

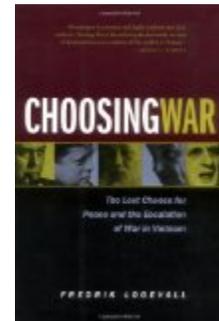
# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



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.

Reviewed by Jeffrey Kimball (Miami University)  
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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.

Fredrik Logevall's *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of the War in Vietnam* is gracefully written, analytically probing, and solidly grounded in the archives of several countries. The author provides new information, draws on fresh documentation, and challenges commonly held assumptions.

Logevall's main topic is the "Americanization" of the U.S.-Vietnam War. His main thesis is that the critical decisions of the United States government to escalate the war by Americanizing it were made during "The Long 1964"; that is, between August 29, 1963, when President John F. Kennedy's administration approved the generals' coup against Ngo Dinh Diem, to late February 1965, when President Lyndon B. Johnson's administration formally agreed to the sustained bombing of North Vietnam and the landing of two U.S. Marine combat battalions in South Vietnam. As we all know, the implementation of these two decisions soon led to large-scale American military intervention, dramatically transforming the existing limited conflict into an all-out war and making it immensely more difficult to achieve a compromise settlement and the extrication of the United States from Indochina. This tragic escalation of the war from a top-priority in August 1963 to a major war after February 1965 was not inevitable, Logevall believes; it was avoidable; but Johnson and his top aides, McGeorge Bundy, Robert McNamara, and Dean Rusk, chose war over negotiations and peace.

What is relatively new about this thesis is the author's emphasis on the decisions made at the end of the calendar year 1964. By that time Johnson, Bundy, McNamara, and Rusk had decided against negotiations and accepted what in their thinking was the necessity of having to bomb the North and deploy U.S. combat troops in the South. In other words, the "crucial" turning point of the U.S.-Vietnam War was not the set of decisions made by the Truman administration to allow the French to return to Vietnam or, later, to support their war; it was not the Eisenhower administration's steps to reject the Geneva settlement and support Ngo Dinh Diem after 1954; it was not the Kennedy escalations after 1960 and not the assassination of Diem in November 1963.

Logevall argues that there was room for maneuver after Diem's death but that it diminished rapidly after the end of 1964 and especially after February 1965. An honorable negotiated settlement was possible, because the Hanoi Politburo was willing to compromise by accepting a temporarily "neutralized" South Vietnam in order to avoid massive American intervention and an extension of the war. The Soviet Union and China were prepared to cooperate. France, England, and other U.S. allies were urging Johnson to negotiate. Pacific Rim countries were uneasy about another Euro-American war against Asians and wished to avoid a major conflagration in the region. An informed, concerned minority of the American "public" was strongly opposed to war, and an uninformed, insouciant majority was vaguely against Americanization or at least malleable in its opinions, capable of being persuaded to spurn an enlarged war and to accept an honorable peace. American elites were divided, with influential senators, congresspersons, journalists, and institutions in favor of disengagement. The right-wing

of the GOP and the senior leaders of the military, who were the greatest supporters of escalation, were politically weaker than commonly assumed. Most South Vietnamese were war-weary, wanted an end to the fighting, and preferred peace and reunification under communism to perpetual war, while their Saigon government leaders were either incapable, factious, corrupt, or willing to negotiate with the other side. But Johnson, supported by his top aides, rejected the alternative course of negotiated withdrawal and a neutral South Vietnam in favor of a winning military strategy—or at least a strategy that promised to improve their military position and, therefore, their prospects in future negotiations.

In the course of explaining how and why the Johnson administration skulked toward war, the author maintains that Johnson was first among equals and the master of his own house; that is, it was he more than his top advisers who insisted on a winning strategy and, dominating policymaking on Vietnam, intimidated wavering lower-level aides and congressional doves and owls into silence or compliance. Moreover, Logevall emphasizes “personal” motives: “Johnson, no one else, ensured that the critical decisions on Vietnam were made by a small and insular group of individuals who by the latter part of 1964 had been involved in policy making for several years in most cases, who had overseen the steady expansion in the U.S. commitment to the war, and who had a large personal stake in seeing that commitment succeed” (394). The decision for Americanization is all the more remarkable, Logevall argues, because there was no public or elite consensus in favor of war or against withdrawal that drove or forced Johnson to decide for escalation. On the contrary, after his election Johnson was riding high in the public-approval saddle and could have led the majority of the citizenry to greener, peaceful pastures. In order to drive home the point that this was Mr. Johnson’s war, the author avers that had Kennedy lived, he would not have Americanized the war.

