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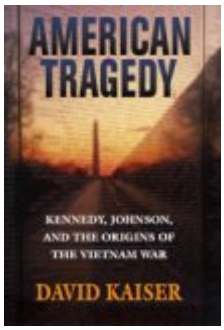

David Kaiser. *American Tragedy: Kennedy, Johnson, and the Origins of the Vietnam War.* Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2000. 558 pp. $29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-674-00225-8.

Reviewed by George C. Herring

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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.

David Kaiser begins *American Tragedy* with some very bold claims. His work is based on an "enormous amount" of new documentation, he insists and it provides "the most thorough and best-documented account" of America's decision to go to war in Vietnam, "the greatest policy miscalculation in the history of American foreign relations." He vows to lay to rest a number of old myths and to offer new interpretations. He implies little short of the final word on a topic that has provoked enormous controversy.

In fact, Kaiser's book is but one of three recent important studies (the others are Fredrik Logevall's *Choosing War* and H.R. McMaster's *Dereliction of Duty*) that address the fundamental question of why the United States committed vast sums of blood and treasure to a war it most probably could not have won in an area of at best dubious significance. It is well researched and well written, and it offers a number of provocative interpretations. But it is by no means the last word on the subject, as the author seems to suggest, and some of its major arguments fail to convince.

Kaiser provides a full analysis of U.S. policymaking on Vietnam during the Kennedy and early Johnson years, with a glance back at the Eisenhower administration (to whose policies he attaches great significance). In contrast to Logevall, who places these critical decisions in a broad domestic political and international context, and McMaster, who focusses on the badly flawed relationship between civilian and military policymakers, Kaiser centers his account somewhat narrowly on the White House and to a lesser extent the Pentagon. The ground he covers has been well trodden, first by journalist David Halberstam and political scientists Leslie Gelb and Richard Betts and subsequently by scholars such as Larry Berman and Brian VanDeMark. Kaiser does add new detail and he fills out an already familiar story. His study, along with those of McMaster and Logevall, gives us full and up to date, if not yet de-

finitive, coverage of the fateful *American* decisions that led to tragedy for the United States and especially for Vietnam.

Where does he line up on the major issues that have divided historians? He accepts as givens the "dove" conventional wisdoms that the war should not have been fought and could not have been won. He rejects the arguments of Berman and others that the United States intervened mainly for reasons of domestic politics, the fear of falling dominoes at home or Lyndon Johnson's determination to protect his cherished Great Society programs, insisting rather that it was for reasons of high policy, the national security imperatives that had shaped U.S. decision-making during much of the Cold War era. Also taking issue with Gelb and Betts and Daniel Ellsberg, he argues that, although the Johnson administration intervened reluctantly, it did so with some measure of confidence in ultimate success. On the issue of whether LBJ chose war, as Logevall claims, or was responding to irresistible pressures, as his biographer Robert Dallek argues, Kaiser does not take a firm position.

Kaiser blames the war mainly on the Eisenhower and Johnson administrations and on the persistent and egregious miscalculations of the national security bureaucracy regarding the importance of Vietnam and the ability of the United States to work its will there. In a brief introductory chapter, he contends that the Eisenhower administration drew up war plans for the defense of Southeast Asia and especially South Vietnam that included the use of nuclear weapons. These plans, he continues, guided U.S. military thinking on Vietnam through Johnson's decisions for war, and in fact the Johnson administration followed them to the letter, at least up to the point where nuclear weapons would be used. Upon taking office, Johnson quickly elevated Vietnam to a top priority issue, never questioning basic assumptions and making it the centerpiece of his foreign policy. Facing North Vietnamese escalation and a deteriorating situation in South Vietnam, he significantly expanded the U.S. commitment. Once reelected in November 1964, he made his decisions for war, not to fend off a possible right-wing backlash or to protect the Great Society but to uphold the national security imperatives established in the Eisenhower years.

