluralism, would prevail. Until recent scholarship by Americans with good access to Vietnamese records began to appear, that simplification was perhaps excusable. The now-standard surveys, whether critical or celebratory of U.S. policy, will need to be re-thought in light of this new work about debates and choices in Vietnam, north and south.

The problems in *Lyndon Johnson's War* do not stem merely from having been written one or two years too early to have taken advantage of new scholarship. The book has the same sort of split personality which often plagues the work of scholars attempting to write international history. Michael Hunt is one of the best practitioners of multi-perspective history, and has served as a model to many young scholars, like myself, embarking on this difficult task. Not all questions, however, are well served by this approach. Hunt's two questions both were more about decisions taken in Washington by people who themselves knew and understood little about Vietnam, and might well have made the same decisions even if they knew and understood more. Understanding "the war" requires understanding Vietnamese history, but in much more depth than the thumbnail sketch provided here. Understanding Johnson's decision to fight the war requires the exploration of policymakers and their deliberations done so expertly in this book. The imbalance in presentation will tend to leave students with a nuanced understanding of what happened in Washington, superficial knowledge of what happened in Hanoi, and little idea of what happened in Saigon.

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