Logevall makes a convincing case that Johnson and his top advisers willfully escalated the war despite international and domestic opinion in favor of negotiation, de-escalation, and withdrawal. I am slightly less persuaded, however, that the right was weak and that Johnson dominated his advisers as much as the author maintains. I suspect that the dynamic between Johnson and his top three aides was psychologically and politically more complicated. Perhaps the relationship was more analogous to that between Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger; that is, mutually reinforcing but simultaneously mutually threatening. Nonetheless, Logevall is persuasive in

portraying Johnson as the leader of the decision-making gang of four and in demonstrating how much he, as well as his top advisers, believed in the necessity of the course chosen.

I disagree, however, with the author’s philosophical and theoretical assertions concerning human agency, historical “inevitability,” “structural” explanation, and historical turning points. Arguing that Johnson’s escalations were not “overdetermined” – in other words, that there was sufficient “fluidity” in the situation, even during the long 1964, to make it realistically possible for Johnson to disengage the U.S. from Vietnam—Logevall concludes that “contingency” is a more apt description of the causal context in which Johnson and his aides operated than structural determinism. Logevall purports that even though the structural “trajectory” of events and forces before the long 1964 was such as to make the Americanization of the war possible and even difficult to avoid, an Americanized war was not inevitable. When it came about in 1964, it was because Johnson—for reasons having to do with his ego, his political ambition, and his personal stake in avoiding defeat—had led his top advisers and the nation into the big muddle. Mr. Johnson, therefore, was the real or decisive cause of the U.S.-Vietnam War as we know it.

The author briefly explains that he includes in structural determinism such forces or factors as bureaucratic “momentum” (xvii), ideological and cultural “currents” (384), economic “imperatives” (386), and the “chain” of escalatory steps and processes since Truman (387). (It is not clear whether he includes psychological processes, electoral politics, institutional power relationships, and other such things that I would consider structural). But he rejects all: “The problem with structural explanations ... is that they ultimately do not explain very much” (385). This for me is a perplexing statement. I have long thought the opposite was true, not only about the Vietnam War but about every other human event; that is, we explain little when we say that such and such an event came about because an individual or a small group of individuals possessed “free will” and had “personal” reasons for their actions—as if ambitions, fears, desires, goals, ideals, and so on are *sui generis* to each individual, manifesting themselves in a social, cultural, ideological, or historical vacuum. I am exaggerating what Logevall seems to be saying, but if one rejects my extreme characterization, then one must accept some form of “structuralism.”

This matter of structure may seem a small, abstract matter, one of concern only to philosophers, sociologists,

or social and cultural historians until we remember that every president and his closest advisers between 1945 and 1973 – with minor, qualified exceptions (as in 1968) – chose at key moments to reject disengagement and to escalate the war as each understood the constraints, needs, and possibilities of their time. Why? That, it seems to me, is the question we need to answer. Logevall brilliantly details and documents Johnson’s decisions, but were these part of a long-term pattern, and if so, what was that pattern and what were its causes? Each president and each top adviser was a unique individual, but they all walked steadily into the quagmire. Why? The prime policy reason, it seems, was to avoid defeat and thereby maintain credibility. John McNaughton put it succinctly in 1965: the need was to avoid “a humiliating U.S. defeat (to our reputation as a [‘counter-subversion’] guarantor).” Should we doubt this credo? It has been repeated over and over again in virtually every document and speech in which motives and goals were directly or indirectly addressed. But why was counterrevolutionary credibility so important? Was it only because of chance, accident, coincidence, and human contingency that when defeat loomed, all presidents – all those who bore the “responsibilities” of power in a nation with global aims – chose the course of escalation?

Let’s look at one small but telling example of this mind-set. Former president Dwight Eisenhower resented it when Johnson publicly traced the provenance of his current escalations to the decisions and commitments made during Eisenhower’s past administration, but in February 1965, as Logevall relates, Ike, invoking the Munich analogy, privately advised LBJ to reject the advice of allies and shun negotiating from weakness. Despite his personal principle of helping the South Vietnamese only if they helped themselves, and although cautioning Johnson to avoid over-deployment of U.S. troops, Eisenhower supported the sending of American ground troops to Vietnam with the lame qualification, “if necessary.” He also told Johnson to ignore the unlikely possibility of Russian or Chinese counter-intervention, recommended that he send troops to South Vietnam even if these powers did intervene, and suggested that Johnson use any weapons, even nuclear weapons, to win the war (350). Why? Is there not a policy pattern operating here, a pattern of what might be called “structural” causes? Each president, each adviser, each supporter, and each dissenter who failed to dissent strongly enough—each possessing “free will” – could have acted differently, but they did not do so when they needed to do so.