John F. Kennedy and to a much lesser extent George W. Ball are the lone heroes in a book generally devoid of them. Ball is hailed for "one of the most remarkable strategic appreciations ever written by an American," even though his arguments did not persuade, and, as the author fails to note, Ball's inveterate loyalty and reputation as a domesticated dissenter rendered him a harmless skeptic. Kennedy was a "brilliant natural diplomat," more sensitive than most of his advisers to the "dangers of rash action," more disposed to negotiation than military means, and more accepting of "genuine" neutralism. A politician rather than bureaucrat, he understood how little importance most Americans attached to Southeast Asia. Kaiser rejects John Newman's argument that Kennedy knew the United States was failing in Vietnam and therefore developed a secret plan for extrication after he had been safely reelected. He attaches little importance to the 1000 man withdrawal plan that has provided so much grist for the mills of those who believe Kennedy was determined to get the United States out of Vietnam. Rather, he emphasizes Kennedy's consistent reluctance to commit U.S. prestige and military power in Indochina, manifested first in his rejection of intervention in Laos in the spring of 1961 and later in the year in his refusal to commit combat forces in Vietnam. Kennedy, he argues, also demonstrated a firm commitment to what he came to consider more important foreign policy objectives, most notably easing Cold War tensions and improving relations with the Soviet Union. Kaiser admits that we can never know what Kennedy would have done had he lived, but the

implication is crystal clear: he would have found a way to avoid the "American tragedy."

Kaiser's book has much to commend it. He is very good at placing Vietnam decisions in a broader foreign policy context, and he does better than those who have preceded him in linking Vietnam decisions to the ongoing crises in Laos. He is also very good on the 1964 coup that brought Nguyen Khanh to power, confirming George Kahin's arguments about the centrality of U.S. involvement in that important but little known episode. He offers some shrewd insights and observations. He sees the Pentagon's acceptance of gradual escalation in 1964 as necessitated by the hard facts of logistic life--the military could not have escalated the war more rapidly even if given civilian approval because of the primitive infrastructure in Vietnam. He plays down the importance of the much-studied July 1965 discussions that scholars have generally seen as producing Johnson's decisions for war. Rather, he insists-- and on this Logevall agrees--LBJ made his decisions for war in Vietnam "in principle" in December 1964 and implemented them early the following year. He so effectively concealed from the public what he was doing, Kaiser goes on, that he has also misled a whole generation of historians. Similarly, the importance of Gen. William C. Westmoreland's May 1965 ground troop request is minimized. Its principal significance was to force the administration to go public with its decisions for war. When he finally revealed his hand in July 1965, Kaiser concludes, LBJ still brilliantly obscured the extent and the magnitude of the commitment he was making.

Kaiser also advances a generational explanation for the war. He pins primary responsibility on what he calls the G.I. generation. Lodged between the more cautious "Lost Generation," which came before, and the more skeptical "Silent Generation," which came after, the G.I.s, born in the first quarter of the century, successfully fought World War II. Tom Brokaw's "great generation" brought to the task of government "an exemplary willingness to tackle difficult and costly tasks, a faith in the institution of the government of the United States, a great capacity for teamwork and consensus, a relentless optimism," not all of them all of the time virtues. Their baggage also included an unwillingness to admit the possibility of failure, a trait that served them especially poorly when dealing with Vietnam.

Although a valuable contribution to the literature, ***American Tragedy*** falls considerably short of its author's extravagant claims. Kaiser's research is thorough but hardly exhaustive and original. He relies mainly on the State Department's ***Foreign Relations of the United States*** volumes and on recently declassifed documents from the presidential libraries. The ***FRUS*** volumes in Vietnam are especially well done and certainly represent an authoritative source. But they hardly constitute original research on the author's part, and their own editors would be the first to admit that they do not comprise the entire record. Pentagon records for the most part are unavailable and many important JCS documents appear not to have survived. State Department files are available but are not extensively used by Kaiser. McMaster and Logevall have shown the value of research outside the ***FRUS*** series and the presidential libraries, and thus, despite claims to the contrary, represent more comprehensive research than that done by Kaiser.

The generational interpretation is interesting and offers some insight into the mindset of Vietnam decisionmakers such as Robert McNamara, the Bundy brothers, Dean Rusk, and even Lyndon Johnson, especially their stubborn determination to persist despite ample warning signs of possible failure. But Kaiser does not really develop it systematically, and his exception of Kennedy, who he admits is in many ways the archetype of his generation, raises doubts about the theory itself or his use of it.

