H-Net Reviews in the Humanities & Social Sciences

David M. Barrett, ed.. *Lyndon B. Johnson's Vietnam Papers: A Documentary Collection.* College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1997. xxxiv + 869 pp. $94.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-89096-741-6.

Reviewed by Edwin Moise

Published on H-Pol (November, 1998)

David Barrett has chosen a diverse mixture of materials for *Lyndon B. Johnson's Vietnam Papers*. He includes the sorts of official reports and minutes of meetings that can also be found in *Foreign Relations of the United States*. Evidently he felt that a substantial overlap with *FRUS* was unavoidable, but he seems to have adjusted the balance of the volume to minimize the effect of the duplication. Well over half the pages are devoted to the years 1967 and 1968, for which *FRUS* volumes have not appeared and are not imminently expected. At least for now, Barrett's volume serves as a very useful preview, making conveniently available some of the important documents that will be in the FRUS volumes.

Barrett also presents more informal materials. It is very valuable to have a sampling of the advice that President Johnson was getting from various senators, from former President Dwight Eisenhower, from his close friend Abe Fortas, and others.

This is a hefty volume. Yet the problems and pressures Lyndon Johnson dealt with in regard to Vietnam were so diverse and so complex that a mere 851 pages of documents cannot give thorough coverage to most issues. The most conspicuous case of thoroughness is near the end, where Barrett devotes 59 pages to the single month of October 1968, when President Johnson was making up his mind to halt all bombing of North Vietnam. One gets a reasonably clear sense of what was being said at the meetings, and even of what was not being said. The purpose of the halt was to improve the chances of a peace settlement being reached in Paris, but there is an astonishing lack of discussion of the terms and practical implications of the settlement Johnson and his top advisers were hoping to reach. It seems clear here that people simply were not thinking that far ahead.

When reading the sections of the volume covering 1966 with an average of less than 7 pages per month, or even 1965 with 17 pages per month, one seldom gets the record of meeting after meeting on a single issue, showing how the discussion evolved. One cannot assume that if a question does not appear in the limited material presented, this means the question had not been asked. Also, when Barrett has chosen the record of a single meeting to represent an issue, rather than the records of half a dozen consecutive meetings, the single record presented may be quite opaque for lack of context. The volume does not have much editorial explanation of ambiguous passages, and in one place where there is an explanation it is wrong. (An editorial interpolation on p. 32 identifies "Farmgate aircraft" as CIA aircraft; they actually belonged to a U.S. Air Force Air Commando unit.)

What one does get, even from the sections of the volume where coverage is skimpy, is a sense of the range of issues President Johnson was considering, the types of people he consulted, and the

range of advice they gave him. One also gets endless fascinating insights and snippets of information about particular people and particular events. This reviewer happens to be interested in the Domino Theory, and the ways it shifted over the years. There are many useful examples here, ranging up to Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge's statement to the President in July 1965 (as summarized in McGeorge Bundy's record of the meeting) that a U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam would be "worse than a victory for the Kaiser or Hitler in the two World Wars" (p. 259). Someone more concerned with covert operations would note that in October 1968, when top officials were considering plans for a complete halt to U.S. bombing and other actions against North Vietnam, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff told the President that there were 20 men on the ground in North Vietnam who would have to be gotten out (p. 796).

There are interesting inconsistencies in the Johnson administration's relations with the press. President Johnson denounces the attitude of the press to the war, in preposterously exaggerated terms (pp. 287, 525). But when a case of remarkable misbehavior by the press actually did occur (a reporter for the *Wall Street Journal* revealed, ahead of time, that the United States was about to conduct its first air strikes in the areas of Hanoi and Haiphong, and identified the particular targets to be struck), the only comments one sees, by George Ball and Walt Rostow, are calm and low-key, without the outrage that the incident could have justified (pp. 355-56). And shortly after Harrison Salisbury returned to the United States from his famous trip to Hanoi, which had inspired frenzied denunciations (not found in this volume) of Salisbury as a Communist propagandist, Walt Rostow sent the President a memo (pp. 384-85) on a private briefing Salisbury had given him, on things Salisbury had learned in Hanoi that had not been published in the *New York Times*.

Many of the documents are clearly labeled as incomplete. In the cases where passages were unavailable because they had not been declassified, it often seemed clear that the omitted material would have been important, but there obviously was not much Barrett could have done about this. In the cases where Barrett chose to omit passages because they did not deal with Vietnam, or simply for reasons of length, this reviewer got the impression his judgment was usually reasonable.

Thinking back on the volume, this reviewer cannot recall, offhand, seeing any document that was obviously a waste of space, anything that clearly should have been omitted to make room for more valuable material.

Serious libraries should acquire *Lyndon B. Johnson's Vietnam Papers* as soon as possible. The price may deter most individuals from purchasing it, but scholars should at least consider it; the cost per page is not out of line for current hardcovers.

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Citation: Edwin Moise. Review of Barrett, David M., ed. *Lyndon B. Johnson's Vietnam Papers: A Documentary Collection.* H-Pol, H-Net Reviews. November, 1998.

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