Human agency, along with historical accident,

chance, randomness, and chaos, operate in a “structural” context. It is the way of things in this world. The issue for historians, it seems to me, is not whether this is so, but why and how it happens; that is, the issue is to explore the relationship between human agency and structure. You do not need to be a Marxist to conclude from historical study, experiential observation, or plain common sense that while men and women make their own history, they do not make it just as they please; they make it as heirs of the past and under the constraints and influences of the present, which are products of history and culture. In foreign policy history we usually think of structural context as consisting of individual or group psychological processes, bureaucratic-presidential dynamics, political factors, public opinion, ideological currents and mind-sets, social and cultural institutions and influences, technological developments, and economic imperatives, goals, systems, and relationships, as well as the more specific notions of gender, race, and class. We also acknowledge that power – the nature and location of which is determined by institutional, political, social, economic, and cultural factors – is distributed unevenly. Presidents, for example, are in a position to have and use more of it than others but nonetheless operate under various constraints.

Perhaps mine is simply a quarrel about how one defines “structure,” because Logevall’s book, it seems to me, provides abundant evidence for what I would call a “structural” argument. It goes something like the following. President Johnson was the prime but not the only agent of dramatic escalation in 1964. His instrumental role was facilitated by what Logevall describes as a “permissive” historical and institutional environment – an environment in which opponents of the war, for example those in Congress and the press, ultimately deferred to him. But Johnson was also an agent of change because his personality and historically-rooted ideological mind-set was such that he could not accept defeat in Vietnam. He could not because he, like other presidents before and after him, linked his institutional persona with the nation’s interests – a conceit, no doubt, associated with most heads of state. Thus, Johnson believed that his personal defeat would be the nation’s defeat; his loss of credibility would be the nation’s loss. Moreover, he had also inherited foreign policy commitments involving American prestige, treasure, lives, and rhetoric from previous administrations, which were seen by him and significant others to be at risk in Vietnam and which could not easily be gambled in choosing disengagement. He thought of himself as being trapped in a catch-22: if he

withdrew, he would be damned and he and his programs would suffer politically, but if he escalated he would be damned and he and his programs would suffer politically. On balance, his foreign-policy concerns about credibility and his political concerns about criticism from the right and even from cold-war liberals and centrists disinclined him to disengage from Vietnam but impelled him to try harder to win. He would chance a turnaround in Vietnam. His most trusted can-do advisers from corporate America, the military, the imperial bureaucracy, and elite universities told him that the war and the citizenry could be manipulated, managed, or ignored; he, the tall, macho Texan and former majority leader of the Senate, concurred. Stewards of the most powerful nation in the world, he and his top aides could not really imagine defeat should they strive to avoid it; such hubris is not uncommon among empire builders or leaders of world systems.

However one phrases such a structural explanation, Logevall provides most of the evidence. Unfortunately, he gives short shrift to analyses of Johnson's ideological worldview or of the indirect but nonetheless essential links between the powerful notion of credibility and the economic and national-security goals and assumptions of those in leadership positions. (One mid-level aide once told me that intervention in a particular third-world country was necessary in order to preserve "free enterprise," protect "national security," and maintain U.S. "credibility" with its friends and dependents.)

Logevall also provides evidence in his book for what

he calls the "phenomenon of escalation"; that is, of the chain of events leading to the quagmire of 1965. Recalling that from 1945 or so until 1973, American presidents and their advisers chose time and again to reject negotiated compromise in favor of some form of escalation, we can plausibly speak of escalation "phases" – in other words, of many crucial turning points. Truman could have prevented the French from returning to Vietnam or later allowed the French to lose their war; Eisenhower could have accepted the Geneva settlement; Kennedy could have allowed Diem and his brother to negotiate with the other side or could have negotiated his own settlement. Skipping past Johnson, in 1969, 1970, 1971, or 1972, Nixon could have negotiated the same settlement he got in 1973. Johnson's escalations were the largest in terms of troop commitments and perhaps the most important turning point in the long war, but previous escalations had nonetheless led to subsequent ones. Logevall asserts that each escalation only made the next "more likely" but did not "ensure" the next (387). Could it have been, however, that "more likely" was sufficient? While the march to full-scale war was not inevitable, steps that made the next more likely meant that it was progressively less likely that decision makers would or could stop their march into the quagmire. It was, therefore, an inexorable march, even while along the way and to the very end, other roads were open but never taken.

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