His main arguments fail to convince. Eisenhower deserves a share of the blame for Vietnam, to be sure, but Kaiser's handling of this issue is curious and his emphasis seems misplaced. One might question first why he begins his study with Eisenhower. The outlines of Vietnam policy, as numerous scholars have pointed out, go back at least to the Truman administration, and decisions made under FDR had a great impact on subsequent policies. Kaiser appears to see himself as a lonely voice in the wilderness standing forth boldly against the powerful forces of Eisenhower revisionism. He seems grandly unaware that, at least on Vietnam, Eisenhower revisionism has long been discredited. Kaiser notes the "paradox" between Eisenhower's decisions not to go to war during the Dien Bien Phu crisis in 1954 and his subsequent plans for war in Indochina. In fact, there is no paradox at all. War in support of a decadent and recalcitrant France was one thing; war in defense of U.S. strategic objectives quite another. He overemphasizes the importance of Ike's "secret" war plans. What is really crucial in terms of U.S. involvement in Vietnam is Eisenhower's political decision in late 1954 to buck the admittedly bad odds and assist South Vietnam. It is hard to believe, moreover, that even in a hidebound military establishment war plans drawn up in the heyday of the New Look would continue to exercise such sway through Sputnik, Flexible Response, and the Cuban missile crisis.

Kaiser's treatment of Kennedy borders on infatuation and is even less convincing. He produces no new evidence to demonstrate Kennedy's skepticism about the importance of Vietnam and his advisers' claims of success. He admits that Kennedy went to some lengths to obscure his thinking, but professes in places to know what it was. He bases his argument on his own estimate of Kennedy's diplomatic skills and on surmise--on what he claims Kennedy did and what, therefore, he might have done.

Indeed, he goes out of his way to exonerate Kennedy from responsibility for the Vietnam debacle, thus underminimg his credibility. He ignores JFK's dissembling about what American "advisers" were up to in Vietnam and his heavy-handed efforts to muzzle the press. He excuses Kennedy from responsibility for the overthrow and death of Ngo Dinh Diem and Ngo Dinh Nhu. They brought on themselves, he callously claims, a *Vietnamese* tragedy for which Kennedy himself accepted full responsibility. In any event, Kaiser concludes disingenuously, the coup was not all that important in the history of U.S. involvement in Vietnam.

There are numerous problems with such interpretations. Kaiser praises Kennedy's ability to relax and separate himself from his work (perhaps even his dalliances?) and finds no fault in his not doing anything until he has to. What he sees as detachment and caution, however, might also be viewed as indecision and even lack of courage. JFK's inclination to hang in there and hope for the best places him squarely in the "G.I. Generation." It can be argued, moreover, that Kennedy, like Johnson, repeatedly chose the middle ground between the extremes offered by his advisers. The problem is that, in part as a result of decisions made by Kennedy, the middle ground left to Johnson involved a much higher level of military force. Kennedy may have been sympathetic toward neutralism, but he rejected it for Vietnam, in so doing rejecting an option that, if we can believe recent Vietnamese testimony, might have provided a way to avert war. Kaiser admits that Kennedy did not institutionalize his policies and that he did not do enough to challenge the more hawkish views of his advisers.

Most important, in the final analysis, Kennedy must be judged on the basis of what he did not what he may have been thinking and might have done. Kaiser is quick to accuse Eisenhower of leaving his successor a hard choice between war and peace. The same must be said of JFK. Looked

at over the long haul, the Kennedy administration seems less the anomaly Kaiser makes it appear than just another phase in the seamless evolution of the U.S. commitment toward full-scale war.

The larger problem with Kaiser's analysis of the road to war is characteristic of most of the literature on the Vietnam War. In this instance, it is not the winners who have written the history. On the contrary, as Robert McMahon has pointed out, the literature is dominated by "American scholars asking American-oriented questions and seeking answers in documents produced by Americans." Kaiser insists that however "fascinating and important" the story of Hanoi's decisions might be they "may well add relatively little to our understanding of American policy, since American leaders knew so little about what their enemy was doing and thinking." In fact, what would be most useful now is a study based on sources from and an understanding of policymaking in both nations. Only then can we truly understand how decisions made on each side interacted to provoke a war that neither nation really wanted and that produced a Vietnamese as well as an American tragedy.

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